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**‘Distilling More than 2,000 Years of
History into 161,000 Square Feet of
Display Space’: Limiting Britishness
and the Failure to Create a Museum of
British History**

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Abstract: National museums both mediate and inculcate official and formal ver-
sions of national culture and by this means make and maintain national identity.
Three times in the course of the twentieth century, various groups have attempted,
and failed, to establish a national museum, identified variously as British or English.
This paper explores just one of those attempts: the Museum of British History
Project, first proposed in 1996 and finally killed off in 2008. The focus here is,
therefore, on failure and on the role of the conflation of Britishness and English-
ness in that failure as well as the nature of British identity construction more
generally.

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All three attempts to create a national museum placed the rural idyll at the heart
of the project. In the course of a detailed investigation of the Museum of British
History project, this paper will pay particular attention to the proposed designs for a
‘British Landscape Gallery’ and the project’s hegemonic, ruralised and Anglocentric
perspectives. The gallery was the principal way in which established constructs
of England and Englishness became conflated in the museum with Britain and
Britishness and served to perpetuate the dominance of the ‘rural idyll’ in hegemonic
manifestations of the nation. But the project remained stillborn in the face of the
new museology: a failure which undoubtedly demonstrates the limits to the cultural
power of the rural idyll.

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Introduction

What is required is a National Folk Museum, dealing exclusively and exhaustively with
the history of culture of the British Nation within the historic period . . . The way in which
we as a people have responded to our environment, or put another way, the effect of the

37 environment upon the development of our physique, culture and national characteristics,
38 might be made clear.¹

39 In 1909, at the height of the cultural shift which saw the drawing together of English-
40 ness and the rural idyll, the Museums Association was addressed by its President, Henry
41 Balfour. Balfour used his speech to urge the creation of a national museum which could
42 address the absence of native ethnography in Britain's museums. What he was advocating
43 was an open-air folk park, arguing that a 'most picturesque and instructive presentation
44 is effected' if the 'culture and social economy of the peasantry' is manifested in a 'typical
45 village setting'.² What Balfour envisaged was a museum consisting of vernacular buildings
46 from the 'country districts', relocated, reconstructed and furnished with appropriate
47 furniture and domestic utensils. Further to this would be collections of agricultural
48 implements and vehicles, local flora and fauna, and the performance of folk songs, dances
49 and games.³ Balfour's conceptualisation of British culture was, therefore, thoroughly
50 embedded in ideals of the rural environment and more specifically of rural England. In
51 this paper we are centrally concerned with this conflation of Britain and England and of
52 Britishness and Englishness. More specifically, we will explain these troubling dualisms,
53 and the role of the rural idyll in the making and maintenance of national identity, in the
54 context of the cultural project of creating an English/British museum.

55 The campaign of Balfour and other interested parties such as the Folklore Society
56 and Royal Anthropological Institute would lead to two initial efforts to create just such
57 as national museum. In 1929 the English Folk Museum Committee, an organisation
58 comprised of various curators and civil servants from the Office of Works and Board
59 of Education, made a failed attempt to create a national folk park in Regent's Park
60 in London. Inspired by this project, the Royal Anthropological Institute formed its
61 own British Ethnography Committee in 1949 to create a 'Museum of English Life
62 and Traditions', once again without success.⁴ Both projects failed due to financial and
63 practical constraints, yet they reveal a strong belief amongst curators, ethnographers and
64 folklorists that a national museum should focus upon the interpretation and representation
65 of England's 'country conditions'.⁵ In principle, this meant the physical manifestation of
66 what Mortimer Wheeler, a member of the English Folk Museum Committee, described
67 as 'the simplicity, directness and honesty of the older village craftsmanship', through
68 the collection of 'the implements wherewith the soil have been cultivated in some cases
69 from time immemorial'.⁶ Here then, we encounter the selective nostalgic, romanticised
70 and largely ahistorical narrative of the nation as 'rural idyll', with a national sense of
71 self that is bucolic, homogenous and rooted in the ancient past. As scholars such as
72 Robert Colls and Phillip Dodd have demonstrated, such discourses became unifying
73 tropes to both British and English nationalisms, to the exclusion of more complex
74 narratives of social and geographical difference.⁷ Similarly, whether it be the *English* Folk
75 Museum Committee, or the *British* Ethnography Committee, the often unthinkingly
76 interchangeable and habitually indistinct usage of these two politically, socially and
77 culturally loaded terminologies, is particularly revealing. It is illustrative of a persistent
78 failure to distinguish between England and Britain, and Englishness and Britishness,
79 which speaks to a particularly hegemonic, imperialist historiography of the nation. While
80 this paper does not focus on the attempts to create a 'folk park' or a 'Museum of English

81 Life', it has its origins in wider research into these projects. The primary concern
82 here, however, is with the problematic manifestations of English national identity in
83 a subsequent effort to establish a museum of British history.

84 Much has been written about the construction of Englishness and the rural idyll, and
85 the idealisation of rural working class culture through the folk song and dance revival,
86 but the representation and cultural power of the rural in England's museums has been
87 largely neglected.⁸ When commentators do turn to such considerations, they tend to
88 concentrate on the emergence and practicalities of agricultural history collections during
89 the folk revival, in institutions such as the Museum of Rural Life in Reading.⁹ Little has
90 been written about the long term implications of this ruralised vision of Englishness in
91 the museum context. In emphasising the successful creation of such localised agricultural
92 collections, commentators have neglected to address the failure of rural Englishness in
93 a national museum context. This is a serious omission, not least because it helps to
94 reveal the cultural power inherent in museums to construct and maintain specific identity
95 formations. Museums are potentially powerful ideological instruments, conveying and
96 reinforcing the persistent, hegemonic identity of rural England as *the* national identity.
97 Nevertheless, the story of attempts to establish an English/British national museum,
98 based on representations of old England and the South Country, is one of failure. This,
99 we contend, is less to do with the limits of the cultural power of the rural idyll, significant
100 as that is, and more to do with the realisation from within the museological sector of
101 the issues surrounding the unthinking, indistinct and interchangeable habitual usage of
102 English and British.

103 This was certainly the case for the project that is to be the focus of this paper. Having
104 established that there was a tradition of proposal and failure, we turn from the early
105 attempts at national museum making to the Museum of British History Project. First
106 proposed by the former Conservative Member of Parliament, Kenneth Baker, in 1996,
107 the aim was to create a centralised national museum to mark the Millennium. As with both
108 previous attempts, however, this was to end in failure. This paper will make full use of
109 original documentation where possible, to provide a general exploration of the proposals
110 for the Museum of British History as well as a detailed critique of its communication and
111 interpretation policies and principles and, finally, consideration of the reasons behind the
112 rejection of this proposal. The sources used include the Millennium Commission records
113 held at the National Archives in London and documents viewed by the authors at the
114 Museum, Libraries and Archives Council. We would also like to record our thanks Lord
115 Baker who graciously gave us access to his copies of the original designs for the Museum
116 of British History. Critical analysis of this material allows us to build a picture of what was
117 proposed and why it was rejected, as well as revealing underlying historical and political
118 perspectives and agenda from both sides of the national museum debate.¹⁰

119 The documentary evidence was reinforced by interviews with Kenneth Baker and
120 Jeremy Black, the project's chief historian. Following the protocols of the Oral History
121 Society, and Valerie Yow in *Recording Oral History*, these were semi-structured inter-
122 views, which raised the desired research themes but allowed the respondents to express
123 themselves freely. Full consideration has been given to the dialogic discourse of the
124 oral history interview, the dynamics of the interviewer/ interviewee relationship and in

125 particular the implications of elite oral history. As a politician and an academic, both
 126 speakers are authoritative, experienced public speakers, used to communicating their
 127 perspectives in an advocacy manner. These attributes could have a negative impact on
 128 the course of an interview, but in this instance we would suggest that they were an asset.
 129 The value of both sets of responses lies not, we would suggest, in the accuracy of the
 130 historical detail obtained, but in the analysis of their motivation in advocating a national
 131 museum.¹¹

132 In what follows we first discuss the relationship between nations, identity and museums
 133 and the role of the rural idyll in this relationship. We then dissect the implications of, and
 134 the cultural processes underpinning, the proposals for a Museum of British History. In
 135 particular we will focus on the designs for a 'British Landscape Gallery', as here we find
 136 proposals for exhibits which demonstrate the endurance of the ruralised reading of British
 137 national culture.¹² What this case study demonstrates is that whilst the rural idyll still has
 138 power as a fundamental component of Britain's national identity, the failure of the project,
 139 and the criticism it received, reveals the limitations of this ruralised interpretation of the
 140 nation in the face of more nuanced contemporary examinations of national museums
 141 and their function. Before, however, turning to the Museum of British History Project,
 142 we will explore the relationship between nations, identity and museums more generally,
 143 in order demonstrate how museological discourses of Britishness and Englishness have
 144 become significantly more complex and contested.

145 **Nations, identity and museums in theory**

146 *Nations and the construction of national identity*

147 It is now difficult to deny that the nation is a modern socio-political construct, rooted in
 148 the imposition of a hegemonic identity via the appropriation and accretion of symbols,
 149 customs and practices of earlier ethnic, vernacular communities from which modern
 150 nation states have shaped their traditions, formulated their visual culture, and lent
 151 themselves political legitimacy. A greater challenge for these embryonic states was to
 152 ensure that the individual identified with, and became attached to, the nation as a
 153 socio-political ideal, for example through the creation of Benedict Anderson's imagined
 154 community and its physical corollary in the standardisation of the calendar, time and
 155 language.¹³ For Raphael Samuel this sense of belonging was often engendered through
 156 a process of social conditioning which drew on shared and familiar customs, ideologies
 157 and cultural norms and was disseminated, according to Ernest Gellner, through the
 158 development of particular technologies such as print media and improved transport.¹⁴
 159 These technologies further enabled the repetitive use of such emblems, creating and
 160 reinforcing a sense of national unity and inculcating the individual into a homogenous
 161 society, which in turn became both a cultural norm and a part of the 'national rou-
 162 tine'. Here, then, is Eric Hobsbawm's and Terence Ranger's 'invention of tradition' in
 163 which the creation of a nation's myths and symbols relies upon selected elements of
 164 the past being utilised in the present.¹⁵ National identity, then, is not a 'given' but is
 165 instead based upon a 'shared interpretation' of the past, one that helps to confirm the

166 ‘self-image and aspirations of the group’, and which is conditioned by specific, but fluid
167 historical circumstances and political needs.¹⁶ Thus, whilst it is neither feasible nor
168 desirable to try to produce an exhaustive account of the making and maintaining of
169 British national identity here, it is worth examining how certain elements of England’s
170 history and culture have contributed to the construction of the collective interpretations of
171 Britishness.

172 *The hegemony of rural England and the construction of Britishness*

173 Krishnan Kumar has described Britain as England’s ‘internal Empire’, because of the
174 way England effectively subjugated the other countries of the British Isles and embarked
175 upon a programme of cultural colonialism, in which a sense of Britishness was con-
176 structed and maintained through particular institutions emanating from England, or
177 more specifically London.¹⁷ Formal education was particularly important because it
178 emphasised the English language, literature, arts and English perspectives of history,
179 all of which forced other cultures to the periphery or the private realm.¹⁸ Thus for
180 Peter Yeandle, the decline of both Gaelic and Welsh languages can be attributed to the
181 dominance of English in official and institutional life, particularly through the printing
182 of history textbooks which treated England and Britain as synonymous.¹⁹ Convergent
183 sentiment such as this is perhaps best summarised by the constitutionalist James Bryce,
184 who wrote in 1887: ‘An Englishman has but one patriotism because England and the
185 United Kingdom are to him practically the same thing’.²⁰ Revealed here also is an
186 assimilationist perspective on Britain and Britishness in which history is comprised
187 of an evolutionary Whiggish narrative which privileged and placed English culture at
188 the summit of the British state.²¹ Moreover, according to Tom Nairn, the nuances of
189 the functional distinctions between Britain as a political unit and England as a cultural
190 entity are not always recognised in these narratives with the result that English and
191 British identities have often been confused and ‘interchangeable’, from one national
192 perspective at least. This is why many politicians and indeed the English themselves
193 have often found it difficult to recognise or articulate the difference between England and
194 Britain.²²

195 Central to this near-permanent elision between the two registers of identity are national
196 landscape tropes. Critical here is the way that the imagery of Southern England has
197 become dominant within British discourses, notwithstanding the powerful interrogation
198 of the notion by David Matless.²³ The origins of this can be found in artistic manifestations
199 of the countryside which contrasted the urban squalor of the Industrial Revolution with
200 the ideal of the rural idyll. Artists such as J. M. W. Turner and John Constable and poets
201 such as Robert Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson contributed to a new landscape
202 tradition which focused upon rural England as a conduit for identity. They depicted the
203 countryside as a stable, natural landscape, ‘peopled by farmers, craftsmen and labourers
204 pursuing their cyclical toil through the seasons’.²⁴ This was a romanticised, bucolic ideal,
205 often stripped of any connotations of rural poverty or discontent, which is particularly
206 significant because it created an image of Britain/England as an ancient, harmonious and
207 politically stable country.²⁵ This was not even the English countryside as a whole, but a

208 particular vision of the south east of the country that came to dominate representations of
 209 the nation.²⁶ Here too is encountered ‘deep England’: the ancient and ingrained Anglo-
 210 Saxon landscape, with the gentle undulating hills of the South Downs and the productive,
 211 orderly fields of Kent standing for the ‘rustic’ values of stability, stoicism and obligation
 212 of the British people.²⁷ Put very crudely, the history of these sentiments can be traced
 213 through a whole series of artistic movements from the Romantics, the Pre-Raphaelites to
 214 the Arts and Crafts movement. Under the influence of John Ruskin and William Morris,
 215 founding fathers of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the rural idyll
 216 collided with the burgeoning heritage and conservation movement. The impact of this
 217 was to be felt most strongly in the early decades of the twentieth century with a whole
 218 series of satellite groups developing such as the National Trust (1884) and the Ramblers
 219 Association (1935) as well as the proposals for the English Folk Museum and the Museum
 220 of English Life and Traditions.²⁸

221 As critics like Patrick Wright and David Lowenthal have argued, this trajectory ensured
 222 that the landscape of southern England became ‘freighted as legacy’, not just for the
 223 English, but for Britain as a whole.²⁹ England and its rural landscape were constructed as
 224 a spiritual homeland, effectively functioning as a metonym for Britain and its wider
 225 Empire and excluding from the national discourse other landscapes that were seen
 226 as less harmonious and less aesthetically pleasing. And although Welsh, Scottish, and
 227 northern English landscapes and industrial and urban spaces have often been co-opted
 228 for alternative images in popular conceptions of the nation, when it came to the unobtrusive
 229 conveying of Britishness in particular, deep England and the South Country prevailed
 230 and found its way into England’s museums.³⁰

231 *The role of museums in the construction and maintenance of identity*

232 David Harvey argues that the construction and representation of identity through the
 233 use of the past is an ‘omnipresent’ of the human condition.³¹ The roots of the museum
 234 are, however, found in the private and personal collections, and signifiers of hegemonic
 235 dominance, that are the *Wunderkammer* and the Princely Gallery. Under the ideals
 236 of the Enlightenment, as typified by the Louvre, these were later translated into the
 237 great national collections, as found in the British Museum. And it is in these great
 238 public museums where the human condition is most celebrated and where the modern
 239 museum was born. However, much of the literature on the subject agrees that this
 240 process was at its zenith in the public museums of the modern period. The popular
 241 conceptualisation of a museum is that of an institution for the collection, preservation
 242 and display of items of scientific, cultural, or artistic significance for the benefit of
 243 public education. It can be argued that many of these principles particularly origi-
 244 nate in the rationalist, evidence based thinking of the modern era.³² As Pyrs Gruffudd
 245 and Eric Hobsbawm have noted, nationalism seeks to utilise the cultural and political
 246 power of a ‘rich ethno-history’ in order to construct a narrative and tradition stretching
 247 back in time in order to legitimate the present regime.³³ Many nationalist governments
 248 therefore saw the potential for museums to display the evidence of this constructed
 249 sense of national self because these institutions, through their collections and ways of

250 presenting the past, could translate 'abstract concepts into tangible and quantifiable
251 material evidence'.³⁴ It follows, therefore, that the conservation and commemoration
252 of the past is 'implicitly political', with national museums as physical articulations
253 of a 'complex of disciplinary and power relations'.³⁵ The nation becomes preserved,
254 polished and presented for public consumption. In this politics of representation, cultural
255 power lies with and is maintained through those who decide what is deemed to be
256 worthy of collection and representation in a national museum. Inevitably, therefore,
257 critiquing the role of the museum involves addressing issues of cultural hegemony and
258 influence.

259 Museums always rely on a process of 'selection and exclusion' in terms of what they
260 choose to display, and in the stories, themes and concepts they represent. One of the
261 consequences of modernity was an increasing deference to the integrity and competence
262 of the 'professional' and the concept of the 'authority' of curators and historians to
263 maintain the 'official' version of the past. This reflected a society in which 'art and
264 scholarship were a closed circle'.³⁶ As Pierre Bourdieu notes, social stratification was in
265 many ways reinforced not just by the economic resources of different classes but by their
266 access to education. He argues therefore that museological judgements about the aesthetic
267 or evidentiary 'worth' of artefacts are rooted in elitist ideas of taste and accumulated
268 knowledge.³⁷ In order to do this, museums are premised upon what John Urry calls
269 the 'aura of the authentic historical artefact' in which the exhibitory regime is based
270 upon objects that are given an authority through their fame, value, craftsmanship and
271 'authenticity'.³⁸ Objects are thus imbued with meaning through the 'exhibitory complex',
272 the modes of organisation, presentation and contextualisation employed by museums to
273 communicate a comprehensible narrative of the complex past.³⁹ Gruffudd suggests such
274 exhibitions reveal much about the 'contemporary anxieties, and contemporary desires'
275 of the society they represent.⁴⁰ In particular they represent a desire to utilise museums
276 as 'vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting' the contemporary authority of the nation's
277 elite.⁴¹

278 Despite their claims to the contrary then, modern public museums were not represen-
279 tative of the nation as a whole, but were rather, as Gans describes them, an 'elite controlled
280 cultural production' with 'a monopoly on public and visual culture'.⁴² The public's role
281 in these museums was not to question, or contribute to the discourse. Rather they were
282 passive consumers who were 'invited' to 'show gratitude and admiration' for the privilege
283 of visiting and encouraged to identify with this idea of the national culture.⁴³ What they
284 received in return was a selective articulation of the past that was designed to inculcate
285 the individual into the culture, ideas, values and meanings of the shared national identity.
286 Thus, the power of museums came from their ability to reinforce the idea that the nation
287 is a 'knowable' entity, one that can be collected, documented, and represented under one
288 roof.⁴⁴ This was reinforced by the way that museums utilised interpretative techniques.
289 Interpretation, the process through which museums and heritages sites communicate
290 with their audience, can involve a variety of media from the simple transformation of
291 information through a label, to the facilitation of a more nuanced debate through a guided
292 walk. It is, however, generally shaped by the places or contexts in which it is situated,
293 the audiences it is attempting to reach, and the desired outcomes of its producers.⁴⁵

294 During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries these elitist national museums
295 were inclined to make the 'assumption that the viewers were educated in a certain
296 manner, with a uniform understanding of how . . . objects should be interpreted'.⁴⁶
297 Consequently, exhibits commonly took the form of objects enclosed in glass cases,
298 organised using scientific and hierarchical principles with the minimal use of descriptive
299 labelling.

300 The gradual movement of museums from the academic to the public sphere during
301 the twentieth century may have been one factor in this changing approach to inter-
302 pretation. This coincided with increasing challenges from social history, post-colonial
303 politics and postmodern theories of meaning to the hegemonic discourses of history
304 and concepts of reality. The authority of museums to manifest such cultural bias has
305 been further subverted by the desire to represent cultural diversity and recognise non-
306 elite discourses and heteroglossic interpretations of the past.⁴⁷ One of the consequences
307 has been an acceptance that museums have to embrace a more diverse range of inter-
308 pretation techniques to cater for a broader audience that comes with its own set of
309 experiences and preconceptions. Such has been the extent of this rethinking that it is
310 possible to identify 'a dramatic paradigm shift in the way museum professionals, and
311 some members of the public, regard museums'. No longer, it would seem, can the
312 line hold. There has been a general movement away from 'the museum as an ivory
313 tower of exclusivity and towards the construction of a more socially responsive cultural
314 institution'.⁴⁸

315 One of the triggers for this change was Freeman Tilden's influential work for the
316 National Park Service in America, and his seminal *Interpreting Heritage* (1957). Tilden
317 counsels against positivist interpretation and the pedagogical transmission of facts, and
318 promotes techniques which create a provocative, thinking process, through which visitors
319 are encouraged to make their own meanings.⁴⁹ As Veverka points out however, this is
320 not about museums and heritage sites abrogating their educational responsibilities, but
321 rather about the realisation that communication is a constructivist, dialogic process.⁵⁰
322 Thus in the period since Tilden published his work, institutions have put significantly
323 more thought and effort into taking this approach through interpretation planning and
324 have developed ever more sophisticated ways to communicate with audiences. Exhibitions
325 are therefore likely to include not just taxonomic glass case displays, but also a diverse
326 range of experiential, interactive and stimulating interpretative media that enable visitors
327 to engage actively with the message of the museum.⁵¹

328 Examination of national museums has, therefore, shifted to focus on the inherent
329 tensions between, on the one hand, museums as institutions designed physically to
330 enshrine a particular idea of the nation and, on the other hand, a broader understanding
331 of the fluid nature of collective and personal identities.⁵² There are additional concerns
332 over reliance on the rural idyll trope as signifier of England and of an Englishness that
333 is all too easily conflated into Britishness. These developments inevitably raise questions
334 about the nature of national museums, who controls them and the interpretation of the
335 national culture they wish to impose. It is in this context that this paper will proceed to
336 consider the development of a proposed British National Museum, and, most critically,
337 the implications of its failure.

The Museum of British History Project: a case study of failure

The decline of Britain and educating the people: motivations for a national museum

For the Conservative politician John Redwood, the 1990s were a time of 'crisis' for Britain as a socio-political entity.⁵³ Greater integration with the European Union following the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, combined with the increasing power of devolutionary movements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, were seriously calling into question the continued existence of Britain as a unified sovereign state. The 1997 General Election can be seen as a microcosm of this national soul searching with the question of devolution coming to the fore. On the Conservative side, it was held that devolution was leading to a further dilution of the British state and, as Margaret Thatcher argued, represented a 'negation of our shared history and an abdication of our joint future'.⁵⁴ Conversely, Tony Blair shaped his leadership of the Labour Party in opposition to what he saw as the Conservative's regressive isolationism and nostalgic attachment to the 'pre-modern institutions of the British State'.⁵⁵

Another manifestation of uncertainty was the emergence of the Museum of British History Project under the direction of former Conservative Secretary of State for Education Kenneth Baker. Lord Baker had been passionate about history from a young age, citing the inspirational role of his own history teacher P. D. Whitting, who introduced Baker to the Historical Association and encouraged him to read their pamphlets and attend lectures.⁵⁶ Baker came to believe that:

We're all creatures of the past in one way or another and we all carry bits of the past stuck on little badges everywhere affecting us one way or another. And I thought that was essential to have the understanding.⁵⁷

Baker therefore attempted to create a more consistent history curriculum as part of his education reforms in 1988, emphasising the need to produce a narrative of British history. However, he subsequently regarded these reforms as something of a failure because history became a voluntary subject after age fourteen, allowing many pupils to miss out on what he felt were the 'valuable lessons about British history'.⁵⁸ The solution to this came to Baker following a visit to the National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico in 1995. He was inspired by the educational potential of a national history museum, and became determined to create a similar institution for Britain 'which would actually tell the whole history which every pupil in the country, I mean the whole country, would go to twice while they're at school, both at primary and secondary'.⁵⁹

Baker suggested when interviewed that he was aware from the outset that direct funding from the public purse would not be available for the project. He therefore raised money through corporate and private donations, allowing him to establish a diverse steering group of cross party politicians and businessmen in February 1996. The steering group then turned to the Millennium Commission for development capital.⁶⁰ Established in 1993, the principal aim of the Commission was to distribute National Lottery funding for 'projects with popular support which make a lasting good as we approach the third millennium'.⁶¹ Equally significant, and indicative of his South Country perspective, was Baker's consistent assertion that the museum 'had to be in London', because of its

380 positions as the social, cultural and transport hub of the nation.⁶² Thus in February
 381 1996 the committee entered into discussions about the availability of the site of St
 382 Bartholomew's hospital in London, which was due to close under National Health Service
 383 restructuring.⁶³ The steering group then commissioned architectural plans for a new
 384 museum on the site, which were submitted to the Millennium Commission in November
 385 1996. Content for the museum (it would be incorrect to call it a collection) was to be
 386 decided by a diverse group primarily comprised of academics with Professor Jeremy
 387 Black, the project's lead historian, creating the interpretation schema.⁶⁴ It is interesting
 388 to note that no museum or interpretation professional appears to have occupied any
 389 significant role and it is appropriate to consider the interpretation schema in some detail,
 390 given its significance in the project's ultimate failure and the foregrounding of the rural
 391 idyll and the South Country.

392 *Interpretation design at the Museum of British History Project*

393 The underlying principle of Professor Black's interpretation vision was that by building
 394 understanding of, and a link to, past generations, national museums reveal the impact in
 395 the present of the socio-cultural work undertaken in the past. When interviewed, Black
 396 suggested that national museums serve a social function to create 'trust between the
 397 generations in a civic polis', demonstrating the effects of the past in shaping the present
 398 and building a comprehension of past generations.⁶⁵ Black describes this process as
 399 'humane scepticism', to help the visitor realise that: 'developments are not inevitable,
 400 that there are differing ways in which history can occur, and that there are differing
 401 narratives of history, and to allow a full understanding of that, as it were, as part of the
 402 democratic citizenry'.⁶⁶ Black could therefore be seen as having identified the capacity of
 403 a national museum to reinvigorate and reinforce what Kenny terms 'the shrinkage of the
 404 imagined community'.⁶⁷

405 Whilst some of this accords with Kenneth Baker's views on the link between national
 406 museums and history education, there were clear divergences and Black's embracing of
 407 a multiplicity of histories did not fully extend to the interpretation schema. Baker was
 408 firm in his view that a national museum disseminating a historical master narrative of
 409 democratic progress could contribute to the visitors' understanding of the nation. As
 410 he argued: 'when democracy is under challenge and threat, as it is in many ways, and
 411 weakened, it is very important to go back to the birth pangs of democracy in our own
 412 country'.⁶⁸ He felt that by constructing a history focusing on 'how we've gained our
 413 liberties and freedoms some going back to Magna Carta', it could instil within the
 414 visitors a sense of citizenship and belonging.⁶⁹

415 Aiming to tell the 'complex and riveting story' of British history, and construct a
 416 'comprehensive picture' of the nation, the Museum of British History Project defined its
 417 projected institution as a 'narrative museum'.⁷⁰ The design and interpretation plan sub-
 418 mitted to the Millennium Commission was the material manifestation of this approach,
 419 with displays centred around 'five core themes: The British People, Politics and Monar-
 420 chy, Language and Culture, The British Landscape, Invention, Science and Technol-
 421 ogy'.⁷¹ The nature of these displays, however, reflected the absence of a collections and

422 conservation policy. Furthermore, in a fascinating echo of the imperial strand at the
423 core of the project, 'artefacts' and what were significantly denominated 'icons' would be
424 borrowed from other museums and private collections, with seemingly no consideration
425 given to whether these institutions would be happy to lend what often would have been
426 the centrepieces of their permanent collections.⁷² The Museum of British History would
427 have been all about the superficiality of the display. Museum as simulacrum.

428 The interpretative strategy of the Museum of British History Project makes this
429 superficiality explicit by stressing the use of 'presentation' to communicate meaning.⁷³
430 This visual narrative approach, likened by Michael Belcher to a 'three dimensional
431 essay or book', offers a chronological progression that helps the audience make sense of
432 events.⁷⁴ The Museum of British History would therefore have relied upon chronology
433 and periodisation 'to place in sequence' the 'personalities, the great events, inventions and
434 cultural depths of Britain's heritage'. This narrative would have been organised through
435 the use of timelines, infographics, animated displays and thematic storylines, housed in
436 a 'walk through linear gallery' including a 'circular drum' which would 'act as a fulcrum
437 for the curving galleries that radiate around it'.⁷⁵

438 Museums are often compared to performance spaces where the visitor enacts a prede-
439 termined route which gives them a sense of 'progress'.⁷⁶ This is particularly evident within
440 the Museum of British History Project design, which stressed the benefit of having the
441 'building and display developed together and totally interlinked'.⁷⁷ The emphasis within
442 narrative exhibitions on the communication of meaning through diverse, flexible and
443 inclusive interpretative media, rather than the slavish interpretation of authentic historical
444 artefacts, has led some theorists to suggest that they challenge traditional ideas of muse-
445 ological discernment. However, as the circulation pattern from the Museum of British
446 History Project demonstrates, this is not necessarily the case. Even without artefacts
447 guiding the interpretation, many narrative museums are still shaped by a preordained,
448 closed message, and retain their hierarchical organisation.⁷⁸ Thus a narrative museum
449 often remains intensely didactic and often fails to take advantage of the physicality of
450 the space, because the museum simply shifts the emphasis from the object to the text,
451 essentially becoming 'what amounts to a book written on the wall'.⁷⁹ The Millennium
452 Commission's response to the Museum of British History funding bid reinforces this
453 view by suggesting that the absence of permanent collections and a conservation policy
454 meant that it would not be a museum 'in the strictest definition of the word, a "pageant"
455 or "Panorama" would be a more accurate description'.⁸⁰ As such, the Museum of British
456 History could be considered thoroughly postmodern and yet closer examination of
457 the designs for the 'British Landscape Gallery' reveals a modernist, hegemonic and
458 didactic narrative of British history. There are dissonances then, between the proposed
459 interpretative techniques of the project and the nature of the museum, the medium and
460 the message, which require exploration.

The British Landscape Gallery: a critical analysis

461 Like many representations of the nation which heighten the relationship between the
462 mythologizing of the past and the politically conditioned conceptualisation of space,
463

464 the British Landscape Gallery design is a manifestation of Britishness based around
 465 traditional markers of national identity that are conterminous with Britain as a territory.⁸¹
 466 More particularly, it is a design which historicises the idealised spiritual homeland of the
 467 British, the English countryside. In the ‘circular drum’ which would have acted as a
 468 starting point and hub for this gallery, the narrative would have focused upon delineating
 469 the nation in terms of its territorial demarcations and natural formations. This would
 470 have taken the form of:

471 A 5m diameter centrepiece [showing] the British Isles and the surrounding sea, [and] indicating
 472 depths, fishing grounds and oil exploration. An additional eight smaller models were designed to
 473 reveal cliff forms, erosion, tidal bores, fishing grounds, North Sea Rigs, the Thames Barrier and
 474 the effects of the Gulf Stream.⁸²

475 A further major area was a ‘natural zone’ to include a ‘hypostyle hall showing the geology
 476 and layering of the country’s landscape from pre-history to the present day’, and a
 477 ‘greenhouse . . . heavily planted, with birds and inhabited ponds containing fish and
 478 aquatic plants’.⁸³ Here, therefore, is a manifestation of the nation typical of traditional
 479 museology in that it sees the land through the lens of scientific and rational epistemologies
 480 such as geology, physical geography, archaeology and, of course, history. This focus
 481 on the ‘evolution of our landscape’, especially when bound to a progressional nexus,
 482 powerfully suggests that the character of the nation is a natural consequence of the
 483 (predominantly rural) landscape and the way it has been managed through ‘conservation,
 484 Parliamentary enclosure, agriculture and the development of land.’⁸⁴ This suggestion is
 485 further reinforced by the nature of the exhibit on ‘man-made’ (sic) environments.⁸⁵ As
 486 illustrated in the list in [Table 1](#), this would have been dedicated to tracing the development
 487 of the British landscape through parks, gardens and country estates. It is striking to note
 488 that, whether through agricultural revolution or landscape design, these examples are
 489 all manifestations of what Peter Mandler described as England’s ‘greatest contribution
 490 to Western Civilization’, the taming and ordering of the wilderness.⁸⁶ In particular, the
 491 Museum of British History Project utilises many examples of the English landscape park,
 492 a form of landscape which, particularly through the auspices of the National Trust, has
 493 become elevated and ingrained in the national consciousness as an artful and idealised
 494 recreation of the idyllic English countryside.⁸⁷

495 What we are presented with here and what the museum’s visitors would have been
 496 faced with, is a profound statement of power and control almost wholly bound up with
 497 the rural. Here hegemonic dominance is represented by, captured in and bound up
 498 with simulacra of some of the most powerful and most vocal of the South Country
 499 landscape. Only when fully inculcated would the visitor pass to further rooms dedicated
 500 to: ‘showing the influence of the churches and monasteries on our landscape and secondly
 501 the influence of the great engineers and the history of transportation; Telford, Brunel
 502 and Stephenson’.⁸⁸ Beyond question, in its interpretation plans the Museum of British
 503 History Project represented a deeply hegemonic, ruralised and Anglocentric, master
 504 narrative reading of the British landscape.

505 The Museum of British History Project design further reinforced this narrative through
 506 its proposed use of replicated spaces and symbolic depictions which embodied a

Table 1.
Lists of landscapes contained within the Museum of British History Project design

'Man-Made' Environments
Medieval Royal Hunting Forests
Richmond Deer Park
Enclosed medieval gardens
Hampton Court
Blenheim
Stowe
Rousham
The Royal Parks in London – Hyde Park, Regents Parks and St James's
The provincial parks of Victorian Britain
Kew Gardens
Sites of 'Iconography'
Stonehenge
The White Horse of Uffington,
The London Parks
Hadrian's Wall
The City of York
Offa's Dyke
Kew Gardens
Stourhead
Stowe
Blenheim,
Avebury and the Isle of Lewis
Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal

507 thoroughly heritagised discourse of the nation. The central hub of 'The British Land-
508 scape' gallery would portray the 'iconography' of the British landscape by utilising
509 interpretative panels evoking 'standing stones', to symbolise the timelessness of the
510 landscape and the longevity of British peoples' control over that territory. On their front,
511 these standing stones would have 'relief maps of Britain' showing the chronology of land
512 development. On the reverse of the standing stones would have been illustrations of
513 'iconography through the centuries'.⁸⁹ As indicated in [table 1](#), this was an assemblage of
514 heritage sites ranging from prehistoric monuments (again) to eighteenth-century country
515 parks. Linking these images to and through the standing stones would create emblematic
516 connections between them, reframing them in an artificial grand narrative which, for
517 instance, completely ignores the nuances of definitions of Britain and the British. For
518 example, is Britain the pre-historic tribal identity of ancient Britain, or the modern
519 imperialistic construct? These and other similar distinctions are significant because what
520 the Museum of British History Project would have told the visitor was that all these
521 landscapes are connected as part of a continuous landscape tradition that speaks of deep
522 England.⁹⁰ As with the 'man-made' exhibition, these are not sites which reflect in any
523 way the everyday lived experiences or common environments of ordinary people, but
524 are instead extraordinary sites of supposed historical significance. These psychic terrains

525 would be evoked to demonstrate the timelessness of the British, but specifically the
526 English, elite, their longevity, their impact on the landscape and their unique culture.⁹¹

527 Moreover, the same gallery would have contained the starkest elision of Britain
528 and England and of Britishness and Englishness. In the British Landscape Gallery
529 there were to be virtually no references to the landscapes of Scotland or Wales, apart
530 from where they directly intersected with a wider English narrative. The central hub,
531 for example, directly linked the Isle of Lewis and its standing stones to England's
532 prehistoric landscapes at Avebury and Stonehenge. More subtly, but no less profoundly,
533 two landscapes on the list, Offa's Dyke and Hadrian's Wall, are border demarcations
534 that have helped to separate England both physically and psychologically from Wales
535 and Scotland respectively. These are of course landscapes that manifest elite militarised
536 control over essentially rural space and reinforce the internal imperialistic undertones
537 at the heart of the project. Arguably, even the urban environment would have been co-
538 opted to demonstrate England's cultural and political dominance over Britain. Edinburgh
539 New Town was to be utilised in the 'History of Settlement' display to demonstrate
540 urban planning. The seventeenth-century New Town development marked a high point
541 in the Georgian architectural style that developed in England and was disseminated
542 across its colonies to replace vernacular styles. The New Town was therefore used to
543 symbolise Scotland's commitment and loyalty to the Crown and the Union, as evidenced
544 by street names with Royal connections such as George Street and Charlotte Square.⁹²
545 The inclusion of this landscape in a British national museum came loaded with political
546 and cultural meaning.

547 Drawing on the 'John Bull school of English historiography', the British Landscape
548 Gallery would have been the epitome of Laurajane Smith's Authorised Heritage Dis-
549 course, in which selected sites become transformed into symbols of national heritage
550 through the interpretative auspices of institutions of hegemonic dominance such as
551 English Heritage, the National Trust and national museums.⁹³ In making use of sites
552 already solidified and ingrained in the national narrative through their repetitive use by
553 museums, heritage organisations, text books and other media, the Museum of British
554 History Project was clearly conceptualised to continue that hegemonic position. The
555 interpretative ethos of the Museum of British History Project was to utilise a gamut
556 of multidisciplinary interpretative methodologies including sound recordings, computer
557 images, pictures, costumed interpreters and other simulacra to transmit the authorised
558 heritage discourse to its audience.⁹⁴ Ultimately then, what the Museum of British History
559 Project intended to do in the British Landscape Gallery was draw on, and perpetuate, a
560 very particular sense of England and Englishness, founded in the South Country myth
561 but disguised as British national identity. In so doing the project took advantage of
562 the fact that landscapes, as 'exemplars of moral order and aesthetic harmony' have
563 the power to 'picture the nation'.⁹⁵ Further, this narrow reading of rural England,
564 promulgated by the Museum of British History Project, was mobilised in support of
565 constructions of a national sense of self that is imbricated within a particular hegemonic,
566 centralist reading of Britishness based around the nation as a homogenous, consistent
567 and harmonious entity. However such hegemonic, centralised readings of Britishness are
568 precisely why the project was ultimately rejected, not once, but twice. As this reveals

569 the limits of the cultural power of the South Country at a very particular moment in
570 time, it is appropriate that the last substantive section of this paper should consider this
571 failure.

572 **New Labour, the rejection of past and the limitations of the rural**

573 In January 1997 the Millennium Commission submitted its assessment of the Museum of
574 British History Project. This recognised the project's potential as an 'innovative educative
575 resource' but declined to fund it.⁹⁶ In part, this was due to the impracticality of the
576 scheme. The Museum of British History Project steering committee had not secured
577 the St Bartholomew's site, and there were concerns over the projected running costs
578 and estimated timescale, which would not see the museum open until 2001. But beyond
579 these practical issues there was a sense that the project simply did not fit the remit of
580 the Millennium Commission to 'fund projects across a wide range of locations, some
581 off the tourist trail, to give the whole of the United Kingdom the opportunity to share
582 in the bounty'.⁹⁷ This meant an emphasis on projects that engaged with and benefited
583 local communities, non-traditional audiences and environmental and urban regeneration
584 projects. When measured against such criteria, the Museum of British History Project
585 was adjudged to be 'less distinctive than other applications received'.⁹⁸

586 Having been rejected by the Millennium Commission, Baker then proposed a national
587 history exhibition for the Millennium Dome but was unequivocally told by Lord Faulkner,
588 the minister in charge of the project, that there would be 'no history under the Dome'.⁹⁹
589 Baker's view of this was that it was a reflection of 'his master's voice' in that 'when Blair
590 won in '97, he wasn't remotely interested in history, not remotely . . . to him history began
591 on May 19th 1997, it was the beginning of a new dawn and a new age'.¹⁰⁰ Certainly the
592 ethos of the Millennium Commission, and the direction taken by the Millennium Dome
593 closely mirror Prime Minister Tony Blair's attitudes to Britishness captured in his book
594 *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country*, which sought to depict Britain as progressive
595 country, no longer rooted in the past.¹⁰¹ Heritage and history were intrinsic to the
596 'backward looking' Conservative ideology that the 'forward looking' Labour Government
597 wished to undo. The subsequent rebranding of the Department of National Heritage as
598 the Department for Culture Media and Sport in July 1997 represented a deliberate
599 attempt to create a new civic identity and political discourse shaped around 'modern'
600 creative industries.¹⁰² This strategy began with the implementation of a report from the
601 cross party think-tank Demos, published in January 1997, the focus of which was on
602 renewing identity and rebranding Britain. Entitled *Britain TM*, the report was critical of
603 the country's image as a 'theme park world', stuck in the past and dominated by outmoded
604 images of heritage and pageantry.¹⁰³ Importantly for the prospects of the Museum of
605 British History Project, the Demos report concluded that the future of Britain's culture lay
606 in commodifiable and exportable 'contemporary' and 'creative' industries such as music
607 and fashion, and not in heritage and museums.¹⁰⁴ This is ironic considering criticism
608 from scholars such as Robert Hewison and David Lowenthal about the manner in which
609 the heritage 'industry' has manipulated and commodified Britain's past for its present
610 needs.¹⁰⁵

611 After the rejection of the proposal to put a national museum in the Millennium Dome
 612 in June 1997, Kenneth Baker effectively wound down the Museum of British History
 613 Project because: 'I was getting nowhere, I couldn't see a way forward'.¹⁰⁶ At the very
 614 least, this suggests that the power of deep England and the South Country to make
 615 and maintain a sense of English/British national identity was turned aside. It is not
 616 without irony, therefore, that the revival of this project should have been under the
 617 auspices of a Labour government. In December 2007, against a backdrop of doubts
 618 and uncertainties about the nature of Britishness in a multicultural society and with the
 619 Conservative supporting newspaper the *Daily Telegraph* running a 'Call Yourself British'
 620 campaign, Kenneth Baker approached the Prime Minister with a proposal to revive the
 621 Museum of British History Project with the same contents and interpretation policies but
 622 in a different location, although still in London.¹⁰⁷ Remarkably, Prime Minister Brown
 623 publicly endorsed the need for a national museum, stating that: 'We will focus not just
 624 on how a museum could relate the narrative of British history, but how it could celebrate
 625 the great British values on which our culture, politics and society have been shaped'.¹⁰⁸

626 Brown consequently commissioned the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council, the
 627 non-departmental body which advised the government on policy for this sector, to run
 628 a consultation process on the project during 2008. This involved a series of seminars
 629 and interviews with 'museum professionals, historians, educationalists and others'.¹⁰⁹ In
 630 October 2008, Roy Clare, chairman of the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council,
 631 delivered the results of this process in a paper entitled *Towards a Museum of British*
 632 *History*. This perfectly reflected the museum culture shift noted earlier, certain aspects of
 633 which the Museum of British History Project had blithely ignored in each of its iterations,
 634 and which can be summarised as the new museology.¹¹⁰ Despite suggesting that 'the
 635 overwhelming majority' of those consulted did not support a new national museum,
 636 the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council report agreed that the 'full potential of
 637 the UK's collection is not being realised'.¹¹¹ Yet the report concluded that a narrative-
 638 driven, London centric institution, drawing on outmoded historiographical traditions and
 639 reinforcing hegemonic tropes of national identity, was not how this should be achieved.
 640 The view was taken that:

641 A single location could not present the complex and diverse history of our country in an innovative
 642 and thought-provoking way that does justice to the many possible cultural components; nor could
 643 it attract and engage people locally and elicit responses from communities in ways that promote
 644 broader cultural understanding and foster identity.¹¹²

645 This led to a proposal to establish a Museum Centre for British History which would
 646 coordinate national events and exhibitions within existing institutions and promote local
 647 museums as a more effective way to encourage engagement with the national collections.¹¹³
 648 Underpinned by digital resources, the Centre would adopt a federal structure that would
 649 involve all public collections and coordinate research, scholarship, skills and themes across
 650 the United Kingdom. This essentially small-scale organisation would act to disperse
 651 visitors across the museum sector, functioning as a 'gateway for visitors' by supporting
 652 the national curriculum, producing themed programmes and events and developing
 653 commercial and marketing partnerships. The report insisted that through this approach

654 and a dispersed funding model which would invest in a diverse range of museums across
655 Britain, the Museum Centre for British History would achieve the desired outcome
656 of ‘presenting and illuminating all aspects of British history’.¹¹⁴ Ultimately, whilst the
657 report acknowledged that the dispersed model required funding and coordination on
658 a national level to achieve its aim, the Centre had to promote ‘local and community’
659 initiatives. Therefore, the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council report rejected the
660 need for any physical monolithic museum, and specifically the Museum of British History
661 Project. Their conclusion on the Museum of British History Project was that: ‘We are
662 not convinced this is the most effective way to reach wide, non-traditional audiences, nor
663 does it make the most of existing investment in museums, libraries, archives and heritage
664 sites across the UK’.¹¹⁵

665 Baker’s response was unequivocal: ‘This is a huge opportunity missed and a damp
666 squib. UK museums tell part of the history but no institution pulls it all together. We
667 now have the option of a British history Nintendo website.’¹¹⁶ Ultimately however, with
668 the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council unwilling to support the foundation of a
669 national museum, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport unconvinced by
670 their recommendations for an online facility, the project ‘ran into the sand’ as Baker
671 put it.¹¹⁷ It has never been revived. Central to this final miring of the project was the
672 opposition, emerging in part from the new museology, of politicians, historians and
673 curators to the imposition of a single master narrative. Those who were critical of national
674 museums principally based their opposition on the belief that these were exercises in
675 historical exceptionalism. As such, national museums were understood to utilise their
676 control over the images and artefacts within their exhibition spaces to demonstrate why
677 the nation has been singled out for greatness by destiny. As expressed by Simon Tait in
678 the *Independent* newspaper, and commenting on the Museum of British History Project
679 specifically, national museums as a genre represented a ‘drum and trumpet, Westminster
680 and Whitehall view of history’.¹¹⁸ Tristram Hunt, the then historian and now politician,
681 was another who asserted that

682 State-sanctioned museums of national narratives are dubious projects. Far more successful in our
683 civil society is our pluralism of museums. Because of the richness of our history, it would be very
684 difficult to create a single narrative story in a single museum. If you go down this road of national
685 museums pursuing a political agenda and directors being appointed by the minister of culture, you
686 invalidate the autonomy of our cultural and heritage sector.¹¹⁹

687 Intriguingly, in February 2016, Hunt utilised his regular column in the *Guardian* news-
688 paper to assert that ‘Labour must embrace Englishness – and be proud of it’.¹²⁰ Perhaps
689 life remains in the old master narrative after all.

690 Further opposition centred around, firstly, the fact that the Museum of British History
691 Project would have no permanent collection but that it would cherry-pick the most impor-
692 tant parts of other collections. Strong voices against the London base were also heard. Alec
693 Coles, director of the Tyne and Wear Museums, was particularly disapproving, stating
694 that: ‘The last thing we need is another building that perpetuates the idea that Britishness
695 only happens in London’.¹²¹ Underlying all this was the belief that the Museum of British
696 History was fundamentally and philosophically unable to deliver a sufficiently nuanced

697 view of the past for a postmodern and polyvocal age. In an article in the *Independent*
 698 newspaper in August 1997, for instance, Rupert Cornwall commented that '[History's]
 699 essence is argument; one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist. If it truly
 700 seeks to distinguish itself, the Baker museum must acknowledge that Britain's record,
 701 like that of every other country, is not pristine white but a tapestry of greys'.¹²² This is a
 702 philosophy which he appears to have shared with Jeremy Black.

703 Once again, the Museum of British History Project was confronted by opposition from
 704 within the new museology but it also fell foul of an equally dramatic shift in approaches to
 705 communication and interpretation.¹²³ Central to this has been a shift from 'positivist' to
 706 'constructivist' approaches to interpretation and communication, with the emergence of a
 707 view of heritage, and indeed landscape, as a cognitive and mnemonic assemblage, in which
 708 every individual has their own experience or interpretation. What this new approach has
 709 wrought is perhaps best summarised by Anderson:

710 The traditional communication ideology of the museum has been to see the museum as the holder
 711 of knowledge and truth with a responsibility to exercise one-way communication *to* the public. In
 712 the reinvented museum, communication *between* museum and public is exemplified by a mutually
 713 respectful relationship; the ideology of two-way communication *with* the public creates a more
 714 responsive interchange of ideas.¹²⁴

715 It is not difficult to position the schema developed by the Museum of British History
 716 Project on the positivist/constructivist interpretation spectrum. Indeed, museums which
 717 function solely as didactic storehouses of 'culture', reminiscent of the Museum of British
 718 History proposal, stand further accused of failing to encourage the participation of social
 719 groups not normally engaged with ideas of heritage.¹²⁵ In their paradigm shift, museum
 720 leaders no longer perceive people as passive consumers, but rather as individuals with
 721 unique perspectives and a capacity to make their own choices about the construction of
 722 heritage.

723 Thus, by the 1990s when Kenneth Baker was trying to persuade the museum sector that
 724 a didactic Museum of British History was exactly what it needed, the heritage landscape
 725 had changed significantly, moving away from rigid ideas of national heritage in order to
 726 embrace a diverse range of sites and artefacts to embrace a multiplicity of periods and social
 727 classes. This process was partly driven by governments, local authorities and civic groups
 728 utilising localised heritage to regenerate the regions economically and socially, however it
 729 was also an ideological expression of heritage as diverse and inclusive. In this discourse,
 730 perhaps the antithesis of the Authorised Heritage Discourse, any form of centralisation
 731 or imposition of national narratives 'degrades cultural complexity' and 'reduces places
 732 to stage sets, someone's idea of the past, tourist destinations, one dimensional and
 733 unsatisfying'.¹²⁶ It is clear that the Museum of British History Project faced both a
 734 political and a cultural movement away from national museums and hegemonic readings of
 735 Britishness and towards an increasingly diverse and regionalised heritage sector.¹²⁷ This
 736 raises the question of where this failure to establish a Museum of British History leaves
 737 the relationship between national identity and museums. It is to this critical question that
 738 we turn by way of conclusion.

739 **Conclusion**

740 Unquestionably, national museums had the power, drawing on national myths, stories,
741 icons and landscapes, to make and maintain a sense of national identity. In terms of
742 an English national museum, in all three failed attempts, the landscape which lay at
743 the heart of the project was the rural landscape of the mythologised South Country.
744 Even if we take Prime Minister John Major's famous aphorism 'Fifty years on from
745 now, Britain will still be the country of long shadows on cricket grounds' as proof of
746 the continuing strength of the rural idyll in British national life, we must now have
747 to question whether it retains its former resonance.¹²⁸ This does not mean that the
748 Authorised Heritage Discourse has lost its power to animate and materialise hegemonic
749 dominance, but the recurrent failure to establish the Museum of British History clearly
750 indicates the manner in which hegemonic discourses have shifted. Put simply, the creation
751 of a national museum in London at the end of the twentieth century was an unlikely
752 prospect. The political will was not present in 1997 and, notwithstanding the backing of
753 Prime Minister Gordon Brown in 2008, at no time did the new museology waver in its
754 opposition to this new museum built on nationalistic and homogenising principles, an
755 old master narrative, old ideas of communication and interpretation and visions of an old
756 England.

757 Shortly before Kenneth Baker visited the National Museum of Anthropology of
758 Mexico in 1995, John Tunbridge and Gregory Ashworth published one of the most
759 important books of the early critical heritage studies.¹²⁹ In *Dissonant Heritage*, the authors
760 were the first to assert that all heritage disinherits; that the same heritage can mean
761 different things to different people and thus engender nationalist conflicts; that heritage
762 carries within it disjuncture, fracture and discord. To say that the Museum of British
763 History Project's muddling (to put it generously) of England and Britain did not help
764 Kenneth Baker's cause is certainly no exaggeration and is itself an example of dissonance.
765 Here too the project came up against opposition based firmly in the new museology.
766 Thus, in their criticism of the continued conflation of Englishness and Britishness the
767 Museum, Libraries and Archives Council asserted that 'any new project would need to
768 be sensitive to the range of meanings implied by such terms as English, Scottish, Welsh,
769 Northern Irish, British, the British Isles and the United Kingdom'.¹³⁰ Intriguingly, this
770 argument for the drawing of clear distinctions between these politically loaded terms
771 in museum narratives was in direct contrast with the museological ethos to avoid such
772 proscriptive definitions. Here, then, is a further layering of dissonance and, in a perfect
773 reflection of the polyvocal and polysemic nature of heritage, other layers of the dissonance
774 onion peel can be removed. Beyond question the principles which underlay the Museum
775 of British History Project were those of the modernist, rational and elitist mind set of the
776 modern museum which perfectly reflects its nationalist perspective. And yet, because it
777 did not seek a permanent collection and consequently eschewed a conservation policy, the
778 project adopted the techniques of the postmodern museum in its interpretation policies:
779 interactives and simulacra. Moreover, there are at least two different levels dissonance
780 discernible within the project. The first is between postmodern interpretation techniques,
781 embracing some of the principles of constructivism, and the modernist, didactic museum.

782 The second is in the challenge to the nature of the museum, with no permanent collection
 783 and no conservation policy. A further dissonance derives from the exclusionary claims to
 784 national identity.

785 In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the attempts of the museum com-
 786 munity to circumvent the tensions caused by these dissonances focused on the multiple
 787 layers of Britain national identities as a geographically bound culture contained within,
 788 but distinct from, the expansive and inclusive notion of Britishness.¹³¹ What emerged
 789 then, was a version of national culture which embraced the plurality of postmodernity
 790 and perceived the nation as a fluid social, political and historical construct, and the nation's
 791 heritage as a cultural mosaic, all parts of which were endowed with equal validity and a role
 792 in constructing the nation.¹³² In the heritage and museum context therefore, Britishness,
 793 and indeed Englishness, have developed into indistinct, if not fluid, identities, because
 794 they have become increasingly diverse. As Michael Kenny argues, there is: 'No such
 795 thing as Englishness. Rather, there are different contending versions of what it means to
 796 be English'.¹³³ In the Museum of British History Project, the refusal to even recognise
 797 this possibility and the dogmatic insistence on England and Englishness as indissolubly
 798 Britain and Britishness were to be the rocks upon which the project would founder. The
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