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Red cottage, Hushinish, Harris

Event Density

Dan Hicks

'IMMOBILE BULLDOZERS, HOLED boats, Allegras buried in the dunes.' The cadaver of a Ford Transit that is sinking into the bog. The ridge and furrow of land drainage. A shackscape of corrugated iron and raw timber. The towers and turrets of James Matheson's castellated mansion. The 'unspiritual' spirit of the Callanish Standing Stones, a Neolithic monument cut from the peat in 1857. The thought of undiscovered prehistoric bodies with ligatures perfectly preserved round the neck by the anaerobic acidity of the land itself.

Just what kind of archaeology is it that runs through Jonathan Meades' essay on Lewis and Harris and Rust? And how should we understand its affinity with the sheer humanity of Alex Boyd's photographs? Three suggestions.

First, maybe both involve some genre of *visual archaeology*. The text and the images share a way of looking. It somehow flips the backward vision with which self-consciously academic writing about the human past so often fixes itself; it does not bury its head in its hands to visualise a world gone by but transforms the present before our eyes. Excavation.

Discovery. Appearance. We're a long way from those three most deadening words in academic discourse – *critical, heritage, studies*. Could we even be beyond the influence of that very English prejudice towards honouring, preserving and curating those failed mid-1980s attempts by historians to co-opt the perspectives of Social Anthropology? It was a putsch driven by little more than shoring up against the threat of francophone deconstruction, the desire to set some parameters to the new relativism; a reduction of our understanding of the past to mere artifice and say-so. Social construction. Contextual interpretation. *The Invention of Tradition*.

It was Eric Hobsbawm and Terry Ranger's names on the book spine that bore that title when it hit the library shelves in 1983. It was, however, neither the Marxist nor the Africanist who contributed the text's ur-example but rather the Borderer, Hugh Trevor-Roper, whose snooty critique of Scottish nationalism re-described the very notion of Highland and Islands culture as nothing but a modern fabrication of bagpipe tartanry misrepresented as ancient custom.¹ Not for nothing did Neal Ascherton call

him 'the Liquidator'.³ It's still too close in intellectual history for us yet to have found a name for the Tory po-mo for which the operation of HT-R's deconstructionist falsifications of belief, of identity, of the work of culture, formed a central motor. But what is clear is that it revealed within the anthropologist's so-called reflexivity a kind of self-regard. As the Liquidator-General himself put it in his valedictory lecture on leaving Christ Church, Oxford to become Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge in 1980, the claim was that, 'Objective science has its place in historical study, but it is a subordinate place: the heart of the subject is not in the method but in the motor, not in the technique but in the historian'.⁴ It was surely no coincidence that Trevor-Roper's laissez-faire snobbery towards those duped by *The Invention of Tradition* was published within just a few weeks of his authentication of the bogus Hitler Diaries.

The parallel visions of Meades-Boyd on Lewis-Harris operate against the 1980s Trevor-Roperian liquidations that still, inexplicably, hold so much currency in 'critical' 'heritage' circles; they lift our view of the past beyond an introspective mode, decentre the donnish sneer at plain invention, understand the vernacular past as something more than mere fanaticism, don't sniff at the composition of the past. They open their eyes to the humanity that inheres in what outlasts people's lives.

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Second, then, there is in Meades-Boyd some kind of shared attention to *the detritus of human life*; it is an attitude that is geographical as well as temporal. Lewis and Harris is remote, at one end of an Antillean-like island chain, and yet somehow two islands in one, the Outer-Hebridean Haiti-Dominican Republic. Never mind 'invented traditions': this is a place not of false consciousness but double-consciousness, not of fake invention but transformation and multiplication.

The anthropologist Edwin Ardener began a list of the characteristics of remoteness, an unfinished list that included: '*Remote areas are full of innovators*'. '*Remote areas are in constant contact with the world*'. '*Remote areas are full of ruins of the past*'. '*Remote areas are full of rubbish*'. For Ardener there were connections between these axioms and paradoxes. He was talking about the Western Isles. It was the mid-1980s, again. Ardener reproduced a contemporary description by the journalist Derek Cooper of some objects around a croft house in Lewis:

Five hundredweight van (circa 1950s); Ford tractor minus one wheel; fragment of pre-Great War reaper; upright piano; 37 blue plastic fishboxes; 7 green lemonade crates; 2 chimney pots; a sizeable pyramid of sand; a pile of cement blocks; 7 lobster creels; assorted timber; 2 bales of barbed

wire (rusted); broken garden seat; Hercules bicycle frame; piece of unidentified machinery (loom?); a sofa.⁴

There had been, Cooper suggested, less rubbish here in the 19th century. Sooty thatch was used as fertiliser. Fishing boats were recycled as roof timbers or furniture. Ropes made of heather and hemp would degrade. Flour sacks were sewn up as children's clothes. 'Then came the Galvanised Iron Age, the Brass Bedstead Age and the Plastics Age,' Cooper wrote; indestructible products of the industrial and consumer society; materials that are impossible to dispose of like fibreglass, plastic, aluminium, rubber; the accelerating obsolescence of accelerating imports.

It'd be easy to mistake these landscapes for ruins. A new generation of Liquidators is filling the pages of the 'critical' 'heritage' journals with newly insouciant and flaneuristic forms of self-regard: ruin porn, dereliction tourism, Anthropocenes, Chthulucenes, object-oriented ontologies of new vibrant nonhuman materialities, posthuman futurities, capitalist realisms. The full constructivist actor-network from HT-R to A-NT. Symmetrical archaeographies. Speculative nihilisms. Sustained manglings of Benjaminian aura in the face of duration, FFS.

Rust is not ruin. Here, the question of rubbish is a question of the visibility of decay, which is to say

it is a question of geography. Commodity chains are one-way streets. At the end of the line things seem to pile up. There is of course far less waste in any remote place, it's just far more visible than in the metropolis. The course of obsolescence is less certain since innovation operates at a different pace, refracted through accumulation and repurposing, improvisation and human life. This is how in remote places the double-consciousness of place starts to give way to a double-consciousness of time. Provisionality gains a kind of depth. Events, Ardener tells us, have a more solid quality. The stuff that happens 'matters' more. There is a different event density.

Third, something about a *remoteness of time*, as well as just a remoteness of place, is shared in the visions of Meades and Boyd. We don't have to believe that the ineffable gneisses of Callanish were arranged as some kind of astronomical calendar that measured the movement of the moon against the horizon in order to affirm that this remote monument serves to measure the passing of time. They embody the ongoing density of events in this landscape; the environment itself calibrates minutes and months and years with rock and machair and sheep; Cambrian, Silurian, Quaternary, this is a place of remote innovation rather than retrospective invention; a folded landscape of unfolding events.

It can't be quite right that the passage from

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Neolithic to Modern runs from Richard Long to Arthur Tress. There is a mutual directionality in the monumental and the transformational. Maybe it's something like Robert Smithson's lecture on Hotel Palenque, read in 1972 to the architectural faculty at the University of Utah. When Smithson visited this ramshackle Mexican hotel, it was undergoing a process of renovation that simultaneously involved the dismantling of some of its wings alongside the construction of others; he identified a spirit of simultaneous renovation and decay in the ancient Mayan ruins as well as in that dilapidated contemporary building. The image is one of a de-architecture of decay and potential that is ripping stuff down and building it up in a single gesture and is thereby bringing about not so much an architectural form as a form of comparison. An environment in which one remote place or time can come to stand for another that it does not resemble.¹ A place for thinking through looking. A Victorian Neolithic. An aluminium geology. The persistent physicality of loss.

Or maybe another lecture, John Ruskin's 'The World of Iron in Nature, Art and Policy' given at Tunbridge Wells in February 1858, where he denied that rusty iron is spoiled iron, since 'iron rusted is living; but when pure or polished, dead'. While gold and silver, which do not rust, have surely only brought bloody violence and death in the human

past, by inhaling oxygen this metal – ferrous, magnetic, transitional – can become somehow 'nobler' with each flushed, corrosive gasp. Ruskin called up images of a horror-filled world where meadows grow not grass but iron wire, and arable land is reduced to flat surfaces of steel: images that he contrasted with that intake of breath through which the atmosphere can colour the world to make the sand yellow and the brick and tile red. In Lewis and Harris the flush of the brine in the wind brings these colours even to galvanised steel.

These are places for comparison, perhaps that is what we are learning here; places of analogy: as with Smithson's anti-ruin, as with Ruskin's anti-rust, so with Meades and Boyd and the scrap-heap of standing stones and Ford Transits. There's more at stake than just reading human life as if it were natural history, which would after all simply read Ruskinian pathetic fallacy back-to-front. No, there are gaps and absences here that hold the same event density, negative traces of evictions and abandonments, negative traces left from the grand Malthusian experiment of the Clearances, not just a failed innovation but one that commanded a linear, progressive, artificial vision of time, enacted that vision. Something akin to tradition works against such horror, against the force in which the picturesque itself was complicit (a way of seeing

without transforming giving way to a contemplative past, the barbaric pretence of island 'savages' by a drug-dealing imperialist, and transportation far beyond this most remote of places).

Against such violence experiences of belonging and of community could never be false consciousness or mere invention. They emerge though the double consciousness of memory in a remote place where the density of events can be felt more clearly than the age of its monuments can be measured. Did the ideology of progressive time emerge in the metropolis because of the illusion that every road in the known world might lead to the library's door? If so then the counterpoint may be that in the *Isle of Rust* a sense of accumulated time is an effect of geographical distance, of community size, and of human loss, written as the possibilities of shifting forms across the island's terrain. The geology of the geiss is metamorphic.

In the hands of Meades and Boyd this landscape collapses time and space. Not clock-time, biblical time, archaeological phases, or the Mercator projection, but something closer to the vertigo evoked by WG Sebald's commentary on Thomas Browne's *Hydriotaphia* (1658), through which the antiquary's melancholic account of the excavation of particles of cremated human bone in earthenware vessels buried shallow in the Norfolk soil hints that

in the practice of archaeology 'the more the distance grows, the clearer the view becomes':

You glimpse the tiniest details with the utmost clarity. It is as if you were looking through a reversed telescope and through a microscope at the same time.⁶

Towards the close of Meades' text the figure of the future archaeologist appears, discovering modern remains, millennia from now. But the words and images of this book are not about a landscape of modern ruin and fragments of time: they trace the scattered re-wilding of human memory across the topography of Scotland's largest island. Meades' text is stripped away here from the moving image of film; Boyd's photographs are the very opposite of stills. The *Isle of Rust*, like any relatively remote location, and like the iron in the yellow sand bank at Camas Uig (where 93 12th-century Norse chess pieces carved from walrus ivory and whale teeth were found in 1831) is an ongoing transformation. Against any liquidation of the false consciousness of invented tradition, this double consciousness breathes humanity into the landscape, present into past. As if we might envision an Iron Age not as some fixed past reservoir of time but a vast, open, distant, enduring atmosphere. A remote knowledge

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emerges through this kind of visual archaeology. And the event-density that it reveals is an index not so much of what has been or what is now, but of what appears to have been.

Endnotes

1. Hugh Trevor-Roper, 1983. The Invention of Tradition: the Highland tradition of Scotland. In E Hobsbawm and T Ranger (eds) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: CUP, p. 15.
2. Neal Ascherton, 2010. Liquidator. *London Review of Books* 32(16): 10-12.
3. Hugh Trevor-Roper, 1980. History and Imagination. *Times Literary Supplement* 4035 (25 July), p. 833.
4. Derek Cooper, 1985. *The Road to Mingulay. A View of the Western Isles*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 182.
5. Robert Smithson, 1995 [1972]. Hotel Palenque. Reproduced in *Parkett* 43: insert (unpaginated).
6. See discussion in Dan Hicks 2019. The Transformation of Visual Archaeology (Part One). In Lesley McFadyen and Dan Hicks (eds) *Archaeology and Photography*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 21-54.



East German Trabant, Flesherin, Lewis