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10 Magic objects/modern objects
Heroes’ house museums

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Introduction

Museums are often compared with temples as the religious sites of the modern age, and museum visiting is correspondingly regarded as a ritual enactment of communion with the sacred values of modern society. The church built on faith and the museum grounded in science constitute an institutional binary that bookends the great shift of modern society that Weber called the disenchantment of the world. Yet more and more cases are being presented to suggest that magical modes of understanding not only persist but thrive in the shadow of the dominant ideology of authoritative, scientific knowledge (Hughley 1979, Saler 2006). Cases of persistent magical thinking are partly fed by resistance and may be dedicated to undermining the scientific paradigm, such as alternative medicine; and are partly condoned by the majority view, permitted in some circumstances, even enjoyed in a playful suspension of disbelief, as with astrology. Further, some magical survivals translate fluently into the modern era under the rubric of civil religion, the mightily effective mobilisation of the forms of ecclesiastical religion to the service of the state, epitomised by rituals of patriotism.

Despite the reputation of the museum as a peak location of scientific knowledge, the institution can also be seen to contain, express and even exploit many tenacious habits of magical thought. One technique is the reverent stress on collections as ‘the real thing’, projecting the rhetoric of authenticity in support of the special value of the museum, yet simultaneously deploying the physical form of the sacred shrine. Another is the trend to affective, experiential modes of interpretation which focus on visitors’ emotional responses to collections and exhibitions.

This chapter explores how these and other magic-based expressions are brought to bear in what would seem to be the disenchantment of the shrine when transformed into a museum. The relics of culture heroes are often collected individually, and are sometimes preserved in the entirety of the hero’s dwelling, in which case the house as well as its contents function as a shrine under the name of house museum. The cottage, house or mansion is decked with historical apparatus that guarantee the meaning of the museum visit, whether it is intact and in situ, partial or even retro-created. The house museum is managed according to professional
standards of access, conservation and security. At the same time, an unspoken agenda permits and encourages visitor communion with the hero in frankly worshipful terms — often inarticulate, for how can a thoroughly modern institution explicitly condone forms of magic-based apprehension?

To make sense of a visit, the ritual of communion requires that visitors arrive with at least some knowledge of the hero, enough to inform the value of a visit. To a degree, it can be taken for granted with a Shakespeare or a Washington. But in the case of heroes of another age who are known only vaguely by today’s audiences, the sense of communion may be fed by the post-modern discourse of celebrity, in a curated vision of the private life of someone ‘well known for being well known’. The highly personalised presentation of the hero’s domestic circumstances can be traced to social history interpretive approaches, but it also happens to correspond neatly with the contemporary style of personal revelation that encourages onlookers to consider themselves intimate participants in another’s life. Theorists of celebrity concur that the interaction generated between celebrity and beholder is a site of interrogation and elaboration of cultural identity which contributes to the integration and normalising of identity construction, a view not distant from sociological approaches to the functions of religion, and with refractons on the social role of museums (Turner 2006: 23–6). The conundrums of these entangled modes of apprehension and presentation indicate that heroes’ houses and their contents present museological dilemmas beyond the usual challenges that museums engage every day.

This chapter focuses on a sub-species of culture heroes’ houses — those that have been entirely relocated from their original sites. They are not as rare as one might think, and their translation from site to site stresses the relic-nature of the building itself in its new career as a museum. Starting with the precursor of a house-relic with enduring magico-religious significance, the Santa Casa of Loreto, the continuity of the practice into the modern era of the house museum is demonstrated by Abraham Lincoln’s birthplace home in Kentucky, via a parallel problematisation of authenticity, relics and faith. A case study of Captain Cook’s cottage in Melbourne suggests that what motivates the continuing public interest in heroes’ houses is the survival of the pre-modern mentality of magical thinking that continues to penetrate a generally secular, rational, managerial world, now enhanced by the concept of celebrity.

Two houses translated

It is said that in 1291, a stone cottage was carried by angels from Nazareth in Palestine to Tersato in Illyria (Croatia) and, in 1294, was again transported by angels across the Adriatic to a village near Ancona, where, after another small hop, it settled in a laurel grove. The trees gave the name Loreto to the structure, which was acclaimed as the very house where the Virgin Mary had received the Annunciation and where the Holy Family subsequently brought up the Christ Child. In Loreto, the cottage (roofless, but containing a door and a window) was enclosed in a basilica built about 1470, and encased in a magnificent carved
marble screen (Figure 10.1). Known as the Santa Casa or Holy House, it became a popular shrine, attested by papal blessings and continuing pilgrim devotion, specially by women (Meistermann 1911, Thurston 1912).

In 1911, another cottage was relocated to a temple-shrine in Hodgenville, Kentucky, on the site of the farm where Abraham Lincoln was born and lived his first two years. A single room built of notched logs, it exemplified the American pioneer cabin tradition, demonstrating the humble origins of the sixteenth President of the United States. After the Lincoln family moved on, the cabin logs were said to have been reused on an adjacent farm; they and the Lincoln site were purchased by an entrepreneur in 1894, and the cabin re-erected on site in
1895. Thereafter the now well-travelled logs were demounted and exhibited, reconstructed, in various cities for some years. The site was sold in 1905, the logs having also passed on in ownership. The property was acquired by a benefactor who established the Lincoln Farm Association in 1906, when the cabin logs were also purchased for $1000 and returned in triumph, their authenticity was affirmed by old timers (suppressing the doubts of others). The Association commissioned an imposing neo-classical temple to house the yet-again reconstructed cabin (Figure 10.2), and when it opened in 1911, transferred the site to the state; in 1916, it shifted to US federal government ownership, and has been managed by the National Parks Service since 1933 (Peterson 1968: chapters 2 and 3).

The Santa Casa of Loreto constitutes an illustrious source of the tradition of the house of a great person being translated into a shrine to its inhabitant, and the Lincoln Birthplace Historic Site proves how the tradition endured. Both structures have been critiqued in modern times for doubtful historical provenance. Addressing this problem, the judgement of religious authority applies equally to its modern manifestation in the civil religion of heritage: both regimes have struggled with histories, proofs, revisionisms and, in the end, with the kernel of faith. In fact, management agency sources on both the Santa Casa and the Lincoln Birthplace now acknowledge that each is more an object of inspirational faith than a historical reality. At the same time, in contemporary popular belief, the rationale for preserving houses associated with heroes, sacred or secular, remains fundamentally justified by the claims of the built fabric to authenticity.

**Authenticity and faith**

The Santa Casa’s authenticity was reviewed by the Roman Catholic Church in the early twentieth century, surveying knowledge about the house’s career in Palestine and in Italy (Figure 10.3). Church historians traced pilgrim sources
Figure 10.3 The walls of the Santa Casa bear some patchy fresco survivals; the room contains the 1921 replacement of an older statue of the Virgin, her robe adorned with jewellery -- the traditional offering at this site. © P. Ferdinando, Santuario della Santa Casa, Loreto.

demonstrating that a basilica had been erected around the Virgin’s house in Nazareth very early in Christian history, perhaps in the fourth century. The Muslim conquest of Palestine in 637 introduced conflict over the site for many centuries, but the basilica was definitively destroyed by 1010, then rebuilt by Crusaders in 1101, and destroyed again in 1263. Not until 1620 was another church constructed on the site, by then structure-less and referred to as the Grotto of the Annunciation. At the same time, Church scholars largely agreed that no reliable records described the Santa Casa’s presence in Italy before the fifteenth century, but that a church dedicated to the Virgin had existed on the Loreto site since the thirteenth century. The historicity of Mary’s house in either Palestine or Italy had to be acknowledged as dubious.¹ The Catholic Encyclopedia sidesteps the obvious conclusion with the gesture that faith trumps reality: ‘there is no reason to doubt that the simple faith of those who in all confidence have sought help at this shrine of the Mother of God may often have been rewarded, even miraculously’ (Thurston 1912).

The authenticity of Lincoln’s birthplace was initially founded on affidavits by old residents, while a handful of dissenters were not asked to make statements. All doubt was sidelined at the time the Lincoln Farm Association began its commemorative project, and again in 1933 when the National Park Service took control. In 1948, an amateur historian published a devastating analysis of the presentation, arguing that the cabin was a hoax (Hays 1948). The Park Service responded with its own research, which supported the critique, though not the implication of intent to deceive. But recognising that the cabin had metastasised into a key element of the legend of the martyred president, which could not be
simply abolished, staff introduced the descriptive qualification, the ‘traditional’ birthplace of Lincoln—a distinction with ‘authentic’ that, they acknowledged, escaped most visitors. Presentation of the cabin within the temple in the formal landscape is today more forthright (Figure 10.4), being referred to as a ‘symbolic’ birthplace, and paired with a second cabin, ten miles away at Knob Creek, where Lincoln lived from the age of two to seven. The Knob Creek cabin is frankly a replica, fully furnished, as is a third Lincoln childhood cabin near Lincoln City, Indiana.\(^2\) The abundance of houses associated with Lincoln points most obviously to the sacral character of the hero’s touch and the faith it evokes, yet all contain an element of the real history of the man, a ‘factual’ basis of belief. As a former Chief Historian of the NPS reflected on the mediating role of the authorising agency: ‘The public’s perception of the Lincoln cabin is important to the nation’s image and an indispensable part of the nation’s ritualistic public tribute to its own humble origins’ (Pitcaithley 2001: 252, Steers 2007: 2).

‘Authenticity is a slippery topic’ writes Peter Howard with brief understatement. In a heroic effort to address the topic in textbook dimensions, he tabulates nine fields in which authenticity is discussed within the heritage business: authenticity of material, creator, function, history, ensemble, style, context and experience (Howard 2003: 227). The spectrum of applications indicates the possibilities for multiple and interpreted authenticities, comprehensively undermining the concept of unique truth. Indeed, the arguments against authenticity as an absolute are blunt. Ontology posits that if something exists in certain conditions, then it is necessarily authentic within those conditions (Muñoz-Vinas 2005: 94). Change the conditions and authenticity persists in line with the changes. This points to the problem of the essentialist view that the material character of things defines their authenticity. If changes to the fabric affect the authenticity of the item, as held by the dominant modern conservation focus on original materials and historically
correct technique, then the passage of time and its historic evidence inevitably distort the 'truth' of things – a classical dilemma of conservation (Phillips 1997: 42–3). Further in this direction, the emphasis that Western thought puts on the first, the oldest, the original, endows these conditions with an apparently natural primacy or authenticity, which devalues subsequent eras and manifestations of objects' careers. Thus, to acknowledge a range of possible authenticities demonstrates that, unless limits are specified (contingently admitting the existence of other limits), a judgement of authenticity is an argument of conviction. In other words, recognising authenticity is a choice, a taste, an act of faith, imbuing the believer with agency. The willingness of the subject to believe goes far to relieve the managing authority of charges of duplicity (especially if alternative information is available in some form), thus locating the act of faith in the field of heritage as social practice.

Faith in authenticity is easier to interrogate at the coalface of managing its manifestations than in the interface with the minds and hearts of believers (Starn 2002: 1–16). Priests and heritage stewards possess the specialist knowledge and intellectual techniques to justify their decisions, which may derive from complex, even casuistical, processes. Reflecting on shifts in understanding authenticity over thirty years of heritage conservation practice, David Lowenthal traces the history of contemporary professional judgement which now comes to the conclusion that no criterion of authenticity is valid for all times and cultures. In fact, he suggests that it can be acknowledged that 'The dynamic processes of change are now more durably authentic than their transitory products', and he uses the argument to call for a more humble and tolerant approach to the authenticities of other times and cultures (Lowenthal 2008). It is an appropriate lesson for the agents of authenticity-management and it also addresses the integrity of the faithful, who comprise the larger part of the authenticity-appreciation equation.

The pilgrims and tourists who visit the Santa Casa and the Lincoln Birthplace anticipate a spiritual satisfaction or emotional affect beyond the rational order of things. It was the normative mentality in the Middle Ages, which is assumed to have been overtaken by modern values and behaviours – yet the enchantments of magical explanation clearly infiltrate more than a few institutions of modernity. A growing number of revisionist challenges to the Weberian secularisation thesis demonstrates that residual irrationalities abound, and, combined with the willing suspension of disbelief for faith-sustaining, romantic or utilitarian purposes, enable a current of Frazerian magic to be observed, practiced and advocated within an otherwise disenchanted world (Meyer and Pels 2003, Styers 2004, Bell 2007). Museums have been eloquently analysed as one such channel (Bouquet and Porto 2005).

The relics and rituals of saints and heroes

Visiting the Santa Casa is a religious ritual conferring communion with the numinous via the building in which a holy person lived, confirming spiritual identity and achieving intercession with the godhead: in the sphere of Christian
faith, the Virgin Mary is the peak agent of intervention between the human and the divine. This heroine’s relics manifest an old tradition of magic — contagious magic — whereby supernaturally endowed objects can transmit the power of their owners to others across time and space (Frazer 1922). For the sake of this transcendent connection, relics of saints and martyrs were venerated from the earliest era of the Christian Church, though its later, more intellectual branches grew wary of the primitive enthusiasm. Primary charisma was located in bodies and body parts, leading to a vigorous medieval trade in, and even theft of, famous relics, which could also be channelled into objects close enough to receive the impress of the body such as clothes, possessions and, by extension, tombs and, occasionally, houses (Thurston 1911). Bodies, parts and possessions were honoured by making them accessible in finely worked reliquaries, whose precious materials and captivating design magnified and decentralised the allure of the sacred object, facilitating supplicants to project their own desires onto the relic. On a larger scale than most, the relic of the Santa Casa itself is enclosed by a marble reliquary screen, designed by Bramante.

The cult of relics transfers easily into the rituals of civil religion, whereby adoption of parallel forms of religious practice legitimises state power or other ideological objectives with solemnity and ritual (Bellah 1967: 1–21, Parsons 2002: 1–5). In the absence of a god, civil religious expression often focuses around heroes political and cultural. Being products of the genteelising enlightenment mentality, civil relics tend less to bodies or corporeal parts, and more to objects associated with the hero’s personal or physical environment.³ While bloodstained pieces such as Nelson’s coat or Lincoln’s handkerchief are not infrequent, it is much more common to find that heroes’ possessions — personalia, equipment and furnishings — are deemed to contain sufficient charismatic aura for civil relic status. In this context, museumised houses fulfil the role of both intrinsic relic and reliquary of further relics.

Lincoln’s Birthplace is one of five Lincoln-associated houses museumised to enable visits by patriotic citizens, instantiating a further type of museum-as-ritual-site as theorised by Carol Duncan. Her view of art museum visits as ‘civilizing rituals’ in institutions that ‘publicly represent beliefs about the order of the world, its past and present, and the individual’s place within it’, suggests also the modern purpose of conserving and museumising the relic houses of culture heroes (Duncan 1995: 2). In the sphere of US patriotic civil religion, Abraham Lincoln, the murdered redeemer, is second only to George Washington, the father of his country (Schwartz 1987: 196–7). All the more to ritualise it, features of the Beaux Arts temple containing the reconstructed cabin were ascribed with numerological significance (the origins possibly informal and maybe retrospective): sixteen rosettes in the ceiling coffers of the chamber said to represent the sixteenth President; fifty-six stairs climbing to the podium of the temple numbered equivalent to the President’s age when he was assassinated.⁴

Not every hero’s house museum is so explicitly divided from the world by symbolism or reliquary structure, but all exist within curtilages that serve the same function of separation. The gate or door of the house museum is the same
kind of portal as the church narthex, a transition from the mundane world to the sacred. Where the power of a visit to the Santa Casa is grounded in the other-worldliness of religion buttressed by the relic house, a visit to Lincoln's Birthplace relic house is girded by history, draped in the veils of civil religion. And so is Captain Cook's Cottage.

The story of Captain Cook's house

In 1929, road-widening in the West Yorkshire village of Great Ayton required the demolition of a modest eighteenth century house, unexceptional but for its connection with the family of Captain James Cook, Royal Navy navigator and explorer of the Pacific. The house had been acknowledged for this fame since shortly after Cook's death at the hands of Hawaiians in 1778, even though the link was attenuated: it was a house built by Cook's father some years after James had left home to go to sea, and there is only circumstantial evidence that he may have ever visited it (Figure 10.5). But relics of mobile heroes such as sailors are scarce, and Cook had no others, so after half the house had been demolished, the owners announced in 1933 that they would sell the remaining portion for reconstruction elsewhere as a memorial to Cook (Dixon 1996: 4–5). Expressions of interest from an American buyer induced the caveat that it would only be sold for relocation within Britain. By this time, an Australian interest in the house had been alerted, and following some deft argument that the patriotic sphere of the British Empire fulfilled the vendor's nationalist requirement, a philanthropist purchased it for re-erection in Melbourne, to celebrate the 1934 centenary of establishment of the state, formerly colony, of Victoria.5

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*Figure 10.5* The house built by Captain Cook's father in 1755, sketched by George Cuit after the explorer's death. Watercolour in the Gott Collection (Yorkshire views). Image by courtesy of The Hepworth, Wakefield.
Cook's significance in Australia derives from his 1770 voyage, which identified the east coast of the country and claimed it for King George III. A British settlement was established at Sydney in 1788, but unfortunately for the honour of the subsequent colony of New South Wales, it was a prison establishment, manned largely by convicts and their guards. Once the colony and others had begun to thrive, the shame of a tainted genealogy led Australian colonists to prefer a history that recognised Captain Cook as discoverer, rather than Captain Phillip who commanded the First Fleet of exiles. Thus, Cook came early to wear the mantle of Australia's foundation hero.

The philanthropist who funded the translation of the Great Ayton house to Melbourne in 1933-34 seems to have been motivated by British loyalism, but his agent in the deal was more picturesquely inspired by the associative magic he inferred from the bricks and stones of what he called the Cook Cottage (Figure 10.6). Invoking the justification of reliquary honour for relocating it to Australia, he appealed to faith in the materiality of the building to enact a supposed visit to his parents by Captain Cook: 'Its doorstep rang to his heel as he entered. Its walls heard his voice... Within them must be stored memories' (Gill 1934: 13). Just as the 'sacred theft' of saints' bones around medieval Europe brought the blessings of their presence to their new owners, so would the patriotic delivery of material (faintly) connected to the foundation hero endow legitimacies on white Australians.

The Cottage was received in Melbourne with vast public enthusiasm. It had been quaintly rebuilt to accommodate the loss of half the original house and furnished with appropriate antique furniture acquired in York; cuttings of original ivy were planted to grow over the reconstruction. From 1934, the people of Melbourne swarmed in, and wrote ebullient thanks to the patron who had brought this slice of the Old World into the antipodes. They expressed pride in the nation's British descent; they identified with positive characteristics ascribed to manly

Figure 10.6 The truncated house with 'stable' and lean-to created to cover the entrance door, now known as Cook's Cottage in Melbourne. Photograph by courtesy of Richard Dobson, 2010.
Yorkshire heritage; they relished the aura of antiquity in this, the oldest house in Australia (Grimwade Papers 1933–34).\(^6\) The opening of Captain Cook’s Cottage (as it was referred to) endowed the overwhelmingly Anglo population with a token of its origins which was true and resonant but also alternative to the self-made, gold-rich novelty of the colony of Victoria and the Commonwealth of Australia. The cottage enabled a ritual that asserted not a land without history, represented by peculiar mammals and back-to-front seasons, but communion with the Empire via its domestic bones, with a highly appropriate sea-going connection to the motherland.

Contemporary visitors showed practically no interest in doubts about the cottage’s authenticity, though the topic gained some currency in newspaper commentary. This doubt informed reluctance among public land managers to provide a site and ongoing management for the donated cottage. Melbourne City Council eventually won the dubious prize and soon began to undermine the patron’s vision by making the small building as simple to manage as possible. Measures such as cutting in a new door to improve traffic flow and closing off the upper room on account of the narrow stairs undermined the sense of sacred fabric, and the beautiful but somewhat marginal park in which it was rebuilt permitted graffiti which grew into vandalism within a few years. The Cottage was rehabilitated after the Second World War for the 1956 Olympic Games, regaining its aura of shrine to the national foundation hero. But the period was the beginning of the end for the ancestral relationship between Britain and Australia, and as that sense of blood loyalty faded, the Cottage required a new justification.

It arrived in the 1970s, a decade begun with the bicentenary of Cook’s 1770 voyage of discovery, and shaped by the 1972 election, which ended a long conservative government for a social democratic one with cultural nationalist leanings. A new popular interest flourished in Australian history and heritage, and in its light, the Cook Cottage was revised for the first time. The National Trust brought together scholars and connoisseurs to apply authoritative standards of research to the building and its presentation. In this process, the peculiarities of the building were analysed, though the absence of the missing half remained unknown and the post-eighteenth-century internal stud walls which established a display of gender-divided sleeping rooms were unremarked. Colonial revivalist furbelows were extracted from the furnishings (though bed-warming pans and samplers remained) and plain finishes were introduced to windows, walls and beams. A professional librarian introduced the new Cottage booklet with an account of Cook’s historical achievements for the first time in a site publication; an architectural historian discussed the Cottage in the context of Yorkshire vernacular building; a well-informed furniture collector pointed out the humble dimension of furnishings that had acquired the glamour of antiquity in the twentieth century (Cook’s Cottage 1978). The booklet represented a challenge to hagiography by acknowledging the remote connection of the Cottage to Captain Cook himself, but nonetheless strengthened the authentic reputation of the structure by contextualising it in time, place and class. The scientific refocusing thus managed to incorporate a proof of authenticity into a bigger story of the hero, and although
technically disproving both, left epistemological space in which the 1934 magical aura could be maintained in public perception.

The overwhelming power of Captain Cook’s sacred presence in the material Cottage was peculiarly proved in the 1990s, when professionalised heritage management standards were introduced in the first conservation management plan prepared for the place (Sands 1993). Research was commissioned in Britain to review the documents as known and discover any more; it turned up a c.1788 drawing of the original double-cell house, demonstrating the extent of its truncation. It validated the sources that had long been understood as proving Cook-senior ownership, producing a sound property history (Cuit c.1788). But the Melbourne-era history of the translated Cottage was prepared in the intellectual atmosphere of post-colonial revisionism, positing Captain Cook as a focus of social memory in constructing the white history of Australia. This perspective was somewhat incoherently attached to the building history and, in best practice conservation terms, it determined the management plan’s statement of significance. Theoretically, the basis of management decisions about the site and its fabric, the statement of significance was composed without mentioning Captain Cook at all. The statement focused instead on the symbolism of the Cottage as a statement of national origin for the white population of Australia and a statement of dispossession for Aboriginal people; in this duality, the statement also aimed to demonstrate the constructedness of histories (see Young 2008). It is a sophisticated interpretation, in tune with its time, but according to Cottage staff it was unconvincing to many visitors.

Visitors continued to visit the Cottage, now named Cooks’ Cottage, minus the Naval rank and with the apostrophe in a critical position to indicate it was the house of multiple Cooks. Again, enough slippage remained in the compromise title to permit the assumption that it included the only famous Cook, the Captain. Logic demands this interpretation: ‘Why would anyone want to visit the house of Captain Cook’s father and mother?’ as the presenter of a 2007 BBC television programme on Captain Cook asked in an astonished tone, gazing at the Cottage (Collingridge 2007). And not only logic: the presence of a shrine manifestly indicates the relics of a hero; its scientifically demonstrated authenticity guarantees the hero. It must be Captain Cook’s Cottage, or else why is it there?

**Does authenticity matter?**

A further question arises if the answer to this question is negative: does it matter if the relic is not authentic? The Roman Catholic Church offered one answer, cited above, that faith is itself sufficient to make a fake relic meaningful. As also recorded above, the US National Parks Service concludes that the fake can take on meanings unjustified by history but no less meaningful. My ‘does it matter?’ question was recently answered confidently by the current manager of Cooks’ Cottage: no – visitors get a thrill even when they know it is not true.

To explain this observation, a new way forward is suggested by the parallels of religion and celebrity culture, both draped in the tradition of magical thinking.
The spectrum of saint-to-hero-to-celebrity contains many a sequence of divergences, but the primary one in this argument is the shift in honour from revered distance to (pseudo-) up-close vantage. Most modern visitors to heroes’ house museums arrive equipped with some or little knowledge of the aura of the hero, and a mentality predisposed to expect intimate personal communion with famous strangers. They see a house of a different era, infused with the expectations of what a house is today. The vision of nuclear family domesticity presented in the Cook cottage matches the ubiquitous magazine photo-spread of stars’ homes, albeit in humble mid-eighteenth-century vernacular form. Guides point out to school students how small the rooms are, how basic the furniture, how absent the comforts of our time, but the frame of the visit is veneration of the great man. Associative magic infects it all with glamour on the same principle as the authenticity of the Cottage itself: it is here in a sacred setting; it must be real.

The (re-created) narrow stump bedstead placed in a closet downstairs is there to cradle the hero on his visit home; it is as simple (allowing for period) as John Lennon’s childhood bed (also re-created) in Liverpool. No ecstatic shaking and weeping has been reported in Cooks’ Cottage as it is in ‘Mendips’, but the tones of vulnerability and sexuality in the beds of the famous hint at the intimate contact that celebrity pretends to permit. Though even celebrity has its practical limits: Elvis Presley’s bedroom is not open to the public in Gracelands for fear of fan hysteria (Marling 1996: 226). The claim ‘Queen Elizabeth/George Washington slept here’ refers to pure relic character, yet in its frequency it is now famous as a credulous visitor joke, a parapraxis which reveals the strength of magical thinking in the era of celebrity, tourism, heritage interpretation and other constructed forms of experience.

Should museums condone magical approaches to their collections and exhibits? Could they control them anyway? Sharon Macdonald addresses the power of ‘enchanted looking’ at museumised sites of disturbing history and discovers dilemma that is best addressed with a consciousness of the political agency of institutions (Macdonald 2005: 224). The canon of ‘heroes’ is inevitably determined by political interests too, though the effects of time reduce many heroes to anonymity and irrelevance. But where heroes maintain currency, there is no doubt their political efficacy is enhanced by magical thinking. Captain James Cook is one of numerous eighteenth and nineteenth century explorers who extended the borders of the British Empire and thereby paved the way for white colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. As a British hero he was soon remembered merely as one of many in the pantheon of Empire. In Australia, however, he was endowed from the 1870s with specific glory as national founder; a century after his voyage up the east coast. Generations of children learned about Captain Cook; he was marked in civic expressions such as commemorative plaques and the relocated cottage; and came to permeate popular consciousness in rhyming slang and schoolyard chant. The survival of Captain Cookery after the history wars of the 1990s, which turned on the presentation of Indigenous rights, suggests that his heroic status persists in Australia, uneroded in the national psyche (Macintyre & Clark 2003: 119–41). The Cottage in Melbourne is still touched by popular magic.
Hero worship and celebrity adoration need an enchanted public, served by agents with some perspective on the constructedness of their role as guardians or gatekeepers. At the same time, the curatorial approach is grounded in the paradigm of scientific knowledge which demands that the hero is presented in the contexts of history and power; and the visitor perspective is coloured by anticipation of contagious magic and intimate revelation. This is not so much a case of the disenchantment of the shrine transformed into a museum, as the museum being assumed enchanted by its audiences – and hence, constructed as a shrine. It is harder for some artefacts to be modern today, than to be magical.

Notes

1 A building in Ephesus, Turkey, said to be the house of the Virgin Mary’s old age and death, has been a pilgrimage site since its miraculous revelation in 1821 and restoration in the 1890s. Archaeologists date the building to the sixth to seventh century, but note older foundations which may date to the first century (http://www.sacred-destinations.com/turkey/ephesus-house-of-the-virgin.htm).

2 Lincoln’s adult family house in Springfield, IL, and Ford’s Theatre in Washington, DC, where he was assassinated, are also NPS sites. The village of New Salem, IN, where he lived as a young single adult but never owned a house, has a historic park of relocated cabins, known as Lincoln’s New Salem. Rounding out the ancestral dimension of the family, the Lincoln Log Cabin State Historic Site near Charleston, IL, is a replica of the house inhabited by Lincoln’s father and step-mother well after he had left home. Knob Hill, New Salem and Charleston were all constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s.

3 In this, civil relics are distinct from personal in memoriam relics, where hair is a very frequent keepsake of the departed.

4 These features are not discussed in Robert Blythe et al., Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site Historic Resource Study, NPS, 2001, but can be found in sites such as Abraham Lincoln Online.Org: http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/sites/birth.htm.

5 For a range of histories, see Jillian Robertson (1981), Maryanne McCubbin (1999) and Chris Healy (1997).

6 The house was built in 1755, thirty years before white settlement in Australia.

7 A Captain Cook = a look (search), now used with nostalgic irony; ‘Captain Cook chased a chook, all around Australia/Lost his pants in the middle of France and found them in Tasmania’ (and many variations) – I learned this one at school in the 1960s.

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