

“The Stunning Afterlife of Neil MacGregor’s *History of the World in 100 Objects: A Historiography*”

Written by Sarah Churchill, PhD Candidate, Drew University | schurchill@drew.edu

For 250 years, the British Museum has embodied the “grand” evolutionary narrative of human culture and modernity as a single, shared story told by and through the object. Since its early genesis as a collection of antiquities and scientific specimens, the Museum has amassed some eight million objects, each of which speaks to the universality of human experience in all of its vigorous complexity. Under the dynamic leadership of museum director Neil MacGregor, the museum experienced an unprecedented increase in its visitor attendance, making it the most visited museum in all of Great Britain. With 6.4 million visitors annually, it’s currently the second most visited museum in Europe and the fifth globally.¹

Ironically, the British Museum is, to a large extent, no longer much of a “British” collection at all, but rather a collection of international report. MacGregor’s exciting thirteen-year tenure (2002–2015), which redefined the Museum’s intellectual imperialism as a shared global universalism, followed on the heels of the collective invention of the “universal museum” in 2003. Under “The Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums”, museums of global culture and antiquity throughout Europe declared the “universal” to be an essential tool, offering a more insightful perspective on account of its diversity over more localized and essentialist displays.² For MacGregor, the past was not the import of empires, but was, rather, a shared heritage, alive in the present. His revisionism found an audience in the BBC 4

radio program, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (2010). Ordered chronologically from 2,000,000 B.C. to the present day, the series explored the world temporally and thematically, addressing the major themes in human development, from the Palaeolithic to the emergence of the modern world.

The program's success resulted in a publication of the same name later that year. MacGregor's approach to the grand, Eurocentric narrative of history marked a new methodology for history, one which "deciphered messages" across time "about peoples and places, environments and interactions, about different moments in history and about our own time as we reflect upon it."³ In looking carefully at the *things* humanity has made, rather than at text alone, MacGregor argued that one could bypass the privileging of Eurocentric culture and appreciate non-Western societies on their own terms. By animating the history of the *object*, one could refract the whole of history through a global lens, telling stories that resonate beyond the "great events" and "great men" of historicity.

Though he could hardly have anticipated its impact, MacGregor's "100 object" methodology was wildly successful, sparking a new "favourite gimmick" in history publishing.⁴ To date, there are nearly fifty titles employing MacGregor's schema, addressing histories of war, popular culture, and geography, both national and local. There are few, if any, that rival MacGregor's thoughtful ingenuity or sensitivity to the "accidental or deliberate distortions" of history. Nonetheless, this collection shares a common ancestor and, therefore, each attempts to reproduce MacGregor's schema to

varying degrees of success, conceptualizing the development of an imagined heritage and identity through a carefully curated selection of 100 things.

MacGregor's *A History of the World* is an attempt to redefine the cultural heritage identity of the British Museum in universal terms. However, the legacy of British imperialism proves, ultimately, impossible to ignore. As Neil Curtis explains, many have viewed the "universalizing" of museum spaces as an explicit attempt to circumvent repatriation requests and as yet another example of "exploitative colonialism".⁵ Writing in 2003, MacGregor appears to have confirmed this supposition, stating the declaration to be a "statement of common value and purpose...the diminishing of collections such as these would be a great loss to the world's cultural heritage".⁶ MacGregor's statement here explicitly revises the British Museum's ownership of their collection as "British" (the association of which was deliberately forged throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) reassigning the heritage under his stewardship as instead global.⁷

A History of the World illustrates this sentiment. Writing history from objects requires, as MacGregor explains, a "leap of imagination", an act of imaginative interpretation, especially in places where writing fails us in our understanding. Understanding is enhanced when one can look comparatively across cultures to access meaning. This is particularly true of objects whose societies colonialism disrupted or destroyed, such as the Benin bronzes of the Oba people or the stone sculpture of a Huastec goddess. Consequently, *A History of the World* finds itself at the centre of a

great postcolonial reckoning in Great Britain. While MacGregor's intent is to illustrate the universality of human experience – it cannot deny the touch of British imperial dominance upon so many of the objects in its collection.

MacGregor's methodology, while commendable, is problematic in that it reproduces the postcolonial inequity of the universalizing approach, seeking to maintain the political hegemony of large, global museums over less powerful actors and agents. As arbiters of standards, the consortium of "universal museums" reinforces its collective power through the "determination to have the power of decision about questions of collections repatriation vested in them rather than anybody else".⁸ Put simply, MacGregor's methodology incorrectly assumes equal relationships between the actors in his global, universalist narrative and the British Museum itself, which functions like the construction of the early British Commonwealth itself. As Giles Fowden explains, a "commonwealth" might be defined as "a group of politically discreet but related polities" defined by a common culture and history.⁹ However, as Barbara Bush posits, the formation of the commonwealth could be viewed as a strategy of power maintenance in the face of mounting anti-colonial pressure.¹⁰ Consequently, the premise that a commonwealth is constituted of a relation of equals negates the preceding unequal power dynamic between colonizer and colonized.¹¹

What kinds of pressures then does MacGregor's construct navigate and what kinds of power does his strategy seek to maintain? Let us consider, briefly, the relationship between the British Museum and that universal history it purports to

represent. For example, MacGregor considers the looting of the so-called Benin “bronzes” by the British through an analysis of the Museum’s *Benin Plaque: The Oba with Europeans*, a brass plaque from Benin, Nigeria AD 1500–1600.¹² Annie Coombes asserts the “spectacle” of orientalised Africa in British Victorian popular culture was fundamental in creating and maintaining racial difference, the discourse of which was rooted in racial anxieties about the elision of whiteness and in ideas about benevolent social imperialism.¹³ The tragedy of such thinking is that the “myth of racial purity” continues to haunt notions of “Englishness” even today, a fact MacGregor overlooks in his analysis of Africo-British cultural contact.¹⁴ With the rise of white, eastern European migration, racial anxiety in Great Britain has by no means abated.¹⁵

While MacGregor acknowledges British looting in 1897, he is less forthright about the legacy of racism and the problematic nature of globalization in Britain today. The violence with which postcolonial imperialism deepened class, race, and gender hierarchies adversely continues to impact, undermine, and exploit the vulnerable. The British Museum is, to a certain degree, complicit in this exploitation. Since the 1960s the museum has repeatedly rejected requests repatriate the Benin plaques. Sadly, incidences like these are not isolated. Such colonial wounds remain unhealed and “Britishness”, as an imaginative construct, remains somewhat problematic for citizens of the postcolonial periphery.

Since the postcolonial turn, museums have begun to interrogate the degree to which the stain of imperialism has blackened their collection policies, display practices,

ways of being, and methods of “doing” history. Chiefly, the “museum problem” concerns its authoritative perception of Western superiority and its legitimization of the imperial centre, which sought to materialize ideological supremacy in sites of cultural and intellectual power.¹⁶ The British Museum, as a powerful site of historical memory, has, consequently, been complicit in appropriating, looting, and exoticizing global material culture, including recent attempts to universalize local production in an “encyclopaedic museum” approach.

To that end, *A History of the World* is, rather, not just a world history, but one of contemporary *British* history, whose inescapable legacy of colonialism is preserved through the ideological hegemony of “universal heritage”. How then might we consider its vast collection of imitators? In what follows, I will survey sixteen of the “100 objects” histories, focusing particularly on those that address, in some significant way, a facet of the history of the British Empire. I will first closely read MacGregor as the model text, arguing that *A History of the World* is the result of an imagined sense of contemporary “Britishness” *in tension* with its postcolonial, globalized present. I will then comparatively analyse the genre’s imitators, concluding that for MacGregor and the other authors in this study, these objects have meaning not only in and of themselves, but also as formations of institutional, social, and cultural identity.

Texts as Cultural Heritage: “Invented Traditions”, and “Imagined Communities”

Bush has argued that the imperial past echoes in the “post-imperial” present through negotiations of race, cultural supremacy, Westernization, Orientalism, poverty

and inequality.¹⁷ For this reason, the term “imperialism” still has relevance in the postcolonial world, in spite of supposed “decolonization”, because Western economic, political, and cultural power has continued to play an outsized role in perpetuating global inequality.¹⁸ Consequently, the West’s ideological conquest, which was predicated upon the assumed “uniqueness” and superiority of Europe and defined through the rise of capitalism, modernity, liberalization, and consumerism, continues today through the cultural conduits of media, language, education, consumption, and tourism, to name a limited few.¹⁹

In this sense, this essay will consider the “100 objects” model of British history as an extension of the neocolonialist enterprise into the world of popular history literature. As Jean-Paul Sartre famously opined, neocolonialism, is best understood as a regulative strategy by which “good” colonialism, as opposed to “bad” is reinforced.²⁰ For the purposes of this essay, I will specify the definition of the term as “subtle propagation of socio-economic and political activity by former colonial rulers aimed at reinforcing capitalism, neo-liberal globalization, and cultural subjugation of their former colonies.”²¹ Further, Benedict Anderson has argued that museums have historically shaped the way “the colonial state imagined its domination, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry.”²² The “100 object” histories, as derivative of a British Museum intellectual enterprise, must be considered within this context of not only cultural superiority, but the economic dominance of tourism and consumption as well.

Nonetheless, I do not wish to cynically overemphasize the “100 objects” history model as a purely imperialist enterprise, but rather, as a commercial engagement between the construction of contemporary British cultural identity and postcolonial historical memory. As Alan Confino explains, twenty-first century cultural memory has become fundamental to collective identity as a result of capitalism and the rapidity with which the present becomes the past.²³ Cultural memory shapes behaviour and experience throughout generations in repeated practices that can become embedded in national identity formation.²⁴ While it may be admitted that historians and scholars *endeavour* to construct histories that are “truthful”, the “truth” is often subjective and malleable, “socially and culturally constructed”.²⁵ As such, the historiography of “100 objects” texts will be critically examined for historical silences and nostalgia, which function intentionally in the construction of popular historical imagination.

As Simon Thurley explains, “English identity is very closely bound up with the physicality of England: the patterns of fields and villages seen out of an aeroplane, red phone and post boxes, the mills of Manchester...this of course changes at the edges as new places develop.”²⁶ For Great Britain and its legacy of colonial expansion, the global *is* local. Contemporary British identity then is constructed not only by the legacy of imperialism but by the upset of its patrimony through economic decline, rural depopulation, immigration, the rise of the European Union, borders disputes, and politics. The appeal to cultural memory then, in the context of the construction of history, is, paradoxically, a response to the present. The invention of heritage may subsequently be viewed, not as continuity, but rather as a rupture with the past. As

François Hartog explains, the projection of cultural identity is constituted by an “uneasy identity that risks disappearance...an identity in search of itself”.²⁷

The British sense of national pride finds rich exposition in the development of its cultural heritage tourism.²⁸ Patrick Wright has argued that the British project of cultural heritage identity, history, and tourism concerned not only the “rhetoric of national recovery” but also functioned as an economic advantage during British de-Industrialization.²⁹ Of the sixteen texts surveyed, more than half appear to have been explicitly constructed to promote the institutional identity of either a collection or museum. This would seem to suggest that the so-called exposition and preservation of heritage illustrated in some of the “100 objects” might also be exploiting its cultural currency in a more literal sense.

Legacies of colonialism and their historical disjuncture in the present, as well as the rise of neocolonialism and British economic tourism are forces convening in the present that threaten to disrupt one’s sense of the past. As Wright explains:

“It is in the service of the nation that public images and interpretations of the past circulate. If many traditional and community-based forms of cultural integrations have been eroded, the nation which replaces them is not simply abstract; it works by raising a dislocated and threatened...everyday life...There is therefore no simple *replacement* of community by nation, but rather a constant...redemption of its unhappy remains.”³⁰

The manifestation of imperial decline in everyday life then disappoints and erodes one’s sense of national well-being. The object, by contrast is possessed of an “aura” — a

uniqueness potentialized to re-invigorate the “everyday”.³¹ In the context of the historical narrative, the object, as a potent and salient representative of both the familiar and the foreign, has the even greater potential to strengthen the community’s sense of place and self. I assert that the “100 object” history model emerges particularly to negotiate postcolonial threats to the British sense of selfhood, rearticulating the nation in a global context and thus “re-enchanting” the embittered British identity.

In this way, MacGregor’s *A History of the World* functions like Hobsbawm and Ranger’s theorizations of the “invented tradition”, a practice that claims historicity yet is recent in origin and often imagined.³² The “invented tradition”, argues Hobsbawm and Ranger, is meant to inculcate certain values or norms through repetition, automatically implying continuity with history that is fictitious and often assembled in response to some intervention in social or structural stability.³³ The invention then, in its ritualistic or symbolic function, serves as evidence of a transformational shift, particularly when it appears in the service of nationalism. It will be worthwhile then to interrogate this question of meaning and transformation in the following survey of the “100 objects” texts. To what degree will these texts, as a collection, cohere or disassemble?

The Literature Review: British History in “100 Objects”

This survey consists of sixteen texts, the construction of which corresponds around a central organizing principle: a history of a particular subject, phenomena, or event “told” in “100 objects”. The texts were selected for their relevance to the topic of “doing” British history. As such, each of the sixteen titles engages with the construction

of “Britishness” or with the legacy of British colonialism to a salient degree and/or engages with the collection of a British institution. As has been discussed, ten titles engage explicitly in the promotion of British heritage tourism. Of the remaining six, four promote British cultural heritage directly on the subjects of The Beatles, cricket, football, and English identity. The outlier, *A History of Women in 100 Objects*, whose title implies a more universal approach, is rather, a history of women written by two English social and cultural historians, Maggie Andrews and Janis Lomas. Having been written in the centenary of British women’s suffrage, the book is Anglocentric in its narrative construction.³⁴

At a dense 700 pages, MacGregor’s *A History of the World* is by far the most comprehensively written of the collection surveyed, devoting roughly six–eight pages of masterful prose and figures to every object. The result is a powerful argument in support of writing history through material culture study and an authoritative defence of museums and their collections. MacGregor suggests that the analysis of material culture in the museum context has the potential to bypass “accidental or deliberate distortions” found in imperialist-inflected histories, which have asymmetrically privileged writing and the archive, giving voice to the historically marginalized.³⁵ His delineates a radical new, decentred approach to the history of the world, “by deciphering messages which objects communicate across time—messages about peoples and places, environments and interactions, about different moments in history and about own time as we reflect upon it.”³⁶ By “spinning the globe”, attempting to look around the world in a single “moment”, MacGregor avoids the trope of histories

told through “great men” and their actions, constructing a global, evolutionary narrative of shared humanity and heritage through artefacts both familiar and novel.

Nonetheless, MacGregor’s admittedly effective defence of the British Museum and its collection assumes, incorrectly, relationships of equality across the vast community of actors and agents in the narratives he constructs. Consequently, his argument is, to a certain extent, a neoimperialist justification for the museum as a superior cultural resource. Of the museum’s founding, MacGregor argues that the recuperation of past cultures was essential for understanding our “common humanity”. “The collectors and scholars of the Enlightenment,” he writes, “brought to the task both a scientific ordering of facts, and a rare capacity for poetic reconstruction”.³⁷ The argument is true, but opaque, in the sense that it ignores the destructive context under which many objects were “found” or, in some cases, stolen. Such contexts necessitated imaginative analyses because the original owners had either been slaughtered by Imperial conquest or assimilated into vast hybrid empires.

Objects such as the wooden *Taino Ritual Seat*, Dominican Republic, AD 1200–1500, and the stone *Sculpture of Huastec Goddess*, Mexico, AD 900–1521, whose meanings mystify MacGregor, testify to the colonial erasure of both the Taino and Huastec people.³⁸ Returning for a moment to the phrase, “poetic reconstruction” MacGregor argues that thinking about the world through things as a “poetic” re-creation requiring some imagination, gives us a “different kind of knowing” that unites the experience of people across cultures.³⁹ However, the assumption that objects were

made by people “like us”, negates the specificity of *their* circumstances, and falsely posits a universal “us”. MacGregor’s analysis of the Huastec Goddess, a lost culture with no known written language, necessarily proceeds through layers of interpretation, including the Aztecs who first subjugated the Huastec, the Spanish Conquistadors who defeated the Aztecs, and finally, the Western scholars who now debate the sculpture’s symbolic function. An understanding of the *Huastec Goddess* (if she is indeed a “goddess” at all), interpreted by the Huastec people in their own words, is presently impossible because the processes of colonial domination and cultural erasure. In this, the museum now functions ambiguously, preserving delicate traces of cultural heritage, while monopolizing the ownership of their potential.

An interesting counter-point then might be to consider the ways in which the formerly colonized have interpreted MacGregor’s model. I turn then to Fintan O’Toole’s *A History of Ireland in 100 Objects* (2013) and Jahnvi Lakhota Nandan’s *Pukka Indian: 100 Objects that Define India* (2017), each of which constructs an identity in conversation with British colonizing influence, but is neither wholly defined nor essentialized by its distance from “Britishness”. Of the relationship between location and culture, O’Toole writes, “The place—its geography and environment, its particular mixture of ‘native’ and ‘foreigner’ (categories that change radically over time) — exerts its own peculiar pressures.”⁴⁰ In this, both *A History of Ireland* and *Pukka Indian*, share a methodology that inverts the hierarchy of cultures formerly marginalized by their relationship to the colonizer, defining instead culture as a conversation of exchange and influence.

In *A History of Ireland*, O'Toole embraces the evolutionary, modernist narrative arc of MacGregor, scouring the collections of the Irish National Museum system for objects that illuminate moments of change, development, or crisis in Irish history.⁴¹ As such, it is perhaps the most derivative of MacGregor's model. However, instead of emphasizing universality, O'Toole asserts the uniqueness of Irish culture as it developed *transculturally*, responding to universalizing influences, like Christianity and technological modernization, in uniquely Irish ways.

O'Toole's *A History of Ireland* is populated largely by the "greatest hits" of Irish historical artefacts, including the medieval *Book of Kells*, c. 800 and *James Connolly's Shirt*, 1916. The selection would seem to suggest a strong interest in Irish cultural heritage tourism, in that O'Toole specifies in his selection criteria that all objects be "freely accessible to readers in public institutions and spaces".⁴² There are few, if any surprises save for, perhaps, the late-nineteenth century *Reclining Buddha*, evidencing Ireland's supporting role in the punitive looting of antiquities in Burma by the British in 1885–86.⁴³

A History of Ireland, whose production was supported by the Royal Irish Academy and the National Museum of Ireland, celebrates the unique history of Irish artistic and cultural achievement. While resisting the narrative impulse to romanticize the provincial and "pre-modern", O'Toole instead positions Ireland in the context of other great Western civilizations, while carefully emphasizing its unique cultural heritage. As such, the book's greatest weakness is its universalising of Irish cultural

history. There are almost no objects referencing the world of women, for example, and almost nothing that engages with Irish modernism and multiculturalism. While fascinating and engagingly written with O'Toole's characteristic wit and insight, *A History of Ireland* reads rather like a sales pitch for Tourism Ireland.

By contrast, *Pukka Indian* is an astonishing and lavishly illustrated portrait of India through the design of its material culture. Nandan's intention here is not to "sell Indian culture" but to document everyday Indian life largely through the ordinary, domestic objects that constitute the core of "Indianness" in contemporary India. Consequently, Nandan examines objects that marry craft and industry, both respond to and resist the pull of modernity, and exemplify India's desires for political and cultural autonomy. A typewriter, Tandoor oven, and bindi, are celebrated alongside the spinning wheel and a Nehru jacket, as salient symbols of Indian hybridity and resiliency. As Nandan notes *Pukka Indian*, the title of which translates into "genuinely Indian", highlights the unsung "champions" of Indian design through the veneration of a material culture to which all Indians emotionally respond to and resonate with.⁴⁴

An intriguing comparison can be drawn across one item appearing in both MacGregor's *A History of the World* and Nandan's *Pukka Indian*, a solar-powered lamp, featured as the hundredth and fourteenth object in each, respectively. For MacGregor, the solar lamp concludes his global history as a summation of the concerns and aspirations of humanity, which speak of the universal experience and relationship between progress and material access.⁴⁵ For Nandan, the solar-powered lamp is more

intimate, a narrative of inequality, in which access to electricity is uneven, and one of ingenuity, in which the *BPL Studylite* is the proud recipient of the German RedDot design award and one of the only products proudly stamped “*Designed* [my emphasis] and Made in India”.⁴⁶ The divergent approach to the same object, both universalist and singular, highlights a point raised, poignantly, by MacGregor, that “spinning the globe” shows “how different history looks depending upon who you are and where you are looking from.”⁴⁷ Put succinctly, authorship matters.

From the national I turn then to the local, to Steven Blake’s *A History of Cheltenham in 100 Objects* (2013) and to John A. Davies and Tim Pestell’s *A History of Norfolk in 100 Objects* (2015), both published by The History Press. Each share a common methodology, to examine the history of humanity through a material culture rooted to place. As Davies and Pestell argue, the diversity of rich material culture in Norfolk positions it to “tell the stories of not only its own history but that of the nation to which it belongs”.⁴⁸ Blake, rather, focuses upon the value of museum objects in understanding the past and its absences. He notes, “preparing this book has highlighted the gaps in local history collections...and will hopefully help the Museum to develop its local history collecting policy for some time to come.”⁴⁹

The authors of both the Norfolk and Cheltenham histories aim for broad thematic and chronological coverage of their locales from pre-history to the present day, highlighting the centrality of libraries and museums as repositories of vast human history and knowledge. However, where Davies and Pestell adopt MacGregor’s

individual object histories approach, for example, object four, *The Happisburgh Handaxe* or object nineteen, a *Fragment of a Roman Equestrian Statue*, Blake weaves an interconnected narrative constructed of chronological chapters, such as "Early Cheltenham" and "the Eighteenth Century". As local histories, each subsequently must narrate the social life of a place through a narrower selection than any of the previously discussed titles. Consequently, the pictures of Norfolk and Cheltenham are more specific, balancing desires to be both iconically British, yet distinctive.

An interesting point of comparison is the way in which each engages with the subject of World War II and its exposition through object histories. *A History of Norfolk* includes five objects from this period, including a B17 pilot's jacket and the painting *Victory in Europe Night* by Phillipa Miller, while *A History of Cheltenham* only two. Each narration posits, with some nostalgia, the centrality of Great Britain to the winning of the War, alongside the often-harrowing experience of the war at home. On the subject of Great Britain and the two World Wars, Wright explains there is a widely shared British cultural fascination with the remembrance of these wars and the meaningful and romantic "pastness" each represents, which contrasts starkly with the experience of a chaotic and ambivalent Modern Britain.⁵⁰ The memory of war in Great Britain, embodied in memorials, material culture, and in land and heritage trusts, consequently communicates a strong sense of shared national and local character, unspoilt and permanent.

It is intriguing then that there at least three titles engaging with the legacy of Great Britain at war: The War Museum of the Boer Republics' *The Anglo-Boer War in 100 Objects*; *The First World War in 100 Objects* by John Hughes-Wilson and Mark Hawkins-Dady; and *The Second World War in 100 Objects* by Allan Reed and Julian Thompson. While all three titles interrogate the horrors and heroics, ingenuity and abnormalities of modern warfare through the object histories of weapons, uniforms, letters and ephemera, only one engages with consequences of war on civilians and on Britain's shameful imperial legacy, *The Anglo-Boer War*.

A photograph of a severely emaciated child, seven-year-old Lizzie van Zyl, featured in the subsection on British concentration camps in the Boer Republics, defies description. Her traumatized gaze sears the conscience, as does the photograph's juxtaposition opposite three concentration camp "penny dolls" and a watch chain braided from the hair of a five-year-old girl who perished in the war.⁵¹ The author notes that in 1901, roughly 90,000 women and children languished in white concentration camps, with a further 140,000 imprisoned in black camps. Between them, over 50,000 prisoners died of malnutrition and inadequate medical care and, "The trauma of concentration camps would linger in the Afrikaner psyche and worldview for generations to come."⁵² It is here where, as MacGregor suggests, material culture history is exceptionally good at speaking for the silenced. Where the British government sought to intentionally suppress evidence of its own barbarity in war, by attempts at the regulation of journalism, for example, these objects bore silent witness to the suffering of the brutalized whose traumas might never have otherwise seen the light of day.⁵³

Another intriguing feature of *The Anglo-Boer War* is its attention to the role and experience of women, a feature shared by Andrews and Lomas's *A History Women in 100 Objects* (2018). Acknowledging at the outset that the infinitely varied experiences of women are simply too multifarious to be encompassed in 100 objects, the authors, rather, celebrate the accomplishments of global feminism while lamenting its uneven development. Andrews and Lomas highlight this disparity in their analysis of ladies-only train carriages, object fifty-one, acknowledging women's uneasy relationship with travel and transportation as both an empowering tool for mobility and equality and the site of physical threat and sexual harassment.⁵⁴ The authors here apply an intersectional lens to the history of the object, bypassing MacGregor's tendency to try to universalize experience. While British women fought against the sexual segregation of ladies-only carriages on grounds that they excused men from poor behaviour, Andrews and Lomas recognize that shift from domesticity to the public sphere has been more dangerous for women in Africa, South America, and Asia. As they explain, "Women in countries with a far higher reliance on public transport who find themselves subject to sexual harassment...see things in a different light from white British feminists."

The remaining seven texts are unapologetically Anglocentric, explicitly celebrating British inventiveness, as well as its cultural peculiarities. Of these, five might be described as packaging British culture for global export. These include: Brian Southall's *The Beatles in 100 Objects* (2013); the Victoria and Albert Museum's *Shakespeare in 100 Objects* (2010); John Matusiak's *The Tudors in 100 Objects* (2016); and Gavin Mortimer's *A History of Cricket...* (2013) and *A History of Football in 100*

Objects (2012). Taken as a subsection of this survey, this grouping attempts to form British identity in relation to its global appeal as a leading exporter of iconic literature, pop music, sports, and romantic political, and historical intrigue. In this, the various authors seek to “re-enchant” audiences with conventional, beloved icons of “Britishness”, while simultaneously reinventing the material for a new audience. For example, The Victoria and Albert Museum’s twenty-fourth *Shakespeare* object, a Nick Ormond costume design for the 1991 Cheek by Jowl production of *As You like It*, illuminates the way in which this treasured play was reconceived as a critical examination of contemporary gender politics.⁵⁵

The sixtieth object in *The Tudors*, a seventeenth-century condom, illustrates what Wright describes as the object’s unique ability to “re-enchant” the nostalgia of everyday life by comparing the heritage of the past to life in the present. Given the ferocity of the continued debate over contraception and abortion access globally, it is simultaneously reassuring (and a little disheartening) to consider the fight is not new. Similarly, *A History of Football’s* third object, the Freemason’s Tavern, famed site of the Football Association’s early attempts to codify the sport, is nostalgically remembered as the locus of masculine sportsmanship, homosocial camaraderie, and, possibly, the “best beer in town”.⁵⁶ The use of a contemporary site as an historical object, also serves to collapse the past into the present, anchoring historicity to place and “museifying” or “monumentalising” the everyday.⁵⁷

Similarly, Alan Moss and Keith Skinner's *Scotland Yard's History of Crime in 100 Objects* (2015) "museifies" the macabre history of British crime and monumentalizes its fallen heroes, the Metropolitan Police.⁵⁸ Of all the texts surveyed, *Scotland Yard's History* is the most sensationalized and the least effective in its deployment of the object as witness to history framework. As the authors explain, the title seeks to "Explore Britain's dark criminal history through the fascinating objects that have been hidden away...a collection that, although world-famous, is so sensitive it has never before been opened to the public." Moss and Skinner deploy language, like "grisly" and "notorious", that excites morbidity in the reader's imagination. A kitschy triple bullet hole motif appears throughout the text. The authors' choice of objects, however, doesn't illuminate the exploration of the crimes themselves. *Scotland Yard's* eighty-ninth object, a wooden eagle, found in the home of one of Britain's "most wanted" criminals, isn't even addressed in the narrative it accompanies; begging the question, why include objects at all?

The final text, *How to be English in 100 Objects, Occasions and Peculiarities* (2015) by David Boyle represents a marked departure from the collection of texts surveyed, which seeks explicitly to see into the "soul" of Englishness as distinctive of the construction of "Britishness". "We have a culture like a rummage sale," writes Boyle, "hideously divided and bizarrely coherent — and, over the last century or so, obscured by an even more varied invention known as 'Britishness.'" ⁵⁹ The resulting text is a sardonic, self-consciously wistful, and light-hearted celebration of the cultural artefacts of "Englishness" and a "guidebook" for those who "are not absolutely sure who we

are”.⁶⁰ *How to be English*, argues Blake, responds to the urgent national crisis of cultural amnesia and confusion. “The British Empire has long since disappeared, the Union Jack may go the way of the Union, ‘Rule Britannia’ is slightly embarrassing...there has never been a more urgent moment to revive a sense of *Englishness* [emphasis added]”.⁶¹

How to be English explicitly defends and preserves an embattled and disillusioned national identity, which Blake peppers with humour, approbation, and critical self-reflection. Of the downfall of the East India Company, he quips, “There is an unexpected side of the English which can tolerate absolute disorder, as long as they can win...but it did fail...It [the East India Company] is now a byword for greed, imperialism, and the kind of slavery which comes from taxing people who have no income.”⁶² On the “nostalgic idea” of Dunkirk, Blake writes, “There was something self-revelatory about Dunkirk...the snatching of consolation from disaster. It was all very English.” His reflection is immediately followed by a depressing catalogue of Dunkirk’s failures, including ships lost, 236, and men captured or killed during the evacuation, an astonishing 68,111.

Nonetheless, Blake, demonstrates great deference for those concepts and cultural exports deemed unapologetically English, such as object seventeen, “Heroic Failure” and object eighty-three, the “BBC”. The book is less about objects and more about ideas. For example, the BBC, he insists, is actually *English* and not British, on account of its “understated politeness” and “obsessive political balance”⁶³ At times Blake’s wistful reverence for Englishness approaches fetishization. In his analysis of

“Roly-Poly Pudding”, Blake vividly conjures the object in winter, contrasting the sweet warmth of the custard against the cold, metallic taste of boarding school dinners. “Ah yes,” he recalls, “the comfort of black and white television and Formica tables, it all comes wafting back.”⁶⁴ *How to be English* embraces an uneasy identity that Blake claims risks disappearance in a shifting landscape of imperial decline. His interrogation of dislocated Englishness, objectifies the everyday and the extraordinary, narrating a sense of national pride in the face of increasing cultural insecurity.

Conclusion: Heritage Under Siege?

As a historiography, the sixteen texts analysed herein cohere as a collection of histories seeking, whether consciously or otherwise, to reinvigorate a national heritage through the exploitation of the aura of the object. Each of the subsequent fifteen texts derives from MacGregor’s methodology, yet none emulate his approach to articulate identity as universal. Rather, each of the authors posits the uniqueness of British, English, Irish or Indian identity through its cultural production at a measured distance *from* global experience. In this, I would suggest that MacGregor’s *A History of the World* diverges from its progeny in its attempt to consciously reposition a formerly Anglocentric heritage as “the universal”, refashioning a new, global identity that obscures the sins of the British imperial past. I would argue that MacGregor’s efforts are problematic in this regard, not because his argument is wrong, but because its *intent* is born out of a strategy of power maintenance that seeks to reassert British cultural hegemony. His approach rests upon the assumption that “cultural difference is

something of an epiphenomenal construct which, rather unfortunately, denigrates the very cultural differentiation that the universal museum is intended and expected to cope with".⁶⁵

MacGregor asks, poignantly, "Can we ever really understand others? Perhaps, but only through feats of poetic imagination, combined with knowledge rigorously acquired and ordered." The remaking and reimagining of identity politics manifest in MacGregor's *A History of the World* illustrates what Clive Gray has argued is the top-down reordering of international museum politics and the desire, by some, to maintain European cultural heritage as a site of political power in the face of fracturing, postcolonial museological perspectives. In this endeavour, "the central decisions affecting societies", Gray argues, "are made by groups of actors who are not concerned with the particular national interests of publically controllable state actors, but, instead, with the specific transnational concerns of particular groups of private interests."⁶⁶

MacGregor's ambitious approach functions then as an argument, not only in favour of "the universal", but also in favour of British cultural hegemony. MacGregor argues for a "common humanity" in which objects from around the world are given equal weight and are, in fact, the most valuable when considered in global contexts. In this, his intentions reveal the circumvention of the repatriation debate: these artefacts belong in *one* place, the British Museum. Given the political and financial instability of some of the governments requesting repatriation perhaps MacGregor's position is well founded. One simply can't deny the care with which the Museum has long protected

cultural heritage. The question remains, however, if we accept MacGregor's argument, are we willing also to accept the consequences of heritage theft in our shared history? Can we both support the repatriation of materials looted by the Nazis while simultaneously denying the British theft of the past? The universalist argument posited by MacGregor can't be dislodged from his support for the "Declaration of...Universal Museums" and its underlying motivations. *A History of the World* thereby maintains the mechanisms of British cultural imperialism, exercising its "power over" more minor players in the repatriation debate by controlling the nature of the debate, rather than arguing its position from within it as an equal agent.

As Clive suggests, "power over", as opposed to "power to", incorporates "the ways in which these factors can be seen to influence the specific political and policy choices that are made within societies".⁶⁷ In this regard, *A History of the World* constructs a national identity that cannot escape its imperial legacy because the hegemonic discourse it constructs about heritage promotes a similar set of elite cultural values that served to construct "Britishness" at its genesis. In her discussion of the invention of the "Briton", Linda Colley articulates the ambiguity with which we now approach this construction of British identity. As she explains, while subsuming all identities under the British umbrella elides individual experience, the "quarantining" of identities from each other results in a "shrunk" history.⁶⁸ Is the articulation of British heritage then a "no win" situation? I think not, as *How to Be English* illustrates. Blake's acknowledgement of problematic British heritage and its consequences for identity

construction in the present allow him an honesty of intention and a vantage point from which to be *both* critical and celebratory of the past.

The question of “how we choose to define ourselves” pervades the invention of “100 object” histories. The strength of this literary construct lies in the ability of a curated selection of objects to “converse” with each other in place of conventional archival research, illuminating new facets of history previously unexplored by the historian’s pen. However, such collections function also as ideological constructions of identity, occasionally with neoimperialist overtones, which threaten to overpower the potentiality of cultural difference manifest in object histories. Nonetheless, these “100 object” histories, which negotiate unstable landscapes of politics, history, and culture, reveal, quite frequently, ideological constructions more fascinating than the intended historical narratives each purports to illustrate.

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