

I N P R I N T

Peddling the past

By Chris Lehmann

David Lowenthal, a dogged student of students of the past, argued in his last book on history and historiography that the past is a foreign country. That thesis gets dismayingly updated in his new book: *Possessed by the Past* documents the various ways the past has become a tourist colony, a sort of fun-house reflection of the present, purged of any abiding controversy and conflict and stocked with carefully selected baubles bespeaking a shiny, warmly tribal authenticity.

The heritage industry in its many guises—privatized stately homes, revisionist textbooks and feverishly ramifying genealogy, to name just a few of the more obvious examples—has captured the imaginations of earnest middlebrow enthusiasts the world over. It's hard to leave the house, let alone go on vacation, without encountering the overstuffed legacies of heritage practitioners: exoticized ethnic artifacts and folklores, period theme parks and museums, the brisk auctioneering trade in the heirlooms of families and nations. It's an enterprise that offers a suggestive vantage on our own age's drastically foreshortened hindsight and obdurate penchant for ignoring—and, indeed, gilding over—the rougher edges of historical memory, human nature and

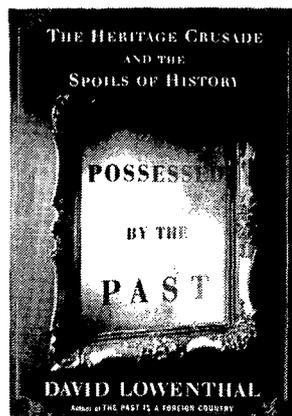
civilizational mortality.

When translated into the present, heritage yields a politics of glib, obsessive contemporaneity, in which the past serves (at best) as a warmed-over version of Bedford Falls in *It's a Wonderful Life*: the burnished, sepia-toned foil to the vast, debauched Pottersville we inhabit today. Consider the luminous bout of nostalgia that prompted Bob Dole to offer his back as a bridge to the past—the unseemly image that started President Clinton and the Democrats on their own blathering “bridge to the 21st century” binge, and left millions of citizens wondering if the whole campaign would not be best described as the beast with two backs. Dole sought to invoke the classic, cozy shibboleths that are the stock in trade of the heritage business—the America in which quaint small-town comity was the order of the day. No one locked their doors, you could take your gal out sparkin' to a soda fountain, and Jeffrey Dahmer wasn't even a gleam in his daddy's eye.

Dole's imaginings prompted an equally predictable flurry of indignant scoldings from the liberal left: The past was squalid and brutal exploitation, racism and sexism, punctuated by world-historic bloodbaths. In all this shrill nostalgia and anti-nostalgia, there is hardly a trace of a lived past—that foreign land where people puzzled out the contradictions of their lives by actually living them, in which you could fight for the eight-hour day or campaign against lynching, but still be a dysfunctional parent or spouse. As long as the past's inhabitants remain the quarry of our own perfervid reveries, they are lost in a way even more final than they are by virtue of their own deaths.

But such careful erasure is the stuff on which the heritage impulse feeds, and as Lowenthal copiously documents, the heritage impulse is everywhere. Indeed, *Possessed by the Past* is as thorough a typology of heritage endeavors as any reader could want, rehearsing the disputes arising from personal bequests and legacies alongside the efforts of nations to cling to discredited mythologies of origin simply because they are old. Along the way, readers glean some edifying and horrifying examples of the unintended consequences of lionizing a mythical past. Consider the British colony of Barbuda, which was once the subject of much speculation that it was being developed as a slave-breeding grounds. The island's rumored slave “nursery” never existed, but the descendants of Barbudan slaves wound up taking a retrospective pride in it anyway: “Selective breeding during slavery, visitors are still repeatedly told, made Barbudans taller, stronger, and more handsome than other West Indians. ... Rather than a shaming saga to be shed with alacrity, the stud-farm past remains a triumphal founding fable—trotted out just now to explain why Princess Diana feels at home in Barbuda ‘surrounded by beautiful people.’ ”

The book is, in fact, a compendium of such detail. Lowenthal adduces case studies not just from British heritage, but from the shrines, monuments, antiques and legends of America, France, Australia, Germany and Japan (just to note the most frequent). And that, finally, is the



**Possessed by the Past:
The Heritage Crusade
and the Spoils of History**
By David Lowenthal
The Free Press
338 pp., \$25



© 1996 PETER HANNAN

problem: So immersed does Lowenthal seem in the heritage business that he reproduces it, making his book a storehouse of anecdotes about the plundering of the past without providing any real context in which to view the whole bewildering enterprise. Early on, he asserts of the heritage boom that “no explanation specific to one people can account for a trend so contagious. What is involved is a cluster of trends whose premises, promises and problems are truly global.” He then provides a familiar litany of the ech-modern anomie that sends people preening into privatized pasts: the rapid pace of social change, a gnawing sense of individual rootlessness, the attachment to legacies of genocides, the media.

Of course it's not that such asseverations aren't true: They're *truisms*, unsuited to the task of historical explanation, which seeks precisely to develop accounts of the past “specific to one people” or place. More to the point, Lowenthal's grab-bag modernity omits perhaps the most obvious source of the heritage craze: the capitalist market. After all, the notion that history can be made one's very own, whether in the form of keepsakes and gewgaws or family trees, is a conceit hatched directly out of the ever-

widening sovereignty of the consuming self. Annexing glamorous ancestors or idealized archaic cultures to one's repertoire of reference points is largely the spiritual and historical equivalent of a shopping binge.

Likewise, it's the market that is responsible for the foreshortening of historical memory that is the precondition of the heritage biz. Couldn't it be that the past gets divided into bite-sized, interchangeable pieces simply in order to make it saleable? For example, the signature division of the past into handily-labeled decades—the Conformist '50s, the Turbulent '60s, the Avaricious '80s—is a recent innovation of mass journalism, not the expression of some perennial, universal attitude towards history. Moreover, the market's various remasterings of the past have leached visibly into the repertoires of culture workers, so that even in the academy it has become increasingly difficult to approach history as anything but a procession of signifying icons, from the Brooklyn Bridge to Madonna.

But instead of examining the social forces behind the remorseless commodification of the past, Lowenthal dwells on the various distinctions between heritage and profession-

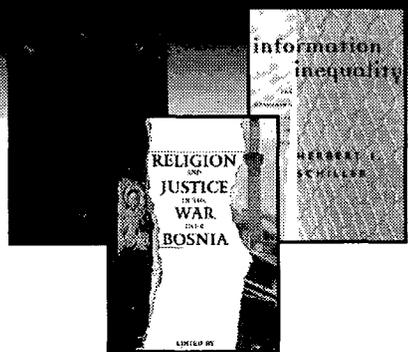
al history. The divergences—and parallels—he unearths are unsurprising: Since all accounts of the past are necessarily partial and biased, historians can't pretend to combat the heritage industry with the trumped-up mystique of objectivity; both history and heritage are guided by historical assumptions. Such observations are truisms delivered with a strangely breathless air of hard-won insight. (In fact, all of this territory was covered, with similarly numbing detail and portentousness, in Peter Novick's 1988 tome *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*.) Lowenthal evidently believes that, even in our jaded post-positivist age, historians enjoy much more esteem as truth-tellers than the evidence would suggest. It's as though the last decade and a half's cognitive assault on the idea and experience of historical continuity—which has besieged both pop culture and the postmodern academy—had simply never happened.

Moreover, in his focus on competing methods, Lowenthal overlooks a far more obvious and fundamental distinction between heritage and history: the raw materials each works with. Heritage fetishizes the intimate, the personal and the banal—the reassuring talismans that remind us that the past was occupied by folks much like us. History seeks to engage public questions: Even the “from the bottom up” social history that emerged in the '70s at least tried to record ordinary lives roiled by social changes—labor struggles, emancipation, secularization and the like—significant enough to deserve the appellation “historic.”

There are, in other words, no historical conflicts in heritage. The cozy ancestors populating the heritage trade—exponents either of bygone glamour and power or of unsullied, sainted oppression—perfectly complement the imperatives of a politics that rarely ascends beyond the brayings and pantings of the imperial self.

Comprehending the past is not really a question of making it “usable” for the present (to paraphrase the famed pronouncement of literary critic Van Wyck Brooks). We are not so much destined to “use” the past as we are fated to be used by it. It's worth pondering Brooks' own fate in this regard; the literary radical of the early 20th century who hailed America's coming of age suffered what amounted to a five-year nervous collapse and spent his later years writing sunny paens to the bygone golden age of New England literature. From historical iconoclast to heritage tender—it's an oddly fitting decline for an overexuberant modernist, and one that much of our culture has traversed since. Unfortunately, since Lowenthal has so little to say about this trajectory—or about any of the affective attachments to the past that make up what might be called the demand side of the heritage impulse—his book is little help in guessing at the reasons a once boundless confidence in surmounting and controlling the course of history has shriveled into nostalgia and antiquarianism. Richly researched though it is, *Possessed by the Past* reminds us that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat themselves. ◀

ROUTLEDGE



RELIGION AND JUSTICE IN THE WAR OVER BOSNIA
Edited by G. Scott Davis

INFORMATION INEQUALITY
Herbert Schiller

RACE TRAITOR
Edited by Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey

Religion and Justice in the War Over Bosnia
Edited by G. Scott Davis
This volume brings together a distinguished group of thinkers to explore the moral and religious issues that underlie the violence and atrocities in Bosnia.
208 pp \$17.95/pb

Information Inequality
Herbert Schiller
Schiller, for decades one of America's leading critics of the communications industry, here offers a pungent salvo in the battle over information.
212 pp \$16.95/pb

Race Traitor
Edited by Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey
“Race Traitor is the most revolutionary challenge to racism made by American-European intellectuals in my lifetime.”
—Ishmael Reed
256 pp \$16.95/pb

The Price You Pay
The Hidden Cost of Women's Relationship to Money
Margaret Randall
“Randall provides a provocative exploration of stereotypes about women and money, and an astute analysis of how colonization and capitalism enforce and maintain economic status based on gender.”
—MS. Magazine
224 pp \$16.95/pb

New **HATREDS**
Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the 21st Century
Zillah Eisenstein
In **HATREDS**, Zillah Eisenstein charts the plural politics of the twenty-first century, which she defines as having begun with the fall of communism and the gulf war.
224 pp \$17.95/pb

*Prices subject to

Routledge 29 West 35th Street, N.Y., NY 10001-2299
<http://www.routledge.com/routledge.html>

AT BOOKSTORES, or call Routledge Customer Service
(800) 634-7064 Visa MasterCard/Amex accepted.



The art of sleaze

By Ken Silverstein

Before being elected to Congress in 1978, Newt Gingrich was a professor of history at West Georgia College, earning \$15,400 a year. Newt wasn't much of an academic—he didn't publish anything and never bothered to apply for tenure—but it appears that West Georgia is where the future House Speaker first honed the fundraising techniques that he later refined in Washington, specifically extracting money from people who needed his help. In an episode that neatly foreshadows his years in government, Gingrich on one occasion suggested that students should give \$5 to his campaign for Congress as a display of "good government."

This story from Newt's college days is but one of many nuggets found in John K. Wilson's *Newt Gingrich: Capitol Crimes and Misdemeanors*. With Gingrich's popularity ratings at an all-time low and the Speaker of the House under investigation by a congressional ethics committee, Wilson's book is a timely offering. Unfortunately, it bogs down badly because the author insists on painting Newt as the root of all political evil.

The first four chapters of *Capitol Crimes and Misdemeanors*, in which Wilson chronicles Newt's long history as a bagman for Corporate America, are the book's strongest. Even people who have closely tracked Gingrich's rise to power will learn of brazen displays of influence peddling with which they were previously unfamiliar.

I'd never heard the tale of Newt's intimate relationship with Kansas City real estate developer Miller Nichols, who in the early '90s sent a series of letters to Gingrich complaining about federal rules on asbestos. Apparently Nichols owned many old buildings constructed with asbestos, and the federal requirement to remove it was causing him "a great deal of financial distress." "It may be that I will call you for an appointment to come back to Washington to discuss this issue," Nichols wrote in a January 19, 1990 missive. "It is costing my company millions and millions of dollars to comply with federal regulations."

Newt was eager to assist his pen pal, perhaps because Nichols in one letter had prudently listed a full record of his political contributions to Gingrich, which came to \$59,000.

On the day after he received Nichols' plea, Gingrich wrote back: "Your continued support ... is very important to me! I want you to know how very much I appreciate your generous contribution!"

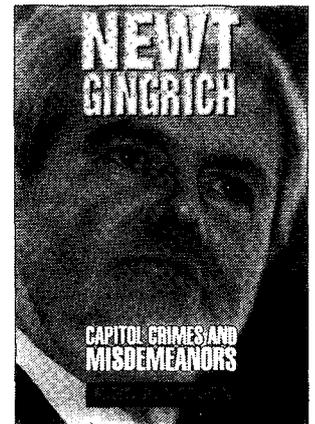
Gingrich quickly began pressing Nichols' cause in Washington. In an April letter to the EPA's William Reilly, Gingrich said that he was concerned "over the crisis that is arising in our courts from asbestos litigation. ... I would appreciate any help you can lend on this matter." Now that's constituent service!

Wilson also describes how GOPAC, Newt's political action committee, boldly turned the quid pro quo into its standard operating procedure. In one fundraising pitch, Chairman Bo Callaway told potential donors that GOPAC was "unique" because it gave "the opportunity for our Charter Members to work with Newt Gingrich and to influence his issues and direction."

GOPAC staffers knew that their tactics were stretching the law to the breaking point and beyond. A memo to Gingrich written in 1990 said forthrightly, "Remember what Ollie North said: 'Mr. President, you don't want to know about this.' We are protecting you, Newt." After reading through the catalogue of horrors Wilson has assembled, it's difficult to understand, even in this jaded age, how Gingrich has thus far escaped censure by the Federal Election Commission or by congressional ethics committees.

Unfortunately, *Capitol Crimes and Misdemeanors* goes mostly downhill after its first 75 pages. To fill the remaining two-thirds of the book, Wilson rehashes every rotten policy that's come out of Washington during the past few years and lays the blame at the doorstep of Newt and the Republican Party.

This leads to uninteresting chapters about Newt's "betrayal" of environmentalism, his support for the military-industrial complex, his homophobia ("Gingrich has an ugly history of anti-gay remarks and votes"), and his "draconian" welfare policies, which "will cause deepening poverty and foster social indifference." These are bracketed by section headings that, after a while, become almost comical: "Lies, Lies, and ... Higher Learning"; "Rhetoric to Shock Even George Orwell"; "Lying About Deficits"; "Lying With Statistics"; "The Thirst for Power"; "The Arrogance of Power"; "Lies, Damn Lies—and Accounting." Very little in these chapters will come as a surprise to anyone even



Newt Gingrich: *Capitol Crimes and Misdemeanors*
By John K. Wilson
Common Courage Press
248 pp., \$24.95