

7.3. Rural history and „reenactment history“: Challenges, questions, opportunities. Part I: Museums and beyond

Panel organiser: Sayre, Laura, National Institute for Agronomic Research, France

This panel will bring together historians and others interested in “agricultural history reenactment” – defined here as projects and situations in which various aspects of agricultural heritage are explored, invoked or put to use for specific contemporary ends. Living history farms and other kinds of agricultural museums; “protected geographical indications” attached to specific foods and modes of production (Gruyère cheese, Welsh beef); antique tractor clubs and other enthusiasts’ groups, competitions and festivals; the preservation of traditional crop varieties and livestock breeds with an eye to future agricultural resilience; the reconstruction of traditional agricultural landscape systems within international rural development efforts; reality television series focused on traditional foods and farming practices – all these and more testify to the enduring appeal of at least certain elements of agricultural history for both popular and scholarly constituencies. Critical analysis of these phenomena, however, is spread across a variety of academic fields (public history, rural sociology, anthropology, archaeology, media studies), while the idea of “reenactment history” remains marginal within the academy, seemingly tainted by its association with popular entertainment. This panel proposes to rehabilitate a notion of agricultural history reenactment as a unifying framework for considering a wide variety of contemporary (or indeed historical) efforts to come to terms with, reinterpret or otherwise make use of the rural and agricultural past as a means of contending with the present (and future) of food and farming. As such, it will engage directly with the conference’s aim to discuss the future of rural history in an increasingly urbanized world: agricultural history reenactment appears to gain in popularity as the number of people directly engaged in agriculture falls, an inverse correlation that raises the stakes for historical integrity within reenactment projects. Questions to be addressed include: Why is agricultural history reenactment at once so popular and yet so curiously overlooked? What are its strengths and limitations as a means of constructing, contesting and conveying historical information? What role does agricultural history reenactment play in the maintenance of national and regional identities rooted in rural images, activities and landscapes?

Chair: Martin, John, De Montfort University, UK

Wednesday, 21 August 2013 // 0900 – 1030 // Session 7 – Room A-122

7.3.1. Where have all the farmers gone? Gone to living history’s greener fields?

Reid, Debra, Eastern Illinois University, USA

Museums that collect and preserve the tangible evidence of the rural past began in Europe at the same time that farm families left their fields. Many of those in the farm diaspora did not look back, but others’ hearts grew fonder for that past hard life. Some took steps to document their history and create venues to share it with the general public. Others understood the need to collect and preserve the tangible and intangible heritage as a means of protecting diversity and ensuring access to complex study collections. Living history farms resulted from national initiatives (Sweden’s Skansen), private investment (Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village), and local history enthusiasts. The living history farms that developed drew former farmers who could share their extinct lifestyle with their children and grandchildren. Visitors could get dirty in fields without having to work from sun up to sun down (from can see to can’t) for an uncertain return. The exhibits took the life-and-death gamble out of farming and thus, some argued, the reality. Yet, agricultural reenactments at living history farms helped preserve skills and processes otherwise lost. While agricultural reenactments allow staff and visitors to leave at any time and spare them the crisis of farm failure, living history farms find themselves at risk due to high operating costs and low rates of return. Living history farms can be, at once, too costly to maintain but too significant to close.

7.3.2. Reenactment, reconstruction and performance at the Museum of English Rural Life, 1951-1956

Douglas, Ollie Angus, Museum of English Rural Life, UK

In 1950, in a letter supporting the establishment of the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) at the University of Reading, historian and Vice-Chancellor Sir Frank Stenton commented on open-air museums. MERL was by comparison, he believed, to become a serious venture wherein curators would not dress in period costumes or play-act historical figures. These were not common tropes amongst the academic methods favoured by social historians at that time. Nevertheless, in direct contradiction, the years imme-

diately following the Museum’s founding in 1951 gave rise to numerous events of the very kind Stenton had decried. Costumed interactions at agricultural shows, set-piece segments on live television, and material experiments for the benefit of scholarly groups were all foregrounded during these early years. The curators were not simply reacting against the old guard or dressing up for the sake of it, nor were they attempting to pioneer public history approaches. Instead, their uses of reenactment, reconstruction, and performance were carefully targeted to achieve the principal goals of this fledgling institution; to salvage a way of life seen to be rapidly disappearing and to cement a technology-centred approach to exploring the English rural past. This paper explores the reenactment-style techniques applied during the first five years of MERL’s existence, and in shedding light on this example seeks to explore what we might mean by reenactment, reconstruction, and living history today.

7.3.3. Toys, trials and information technologies: Miniaturization and virtualization as reenactment

Sayre, Laura, National Institute for Agronomic Research, France

Agricultural miniatures – carefully constructed scale models of agricultural implements – have a long and varied role within agricultural history. They have been used by inventors to test or communicate new designs; by manufacturers to facilitate sales; by researchers as experimental tools; as museum pieces and as collectors’ items; as sophisticated toys and as holotypes in support of patent registrations. Agricultural miniatures constitute a version of agricultural reenactment in that they can be understood either as a serious and reasonable or as a frivolous and inadequate substitute for the object or activity they represent. In recent years, miniaturization has been increasingly displaced by virtualization in the pursuit of simulated agricultural experience, again in a variety of contexts from agronomic research to public outreach to entertainment. This paper explores the status of miniaturization and virtualization within agricultural reenactment by considering a range of specific examples, from the Royal Society of Arts’ “Repository Museum” of prize-winning agricultural implement designs (on display in late 18th-century London), to the National Trust’s “MyFarm”, an online experiment in which participants were invited to vote on key farm management decisions at the Trust’s Wimpole Estate near Cambridge, to the various “farm simulator” computer games now available. I argue that the ambiguity of agricultural reenactment originates in part in the multiple meanings and uses of miniaturization and virtualization, asking to what extent role-playing and nostalgia may be intrinsic to agricultural experimentation and innovation.



Participants

Douglas, Ollie Angus

Oliver Douglas is a curator and researcher with over ten years experience working with ethnographic and rural collections. From 2001-2004 he worked at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford; he then completed his doctoral research at the Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford, taking up his current post as Assistant Curator at the Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading, in 2009. His research focuses on the history of British folk museology and its intersections with anthropology, the history of collections, and the activities of homeland ethnographers, folklorists, and rural collectors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Martin, John

John Martin is Reader in Agrarian History at De Montfort University, Leicester. His main research interest is the impact of government policies on British agriculture and the countryside since the 1930s. His publications include *The Development of Modern Agriculture: British Farming Since 1931* (2000), *The Encyclopaedia of British Rural Sports* (co-editor, 2004), and *The Frontline of Freedom* (co-editor, 2007). He also contributed 54 articles to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004). In 2012 he was a consultant for the BBC’s acclaimed eight-part ‘Wartime Farm’ series, produced by Lion TV in association with the Open University.

Reid, Debra

Debra A. Reid is a professor of history at Eastern Illinois University. She grew up on a farm in southern Illinois and took degrees in historic preservation, history museum studies and history before earning her PhD at Texas A&M University. Her book *Reaping a Greater Harvest: African Americans, the Extension Service and Rural Reform in Jim Crow Texas* (2007) received the Fehrenbach Award from the Texas Historical Commission. She worked for nearly twenty years at historic sites and living history farms in Maine, Massachusetts, New York state, Texas, and Wisconsin before entering higher education full time.

Sayre, Laura

Laura Sayre is a post-doctoral fellow at the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique, Science for Action and Development Department, based in Dijon, France. She holds a PhD in English from Princeton University, where her dissertation, *Farming by the Book: British Georgian in Prose and Practice, 1697-1820*, a study of 18th-century British agricultural writing, was awarded the Agricultural History Society’s Gilbert C. Fite Award. She is the co-editor of *Fields of Learning: The Student Farm Movement in North America* (2011), and is currently working on an edited book on agricultural reenactment history.