

Politics of memory: Historical battlefields and sense of place

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Abstract: The historical landscapes of war and conflict — such as battlefields, remains of military constructions, memorials and graveyards — are fundamental parts of the national iconography of modern states. They stand there not just for their own sake but to — regardless of its pitfalls and mythological aspects — evince a nationalistic narrative of unified history and culture from past time up to the present day. The meanings and historical narratives related to places and landscapes are part of continuous processes of reproduction and representation. Historical places and landscapes and their meanings have never arisen for nothing. On the contrary, they are a part of wider social discourses and the reading and interpretation practices associated with these. These discourses act as frameworks that include particular combinations of narratives, concepts, myths, ideologies and signifying practices, each relevant to a particular realm of social action. They can enable and constrain meanings by constituting the limits within which ideas and practices are considered to be natural. In this article certain factors or interpretation practices related to the historical landscapes of war are identified and discussed. These factors may be identified as processes of 1) marking 2) naming 3) seeing and 4) controlling.

Keywords: historical landscapes, battlefields, sense of place,

Introduction: Historical landscapes as reminders of memories

The value of a historical landscape is composed of the past of its places (Morphy 1995). The past is represented both through relics and traits as well as through names, meanings and stories. In other words, a historical landscape is ‘both material and meaning’, physical marks left behind by history as well as meanings and interpretations related to them (Baker 1992: 3). The historical landscape is also a landscape of memory, a surface inscribed

by historical signs and stories to strengthen, direct and validate both a personal and a collective memory of its places (Kühler 1995: 86).

Still, despite all the layers of the past, the fundamental phenomenon of the historical landscape is its present nature and thus its engagements with the present day. As David Lowenthal reminds us, landscapes exists here and now and thus the past related to them is always to be interpreted from the present (Lowenthal 1975). Historical relics, monuments and memorials, for example, are situated temporarily in a remembered or imagined past but geographically in a

present-day landscape. The primal function of these historical reminders is not to keep or preserve the past but re-waken it and celebrate it (Lowenthal 1979: 121; Heffernan 1995). This awakening is done from the present and it is not unchangeable. On the contrary, the meanings and historical narratives related to places and landscapes are part of continuous processes of reproduction and representation.

War sites and landscapes as part of a national heritage

The historical landscapes of war and conflict — such as battlefields, remains of military constructions, memorials and graveyards — are fundamental parts of the national iconography of modern states. Famous battlefields such as Hastings (1066), Bosworth Field (1485) and Naseby (1645) in England are places that possess a certain relevance for a nation's history and heritage. And it is not only battlefields that have usually been denoted as essential codes of a national signifying system but also memorials and cemeteries. It is not so important whether these sites stand for victory or defeat, the important thing is that they represent a nationalistic past. They stand there not just for their own sake but to — regardless of its pitfalls and mythological aspects — evince a nationalistic narrative of unified history and culture from past time up to the present day.

Places and landscapes related to wars are usually described as sites with a strong sense of place. As a part of nationalistic narrative and memory, they are often described as mystical places where it is still possible to

experience imagined visions and sounds of the past.

"To visit Naseby, for example, on a late summer afternoon is a strangely moving experience, and it takes no great effort of the imagination to see Cromwell's Ironsides charging and routing Prince Rupert's cavalry, to hear the thunder of their hoofs, the cries of soldiers and the crackle of musket fire."
(Neuburg 1972, 93)

But is it really the case that battlefields evoke such a strong sense of place? In fact, visiting an actual battlefield is in many cases an anticlimax, or at least something different from what you expected. The meanings are not created *ex nihilo*. The historical landscape is thus a part of memory made visible by somebody, and usually for a purpose. The spirit of a place, *genius loci*, depends on what spirits, or in the case of battlefields perhaps ghosts, we are willing to see, hear and feel.

The battlefield of Naseby, where according to Neuberg the crackle of musket fire and the thunder of hoofs are still a part of the contemporary soundscape, is not an exception. The battle of Naseby that took place on July 14th, 1645, was a remarkable event in British history, a turning point of the English Civil War. It was at Naseby that the Parliamentary troops gained a decisive victory over the Royalists, taking over 5000 prisoners, capturing the King's artillery and annihilating Prince Rupert's experienced cavalry, the backbone of the Royalist army. After Naseby King Charles I could no longer raise an army capable of threatening the victory of Oliver Cromwell and the Parliamentarians. The tactical details of the

battle of Naseby are well known and the battle itself can be placed in the context of the history of the Civil War. In other words, the aura of place is manifested only if its past is known and if people wish to remember this past or some part of it. The historical landscape needs its story. Without a story and its interpretations there are no ghosts and no sense of place.

Another important factor that has helped to create such a strong sense or experience of place is the fact that the physical environment of Naseby has hardly changed. The old battlefield can be traced almost in the same condition in which it 'really' was over three and half centuries ago. The place is also marked. The site can be found from maps and, what is the most important in the national register of historical battlefields. The Naseby obelisk was erected in 1825, and some years ago a museum and visitor centre were built to maintain, recreate and support the sense of the place. In this centre the visitor can study the different phases of the battle or admire both archaeological finds from the battlefield and replicas of the old armour and arms. There is also an exhibition, a multimedia presentation and of course a gift shop. And if the visitors have arrived at the right time in the season they can watch one of the live heritage re-enactments shows in which the battle of Naseby is refought.

In other words, there are certain factors or processes that make it possible to see historical landscapes, such as Naseby or other battlefields through the present day. These factors may be identified as processes of 1) marking 2) naming 3) seeing and 4) controlling.

Marking

Historical places, landscapes or milieux are always marked in one way or another. Without marking these places would not exist in our present-day landscapes. In most cases the marking of historical sites means that we equip them with memorials, signposts and other informative symbols. After that, we know that we are in a place of significance from the past because the wording on the memorial or signpost tells us so. Thus marking also means that the place is distinguished from its present environment. The marker emphasises its special antiqueness by contrast with its unsignposted present-day environs and diminishes the antique artefact's continuity with its surroundings (Lowenthal 1979: 109–110). These places marked with signposts thus gain the special meanings of historical sights. We stand in front of them as we do displays in museums or exhibitions. Marking can also take place indirectly, e.g. through maps, tourist brochures and literature. In the absence of markers on the ground we mentally erect our own: yes there it is, or there it was, in the right place, standing out from the present-day things around it (Lowenthal 1979: 112).

Marking forms the message related to the place and thus guides the eyes of the observers. The signposts are telling us what we should pay attention to, what we should see and in which direction we should look. In many cases we would not even know of the existence of historical sites without these signs to remind us (Lowenthal 1979: 109–110). This is particularly true in the case of former battlefields. A battlefield, an otherwise undifferentiated area of

land, becomes an ideologically encoded landscape through the commemorative function of the "marker". As a marker inscribes war onto material soil, it becomes the sight (Diller & Scofidio 1994: 48).

Naming

The naming of a place is one means of marking it, and thus an important factor in creating a sense of place. A place must have a name in order to be remembered, for without a name there is no place. In many cases it is the name of the place that brings associations to our minds. On the other hand, it can happen that all we have left from historical events are place names. The naming of a battlefield is not just a chance event. It is usually a process where the will to control the memory of the place is very much involved.

It is typical for sites of battles, and thus the names of battlefields, to be chosen in order to support the national interpretation of the historical narrative. A good example is the famous battle of Tanneberg in 1914, where Hindenburg and his German troops gained a decisive victory over the Russian army. It is generally known by this name, even though geographically the exact location of the battlefield is not at the site called Tanneberg. The name was chosen not because of the accurate location but for historical reasons. The name refers back to the earlier battle of Tanneberg, also called the battle of Grünfelde, or Grunwald, fought in 1410. Although this first battle ended in a major Polish-Lithuanian victory over the Knights of the Teutonic Order,

it became one of the cornerstones among the German national history, a symbol of the everlasting battle between Slavic and Germanic nations in the eastern frontier zone. Thus, by naming the victory of 1914 on the eastern front the battle of Tanneberg the Germans ensured that it could be associated with the everlasting mythical campaign between east and west. And this time it was Germans' turn to win!

Seeing

The visible marks and relics of historical landscapes will help us to remember. On former battlefields any visible constructions related to war, such as remnants of fortifications, pits, graves or ruins, are important documents to confirm that the place is real. In many cases, however, visible marks are rare or totally lacking. This sense of emptiness can be problematic for our experience of place. The names and the history related to the places feed our imagination, but the lack of visible evidence can awaken us to the reality. We must see the past if we want to feel it. Visible relics such as ruins or archaeological finds are so important because they dramatise the historical narrative of their places or landscapes, and by doing this they create, maintain and represent the sense of these places. And not only historical relics do that. Nowadays there are visitor centres, museums and replica landscapes to create this sense of place and usually they are doing so as well or even better than the original remains from the past.

Controlling

Political control over the battlefield is an essential part of the victory. The one achieved in the battle itself and that attained later by symbolic dominance over the site. Control over the battlefield, perhaps means, in effect, interaction between these two. During the Middle Ages this interaction was closely linked to physical control over the battlefield. The winning side had to be able to control the place for a certain formal length of time. There were also some formal rituals, such as eating, counting of the dead, official recording of both sides' losses and of course after-treatment of the casualties, including burring of the bodies on the battlefield. According to chronicles, for example, after the battle of Hastings (1066) "Duke William ate and drank among the dead, and made his bed that night upon the field. The next day, he ordered the Norman dead to be buried" (St John Parker 1996: 17).

Control over the battlefield, and thus control over the narrative related to the place, could be strengthened by marking the site with visible memorials such as crosses, chapels or churches, or with signs and information boards as we do today. The battle of Hastings is again a very good example of this kind of control. After the battle, Duke William, from then on William the Conqueror, founded Battle Abbey on the site, and tradition relates that the high altar of the Abbey marks the spot where King Harold planted his standards and where he made his final stand (Smurthwaite 1989: 65). Thus the function of Battle Abbey was to commemorate the battle and honour the memory of King Harold, but

above of all to celebrate William's victory. It is this control that establishes whose interpretation is right, who has the privilege to say what should be remembered and how.

Conclusions

Historical places and landscapes and their meanings have never arisen for nothing. On the contrary, they are a part of wider social discourses and the reading and interpretation practices associated with these. These discourses act as frameworks that include particular combinations of narratives, concepts, myths, ideologies and signifying practices, each relevant to a particular realm of social action. They can enable and constrain meanings by constituting the limits within which ideas and practices are considered to be natural. The meanings of places are always contested or negotiated, and in the case of historical battlefields control over these meanings is usually very tangible. A landscape is always a landscape for somebody. It has its makers, authors, readers and spectators, who both produce and re-produce the cultural and historic signifying processes attached to it. Thus, the politics of memory has become a part of the politics of representation.

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