CHAPTER 4

History

Introduction

Although we have referred to history and used material from the past in the previous chapters, we have not, so far, considered what we mean by 'history' and how we might approach the past as students of culture. In chapter 1 we wrote about the 'contemporary turn to culture', and in recent decades the study of history has been influenced, along with literature and sociology, by this 'cultural turn'. It is not necessary to have studied history in order to engage with the material in this chapter. If, up to now, you have not enjoyed historical study you may find that approaching the past through culture offers perspectives that stimulate a new interest. If you have enjoyed history we hope you will find material and ideas in this chapter that provoke fresh insights.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'history' as 'a continuous, usually chronological, record of important or public events'. However, we tend to use the word 'history' far more broadly than this. We say of a person, 'she has a history', meaning she has an exciting or chequered past; or we say 'anyway, it's all history now', by which we mean that certain events are over and done with – relegated to the past. History as studied in universities or at school tends to follow the dictionary definition: students study 'important or public events'. Professional historians construct the chronological record of important events, and what constitutes an important event is the subject matter of historical debate and research. The point is that history is a human construction, or perhaps more accurately a reconstruction. The past does not present itself 'as it really was': writing history involves the interpretation and selection of elements in the past to produce an account that 'makes sense' to those who read or study it in the present. Think back to chapter 3, where we introduced you to the concept of 'representation'. History is one of the ways in which we re-present the past in the present, and like all representations it requires a set of shared understandings or a discourse within which it becomes meaningful. For example, from the eighteenth century onwards there was a widespread belief in progress and evolution. Many nineteenth-century historians stressed the ways in which the past had been improved upon or could be learned from. History demonstrated the onward march of civilization and the lessons to be learned from its failures. Yet the writing of history from within a discourse of progress was itself one of the elements of nineteenth-century culture

that *produced* a discourse of progress. In the twentieth century, two world wars, the threat of nuclear war and the continuing existence of poverty, starvation and barbarism have exposed the myth of progress. Contemporary accounts of the past are less likely to emphasize history as a continuing triumph of 'civilization' over 'the primitive'. Raymond Williams (1976, p. 147) comments, 'history as a tale of accidents, unforeseen events, frustration of conscious purposes . . . is probably a specific 20th century form of history as general process, though now used, in contrast with the sense of achievement or promise of the earlier and still active versions, to indicate a general pattern of frustration and defeat' (Williams, 1976, p. 147).

Nevertheless, the belief that history is a story of gradual and sustained progress is one that is often implicit in discussions about the past. We all want to believe that the world can become a more humane place. The past could be represented by a catalogue of random, arbitrary events, unconnected with each other or with the present, but this is rarely the case. History is a way of creating order out of the mass of material that is the past's legacy to the present. In chapter 2, when we looked at autobiography, we suggested that life stories were a way in which individuals shaped the random experience of their lives into something with meaning. To represent the past by selecting certain versions of events or certain personages as significant is to create an order that bestows meaning on the events, people and objects of past times. Choosing, as historians do, to represent the past in terms of cause and effect or as less evolved than the present are two of the ways in which specific meanings of the past are produced and circulated. If you recall, in chapter 1 we introduced you to the definition of culture as 'the production and circulation of meanings'. History, in all its forms, and it has many, as we shall see, is therefore a key practice in the processes of culture. In this chapter we shall be exploring history as one aspect of culture and identity. Social groups, nations and communities all have their histories. History is one of the ways in which human beings acquire identities and make sense of the world and their experience of it. Thinking about how the past is represented, and ideas about it are communicated, in the present can offer insights into the process by which meaning is produced and circulated. So we begin this chapter by posing the question 'what is history?'; we then discuss some recent challenges to orthodox **paradigms** of history, and finally, we want you to think about history as a cultural product, a commodity that is consumed and produced in the present. In order to do this, you will be invited to engage in a discussion about what is often called 'the heritage' industry.

The past 'as it really was'?

In his book *The Nature* of *History*, the historian Arthur Marwick identifies three senses in which the term 'history' is used. As you read this extract note down the three different meanings Marwick identifies.

4.1

'History' as commonly used has three levels of meaning. First it can connote the entire human past as it actually happened. Life, doubtless, would be simpler if this usage could be abandoned in favour of the unambiguous locution 'the past'. Language however is a common property, ill-defined, often badly cultivated, but not subject to enclosure by precious academics. Even those scholars who have publicly renounced this usage of the word will be found at some stage to betray themselves, for it is very hard to avoid such plump pronouncements as 'History is not the handwork of hero-figures', or 'Now is the time to take stock of human history'. History, secondly and more usefully, connotes man's [*sic*] attempt to describe and interpret that past: it is, in the words of Professor Barraclough, 'the attempt to discover on the basis of fragmentary evidence the significant things about the past'. This is the history with which we are concerned when we talk of history as a social necessity, of history being an 'industry'; which comes nearest to the original Greek meaning, 'Inquiry'. Some ventures in discovery or inquiry are clearly more successful than others: some ages have regarded as 'significant' matters which we would now relegate to the realms of superstition, myth or polemic. We can enjoy and profit from historical works spread across the entire timespan of human literary activity, such as those of Thucydides, Ssu-ma Chi'en, Bede or Machiavelli: but we must note that the systematic study of history, history as a *discipline* (the third meaning), is a very recent phenomenon, becoming established in West European and North American universities only in the nineteenth century, far in arrears of philosophy, classical languages, mathematics and natural sciences. In this book we shall be specially concerned with the development of modern historical studies; but an important theme will be the difficult, but highly exciting tensions generated between history as an academic and sometimes pedantic discipline, and history as an essential facet of human experience. (Marwick, 1970, p. 15).

The term 'history' is often used as synonymous with 'the past'. However, in its earliest use history meant a narrative of events which had passed. In this sense its meaning was very close to that of story; either history or story might be used to connote imaginative accounts of events or accounts of events which were assumed to have happened. History, meaning an account of past events, also included the idea of inquiry: why did this happen; what caused it to happen? In a third sense history connotes the academic discipline of history, in which scholarly, systematic methods are applied to the source material from which interpretations of past events are constructed and disseminated.

4.1

Read the following statements and note against each one which of the three senses of 'history' is being used.

1 I really enjoyed reading the novel, *The History of Mr Polly*.
2 It's all history now!
3 Visiting museums can teach us a lot about history.

4 That film was an excellent piece of history.
5 I hope to go on to study history at university.
6 Many of Shakespeare's plays offer a version of history.
7 Shakespeare used drama to present history.
8 The history of football in this country has yet to be written.
9 The history we were taught at school was not very interesting.

Don't worry if you found it difficult to distinguish between history as an academic discipline and history as a less scholarly account of the past, but do ensure you understand the distinction between history as the past and history as the reconstruction, narrating and interpretation of the past (whether academic or not). Points 2, 3 and 6 are using history to mean the past, 5 and 9 are using history to mean the scholarly, academic discipline, 1, 4, 7 and 8 are using history in a more generalized sense, to suggest a narrative account of the past. In the rest of this chapter it is the second and third meanings of the term 'history' with which we are concerned.

Marwick makes a distinction between the disciplined, systematic study of the past undertaken by academic historians and 'history as an essential facet of human experience'. By the latter he has in mind the ways in which the past is made sense of in a variety of ways other than the scholarly work of professional historians. While he concedes that 'superstition, myth and polemic' have been important as ways of passing on knowledge of the past, his implication is that it is only through the academic discipline of history that we can gain a 'true' understanding of past events. The nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke, who pioneered the modern discipline of history, was concerned that history should be seen as a science, providing facts and objective deductions. For Ranke, history should aim to present the past as 'it actually was'. Marwick, while acknowledging that Ranke may have been somewhat optimistic in believing that history can inevitably yield an 'exact, objective, scientific account of "what actually happened" ', writes within the paradigm of history established by Ranke (Marwick, 1986, p. 16). The aim of scholarly history should be to represent as closely as possible the events of the past as 'they really happened'. In order to achieve this, the historian's task is to produce an interpretation of past events from a range of primary sources, the most important of which are written documents produced in the period being studied (manuscript materials). Autobiographies, oral accounts, folk-lore, novels and ballads, although essential in order 'to understand an age from, as it were, the inside', may not give the historian 'one single piece of concrete information' (Marwick, 1970, p. 139). In order to reconstruct and interpret the past, professional historians require a lengthy training in the analysis of primary source material and the use of footnotes and bibliographies, as well as access to archive materials. They are the 'experts' in interpreting the past: those who write autobiographies or trace their family's genealogy or collect nursery rhymes are 'amateur' historians. The history produced by 'experts' tends to be assigned a privileged place in hierarchies of knowledge, and for this reason, it can be argued, historians play a significant role in the 'production and circulation of meanings'.

You will recall that in chapter 3 we discussed the concept of discourse as a process by which certain forms of knowledge are produced. Marwick offers what was,

until the 1960s, an orthodox view of historical **epistemology**; a view which concurs with a specific understanding or discourse of what constitutes valid knowledge more generally. Orthodox historical research is concerned with the systematic production of 'objective' knowledge. It is 'scientific', seeking out facts and proven hypotheses. In pursuit of 'objectivity', myth, anecdote, personal and fictional accounts are relegated to a secondary place, in which the meanings or knowledges offered through subjectivity, polemic and imagination can be categorized as less 'true'.

Now read the following extract from *The Pursuit of History*, by John Tosh.

4.2

Whereas the individual's sense of his or her past arises spontaneously, historical knowledge has to be produced. Society has a past which extends back far beyond the lives of the individuals who happen to comprise it at any one time, the raw materials out of which a historical consciousness can be fashioned are accordingly almost unlimited. Those elements which find a place in it represent a selection of truths which are deemed worthy of note. Who produces historical knowledge, and who validates it for general consumption, are therefore important questions. How well the job is done has a bearing on the cohesion of society and its capacity for renewal and adaptation in the future. That is why what historians do should matter to everyone else. Their work can be manipulated to promote desired forms of social consciousness; it can remain confined to academic circles, powerless to influence society for good or ill; or it can become the basis for informed and critical discussion of current issues. (Tosh, 1984, p. 2)

Tosh raises some important questions about the social and cultural significance of historical knowledge. Let us explore these further.

4.2

- Think back to the history you learned at school. What topics can you recall covering? Which nations' histories did you learn about? Which social groups did you learn about? Following Tosh, can you identify 'those elements' which have found a place in your 'historical consciousness'? Can you think of any period, group, place and/or ideas of which you have little historical knowledge?
- Can you think of examples of history being used as a starting point for 'informed and critical discussion of current issues'?

The point Tosh is making is that the production of historical knowledge is political, by which we mean that researching, writing and disseminating history is one of the means by which power relations can be sustained. For example, in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the state rewrites the history books in order to construct a version of the past in which the current totalitarian regime is presented as the best and, indeed, the only way of ordering society. Equally,

writing and researching history can contest existing power relations. Tosh cites a resolution carried by the International Congress of African Historians in 1965, which stated 'that an African philosophy of history which would serve as a liberation from the colonial experience must be a vital concern of all historians studying in Africa' (Tosh, 1991, p. 5). Making visible those whom the history books have ignored can challenge the apparent 'naturalness' of a historically specific social order. Serious discussions of the position of women in society by feminists gained momentum in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some, like Sheila Rowbotham's *Hidden from History*, took the invisibility of women in the historical record as a starting point for the recovery of a history of women (Rowbotham, 1973).

In 1963, the Marxist historian, E. P. Thompson published *The Making of the English Working Class*, in which he argued that the working class did not 'rise like the sun at an appointed time' but 'was present at its own making' (Thompson, 1963, p. 8). By this he means that working-class people in the early nineteenth century were actively involved in the process by which they acquired a consciousness of themselves as working class. They were not simply born into a pre-given 'class' but, by their own agency, created a set of relations with others whose interests were different from theirs. In terms of our understanding of culture, they were actively engaged in the process of producing certain meanings which contributed to the social phenomenon we understand as 'class'. Now read the following extract from Thompson's preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*.

4.3

This is a group of studies, on related themes, rather than a consecutive narrative. In selecting these themes I have been conscious, at times, of writing against the weight of prevailing orthodoxies. There is the Fabian orthodoxy, in which the great majority of working people are seen as passive victims of *laisser faire*, with the exception of a handful of far-sighted organizers (notably, Francis Place). There is the orthodoxy of the empirical economic historians, in which working people are seen as a labour force, as migrants, or as the data for statistical series. There is the 'Pilgrim's Progress' orthodoxy, in which the period is ransacked for forerunners – pioneers of the Welfare State, progenitors of a Socialist Commonwealth, or (more recently) early exemplars of rational industrial relations. Each of these orthodoxies has a certain validity. All have added to our knowledge. My quarrel with the first and second is that they tend to obscure the agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed by conscious efforts, to the making of history. My quarrel with the third is that it reads history in the light of subsequent preoccupations, and not as in fact it occurred. Only the successful (in the sense of those whose aspirations anticipated subsequent evolution) are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten.

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' handloom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies

may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties. (Thompson, 1968, pp. 11–12)

Don't worry if you don't understand many of the historical references. However, if you are interested, do follow these up in Thompson's book. For now the point to try to grasp is the significance of Thompson's challenge to 'prevailing orthodoxies'.

4.3

- Do you think history ('posterity') has represented working people in ways that are condescending? Can you think of any examples from history books, TV programmes, films?
- Why do you think it matters whether working people are represented, for example, as victims of an economic system? Are there consequences for the way in which they are treated? You could remind yourself of the conclusion of chapter 3 if you feel you need help with this question.

Thompson's history has justifiably been highly influential. As an account of the experiences, values and beliefs of 'ordinary' people at a moment of dramatic social change, *The Making of the English Working Class* contested the idea that history was inevitably about the great and good (or bad). Moreover, it demonstrated that 'ordinary' people could act as agents of social change and were not simply at the mercy of historical and economic forces beyond their control. Such a belief is important, as it can enable 'ordinary' people to believe that social change might be possible. This was important in the 1960s, as movements 'from below' challenged the dominance of the most powerful groups in society. In the 1960s, student demonstrations, the Civil Rights movement, the women's liberation movement and youth sub-cultures, more generally, questioned the right of a small, powerful elite to control access to knowledge and wealth. Writing in the 1960s, Thompson's concern for the 'poor stockinger', like Rowbotham's for the invisibility of women, is, at least in part, intimately connected to the preoccupations of their present. In the present our dialogue with Thompson as well as our dialogue with 'the poor stockinger' are equally related to our contemporary concerns. It could be argued that in the present we construct the past we would like: historians, like Marwick, Tosh, Thompson and Rowbotham, remain critically alert to the dynamics of this tension, but in less scrupulous hands history can become a powerful weapon in political struggle. None the less, an awareness of a shared history is one of the most powerful ways in which group identities, be they family, national, ethnic or social, are formed and strengthened.

4.4

- Think about your own sense of identity. Are you conscious of sharing a history with others? How would it feel if you had no knowledge of the history of the people with whom you share a sense of belonging? Look back to the discussion on identities in chapter 2 to help with this.
- Look out for examples of history being used to create bonds between people. The newspapers and TV would be useful sources for this exercise.

When you write, rewrite or read history you should aim for a critical awareness of the relation between past and present and of the part history can play in the shaping of identities. This takes us back to Tosh's point about the ways in which history can become 'the basis for informed and critical discussion of current issues'.

Challenges to objectivity: post-structuralist theories of history

In recent years the Rankean paradigm of history, within which the historians discussed above work, has been radically challenged. Indeed, the work of Rowbotham and Thompson questions the supposed 'objectivity' of history, revealing the gaps and omissions in the historical record that functioned to hide certain groups from historical scrutiny, and the significance of historical interpretation that, consciously or not, reconstructs in line with present preoccupations. However, recent post-structuralist theories have gone further, questioning the very nature of that reality the historian aims to reconstruct. The German critic, Walter Benjamin, wrote, 'The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably' (Benjamin, 1973, p. 257). So far we have assumed that the past is a reality that can be accessed and thus faithfully reproduced by the historian in the present. Benjamin problematizes this belief, suggesting instead that the past can never be recognized 'as it really was', but only in the ephemeral and transient form of flashing images which if not immediately grasped by the present are forever lost.

4.5

- Think of a historical period that you have some knowledge of, however limited. Could your knowledge of this period be characterized as 'flashing images'? What is missing in your mental picture of the period?
- Think back to your own childhood. How do you know what happened when you were very small?
- If the past can only be known as 'flashing images', what becomes of the historian's authority to represent the past 'as it really was'?

We want now to introduce you to another way in which orthodox **historiography** has been challenged in recent years. Historiography means the process by which history is written. Read the following extract by Hayden White, an American historiographer, from his book *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*. White begins by making a distinction between histories and chronicles, where a chronicle is understood to be simply a list of events in chronological order of their occurrence.

4.4

Historical *stories* trace the sequences of events that lead from inaugurations to (provisional) terminations of social and cultural processes in a way that *chronicles* are not required to do. Chronicles are, strictly speaking, open-ended. In principle they have no inaugurations; they simply 'begin' when the chronicler starts recording events. And they have no culminations or resolutions; they can go on indefinitely. Stories, however, have a discernible form (even when that form is an image of a state of chaos) which marks off the events contained in them from the other events that might appear in a comprehensive chronicle of the years covered in their unfoldings.

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by 'finding', 'identifying', or 'uncovering' the 'stories' that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between 'history' and 'fiction' resides in the fact that the historian 'finds' his stories, whereas the fiction writer 'invents' his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which 'invention' also plays a part in the historian's operations. The same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical stories, depending on the role it is assigned in a specific motific characterization of the set to which it belongs. The death of the king may be a beginning, an ending, or simply a transitional event in three different stories. In the chronicle, this event is simply 'there' as an element of a series; it does not 'function' as a story element. The historian arranges the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle and end.

The arrangement of selected events of the chronicle into a story raises the kinds of questions the historian must anticipate and answer in the course of constructing his narrative. These questions are of the sort: 'What happened next' 'How did that happen?' 'Why did things happen this way rather than that?' 'How did it all come out in the end?' These questions determine the narrative tactics the historian must use in the construction of his story. But such questions about the connections between events which make of them elements in a *followable* story should be distinguished from questions of another sort: 'What does it all add up to?' 'What is the point of it all?' These questions have to do with the structure of the entire set of events considered as a complete story and call for a synoptic judgment of the relationship between a given story and other stories that might be 'found', 'identified', or 'uncovered' in the chronicle. (White, 1973, pp. 7–8)

White's point is that history may be no more objective than any other form of narration: for example, fiction. Because historical narratives are communicated through the medium of language, they cannot escape those features of language

that are common to all spoken or written texts. Such features include the structuring of material into a narrative with a beginning, middle and end: that is, making a story out of a series of events. And what is important for White's argument is that historians do not 'discover' or 'find' a pre-existing story; they construct a story as part of the process of communicating through language. In doing so, historians, according to White, produce completed stories by arranging and selecting events in specific ways. As a consequence there are always other ways in which the events might be organized: these remain unspoken and unwritten in the form of gaps, silences and traces. And in structuring their material in certain ways, historians produce a meaning from it: 'what it all adds up to'. Thus, the significance of historical events is produced by the historian; it does not pre-exist her or his reconstruction of the past into a series of meaningful events. For White, historiography is closely linked to the writing of fiction, using similar fictive devices, such as plot and character. White's insistence on blurring the distinction between history and fiction has raised a number of important issues and problems, but it can also prove a fruitful way of approaching both historical and literary texts.

4.6

- If we accept White's argument that history is akin to fiction, are there any political consequences? Look back to what Tosh said about the role of historians.
- Does White's proposition have implications for Thompson's wish to rescue working people from the 'condescension of posterity'?
- Does it matter if history is seen as a fiction?

Finally, read the following extract from a paper by the historian Carolyn Steedman, on history and autobiography. Steedman is remembering herself attempting to write history as an eight-year-old. What is your response?

4.5

It is at this point that I remember most clearly an eight-year-old in a crowded post-War South London classroom, writing a life of Queen Victoria in three volumes (three LCC exercise books): the holly pinned to the little princess's collar to make her sit up straight at meal times, the moment of destiny on the stairs when the men in frock coats fell at her feet. This story I write (dip pen, a good round hand: it's 1955) is me, but also, exactly at the same time, not-me. It will go on operating like that, the historical past will, as acceptance and denial.

I know that there is no 'really how it was' at all. But knowing about all the pretensions of the historical enterprise that seeks to conjure the past before our eyes, as it really was, does not stop me from wanting what all of history's readers want: the thing we cannot have, which is past time; the past 'as it really was'. The child in the 1950s South London classroom knew (she might be able to articulate this, if you asked her the right question) that the point isn't what happened, nor how the young Victoria sat at

the table, nor the hurried drive through the dark to announce ascension to the throne; the point is what the child does with that history. (Steedman, 1992, pp. 46–7)

We have suggested above that we require a shared history in order to know ourselves as belonging to certain groups. Steedman seems to be suggesting that there is a deeper individual need for history, an unconscious or subconscious yearning for past time; a past that is always already lost to us and that we can never recapture. Steedman's 'historical enterprise that seeks to conjure the past before our eyes as it really was' is a long way from Ranke's systematic sifting of the evidence. For Steedman, the whole enterprise of history is located in fantasy and desire, memory and loss: our relationship with history and with the past constitutes psychological selfhood, both individually and collectively. In seeking to identify with the past we recognize both our belonging in it and our distance from it: 'acceptance and denial'. We will leave you to think about your own response to this.

The past and popular memory

In this section we want to take up the point made by Steedman about what we do with history. If, as White suggests, history is simply another fiction, another text, then the authenticity of the historian to make sense of the past is limited. If he or she cannot represent the past to us 'as it really was', what is the role of the historian? How, in Tosh's words, can 'what historians do . . . matter to everyone else'? The following extract comes from the introduction to a book entitled *Narrating the Thirties: a Decade in the Making.*

4.6

The eminent Tudor historian, Geoffrey Elton, a staunch defender of methodological orthodoxy, described historical method as 'a recognised and tested way of extracting from what the past has left the true facts and events of that past, and so far as possible their true meaning and interrelation'. Even over looking the obvious questions, 'recognised and tested by whom?' and *which* facts and events?', and accepting for the sake of argument that historians can tell us fairly unproblematically 'what happened', there are still insurmountable problems with the claim that they can tell us with authority what those events *mean*. And this is a serious matter, because it is meanings, rather than factual accuracy, that the present looks for when it contemplates the past. Events may be part of a fixed past, but their meanings are part of the changing present, and cannot therefore be settled for good by the authority of professional experts. Walter Benjamin reminds us that the meaning of a historical event can be determined, 'posthumously, as it were, through events that can be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one' [Benjamin, 1973, p. 265]. (Baxendale and Pawling, 1996, p. 8)

In the extract above, we have a suggestion that what is important about history is its meanings: history is one aspect of culture, understood as 'the production and circulation of meanings'. You will recall the discussion in chapter 3 of how meanings are produced through representation, and the processes of encoding and decoding involved in this. In their book, Baxendale and Pawling go on to analyse the ways in which a particular decade of British history, the 1930s, has been given certain meaning and significance:

> in particular, how narratives about or including the Thirties have not only been shaped by subsequent history, but also have been used to shape it, to influence subsequent events and give them particular meanings. These meanings, like the meaning of episodes in a novel, arise less from the intrinsic nature of historical events than from their position in the story – in Elton's phrase, 'their interrelations' with other events . . . disagreements about the history of the Thirties have rarely been about factual matters, but more often about the way the elements of the story have been emplotted, and thereby given meaning. (Baxendale and Pawling, 1996, p.9).

4.7

- What meanings do you associate with the period referred to as 'the sixties'? Compile a list of words, images, events, books, films and people that seem to you to connote 'the sixties'. If you can, compare your list with someone else's. Are there common elements?
- What or who were your sources?

This activity can reveal the enormous range of practices and materials from which we construct a sense of the past. You may have listed any of the following: history books, TV documentaries and drama, autobiography and biography, individual memory or the memories of older relatives, photographs, popular music, exhibitions in museums, films of the period, family saga fictions, magazines and comics of the period, local history groups, school or university study, topic work undertaken at school (the latter are less likely for the sixties, as school and university history tends to end round about 1945). This suggests, as Raphael Samuel (1994, p. 8) points out, that 'history is not the prerogative of the historian, nor even, as postmodernism [see extract above by Hayden White] contends, a historian's 'invention'. It is, rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands'. History, according to Samuel, is not the work of individuals, but 'the ensemble of activities and practices in which ideas of history are embedded or a dialectic of past–present relations is rehearsed' (Samuel, 1994, p. 8). Our sense of the past is not simply revealed to us by professional historians but produced from a storehouse of popular memory, which may include the works of individual historians, from which we draw the impressions and ideas that together constitute a collective consciousness of a particular historical event or period.

Let us begin to examine what is meant by the term 'popular memory' by thinking about the different ways in which history is encountered in everyday life. For example, as this is being written, the day's viewing on television offers two historical

documentaries about events in the 1940s and 1950s, another programme entitled *The Complete Guide to the 20th Century*, three films made in the 1940s, a programme about a couple seeking to replace the eighteenth-century Martello tower they are currently living in with another historical building and a situation comedy based on the main character's ability to 'time travel' between the present and the 1940s. The newspaper carries three obituaries, one of which is accompanied by a photograph of the pop group Abba winning the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest, and a film about Queen Victoria, *Mrs Brown*, has been released this week. Some articles on the Irish peace process refer to events in Ireland's history. The building we work in was founded as a teaching training college for 'Christian gentlemen' in the mid-nineteenth century and overlooks York Minster, erected in the eleventh century. A local café has tables made from the bases of old treadle sewing machines, a cast iron cooking range and sepia photographs of Victorian and Edwardian street scenes. The estate agents across the road are advertising houses with 'period' features, and a trip to the outskirts of the city passes through a council estate built in the 1920s. There are shops offering replica art deco ceramics, Celtic jewellery, William Morris wallpapers, Victorian recipe books and medieval stained glass, as well as greetings cards featuring eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reproductions. Within the region it is possible to visit, for example, Eden camp, a theme museum based on the Second World War, and the Brontë Parsonage, with its museum housing a collection of Brontë memorabilia. In the town is the Jorvik Centre, which offers opportunities to 'experience' life in Viking York. The local paper advertises evening classes in local history and tracing your family tree. We are surrounded in our daily lives not only by historical buildings, landscapes and artefacts but by contemporary representations of the past in TV programmes, films, novels, advertisements, shops, furniture and wallpaper. Moreover, we are also invited to use our leisure time to engage in or 'experience' history by joining classes or local groups, and by visiting museums and theme parks.

4.8

- Choose a week (or a day if you prefer) and keep a diary of all the different ways in which you encounter history during that time. Note, as we have tried to do, everything you come across that has anything to do with history.
- Divide your list into those things that are: (a) legacies or traces left from the past; (b) contemporary representations of the past; (c) practices which involve engagement with the past.
- Are there any periods or themes in history that feature time and again in your list? If so, do they seem to have particular meanings? Do they seem to stand for any particular values? Or do they appear to be offering lessons to be learned? Do certain personages recur again and again?
- Can you discern any patterns of meaning from your analysis so far? Have you noticed any contradictory 'messages' among the apparent jumble of popular memory? For example, the reminders of the grinding poverty in which many people existed, alongside the frequent insistence by those who experienced this that these were 'the good old days'.

Now read this extract from *Theatres of Memory*, by Raphael Samuel. Samuel argues that British culture in the 1990s is steeped in history, much of it visual.

4.7

The last thirty years have witnessed an extraordinary and, it seems, ever growing enthusiasm for the recovery of the national past – both the real past of recorded history, and the timeless one of tradition. The preservation mania, which first appeared in reference to the railways in the early 1950s, has now penetrated every department of national life. In music it extends from Baroque instruments – a discovery of the early 1960s, when concerts of early music began to be performed for the *cognoscenti* – to pop memorabilia, which bring in six-figure bids when they are auctioned at Christie's or Sotheby's. In numismatics[1] it has given trade tokens the status of Roman coinage. Industrial archaeology, a term coined in 1955, has won the protective mantle of 'historic' for abandoned or salvaged plant. The number of designated ancient monuments (268 in 1882, 12,900 today) also increases by leaps and bounds: among them is that brand-new eighteenth-century industrial village – product of inspired scavengings as well as of Telford New Town's search for a historical identity – Ironbridge. Country houses, on their last legs in the 1940s, and a Gothic horror in British films of the period, attract hundreds of thousands of summer visitors and have helped to make the National Trust (no more than a pressure group for the first seventy years of its existence) into the largest mass-membership organization in Britain. New museums open, it is said, at a rate of one a fortnight and miraculously contrive to flourish in face of repeated cuts in government funding: there are now some seventy-eight of them devoted to railways alone.

One feature of the historicist turn in national life – as of the collecting mania – has been the progressive updating of the notion of period, and a reconstruction of history's grand narrative by reference to the recent rather than the ancient past. Thus in TV documentary, the British Empire is liable to be seen through the lens of 'The Last Days of the Raj', as it is in Paul Scott's trilogy [*The Jewel in the Crown*], or the films of Merchant-Ivory. The year 1940 – replacing 1688, 1649 or 1066 as the central drama in the national past – becomes, according to taste, 'Britain's finest hour' or a privileged vantage point for studying the national decadence. Twentieth anniversaries, these days, seem to excite as much ceremony and rejoicing as for centenaries or diamond jubilees. Very pertinent here is what Fredric Jameson calls 'nostalgia for the present' – the desperate desire to hold on to disappearing worlds. Hence it may be the growth of rock pilgrimages and the creation of pop shrines. Hence too, it may be – memorials to the fragility of the present rather than the past – the multiplication of commemorative occasions, such as 40th and 50th birthdays, and the explosive growth in the production of commemorative wares. The past under threat in many retrieval projects, as in the mass of 'do-it-yourself' museums, and self-made or family shrines, is often the recent past – the day before yesterday rather than as say, in nineteenth century revivalism, that of the Elizabethan sea-dogs, medieval chivalry or Gothic architecture. (Samuel, 1994, pp. 139–40)

Can you see the point that Samuel is making? A profound concern with the past is something that all societies, both now and in the past, share. A sometimes obsessive

[1] The study of coins and medals

need to engage with the past has proved common to all cultures; even non-literate cultures have orally transmitted stories, legends and myths handed down from generation to generation. You might want to think about this need in the light of the suggestions made by Steedman in the extract with which we ended the previous section. The point Samuel is making is that in our own time this concern with the past has taken a particular form – an emphasis on the recent past – that is different from, for example, the form taken by nineteenth-century historicism. In the nineteenth century, painting, poetry, architecture and design looked back to the medieval and Tudor periods of British history for inspiration and values. For example, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of young artists in the mid-century, aspired to a standard of art which they believed existed prior to the emergence of the style of art associated with the painter Raphael, and which had subsequently been lost. In their art they aimed to recapture what they saw as the purity of medieval art. In the 1990s, Samuel claims, our concern is not with the distant past but with what he calls 'the day before yesterday'. He goes on to argue that what societies do with the past, which aspects of it are emphasized in popular memory and what forms these take are all themselves historically specific. Society in eighteenth-century England used different aspects of history in different ways from nineteenth- or twentieth-century society. The eighteenth century, for example, used the civilizations of ancient Greece and Roman as models for architecture, literature and intellectual thought. The same civilizations are studied today by schoolchildren, constructing a model of, say, a Roman villa, in terms of how ordinary people lived in the past. Even in the same period there may be competing versions: in the 1990s the National Trust promotes a version of English history which has the country house as a key feature, while museums like the ones at York Castle or Wigan Pier, or the Black Country Museum, offer a version of the past rooted in the urban experience of 'ordinary' people. Samuel's wider point is that a study of the popular forms in which history is presented can tell us much about the values, aspirations, beliefs and tensions of the present and the relationship of these to the values, aspirations, beliefs and tensions of the past.

4.9

Did the exercise you carried out for activity 4.8 confirm or not Samuel's claim that in the 1990s much of our concern with the past is focused on 'the day before yesterday'? Can you identify any specific period(s) as offering particular values for the present?

Now read the following letter to *the Daily Telegraph*.

4.8

Sir – I have recently visited HMS Victory in Portsmouth Dockyard, and was both perplexed and disappointed by the commentary given by the guide.

As a child I remember being fascinated by the description given by the sailor who was then our guide, not only of the function of the ship's equipment and

weapons and the duties of all who sailed in her, but of the battle of Trafalgar and its place in our history.

But now Victory is presented simply as an ancient artefact. The guide dwells mainly on the dreadful conditions suffered by the men below deck and the punishments meted out to them by the officers, who enjoyed great comfort on the deck above.

No mention is made of the fact that all these officers, including Nelson, would have gone to sea as midshipmen, aged as young as 10, they would have lived and worked on the same decks as the men, going aloft with them to handle the sails. There was no purchase of commissions in the Royal Navy, so they would have risen to become officers only if they had mastered the skills of seamanship required to sail and fight.

Nelson's death is now presented as little more than an incident at the battle of Trafalgar. Anyone without historical knowledge might think he died just because he was standing carelessly on deck at the time. There is no explanation of why Nelson and his flagship have been held in such esteem by the nation. No reference is made to his genius, the signalling innovations he used, or his new tactics which enabled him to win his great battle.

This is deplorable today, when so little history is taught in many schools. We need our national heroes as never before. (Jean Gordon, Petersfield, Hants, 'Letters to the Editor', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 March 1994; cited in Samuel, 1994, p. 164)

4.10

1. To what does Jean Gordon object in the commentary accompanying her visit to HMS Victory?
2. Why is she concerned about the treatment of Nelson as a historical figure?
3. What is your response to her claim that national heroes are needed as 'never before'?
4. Can you think of other heroes or heroines of popular memory? What are they remembered for? We have started you off, you carry on.

Hero/heroine	*Remembered because*
• Martin Luther King	Fought for civil rights for black Americans
• Emily Davison	Died for the cause of women's right to the vote
• Joan of Arc	
• Robin Hood	
•	
•	
•	

Those historical figures who become established in popular memory as heroes or heroines often acquire mythical status. Stories circulate which affirm their lives and actions as especially virtuous, courageous or inspiring and, often despite detailed and painstaking research by historians to reveal them as complex three-dimensional human beings, they remain symbolic figures in the collective consciousness of the group for whom their significance is particularly relevant. For example, while closely argued historical scholarship has attempted to represent a

balanced account of the strengths and limitations, as well as the long and chequered career, of Winston Churchill, many people who lived through the Second World War prefer to remember him as the man who, according to the myth, almost single-handedly saved Britain from Nazi invasion. This is not to suggest that the myths which surround a figure such as Churchill offer a completely false representation. Many people who experienced the Second World War accepted that Churchill was one, albeit very important, factor in Britain's victory but were, nevertheless, reassured and inspired by the representations and practices that produced his mythical status. He came to represent a belief in the power of the individual against the forces of evil, a belief that, however embattled, 'good' will triumph and that the essence of this 'goodness' was a particular Englishness.

The Churchillian myth offers a particular way of interpreting and narrating history, in which individual figures are seen as responsible for the destinies of whole nations, and conflicts between nations are struggles between the forces of good and evil. **Myths** are another of the signifying practices we introduced you to in chapter 3: their function is to produce meaning by assembling a set of signs that can be read symbolically. In the case of popular memory, certain figures acquire the status of hero or villain or certain events are invested with particular significance, thereby representing or standing in for a whole nexus of determining factors, motivations and interests. The media, in particular, rely on myth as a way of representing past events. Think, for example, of photo-journalism, which often uses a single image to represent a whole cluster of ideas and meanings.

4.11

Look carefully at Figure 4.1. This photograph of Buckingham Palace was taken in the week following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in August 1997. Can you suggest some of the encoded meanings here?

Roland Barthes, in his highly influential book *Mythologies*, first published in France in 1957, argued that myth is one of the most significant ways in which human beings deal with the complexities of experience.

4.9

[M]yth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made. The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences. A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. The function of the myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence . . .

Figure 4.1 Buckingham Palace

> Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. If I state the fact of French imperiality without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and goes without saying: I am reassured. In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (Barthes, 1973, pp. 142–3)

The function of myth, according to Barthes, is not so much to falsify events or deeds but to reduce them to essences in order to render them comprehensible and significant. As Barthes says, myth 'abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences . . . it organizes . . . a world wide open'. This is particularly relevant for our consideration of popular memory, since our collective sense of the past is frequently organized around myth. For example, the story that, on hearing that the Spanish Armada had set sail for England, Sir Francis Drake insisted on finishing his game of bowls has outlasted the historical accuracy of scholars who have demonstrated that, while it is likely that a game of bowls was being played, it is most unlikely that an astute 'sea dog' such as Drake would waste time finishing the game at such a critical moment. The myth that has Drake saying 'Time to finish the game' captures some perceived essence of 'Englishness' which can 'explain' more 'naturally' than detailed historical evidence why the

Armada was defeated by the English. The victory over Spain becomes the victory of good over evil, rather than the outcome of a nexus of historical, political and economic factors – complex, fallible, human actions are represented as natural forces or, in Barthes's words, myth 'has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature'. As Barthes says, myth 'does not deny things': the main elements of the story are true, there was a game of bowls, the Armada was sailing for England, Drake was at Plymouth. What myth does is 'to talk about them . . . it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact' – and it does so by arranging the elements of the story in certain ways, by creating heroic characters and by reducing the complex interplay of myriad determinations to a statement of fact (in this case victory over Spain). And this statement of fact requires no explanation: it goes without saying, for example, that it was a victory and that it was self-evidently the triumph of good over evil.

4.12

ACTIVITIES

Consider figure 4.2, which reproduces the cover picture of a 1942 leaflet designed to stir up hatred for the 'enemy' against whom Britain was waging war. How does this representation contribute to myths of the Second World War?

To cultural historians the ways in which myths become established at any particular moment are worthy of study: exploring how and why a myth developed can yield insight into the meanings ascribed by popular memory to historical events. Furthermore, as Angus Calder, the historian, comments, 'Myth may distort what has happened. But it affects what happens' (Calder, 1992, p. 14). In the Second World War, the people of Britain were encouraged to believe that they were making history, that this was Britain's 'finest hour', the moment for which all the years of 'our island's history', a historical mythology that included heroes like Drake and Nelson, had prepared them. Because it is important and inevitable that in wartime people make sense of what is chaotic and frightening by reference to heroic mythologies, many people tried to conduct themselves in accordance with these myths, and in doing so helped to sustain and legitimate the story of Britain's heroic stand against the forces of barbarism. As Calder (1992, p. 14) neatly puts it, 'Heroic mythology fused with everyday life to produce heroism.' We cannot simply dismiss myth as falsehood, lies, fiction. Instead, we need to engage with the discourses (see chapter 3) in which specific myths can be understood and the ways in which myth interacts with everyday life to produce certain behaviours and understandings of the world at a specific moment.

History as 'heritage'

Finally, we want to introduce you to the contemporary debate around the idea of heritage in England. We have focused upon England here because there is a

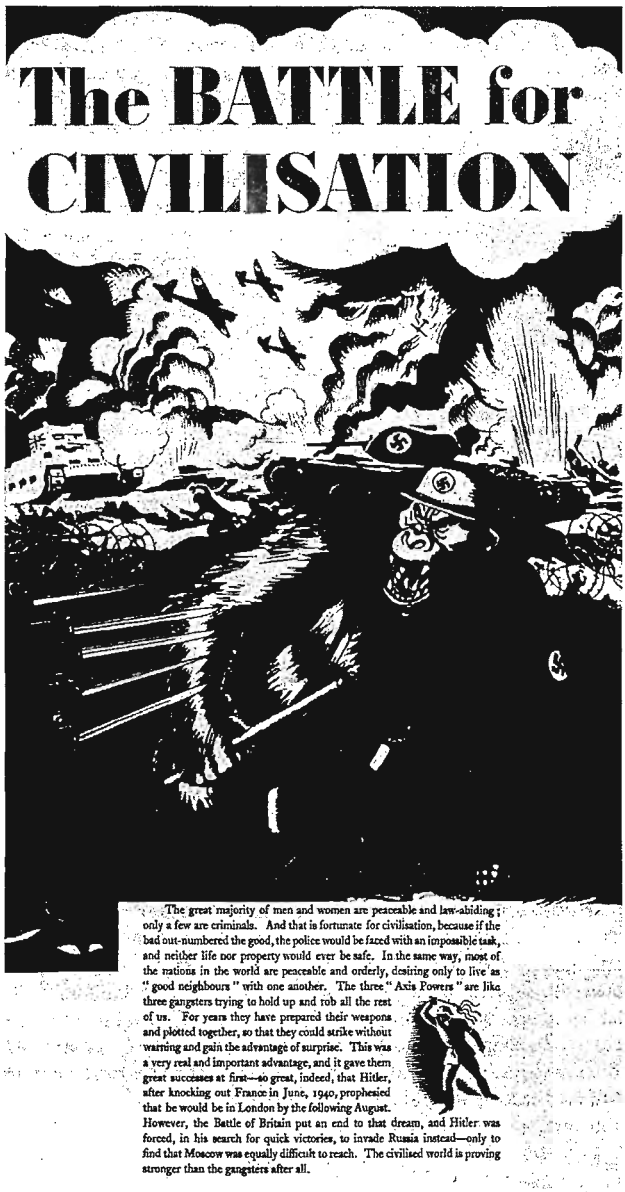

Figure 4.2 'The Battle for Civilisation'

very specific relationship between Englishness and a sense of the past. Unlike the Scots or Irish, for many of whom there is an intimate and personal connection with the past, the English are both strangely reluctant to celebrate the nation's actual history and very keen to commemorate an imagined past, shorn of most of its historical reality (Paxman, 1998, pp. 234, 264–5; Giles and Middleton, 1995, pp. 3–9).

Although the term 'heritage' means in its broadest terms that which is inherited, it has increasingly come to mean those material artefacts, places and buildings left by the past which are worthy of preservation. English Heritage and the National Trust, the two major organizations committed to the conservation and preservation of the past's legacy, have large memberships, many of whom are willing to work voluntarily on conservation or restoration projects, as well as contributing to fund raising along with the general public. Furthermore, such organizations command royal patronage and substantial financial subsidies. On the one hand, 'heritage' has been attacked for shoring up a decaying and beleagured aristocracy by subsidizing the upkeep of their country homes and a certain level of luxurious living (Hewison, 1987). On the other hand, 'heritage' has been criticized for opening historic monuments and sites to the dangers of mass tourism, as more and more historical sites, bygones and memorabilia are preserved and crowds of people spend their leisure time and holidays visiting country houses, theme parks, living history museums and working farms. Equally attacked is the proliferation of historical replicas for purchase, from Victorian christmas cards to 'art deco' ceramics, from reproduction fireplaces to replica storage jars. Those who oppose what they see as the commodification of the past for the purposes of a profit-making tourist and leisure industry point to the ways in which the country is being turned into a giant Disneyland-type museum, catering to a 'vulgar English nationalism'.

> Where there were mines and mills, now there is Wigan Pier Heritage Centre, where you can pay to crawl through a model coal mine, watch dummies making nails, and be invited 'in' by actors and actresses dressed as 1900 proletarians. Britain, where these days a new museum opens every fortnight is becoming a museum itself . . . The Total Museum, though it can entertain, is a lie. Pretending to open a window into the past is a technique which weakens imagination much in the way that colour television weakens the intuition, whereas radio – by its incompleteness – so strongly stimulates it. (Ascherson, 1987, cited in Samuel 1994, p. 262)

The arguments put forward in condemnation of 'heritage' resemble in some ways the debates over mass culture that we encountered in chapter 1. Richard Hoggart railed against 'the candy floss world' of milk bars and juke boxes for its tendency, as he perceived it, to entertain rather than educate. A similar charge is brought against 'heritage'. Visits to living history museums or working farms are a social practice engaged in as a leisure pursuit: as such, it is argued, they encourage the passive consumption of images and impressions rather than the active engagement of reading or study. Equally, to purchase replica 'period' crockery or furniture is to engage in a celebration of the past rather

than critical inquiry. The consumption of history in the form of 'heritage', so it is argued, is a popular activity of 'the masses' and, therefore, by its very nature is degraded and degrading. Historians, as well as arbiters of aesthetic taste, have attacked the 'heritage' industry for offering sanitized and sentimentalized versions of the past which avoid confronting the complexities of human motivation and the fragmentary, often contradictory, nature of the historical record. In his book, published in 1985, *On Living in an Old Country*, the cultural critic Patrick Wright argued that the contemporary British obsession with 'heritage' was symptomatic of a wider malaise, in that it represented a pervasive nostalgia for the 'good old days' of British ascendancy. Such nostalgia, he argued, supported a collective mentality that was backward looking rather than fostering a more dynamic and radical engagement with the present (Wright, 1985). Wright's argument, which is a complex one and has to be placed in the context of mid-1980s Thatcherite Britain, has been critiqued by the historian Raphael Samuel, most memorably in *Theatres of Memory*, in which he mounts a provocative defence of 'heritage' and calls for a reassessment of 'the sources of its energies and strengths' (Samuel, 1994, p. 274). Now read the following extract from *Theatres of Memory*.

4.10

The hostility of historians to heritage is possibly exacerbated by the fact that they are in some sort competing for the same terrain. Each, after its own fashion, claims to be representing the past 'as it was' . . . Interpretation, the privilege of the archive-based historian, and 're-creation', the ambition of heritage, also share a common conceit; the belief that scrupulous attention to detail will bring the dead to life . . .

Whatever the reasons, history and heritage are typically placed in opposite camps. The first is assigned to the realm of critical inquiry, the second to a merely antiquarian preoccupation, the classification and hoarding of things. The first, so the argument runs, is dynamic and concerned with development and change, the second is static. The first is concerned with explanation, bringing a sceptical intelligence to bear on the complexities and contradictoriness of the record; the second sentimentalizes, and is content merely to celebrate . . .

The perceived opposition between 'education' and 'entertainment' and the unspoken and unargued-for assumption that pleasure is almost by definition mindless, ought not to go unchallenged. There is no reason to think that people are more passive when looking at old photographs or film footage, handling a museum exhibit, following a local history trail, or even buying a historical souvenir, than when reading a book. People do not simply 'consume' images in the way in which, say, they buy a bar of chocolate. As in any reading, they assimilate them as best they can to pre-existing images and narratives. The pleasures of the gaze . . . are different in kind from those of the written word but not necessarily less taxing on historical reflection and thought. (Samuel, 1994, pp. 270–1)

4.13

- Think about the various arguments put forward here about 'heritage': (a) the 'heritage' industry supports the aristocracy in a certain lifestyle which is not appropriate in a democratic society; (b) Britain is becoming one huge museum in which crowds of visitors and tourists spend their leisure time passively and uncritically viewing historic spectacles or buying replicated historical products and gifts; (c) 'heritage' does not simply offer passive spectacle but can provide valuable opportunities for discovering history. Can you put forward evidence and argument for each position?
- What is your own experience of 'heritage'? How do you respond to the different standpoints on it? What do you think?
- Think about the use of 'living history' and themed museums in schools. Do you think these offer a valuable experience of history or not? Give reasons for your answer.

Conclusions

This discussion of 'heritage' has brought us back to Tosh's point that history 'can become the basis for informed and critical discussion of current issues'. Wright and Samuel are both concerned with the relationship between the current political climate and the ways in which the past is represented and used in the present. In relation to this you might think about recent calls to teach a particular kind of history in English schools – put crudely, kings, queens, heroic figures and English successes, rather than the histories of other cultures or the histories of so-called ordinary people – and consider whether, how and why this connects to wider political issues both nationally and globally.

Many of the ideas raised in this chapter will be taken up again in different ways later, notably in the case study which completes part I, where you will find discussion of a particular example of 'heritage'. As students of culture you will frequently find yourselves having to engage with the historical past, whether it be in the form of popular memory and myth, archival research, fiction, politics and identities or 'heritage'. Remind yourself when you encounter any form of history to ask questions about the paradigms of knowledge within which it is located and the purposes it serves in the present.