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Heritage on the Margins

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Back in 1991, the cultural geographer Rob Shields asked us to look closer at *Places on the Margin*. In dedicating a book to the subject, Shields wanted to suggest that marginality is not just geographic, but cultural too. As societies change and move on, certain places are ‘left behind’ and come to be ‘placed on the periphery of cultural systems’. His account highlights how social changes create and re-create ideas of what places lie in the cultural core of a society and what places lie on its periphery. In asking us to reflect upon margins in both cultural and geographic terms, Shields is encouraging us to open up how we think about boundaries, frontiers, borders, edges and the implications of dropping off.

Sadly, in what is otherwise a highly insightful text, Shields tells us little about heritage, and the ways in which a language of heritage can give new meaning to places and thus re-claim them from the cultural margins of society. In different ways, and in very different contexts, the authors contained in this volume offer a response to Shields’ ideas. Seen together they consider not only the margins of heritage, but also the ways in which heritage comes to be placed on the margins.

The issue opens with John Pickard’s discussion of railway fencing. Pickard argues that in demarcating the physical boundaries of railway lines fences have also been on the boundaries of our discussions about Australian railway heritage. Drawing on extensive research conducted across a number of states, he traces different technologies, styles of construction and the various intended purposes of railway fencing. In so doing he highlights why these linear objects in the landscape offer a rich source of information for understanding the historical processes by which railway lines came to be embedded in their surrounding landscapes. As Pickard shows, fencing offers us a lens through which we can see how the cultural and natural elements of a landscape have evolved and interfaced over time. Towards the end of the paper, the author also examines some of the issues concerning their upkeep. Given that fences, by definition, mark the dividing boundaries of land, and thus responsibility, their future as a marker of both space and time remains unclear.

Dougald O’Reilly similarly discusses the problems of dealing with and managing a heritage resource that extends across extensive territory. His article examines the illicit trafficking of archaeological artefacts in Cambodia. By situating his discussion within the challenges of post-conflict reconstruction, the author highlights the economic and political pressures fuelling the excavation and trading of one of Southeast Asia’s most important archaeological records. Interestingly, it seems that while rural communities see the country’s pre-modern temples as an important part of their religious and cultural history, they rarely see the archaeological remains contemporary to these structures as ‘heritage’. Profound poverty among many of these communities is identified as a key factor driving the search for precious stones and buried carvings. The situation is compounded by the lack of government resources...
dedicated to protecting cultural artefacts buried in remote provinces. O’Reilly’s concern is that in a country where so much attention and resources are given to temple conservation, most notably at Angkor, an endangered and widely dispersed archaeological record remains firmly on the margins of heritage policies and discussions.

Returning to Australia, Brian Egloff takes up the case of the Belconnen Naval Transmission Station. Once again, in Egloff’s account we see a heritage resource that sits on the edge of political and public debates about heritage. As the author notes, 20th century scientific landscapes seem to pose unfamiliar challenges for preservationists and political bodies alike. To provide clarity Egloff offers a detailed discussion of the architectural and associated values of the Belconnen site. To illustrate the historical significance of transmission stations he draws on examples from the UK and Sweden, tracing how they shaped events in the two World Wars of the 20th century. In this respect, the author revisits some of the key insights offered by Shields. Both authors demonstrate how places on the cultural periphery can be re-centred by being associated with other places. Indeed Egloff highlights how tracing such transnational associations has been effective in raising awareness about Belconnen among both politicians and journalists. But as with the previous two papers, we once again see how a concern for preserving heritage resources that lie on the margins of public debate and political will involves struggle and an anxiety about uncertain futures.

Egloff’s approach of seeing a particular site as a node within a network of historic landscapes is paralleled by Anita Smith and Kristal Buckley in their account of convict heritage in New Caledonia. In order to emphasise the historical importance of the island, Smith and Buckley present a geographically expansive story of convict transportation and imprisonment. But in both their images of ruins and depictions of neglect and decay, we see a history marginalised by a New Caledonia tourism industry that centres on representations of idyllic ‘white sand and sun’. The authors note ‘the historic heritage has a minimal presence in the tourism materials for New Caledonia’. Accordingly, they suggest it is a history that can be brought in from the margins of place representation through greater interpretation and site management. In effect their paper calls for research and management strategies that respectfully recognise the island as a cultural landscape of an early colonial heritage.

Staying with the island theme, the issue closes with a reflection of how—in certain instances—being on the margins is something to be cherished and protected. As Jane Harrington shows, for those living on Magnetic Island, the idea of community is deeply connected to being on the social, physical and cultural edges of Queensland. Over the decades, life on the island has been characterised by a careful negotiation with modernity. Cable electricity was not established until 1960. And today there is resistance to any proposed bridges, connecting the mainland with the island. The author pursues an anthropological approach towards the island’s heritage to reveal the importance of everyday, ephemeral moments like time spent on the ferry, or on the beach picnicking and collecting shells. In this account we begin to see how a sense of place for residents is very much bound up in a desire to be close to, yet simultaneously detached and remote from, the cultural values of mainland life. For Harrington then, it is to these very ‘senses of place’ that we need to look if we are to better comprehend the heritage values of landscapes like Magnetic Island.

Seen together then, these five papers ask us to think about heritage in relation to a series of boundaries, frontiers and edges. We learn how and why places are left behind. In some cases this is desirable, in others it’s frustrating. But as these papers illustrate, understanding
heritage in terms of margins—whether they be physical, cultural, economic or political—offers valuable insights for interpreting the complex interplays between heritage sites and their wider social contexts. Finally, I would like to add an acknowledgment that was omitted from the previous issue:

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References