

Helen Sear 'Spot'

Captured By The Game.

The notion of heritage appeals to a wide selection of British society. Heritage implies something shared or collective, with which we can identify, but it is also remote. It is unlikely that we can ever uncover the full story about any aspect of our heritage, rather partial versions built upon a series of displaced fragments through interpretive texts, which are often a matter of conjecture. Historical objects carry information from which the heritage industry, including contemporary museums, attempts to reconstruct the past. If its intention is to be revelatory, it is also to entertain through packaging objects of historical interest for general consumption. That is not to say that such presentations cannot be revelatory, but the evidence is largely speculative and the experience can only be vicarious.

Heritage straddles past and present, containing implications for the future. It invites comparison with the past and points up our aspirations. It also implies loss; the loss of something which never quite existed in the first place. We have fragments of history, which provide glimpses of our past. We can make an inventory which might comprise bits of pottery, tools, jewellery, old shoes, weapons, books, paintings, stuffed animals, carriages, castles, ocean liners, photographs, aeroplanes, televisions, computers, mobile phones; a host of obsolete objects. They offer only a fragmentary view of life at a given time, so we are forced to construct around the fragment in order to obtain a fuller picture. Perhaps inevitably our constructions romanticise the past. There seems to be a tendency to prefer the more dramatic version of events to the mundane. People frequently make comparisons between an imperfect present and a golden past, sometimes discussed in terms of 'erosion of values'. This is surely an attempt to regain that which cannot be retrieved; a quest for lost innocence which never existed outside the imagination and experience of the child. Heritage and nostalgia may overlap, but they are not the same thing.

The fabric of our society has altered radically over the last century and is in constant flux, but some traits persist. Many people wouldn't give the 'hunting instinct' a second thought or, if pressed, deny that they possessed it. It sounds far too primitive or impractical for the twenty-first century. The idea of 'going back to nature' has limited appeal, perhaps only in the heritage context whereby we can enact the lives of our forebears. The reality might be too brutal. Nevertheless, families go out hunting still and encounter other hunting parties in the local supermarket. If supermarkets are places for hunting they are also places for being hunted, being looked at by other shoppers, the security guards, the video camera, even by the products attempting to catch our eye. 'Buy me!' 'Eat me!' We also like to peer into other peoples' trolleys as if their contents can reveal hidden facets of character or personality, otherwise camouflaged. We are ensnared by the supermarket and enmeshed in it, just as the primitive hunter was enmeshed in the forest.

We no longer kill directly in order to eat. That necessity faded long ago, even though slaughter continues unseen. What remains, and has become stronger, is the urge to tame or control, even defy, nature. Hence our attempt to systematise the food chain. Whilst chance plays a part in 'hunting and fishing' (now regarded as sport), these activities emanate from a desire to outwit nature and to exert absolute power of life and death over it. This in turn emanates from a survival instinct which is deeply embedded in the human race. The sportsman-hunter may be lucky enough to 'bag' a fine example of some unfortunate creature which then becomes the 'trophy'. The 'trophy' acts as a symbol of our ability to survive and of our sense of superiority over other species and nature itself. The 'hunter' is alive and well, though somewhat regulated these days.

Most of us are content to be part of an audience, listening to fishermen's tales, visiting a heritage centre or museum to view the 'trophies' of others. Certain other benign activities can satisfy and sublimate the urge to collect 'trophies'; watching television for example. People need never venture from their couch to see crocodiles snapping in some exotic location. Having viewed it on 'the box' the more adventurous can book a 'package' or 'safari' holiday to a similar location and snap the crocodiles. A camera is essential, and the tourist will be suitably 'armed' in order to 'bag' their 'trophy'.

The camera has, for many people, replaced traps, guns and other weapons. We no longer need to hunt to kill, but it seems that we still need our 'trophies'. 150 years ago most people would not have had access to a camera, a relatively new technology, nor have had the means or the time to pursue and observe creatures as a leisure activity. Leisure time was a luxury most couldn't afford and therefore a relatively alien concept, as it still is in many third world countries. Nowadays, for westerners, travelling and taking photographs are commonplace. We cannot bring back animal 'trophies' from our travels, but we can show the holiday snaps. We can email them to our friends before we return home, thus creating an experience which is even more vicarious.

This need to collect 'trophies' in the form of photographs or video footage seems to be central to our lives. We are not content to allow an experience to reside in our memories. Instead we require tangible, visible proof to display to our friends. If the well-heeled of the past needed de facto 'trophies' as evidence of their attainments, today we use photographs and video enhanced by digital means. The main purpose of the 'trophy' is to ensure that others view it, and to bask in their admiration or envy. The internet is the perfect medium to achieve this end. We may disseminate images on the world-wide web, to ensnare potential viewers. The language itself, 'net' and 'web', are redolent of hunting and trapping. If in the past the collecting of 'trophies' was largely a male preserve, the replacement of guns and traps by cameras and websites has opened this up to both sexes. The same is increasingly true of another form of 'hunting', that of earning money. The 'trophy' is proof of our experience, our worth and our potential. Class and gender are no longer so distinct, having been replaced by status.

If the hunter is alive and well, then so is the naturalist. The latter has always been regarded as more refined, citing scientific or intellectual interests as their motivation with an emphasis on observation. The naturalist collects 'specimens' rather than 'trophies'. Often it is 'specimens' from the past that we see in the contemporary museum context, transferred from private collections to the public domain of heritage. 'Trophies' are for viewing whilst 'specimens' are for observing, but the naturalist like the hunter, had to kill in order to collect and preserve. Ironically most of what the naturalist might have wanted to observe, namely behaviour, would be extinguished when creatures became specimens, leaving only appearance for viewing; a shell of the living creature. Thus 'specimen' comes very close to 'trophy' and both are imbued with a remoteness or an exoticism.

If you accept that 'trophies' are for viewing, whilst 'specimens' are for observing, what difference does this make? If we are meant to stand back and view the 'trophy', is this a passive activity? We can feel curiosity, admiration, or envy and it might excite aspirations and our desire to emulate. In this sense it is not passive, but we view appearance which is focused on the surface and seems superficial or innocuous. We are comfortable with 'the viewer'. Viewing has collective connotations, whereby we share an experience, a desire, with no sense of isolation or superiority to our fellow viewers. Meanwhile we observe behaviour which would seem to suggest an intention to probe. 'Specimens' are collected for observation, implying an analytical role on the part of the observer, which is unsettling. 'The observer' stands apart, outside of society and must do so in order to observe.

If previously it was necessary for the naturalist to collect, preserve and present specimens, the advent of film and photography as accessible tools for observing and recording in the last century made it unnecessary to kill in order to collect specimens. It is now possible to photograph and film behaviour in natural habitats, in ways which were unimaginable even fifty years ago. Nor is it any longer the exclusive domain of the specialist. With the aid of new technology everybody has the potential to record and disseminate images of our environment. As a result there is fusion between 'specimen' and 'trophy' which makes for popular viewing on television, encouraging myriad amateur naturalists, anthropologists, ornithologists, sociologists and eco-tourists.

Television companies don't refer to 'observers', they refer to 'viewers'. This seems to indicate that they anticipate a passive audience or at any rate a collective audience. People still seem to crave '15 minutes of fame' on television, presumably in the hope of acquiring superior status which media exposure and its collective audience can confer. With the emergence of 'reality TV' and the prevalence of game shows and the like, it is becoming commonplace to appear on television. However, this form of television brings us closer to observing, rather than viewing, our fellow human beings. The participants in this context submit to being 'specimens', considering themselves worth watching. The *appearance* itself which confers instant celebrity status, along with the cash, is their 'trophy' for later (re)viewing. Thus we can be both 'the viewer' and 'the viewed', and the experience remains collective. Only a minority of people might claim to be 'the observer' or 'the observed'.

We are intrigued by the collective activity which is 'reality TV', because there is a vicarious pleasure to be derived from following the trials and tribulations of our fellow human beings, and their resultant behaviour. It is acceptable because we assume that the 'specimen' has some choice in the matter, is being paid, and will regain the position of 'viewer'. It is reciprocal viewing, not dissimilar to our supermarket 'hunting' activities. In the case of animal 'specimens' seen at close quarters on television, where vision can also be reciprocal, our interest lies in whether the presenter or cameraman will be eaten alive. Ultimately human behaviour or fate is of greater interest to us than that of the animal.

Of all our rites of passage death is the final stage, whereby we take leave of the material world. 'Reality TV' and game shows are also rites of passage, perhaps rehearsals for the final rite of passage. We can be both 'viewer' (disembodied) and 'viewed' (embodied). However difficult it may be to accept a person's death, we cannot deny it. We view the corpse in order to 'realise' the death. At the same time we can imagine the person, no longer alive and in some disembodied form, *observing* us in the act of *viewing* their physical remains.

We are under no misconception that the preserved 'trophy' or 'specimen', which we may encounter in the museum or heritage centre, will ever regain the position of 'viewer'. It is clearly an impossibility since they are dead, but they are usually presented to us in a form which is 'life-like', often in a constructed setting or diorama. However artificial the setting, and despite the fact that these 'specimens' are mere shells, they appear to return our gaze. It is largely through vision that we register response. We look into others' eyes to detect thoughts and emotions as they look into our eyes and, such is the power of vision, find this difficult to circumnavigate.

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