‘Heritage on Exile’: Reflecting on the Roles and Responsibilities of Heritage Organisations towards Those Affected by Forced Migration

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On a small Greek Island, during my last year’s summer break, the impact and scale of the current refugee crisis suddenly hit home. Around mid-morning of another cloudless heat-filled day, the tranquillity of the bay was filled with the noise of a fast-approaching coastguard vessel. Barely waiting to tie-up alongside the tiny and rather inadequate pier, the single pilot jumped ashore and ran to the taverna returning shortly with as many water bottles as he could carry, followed by staff doing the same. The boat sped off. An hour later it returned more sedately, packed with women and children, exhausted and each with a single day-pack, the type people take on budget airlines for a weekend away. As they crossed the beach the children from the boat waved to us, the bemused holidaymakers. The beach felt very strange after they had left. No-one knew quite how to behave, or what to do next. An hour later the boat returned, this time with men on board. The same disembarkation ritual followed, as it did several times over the next few days. And as we left the island some days later, we saw these same people and many more camping on the harbourside, awaiting the next inter-island ferry that would take them on to Athens and from there, in many cases, to Germany.

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This short contribution is a simple reflection on the current refugee crisis, grounded in an active interest in the contributions heritage organisations can or should make towards ameliorating life-changing impacts on people directly affected by situations beyond their control. It also reflects on a career working within the UK heritage sector that can appear to me sometimes rather detached from contemporary life, or slow to respond to it. While recognising the importance of heritage in post-war reconstruction (and recent UK government initiatives address this, in the form of, for example, the Cultural Protection Fund: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-scheme-to-protect-cultural-sites-from-destruction - accessed 18 February 2016), this paper concerns the people themselves, forced to escape conflict and seek safe haven elsewhere at the moment of crisis, when they are at their most vulnerable, disorientated, traumatised and isolated. They, it seems to me, are the immediate concern. Post-war reconstruction (or debates about whether this is appropriate) can follow later.

Working with homeless communities (eg. Kiddey and Schofield 2011), and with people from socially-deprived backgrounds (eg. Lashua, Cohen and Schofield 2010; Schofield and Morrissey 2013), I have seen first-hand how activism amongst archaeologists and heritage

practitioners can soften the impact of unwanted change, or of becoming marginalised by or in society. (And by activism in this sense I mean: being active; putting other people first; and attempting to use the subject we are most familiar with for the betterment of others. Larry Zimmerman and others [2010] referred to the need sometimes for a 'translational approach', in which 'expertise' is given over to the participants to enhance their sense of ownership.) De Leon's work is an obvious example of ways in which archaeological and anthropological practices can contribute to understanding migration (Gokee and De Leon 2014; De Leon and Wells 2015), in this case across the US/Mexican border. Such activism in these various contexts has created a sense of inclusivity and opportunity out of adversity. The 2005 'Faro' Convention on the Cultural Value of Heritage for Society (Council of Europe 2009) formulates a position whereby 'heritage' and the rights of all people to participate in it are not only central to society, but are also an essential human right. Given the success of these previous projects, this would seem a particularly relevant contextual framework for working with Europe's refugees as well as other minority and excluded groups.

So why is it that many heritage organisations, like Historic England to take an obvious example, established to 'look after England's historic environment, [to] champion historic places, helping people understand, value and care for them', appear reluctant to adopt such principles, and to push an agenda to which they could make such a distinctive and telling contribution? Why is this not a priority, not least given the emphasis often placed on England's diverse pasts, on the many and varied cultural contributions that have created the rich heritage which so many people now enjoy? Or should we accept, rather, that this is not an appropriate or necessary role for such organisations at all, and that projects and initiatives of this type should originate at the grass roots, not through authority?

To give some specific examples of what can be achieved by heritage organisations requires a consideration not only of the forced migrations emphasised in this collection, but also those which are unforced, where pull factors may weigh more heavily than those pushing people to new horizons. The social conditions of course are very different in these two sets of circumstances, but the examples outlined briefly above demonstrate that it can be done through conventional archaeological or heritage practice. Some fifteen years ago, The Australian Heritage Commission (2001) released its 'Guide to Migrant Heritage Places in Australia'. In his Foreword, Peter King, the Commission's then Chairman, noted how it had recognised a problem (that the wider community was not aware of the significance attached to places by people recently arrived in Australia) and responded to it by funding a project to focus on post WWII immigration. The Guide explains what is meant by significance, and defines heritage registers before defining a 'migrant heritage place' and explaining how to assess it. Meetings are recommended to help facilitate this process, meetings which themselves can be used to build identity and community that may previously have been lacking. Questions within the guidance included 'the heritage of an immigrant group in Australia before [they] arrived' and 'experiences in Australia'.

There are of course critical issues to be addressed such as whether there will always be benefits for people in participating with state-led heritage initiatives and that the stance of government agencies and heritage bodies towards present day migrants can be very

different. . There are questions also about authority (eg. Smith 2006), and the role of the expert (Schofield 2014), as leader or as facilitator. The 'Migrant Heritage Places' example gave migrant communities in Australia the opportunity to promote the significance of those places that, 'tell the history of migration in Australia. The history of migration is a valuable aspect of Australia's heritage. There are many places that are important to different migrant groups that may not be known to the wider community, such as places of worship, places of work, local shopping areas or places associated with people or events that have significance for particular migrant communities' (Australian Heritge Commission 2001, 9). This may not be the most original or creative approach for documenting place attachment within the context of contemporary forced migration, and it does pre-date social media, but it does nonetheless demonstrate a history of good practice that may not be fully realised.

The Australian Heritage Commission later extended beyond this generic guide to issuing specific guidance for assessing Chinese Australian Heritage Places (AHC, 2002), while the National Parks and Wildlife Service in New South Wales articulated a methodology for assessing the relationship of both Macedonian (Thomas 2001) and Vietnamese (Thomas 2002) communities to their newly familiar landscapes. The Macedonian experience is particularly relevant. Reed (1996) has paid close attention to the trauma of lost places. In the case of the Macedonian community, the national parks around Sydney came to represent the 'lost' and socially meaningful landscapes of rural Macedonia, into which the significance of social occasions and community building had been deeply woven. But the way Macedonian immigrants used their new environment in traditional ways was not always to the liking of the settled (including the indigenous) population. Thomas's (2001) study presents a methodology through which these tensions can be explored and resolved for mutual and long-lasting benefit. As Thomas states, this example shows how 'people and the environment are inextricable', and that 'maintaining cohesion was a way of ensuring some degree of continuity in a world where everything had changed. The research showed [for example] how parkland … played a unique role in consolidating the feeling of being Macedonian in Australia' (ibid., 92). This refers closely to a concept that appears prominent within contexts of upheaval and instability: ontological security, which Giddens (1991) referred to as the sense of order and continuity in relation to an individual's experiences and which Grenville (2007) applied to the built environment. In short ontological security can give heightened significance to fixed places in landscapes and social states of flux.

In Greece last summer I wondered briefly how much notice people took of the beach on which they finally and safely arrived in Europe. Listening to interviews a few weeks' later, of Syrian refugees at Munich railway station, I heard several talk about their journey. Most could not remember the name of the island where they came ashore, or indeed many of the countries they had passed through en route. Maybe the journey is always a bit of a blur, especially when it is long and traumatic. One example of this heritage of transition is Pier 21 in Halifax, Canada where, between 1928 and 1971 over a million migrants entered the country (https://www.pier21.ca/home). This is now the Canadian Museum of Immigration, a popular tourist destination and archive, and a place to which many of Canada's migrant population feel a strong sense of attachment perhaps because it is a specific and tangible point of arrival – a threshold of sorts. Ellis Island in New York is another example. One thinks

also of the vehicles and vessels in which journeys were made. Many of these boats now lie abandoned on Malta's shoreline. *Tu Do*, a boat used by the so-called Vietnamese Boat People in 1977 is now part of the Australian National Maritime Museum's floating collection (http://stories.anmm.gov.au/tudo/restoring-tu-do/ - accessed 12 April 2016) (see Byrne, this volume).

Gard'ner's (2004) study of heritage significance in the East End of London makes a related point: here designated historic buildings in the area mean little to the circa 61% Bengalee population that has occupied the area since the 1960s. As Gard'ner describes it, this migration began with Bengali-speaking merchant seamen arriving in the docks of London's East End during the 1960s, opting to stay in Britain to escape the political tension with the Karachi government over Bangladeshi independence (ibid., 76). Their families joined them and so the population grew. As with Pier 21, there appears a strong association here for these migrants with places connected with their immigration. Particular value is attached by the Bengalee community to community centres and buildings used by community groups. As Gard'ner states, '[T]he reasons for the [importance of these buildings] to the community include providing a venue for community, cultural and musical events as well as an array of services including immigration and general advice, training and employment counselling, and day care for both the young and the elderly' (ibid., 79).

Returning to the examples of activist archaeology presented at the outset, the homeless heritage project is perhaps a parallel to what might be possible with displaced peoples, people lacking most of their possessions, feeling the loss of home and community, yet searching for some new sense of stability and belonging in an unfamiliar world. In the fieldwork conducted amongst homeless communities, there was crucially a translation of authority and expertise from 'us' as heritage practitioners to 'them' as members of the communities with whom we hoped to build relationships of trust and understanding. We gave them the methods (the tools) and taught them how to use them. The results (and the people we worked with to achieve them) were inspiring, in spite of the truly awful experiences that had shaped many of their lives. Language may be an additional barrier in cases of migration, and some cultural reference points may be less familiar, but with those exceptions, much of the same methodology could apply. And by heritage we can also mean its intangible manifestations, many of which have long traditions of creating unity and cohesion amongst diverse communities. One thinks immediately of music and of cooking. I recently heard of an example in Stockholm in which local women shared cookery sessions with migrant women, learning and practicing each other's culinary skills together.

Coming back to my own country's lead heritage agency, and the British Government's statutory advisor on heritage matters in England, Historic England (merely as an example of what might be possible), I wonder what contributions such an organisation could helpfully make, and with a degree of urgency, if indeed such contributions are even appropriate. There is a question here concerning the organisation's mandate to act (under the terms of the 1983 National Heritage Act), which limits its options and no doubt explains its lack of close attention to intangible heritage. That said, there do appear to be possibilities.

Within the context of its mandate, Historic England currently has five Corporate Aims (https://historicengland.org.uk/about/what-we-do/corporate-strategy/), to:

- Champion England's Heritage
- Identify and protect England's most important heritage
- Support change through constructive conservation
- Support owners and local authorities to have the expertise to look after England's heritage
- Achieve excellence, openness and efficiency in all it does

The Historic England Action Plan (2015-18) maps Objectives onto those Aims (https://historicengland.org.uk/about/what-we-do/action-plan/), and while not explicit or obvious, there are hooks onto which projects and initiatives that relate to 'migrant (or refugee) heritage' could be hung. One opportunity perhaps falls under the Corporate Plan Objective 1.3: to 'Use our research, archive collections and education programme to engage and enthuse people about the history of places'. Exhibitions and publications are given as examples of how this might be achieved and have impact. But notwithstanding the dangers of being authoritative (Smith 2006), one wonders how migrants/refugees, recently arrived and feeling isolated and disorientated, would respond to any attempt to promote understanding through outputs that explicitly or otherwise promote 'English' heritage, even where 'non-English' heritage was clearly the focus of enquiry. This dilemma aligns closely of course with debates on nationalism, the idea of the nation and of national borders now challenged by the migrant/refugee (see for example Lechte and Newman 2012, following Agamben 1995 and ultimately Arendt 1943 [1994]).

Corporate Plan Objectives 2.3 (to 'Improve the National Heritage List for England to make it more useful and accessible and enable others to add content')' and 2.2 (to identify, record and define the significance of heritage that is poorly understood, under-represented or most at risk') may provide further opportunities, aligned with the examples of migrant heritage described earlier from Australia. Here there could be opportunities for constructive creative interventions not unlike Gard'ner's (2004) study in the East End of London, shaping methodologies, creating toolkits, engaging community groups of all kinds and in a diversity of cultural and environmental settings to assess significance. Yet this all assumes some familiarity with and interest in the local area in which refugees find themselves. This interest takes time to develop, like a patina. Of more use initially perhaps would be initiatives that facilitate discussions amongst groups that create a sense of common heritage lost or left behind, of what really matters, both in terms of places and things, but also the things people carried on their journeys – mementoes, photographs of people and places, accepting of course that much of this material will be stored digitally, allowing a greater weight of memory to accompany people on their journies. With the built environment in mind, one might focus on particular and familiar building types or places (e.g. mosques or markets – see Gard'ner [2004] again for examples of both), and the ways people respond to them, and the reminders they evoke (but see Mire 2007 for an alternative view). Intangible heritage is

more challenging given that Historic England's mandate only extends to 'ancient monuments, historic buildings and conservation areas' yet exploring associations between the built environment and associated traditions remains a possibility.

In responding to social crises it is understandable for heritage organisations to focus attention on the built environment, its security during conflict and its role in post-conflict reconstruction. Heritage is after all largely place- and thing-centred, at least for established and often statutory heritage organisations. Yet as we have seen, the 2005 Faro Convention promotes an approach to heritage that is people-centred and focuses on the social value of heritage for 'everyone in society'. It also concerns the making of heritage, not just the protection of it. Maybe it will take time for heritage organisations, often established by statute and with a specific mandate, to have the capacity, skills and the opportunity to act in response to human crises, and in the 'spirit' of Faro (Schofield 2015a, 2015b). But unfortunately the nature of human crises is such that waiting is not an option. Or maybe this is not a matter for politically aligned or politically dependent organisations at all.

As long as politicians (and arguably also the wider public) exhibit mixed feelings about forced migration, bodies like Historic England will deliberately avoid the issue, for being too contentious. Such organisations are after all dependent upon politicians for their support and funding. Perhaps this is why the sector needs independent activists, to say the uncomfortable things! Equally we should all remember what Hannah Arendt said over 70 years ago, that '[t]he comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted' (1943,119), not least in the light of Britain's recent vote to leave the European Union.

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POSTSCRIPT

One time, back in the eighteenth century perhaps, ancestors on my mother's side arrived in the UK on a ship. The precise journey they had taken, or the reasons for it, is unknown, though I intend to find out. All I know is that they had the name Davidovic, and came from Belarus. Davidovic was translated on arrival into 'Davson' (perhaps an error, as Davidson is the more usual translation), this being my mother's maiden name. There is also the rumour (and one wonders where it would have come from if not true) that their journey had brought them via Papua New Guinea. Thinking about the current crisis, the migration of people, forced and otherwise, and the tensions and difficulties that movement inevitably creates (alongside opportunities of course) have caused me to think further about this story since the events and experiences witnessed last summer. I am also more determined than ever to establish the facts behind it.

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