

Ram-raiding the modern past, at a garden centre near you

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I found a garden centre catalogue last summer which contained a strange advert for a 'ram raid barrier' (see figure.1). This comes in different styles and is almost designed like a Metropolitan Drinking Fountain & Cattle Trough Association replica. It also resembles a dolmen. It is set in concrete to resemble stone. Drainage holes enable it to be filled with plants and/or flowers.

I put the advert to one side, unsure what to do with it. Later, I read Simon Faulkner's 2003 essay, "Asylum Seeker", *Imagined Geography and Visual Culture*. This essay identified elements within UK tabloid cartoons which posited a garden England as ideologically walled off from an 'alien' other. It immediately began to resonate with this odd find, which I couldn't quite bring myself to throw away. Faulkner wrote:

'The tabloids... construct an overtly value-laden set of geographical contrasts between the inside and

outside of Britain, and between "Britishness" and the refugee as "other"'. (Faulkner, 2003).

Faulkner described how 'Britishness' is defined in the UK tabloid press as rural and white, as opposed to urban and multi-cultural. He was writing about the other as 'immigrant', as 'asylum seeker', yet strands of his argument seemed to illuminate this curious advertisement, which almost seemed like a joke. Certainly, the idea of a 'garden England' under siege was present. Yet perhaps the 'ram raid', with all its connotational baggage, is a different terror, imaginary or otherwise, to that which Faulkner was attempting to tease out.

There seemed to be a jarring contrast between the product's rustic design, its heavyweight construction and intended dual-usage as both rampart and flower bed. Dolmen means 'stone table' in Breton, which has been said to invoke the image of giants building

them. As components of tombs, Dolmen are also said to form a barrier between the living and the dead.

There may also be a way in here, to a broader reading of 'asylum'. Although the 'asylum' Faulkner discusses is not directly applicable to the advert in question, 'asylum' may be connotationally present. Liza Schuster, in 'Asylum and the Lessons of History', supplies a broader reading of the term:

'The word asylum originally came from the Greek "asylos", that which may not be seized or violated and usually referred to a place that was sacred or magical, such as a temple. Those who took sanctuary in such a place put themselves under the protection of the gods and so out of secular control'. (Schuster, 2002).

The idea of the 'rural idyll' has a strong hold over western culture, stretching back well over two thousand years. Later, Schuster writes of how the state came to be the guardian of 'asylum'. Yet she describes how, historically, states act out of self-interest in relation to 'asylum', rather than compassion, how 'Liberalism only served to disguise...brutal reality'. (ibid).

The Metropolitan Drinking Fountain & Cattle Trough Association placed more than 800 constructions in London. The drinking fountains were erected due to public ill health through choleric water supplies and a tendency for citizens to drink its 'safer' alternative, beer. The cattle troughs were designed to improve animal welfare. Many such troughs still exist in towns and cities, the curated remnants of a vanished era, some filled with flowers.

At this point the ram raid barrier seems to collapse into jarring, soil-covered fragments. Remnants to be picked over: A broken hulk of philanthropist welfare institution here, a section of castle wall there. As an object it serves, if only metaphorically, as a figure for both provision and control. More importantly I think, it speaks of the link between the two, as well as the attempt to erase that link via spatial curation.

Patrick Wright has written of such curation, how we 'Rationalise nostalgias' (Wright, 1985). Quoting Philippe Hoyau, he explained that 'the whole frame of reference has shifted in a new and vernacular direction. "The past" may still be an imaginary object, but it is now organised around three major models:

the family, conviviality and the countryside. Purged of its leading political tensions, the past can then be offered to one and all in newly inclusive ceremonies of collective identification: "History annuls itself in ethnology... it dissolves itself in the circumscribed depth of the countryside and congeals in the time of repetition.'" (ibid).

Wright has written that '...colonialist expectation... no longer finding its customary outlets in the periphery of a mastered world, recoils bitterly on its disappointing home territory' (ibid) and discusses the 20's, when the 'culture of the German countryside migrated into the hideous, but nonetheless "hopeful" symbolism of national Socialism' (ibid). Academia, Wright says, does not completely enframe history, or rather, what he terms the 'modern past':

The 'modern past' can be disseminated and popularised via TV, film, or tourism. Older forms of everyday, ritualised activity, from dolmens to water troughs, 'the sacred' to 'the state', are subsumed by the 'modern past'. Wright continues:

'...a phrase of rhyming slang, an old piece of industrial machinery (preferably in situ), a hand-painted plate from the turn of the century and a cherished landscape or place. It is not official cultural policy which determines the meaning or the extent of the modern past.' (ibid).

There are many cattle troughs in London, made of granite, which are now anchored in the public, municipal concrete. The 'effective ram raid barrier' is made of concrete and is now available for private sales.

Some references

Faulkner, Simon. 2003. "Asylum Seeker", *Imagined Geography and Visual Culture*. From *Visual Cultures in Britain*, Vol.4 No.1. London: Ashgate, 2003

Schuster, Liza. 2002. *Asylum and the Lessons of History*, in *Race & Class*, Vol. 44, No. 2. London: Sage pp40-56

Wright, Patrick. 1985. *Everyday Life and the Aura of the Modern Past*, from *On Living in an Old Country*. London: Verso, 1985

<http://drinkingfountains.org>