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## Introduction

### The work of conservation

Seated at his desk, in a large open-plan office, Grant, is talking about his job. Originally trained as an archaeologist, he works as a heritage manager for Scotland's national heritage body. The monuments he regulates are exemplars of Scottish cultural heritage, designated as nationally significant. They range from castles and cathedrals to Neolithic standing stones, battlefields and industrial structures.

It's what is the right thing to do? What do I want the outcome to be? What do I think is reasonable in this situation? And I find that flow fascinating to work through. When it goes right it's so intensely rewarding. Although the beauty of it is that in a hundred years from now you won't notice the value of that work, all you'll notice is the [monument's] there and it's in an appropriate setting, or that the castle hasn't fallen down, because the grant case went correctly.

Grant foregrounds the active work involved in keeping something ostensibly as it is – those things that need to happen in order to make it appear that nothing has been done. His approach is informed by an archaeological sensibility to the past, alongside international conservation charters and national policies. However, every case is specific, involving different kinds of monuments, different interest groups and different threats. As such there is an ongoing need for judgment and consideration, translation and compromise. These emerge through particular kinds of practice linked to specific expertise; in his case, sites are visited, maps consulted, meetings held and reports written. For Grant, as for other heritage professionals, the continuity integral to conservation, does not arise as the passive outcome of doing nothing. Rather, it is an active achievement of judgments, decisions and interventions – it requires work.

Inherent to this work is a fundamental tension. While objects of conservation exist *in* the present, they are significant in being *of* the past. As monuments they are seen to be important as authentic embodiments of specific pasts, but as physically existing structures, they are subject to various forms of change. At the heart of conservation is a

long-standing commitment to conserving historic monuments as they are, so that they can be passed on to future generations. John, an Historic Scotland stonemason working on monuments in the care of the organisation, proudly tells us that:

[w]hen we get things that come together you just see a couple of wee [small] bits of stone. You don't actually see the work that's went into it. People go 'oh, that's nice'. But it's satisfying getting it to all come back as if it's never been touched.

The craft of cutting stone is a highly complex process, involving techniques, attitudes and dispositions learnt during three-year apprenticeships, and mastered over lifetimes. It is a very different kind of labour to that of Grant's, involving different principles, practices, skills and dispositions. Yet there is a similar paradox at the heart of both their endeavours: animated by a commitment to preserve the material traces of the past, the work of heritage conservation inheres in forms of intervention that appear to leave things "as they are", seemingly unchanged in essence. When things go well, nothing seems to have happened.

Nevertheless, even the most sensitive interventions can affect the materiality, character and meaning of what is preserved. Slowing stone decay might involve raking out and replacing mortar, injecting epoxy resin solutions into cracks, or applying biocides to prevent algal growth, for example. Even where these interventions are in theory 'reversible' they have material implications that can effect the meaning and significance people attribute to buildings and monuments (Douglas-Jones et al. 2016). More profoundly, commitments to a monument as the expression of a specific historic period might conflict with the values it accrues through later modifications and interventions. Is it better to conserve it as it now exists, or take it back to an earlier stage in its life? Are restoration and reconstruction a means to reinstate an original, authentic form, or a kind of historical deceit and erasure of the authentic life of the object? In recent decades, such long-standing conservation dilemmas have been re-animated by changing approaches to governance and management, alongside interrelated pressures of austerity, sustainability and climate-changed environments (Cooper 2013). Yet the fundamental paradox remains: how to keep things in some essential way the same, even as they and the world transforms.

Based on a multi-sited ethnographic study (2010-2014), this book examines how historic buildings, monuments and artefacts are cared for as valued embodiments of the past. Our focus on “conservation” is ethnographic rather than analytic. Throughout the book we examine how practitioners variously define and understand conservation as active forms of care for the past and highlight the actions and understandings that flow from these commitments. Focusing on Historic Scotland (HS), the national executive body charged with safeguarding Scotland’s heritage until 2014, we show how this opens out new ways to understand how “heritage” is made and imagined. We explore the *Object of Conservation* in the linked senses of how conservation objects are made, and the consequences and moral purpose of that making. At this intersection of conservation as object and purpose we ask, how are conservation objects produced through the diverse practices of heritage professionals and others? How does their work make the material traces of the past available as objects of attention, concern, intervention and care? How are contemporary social practices and institutional realities produced through heritage practitioners’ moral commitments? Relatedly, what are the ethical and political dimensions of conservation? We foreground conservation professionals’ own understandings of historic buildings, monuments and artefacts as materially and meaningfully consequential things, not so much worked *on* as *with* and *through*. We also reveal how things at times resist these understandings and practices, emerging as unruly, mutable and open to multiplicity.

International conservation instruments and national policy documents presuppose an ontology of monuments and buildings as stable, unified objects. While our account complicates this understanding, it also highlights how such ideas are central to these institutional practices and are physically enacted through them. Intractable forces of erosion and deterioration, as well as complex histories of physical modification and changing significance, create sources of instability, disorder and jeopardy, which threaten the stability of the objects that practitioners seek to conserve. We show how they expose, negotiate and resolve this instability, through practices oriented to stabilising and unifying objects in the face of threats. They do so with a subtlety, reflexivity and personal commitment often neglected in prevailing critiques. The book highlights how conservation actors play an active, and at times decisive, role in the biographies of buildings and monuments, (re)assembling them conceptually and

materially. Through this work they grapple with conceptions of materiality, authenticity, significance and time, ultimately negotiating the problem of how to maintain meaningful relations with the past in a world of rupture and change.

### **Situating conservation**

How are conservation objects produced? Answers to this question have tended to take two forms, seeing these either as a product of actions of people in the past, or as a construct of present social relations, identities and political interests. Analytically this book departs from these two positions, as we elaborate in the next section. First, however, we trace how they have been central to both conservation thinking and critiques of it. We briefly delineate key developments in this history to foreground two distinctive orientations to conservation and its object.

The roots of the modern conservation movement are usually traced to the eighteenth century, when Europeans began to think of history as a process of temporal progression (Jokilehto 1999). Understanding time as a series of unique and unrepeatable events, the past came to be seen as a “foreign country” (Lowenthal 1985). Where previously historic remains were valued as manifestations of universal ideals of beauty, they came to be seen as culturally and historically specific expressions. Enlightenment thinking valued these as evidence of progress from earlier stages of development. Romantic perspectives, by contrast, saw these as valuable material embodiments of folk traditions and ways of life, lost or marginalised in the process of modernisation. Both shared a concern to preserve material remains, founded on the common understanding that these retained the essence of national pasts, which once obliterated could not be recovered.

Developing consciousness of the ruptures and destructive capacities of modernity played a key role in framing the modern conservation movement in the nineteenth century (Betts and Ross 2015; Jokilehto 1999; Pendlebury 2008). Where continuity could no longer be taken for granted, conservation emerged as an active and self-conscious valorisation of the past, linked to a specifically modern “endangerment sensibility” (Vidal and Dias 2016). While distinctive in its ideological underpinnings and substantive focus, heritage conservation entails a broadly similar logic to ecological conservation and political conservatism in its orientation to changes associated with

modernity. Whether focusing on the destruction of historic artefacts (heritage conservation), social and political formations (political conservatism), or natural environments (ecological and environmental conservation), all conservationist thinking involves a theory of the limits and problems of transformative change and an effort to actively resist the negative consequences. Distinct conservation movements locate and conceptualise these effects in different ways, but, extending Francesco Giubilei's analysis of political conservatism, they can all be seen as a persistent and recurring "undercurrent in modern society [that] serves to express the need and value of continuity in a complex culture [that] has taken on change as its top priority" (2019: 3). In its various manifestations, conservation involves an explicitness about the relationships between past, present and future, and an active questioning of what this should be (Giubilei 2019; Harrison 2020).

State intervention and the development of national legislation for the protection of historic monuments developed in many European countries during the nineteenth century (Glendinning 2013; Jokilehto, 1999; Thurley 2013), from where it was also transposed to imperial colonies and subsequently post-colonial states (Betts and Ross 2015; Sengupta 2018). However, a broader view of "the state" and related actors, including the rich tapestry of antiquarian and preservationist groups, learned societies, and influential individuals, reveals a complex set of ideas, debates and practices regarding conservation, both preceding and adjacent to formal state protection (Hall 2005; Swenson 2018). Swenson (2018), for instance, argues that the development of national heritage protection in Britain was often driven by imperial interests and international competition. Sengupta (2018) has shown that the power relations and bureaucracy of the British colonial state in India facilitated stricter, more sweeping heritage protection legislation than could be enforced in Britain in the early twentieth century. Heidi Geismar (2015) has explored a long-standing tension between nationalist and internationalist conceptions of heritage, the latter embracing cosmopolitan ideals of shared humanity.

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth century, ideas about authenticity have been central to conservation (Eggert 2009). If the importance of architecture, historic artefacts or works of art, lies in the embodiment of a "real" connection to the past, and in the uniqueness of the artefacts that result, different thinkers have understood the

originality of these works in divergent ways. For the influential nineteenth-century French architect Eugene Viollet-le-Duc, originality was located in idealised understandings of original design and architectural intention, a perspective that gave priority to the form of buildings as creative expressions (Glendinning 2013: 91-97). As a corollary, Viollet-le-Duc and others (e.g. Salvin, Bodley and Gilbert Scott), set about stripping back later additions to historic buildings, with the aim of restoring what they understood to be the “truth” of original architectural vision (Delafons 1997: 14). By contrast, for John Ruskin, a leading Romantic thinker, all forms of restoration were inimical to the aims of conservation; “a Lie from beginning to end” (1880 [1849]: 196) involving the destruction of the unique authentic work, shaped by those associated with it and marked by the passage of time (Jokilehto 1999: 175). Reflecting with dismay on restorations he witnessed on a tour of Italy, Ruskin wrote to his father: “Let them take the greatest possible care of all they have got, and when care will conserve it no longer, let it perish inch by inch, rather than retouch it” (cited in Jokilehto 1999: 180).

Ruskin’s work was influential on later developments in the history of conservation, contributing to the idea that authenticity is located in material fabric. The primary thrust of William Morris’s Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) *Manifesto* (1877) was a critique of restoration and the promotion of protection, combining “carefully considered inaction” (Slocombe n.d.) and judicious maintenance using traditional crafts; as the *Manifesto* put it, “to stave off decay by daily care, [...] to resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands” (SPAB 1877). A concern with material fabric as the locus of authenticity was also taken up in various modified forms by influential European architects, engineers and conservators, such as Alois Riegl, Camillo Boito, Gustavo Giovannoni and Cesare Brandi (Hernández Martínez, 2008: 249–251). In turn, along with the principle of minimum, evidence-based intervention, a materialist approach to authenticity came to underpin a number of international conservation instruments, including *Recommendation of the Madrid Conference* (1903), *Charter of Athens* (1933), *Venice Charter* (ICOMOS 1964) and *World Heritage Convention* (1972).

Over the course of the twentieth century, a complex battery of techniques and methods have been marshalled to determine the authenticity, or truthfulness, of historic objects, buildings and art (Jones 2010). Initially connoisseurship played an important role,

alongside historical disciplines, including archaeology, art history and architectural history (Stanley Price et al. 1996). As the twentieth century progressed, these were combined with, and at times displaced by, conservation science. According to Muñoz Viñas, this operates as a “truth-enforcing operation” (2011 [2005]: 81), reinforcing notions of authenticity by applying increasingly sophisticated techniques for analysing the interior fabric of the object of conservation. Finally, at a different scale altogether, setting and use have been long-standing factors in establishing authenticity, particularly with regard to historic landscapes and buildings in use. Objects that are located in primary contexts, often being seen as more authentic than those in secondary ones.

Despite differences of orientation, these approaches all share the assumption that the past exists as a self-evidently distinct context from present concerns, interests and meanings. From this broadly modernist perspective, conservation philosophies construe the practices of conservation as subsidiary to the truth of the object that is conserved (Muñoz Viñas 2011 [2005]: 65). Alois Riegl (1996 [1902]) acknowledged how heritage is meaningfully elaborated in relation to various “present day values”, but saw these as subsidiary to the “memorial values” imposed by the authors of the work. For Martin Heidegger, writing in the early and middle part of the twentieth century, preservation thus consisted in the creative custodianship of the truth of the artwork (Eggert 2009). Cesare Brandi’s influential conservation philosophy similarly emphasised how the object conditions the work of conservation, encompassing careful and critical “restoration” to recover the truth of the “aesthetic creation” and its subsequent reception (Glendinning 2013: 264).

Since the 1980s, these essentialist understandings of the object of conservation have existed alongside an increasingly influential paradigm of thought that starts from a very different foundational premise. Whereas modernist conservation thinking locates the authenticity and value of heritage as intrinsic to the object of conservation, postmodern approaches reverse this, seeing both as a construct of present social practices and relations (Eggert 2009; Muñoz Viñas 2011 [2005]). Heritage objects are in this view subsidiary to contemporary concerns, particularly political ones, being understood as semiotically and materially constructed by them. The temporal logic of modernist understandings is thus reversed: rather than past epochs constituting a prelude to



present concerns, the past is understood as a construct of the present, a backwards projection, shaped by contemporary interests and values (Tonkin et al. 1989).

Laurajane Smith's (2006) idea of an "Authorized Heritage Discourse" (AHD) captures and consolidates critical orientations to heritage, linking critiques of the ideological uses of heritage (e.g. Lowenthal 1985; Wright 2009 [1985]) to the normative principles and technical practices associated with its conservation.

There is a hegemonic 'authorized heritage discourse', which is reliant on the power/knowledge claims of technical and aesthetic experts, and institutionalized state agencies and amenity societies. This discourse takes its cue from the grand narratives of nation and class on the one hand, and technical expertise and aesthetic judgement of the other. The 'authorized heritage discourse' privileges monumentality and grand scale, innate artefact/site significance tied to time depth, scientific/aesthetic expert judgement, social consensus and nation building. It is a self-referential discourse, which has a particular set of consequences. (2006: 11)

Heritage conservation and management are here positioned as constitutive cultural processes; "heritage is heritage *because* it is subjected to the management and preservation/conservation process, not because it simply *'is'*" (2006: 3). For Smith, like others (Handler 1986; Holtorf 2013; Holtorf and Schadla-Hall 1999; Lowenthal 1992), authenticity and meaning are socially and politically constructed, motivated by everything from essentialist identity politics to the commodification of heritage in the context of tourism. At the same time, she argues, authenticity "exists within the AHD as a device through which heritage professionals may authorize and legitimize the past and its material remains as universal heritage" (Smith 2006: 125). In the substantive analysis of the "manored past", Smith (115-161) consolidates critiques by Robert Hewison (1987), Patrick Wright (2009 [1985]) and others, arguing that the English country house obscures visions of the "real" past through a synthetic heritage that responds to present concerns, upholding the claims and causes of the wealthy and powerful. Elsewhere in the book, Smith embraces relativistic understandings of heritage dissonance, celebrating the plurality of ways in which pasts are made meaningful,

specifically viewed from marginalised perspectives (for other examples, see Graham et al. 2000; Samuel 1994; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996).

Undoubtedly a gulf has opened-up between modernist approaches to heritage conservation and postmodern critiques from the late twentieth century onwards (Eggert 2009). The influence of modernist conservation thinking remains important in conservation principles and practices, perpetuating the idea that “evidence” and “authenticity” are inherent, objective attributes of historic objects, which postmodern, deconstructive scholarship has been intent on dismantling. Yet, substantial bodies of academic research in historical disciplines remain founded upon an essentially affirmative modernist stance to the authenticity of the objects of study (see Brumann 2014: 174). Moreover, heritage conservation itself is not immune to postmodern intellectual currents, as illustrated by the practitioners contributing to Alison Richmond and Alison Bracker’s volume, who “expose the uncomfortable truth of the impossibility of singular and objective truths within cultural heritage care” (2011 [2009]: xvii). A growing literature by conservation practitioners turned academics develops new conservation paradigms attentive to both critical academic literatures and the changing socio-economic contexts in which conservation is practiced (e.g. Clavir 2002; Eggert 2009; Emerick 2014; Muñoz Viñas 2011 [2005]; Pendlebury and Brown 2021). Meanwhile, Višnja Kisić argues that AHD has been challenged “from within” by a number of recent authorising charters and conventions in which heritage objects are “addressed not simply as static forms in need of preservation, but as dynamic resources that are both constitutive of identity and the basis for development projected into distinctive futures” (2016: 65).<sup>1</sup>

The result of these complex currents is not that modernist concerns with historic truth, authenticity and intrinsic value have disappeared from contemporary heritage discourses, but that they are now configured in qualitatively different ways (Cooper 2010, 2013; Pendlebury 2008, 2013; Harrison 2013a). If in some contexts modernist

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<sup>1</sup> These include the UNESCO *Declaration on Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003) and *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (2005) (Faro Convention), which Kisić argues exemplify a discursive shift that links “heritage to concepts of intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity, rights to culture, pluralism, participation, change, sustainable development and reconciliation” (2016.; see also Brumann 2014: 178-179).

conservation ideologies continue to hold conviction, they no longer work as universal grounding principles in the way they once did. Conservation practitioners often act with authenticity in mind but do so despite, and even because, its status as a self-evident truth can no longer be assumed (Handler and Gable 1997). Materially essentialist ideas of authenticity persist in often unarticulated assumptions, alongside more relativistic approaches where the focus is increasingly on culturally specific meanings and social values. *The Nara Document* (1994), and responses to it, exemplify the contradictions and tensions. For Knut Larsen, the scientific co-ordinator, *Nara* represents a shift away from “a Eurocentric approach to a post-modern position characterized by recognition of cultural relativism” (1995: xiii). Nevertheless, there is still a strong emphasis on universal value in the Nara conference proceedings (Larsen 1995) and, as Herb Stovel puts it, a concern with “the need for practical tools to measure *the wholeness, the realness, the truthfulness of the site* on which they work” (1995: 396, our emphasis). Furthermore, the final paragraph of *The Nara Document* returns to a set of criteria for determining authenticity: “form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling” (Article 13). Thus, the principles at the core of modernist understandings of authenticity remain fundamental even whilst they are widened to include values, spirit and feeling (Brumann 2014: 178). The current epoch encompasses as much as it supersedes modernist understandings of conservation and heritage. In our account, we explore how these different orientations intersect in the everyday institutional practices through which conservation makes its object. In the following section we outline our conceptual approach to these practices.

### **Theorising objects in practice**

Modernist and post-modernist understandings of heritage both start from the assumption of a subject-object distinction. Consequently, they have tended to speak past one another. Either the object is ‘real’ and authenticity an inherent property of it, or both it and its authenticity are cultural constructs. Either values and meanings are an intrinsic product of past realities, or a product of current ideas and agendas. The problem is that these opposing understandings elide understanding of the complex negotiations at the heart of conservation practices (Eggert 2009; Jones 2010), where people and things are complexly enmeshed in ways that are not well-captured through

these analytic binaries. Seeking to explore these practices, we approach our material from a position of “theoretical pluralism” (Macdonald 2013: 7), drawing on work by scholars focusing on other heritage contexts, as well as comparative literatures that help shed light on these social interactions.

As Rodney Harrison has argued, the “discursive turn” that underpins many postmodern critiques of heritage has been important in “drawing attention to the knowledge/power effects of heritage and its processes of identification, exhibition and management” (2013a: 9). However, despite Smith’s (2006: 13) insistence that critical discourse analysis accommodates practices and performances, subsequent research on AHD predominantly focuses on principles of heritage conservation and management, as articulated through legal instruments and policy documents, conventions and charters. Concomitantly the complex relations between conservation policies and the everyday practices of heritage institutions have often been neglected, alongside the intersecting agency of material things (Hill 2018). While the concept of AHD importantly foregrounds the systemic relations and shared assumptions of heritage professionals, this framing tends to render heritage expertise as a relatively undifferentiated discursive nexus, flattening the diverse forms of expertise involved in constituting conservation objects. Even while practitioners increasingly recognise the complex, subjective, and contingent nature of their own work (e.g. Bracker and Richmond 2011 [2009]; Pye and Sully 2007; Villers 2004), the ethnographic complexities of their practices remain relatively poorly understood. This is particularly true with respect to the institutional practices through which expert knowledge materially congeals around specific historic buildings, monuments and artefacts (Jones and Yarrow 2013; Hølleland and Skrede 2018).

Moving beyond a discursive focus, we build on recent ethnographic approaches, which foreground the quotidian practices through which the past is constructed (e.g. Breglia 2006; Handler 1988; Handler and Gable 1997; Harrison et al. 2020; Meskell 2011; Winter 2011). These nevertheless tend to focus on resistance to official heritage discourses, for instance, by local residents, minorities and indigenous communities (e.g. Herzfeld 1991; Jones 2011; Joy 2012). Even when heritage experts are present in these accounts (e.g. Breglia 2006; Brumann 2012) they are rarely a primary focus of attention (though see Harrison et al. 2020; Lamprakos 2015). Thus, as Christoph Brumann has

recently observed, “[i]n comparison to what we know about the carriers and consumers of heritage, we are much less informed about heritage institutions and their personnel” (2014: 182). A recent spate of UNESCO ethnographies reveals the power of ethnography to shed light on the “world-making” practices involved in inscription, evaluation, monitoring, decision-making and governance within international heritage institutions (e.g. Borlotto et al. 2020; Brumann 2021; Hafstein 2018; Meskell 2018). Notwithstanding this important work, little ethnographic research has focused centrally on national heritage institutions (though see Heinich 2009, 2010-2011), which have so often been the focus of heritage critiques.

We address this lacuna in this book. Our focus on conservation objects is developed in two related ways: on the one hand we seek to show how conservation creates objects out of the actions of heritage experts (to paraphrase Candea 2014); on the other, we explore how conservation professionals attribute actions to these objects and act with them in mind. While we foreground how conservation professionals’ decisions and interventions profoundly shape these conservation objects, we also highlight how their own actions are shaped through their engagements with them.

Mathew Hill observes that “Even though heritage is ultimately about things, scholars of heritage have paid surprisingly little attention to their nature” (2018: 1179). Aiming to understand on how conservation objects materialise through practice, we draw on Actor Network Theory (ANT) and assemblage theory (Latour 2005; Law and Singleton 2005; Mol 2002). These accounts foreground how expert knowledge shapes the world in order to know it, in ways that are always specific and situated. Like Harrison et al., we are interested in conservation’s “varied modes of existence” (2020: 7); the multiple realities that are produced through “contingent practices of assembling and reassembling bodies, techniques, technologies, materials, values, temporalities and spaces” (2020: 6). Influenced by Annmarie Mol’s work on medical practice, we approach heritage conservation as “an amalgam of variants-in-tension” (2002: 115), examining how it involves different ways of knowing, associated with specific modes of “doing” (cf. Macdonald 2009; Hill 2012). Building on this work, we foreground how conservation knowledge is contoured by the material contexts in which it arises and

through objects it seeks to know and understand. Thus we explore how distinct forms of expertise “enact” (after Mol 2002) conservation objects in qualitatively different ways.

Inspired by Cristina Grasseni’s concept of “skilled vision” (2004, 2007a) we aim to highlight how these ways of knowing involve seeing in importantly specific ways. Grasseni argues that “cattle breeders, archaeologists, laser surgeons, even police consultants [...] each have a different world in front of their eyes, because they were each trained to see it differently” (2007a: 3). If different conservation professionals see conservation artefacts in different ways, this is not because they have abstractly different “perspectives”: rather, different skilled practices are associated with particular forms of sensory engagement, bodily comportment and technical competency that materialise as specific relations to conservation objects. Modernist and postmodern perspectives have often shared an assumption that the object of conservation is a singular and stable point of articulation between subjectively plural perspectives (Hill 2018). By contrast our account foregrounds how the singular conservation object emerges as a provisional outcome of the “coordination” of these plural enactments (Mol 2002: 54-55).

If the object of conservation is constituted through heritage practice, what kinds of actions are set in train by these objects? While anthropological discussions of material agency (Gell 1997; Henare et al. 2007; Reed 2011; Strathern 1988) intersect and overlap with many of the ANT-inspired approaches described above, anthropologists have tended to emphasise actors’ own conceptualisations of materials (Jensen et al. 2017) and the actions that result from these understandings. Casper Bruun-Jensen describes (sympathetically but not uncritically) how in this anthropological approach “the thing becomes the story of its effects as told by people” (2021: 8). From this more classically ethnographic orientation, we foreground conservation professionals’ understandings of the material past as an animating force in the present (Yarrow 2018a.) We examine the practical consequences of these understandings, specifically how institutional practices, professional identities and forms of ethical care emerge as effects of commitments to these conservation objects. Rather than analytically deconstruct these ideas, we aim to show ethnographically how they are practically situated and deflected. Our aim is not to critique the linear, modernist understandings

of time (Bear 2014) that underline conservation, but to unravel their specific effects: how the present is variously directed and unfolded from the material remains of the past. Likewise, we explore how materially essentialist understandings of conservation objects orient a range of institutional actions and professional identities. Seeking to understand the animating force of ideas about evidence, authenticity and significance, we describe how conservation practice simultaneously creates and complicates these concepts (Jones 2010; Jones and Yarrow 2013; Yarrow 2018a; Yarrow 2018b).

In moving beyond the monolithic understandings of institutional practice that have often characterised accounts of AHD, we build on the “new anthropology of bureaucracy” (Bear and Marhur 2015: 18; particularly Hoag and Hull 2017; Hull 2012a and b), specifically the limited studies where these approaches have been applied to heritage (e.g. Borlotto et al. 2020; Brumann 2020; Harrison et al. 2020). Inspired by this work, we question the utility of morally absolutist critiques of heritage organisations, variously as sites for the enactment of structural violence, the retrenchment of state power, or as neoliberal agents of the market. Our contention is not that these aspects are unimportant, but that conservation objects are entangled in institutional practices involving tensions, choices and negotiations that are not well understood if interpreted as mere epi-phenomena of such purportedly underlying, systemic processes. By exploring heritage bureaucracies ethnographically, we foreground the ethical and ideological commitments of those involved in this work; how work is structured materially and spatially and the plurality of personal and professional commitments that characterise these institutional spaces. Rather than search for an “essence” of conservation discourse we draw out the manifold ways in which conservation matters in the lives of those tasked with enacting institutional policies and objectives. Focusing on the role of documents as specific artefacts of institutional process (Hull 2012b; Riles 2001, 2006), we highlight how they describe and animate a range of activities in ways that are not reducible to their straightforwardly representational functions.

Decision-making processes have political dimensions, but to suggest that the views of conservation practitioners merely reflect these interests considerably underplays the ethical and practical complexity of these negotiations and their affective dimensions. Inspired by recent calls to “personalise the expert” (Boyer 2005, 2008), we aim to “move beyond signalling the presence of experts and towards grappling with what

kinds of persons they are” (Boyer 2008: 39). Thus, we ask how individual subjectivity variously becomes a source of expertise or a barrier to knowledge (Shapin 2008). Relatedly we explore how conservation actors imagine their life to be implicated in their work and vice versa. We build on recent insights from the anthropology of ethics, to highlight and explore how conservation is associated with ethical tensions that are encountered and explored in practice in a range of routine ways (Laidlaw 2001, 2014; Lambek 2015; Mol 2002). How and why do these professionals care for the past? What ethical claims support these duties of care? And how do those involved imagine and resolve the contradictions inherent in their respective roles? In practice conservation involves choices between courses of action, informed, but not determined by principles, philosophies and regulations. We therefore examine how ethical issues are encountered through the quotidian contexts of specific interventions.

Inspired by work on ‘care’ in medical (Kleinemann 2012) and other contexts (Puig de la Casa 2017), we foreground how acts of caring for the past, make people differently present to themselves and to others. Conservation involves entangled “matters of concern” (Latour 2004) that move beyond political interest to encompass “affectively charged connotations, notably those of trouble, worry and care” (Puig de la Casa 2017: 42). In this way we explore objects of conservation as “matters of care” (2017.: 57), in the distinct but entangled senses of mattering: their value makes them worthy of protection; and that protection arises from their material qualities and shapes their material form. We show how conservation objects are both the cause and consequence of these acts of care.

### **Approaching conservation ethnographically**

At the heart of our project is an attempt to gain an intimate understanding of the everyday work of heritage conservation from the perspectives of those involved. This agenda has been pursued through an ethnographic approach involving extended periods of time observing, participating in, and discussing the day-to-day lives of heritage conservation practitioners. Our account is situated “adjacently” (Riles 2001), rather than critically, to the more practically oriented concerns of those we describe. Here, we introduce the ethnographic context before describing our methodology.



Our research focuses on heritage practitioners employed by HS, the executive government agency responsible for safeguarding Scotland's built heritage and promoting its understanding and enjoyment between 1991 to 2015. Initially a branch of the Scottish Office, it became part of Scottish Government with the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. As a direct government agency, HS was part of the Civil Service and still very much imbued with a public service culture. (Cooper 2013: 88). A public service ethos was an important dimension of HS's institutional culture. However this was often in tension with neoliberal reforms, such as externalisation of services, customer service, value for money and, from 2008, austerity economics (see Cooper 2010; also Thurley 2013 on the English context).

Our ethnographic fieldwork (2010-2014) coincided with the final five years of HS's existence and a time of considerable change, leading up to the creation of a new non-departmental public body with charitable status in 2015: Historic Environment Scotland (HES). HES was created by the amalgamation of HS and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), the executive public body responsible for recording, interpreting and collecting information on the built and historic environment. Our research does not incorporate the new organisation and, whilst many of the pre-existing functions of HS transferred to the new body, there are significant differences in institutional governance and culture.

HS's remit for conservation took a range of practical forms. During our fieldwork, the organisation had a statutory role in the designation of scheduled monuments, listed buildings, gardens and designed landscapes, and historic battlefields. HS heritage managers (ancient monument and listed building inspectors up until 2012) also dealt with regulatory work for scheduled monument consent and were statutory consultees on a range of development proposals affecting the historic environment (including some listed buildings). The organisation also administered several conservation grant schemes and offered technical conservation guidance to owners of historic properties. Importantly for our research, HS was also responsible for the conservation, management and presentation of the national estate, composed of sites either in state ownership or under state guardianship agreements. At the time of our fieldwork these amounted to some 345 so-called Properties in Care (hereafter PiCs), most of which were also designated scheduled monuments (or treated as such), and therefore by

definition deemed to be of national significance. Regulation of conservation work at PiCs was complicated in some instances by also being (part-)designated as listed buildings. A few properties were also (part of) world heritage sites with management plans produced by HS and periodically monitored by UNESCO.

For HS, 2010-2014 was a time of significant institutional change and restructuring, one of the most important developments being the separation of regulatory powers from those parts of the organisation involved in conserving and managing the PiCs. This was accompanied by the introduction of a formalised internal consent process, Properties in Care Clearance (PiCC), in 2010, but thereafter renamed Scheduled Monument Clearance Process (SMCP). As a result, HS architects responsible for the conservation of PiCs found themselves in a similar position to external clients. Informed by cultural resource officers with expertise in the cultural significance of PiCs, they had to apply to heritage managers for consent to undertake repairs and maintenance work on these monuments. These changes related to a broader increase in practices of audit, linked to new concerns with “transparency” and “public accountability”. At the same time, significant cuts to core government funding created pressure to develop the income-earning potential of the PiCs through high-quality visitor services and experiences. These pressures, alongside changing health and safety and accessibility legislation, the threat of associated litigation, transition to a low-carbon future and the impact of climate change, contributed to the increasing complexity of the challenges facing the people we worked with.

At the same time their work was framed by international conservation instruments. As already discussed, these comprise a complex mix of modernist foundational principles relating to minimum intervention and material authenticity with policies that position heritage objects “as dynamic resources that are both constitutive of identity and the basis for development projected into distinctive futures” (Kisić 2017:65). The latter late modern orientation, linking heritage to concepts of intercultural dialogue, participation, wellbeing and change is prominent in *Our Place in Time* (Scottish Government 2014). Arguably this ethos was also informed by the contemporary majority Scottish National Party (SNP) Government’s desire to differentiate itself from the Westminster Government approach (then a Conservative-Liberal Coalition) in the lead up to the 2014 Referendum on Independence. Whilst also focusing on “mainstreaming” heritage

(Baxter 2015), the SNP government emphasised the intrinsic value of heritage to society, tying it in with the wider sustainable development goals and the public value ethos of Scotland's National Performance Framework, in contrast to the narrower focus on economic benefits at Westminster. Contrary to media expectations, the independence movement was not for the most part driven by cultural nationalism, but rather an inclusive civic nationalism, focused on a distinctive vision of Scotland's future. Accordingly, whilst, heritage offers a ready source of national symbolism dating back to nineteenth-century nation-building, government policy primarily emphasised its socio-economic contribution to a fairer, more equal society characterised by sustainable growth.

As new anthropologies of bureaucracy have shown, organisations emerge through practice in complex and specific ways that are only ever partially captured by formal structures and institutional histories (see Hoag and Hull 2017). Multiple versions of a large bureaucracy like HS exist, because where you are and what you do in an organisation, changes what it is. Accordingly, we treat "organisation" as a verb rather than a noun, as process rather than object. We encountered multiple versions of HS between 2010 and 2014, in part, because it underwent several phases of restructuring. Directorates and teams focusing on specific practices, specialisms or regions of Scotland were variously amalgamated, broken up and/or renamed from one year to the next. At times it seemed like HS employees struggled to keep up with these changes as much as we did, but their unknowing was also a form of elision or even active resistance. Organisational structure and workflow diagrams proliferated and could be seen on noticeboards throughout HS buildings. These "bubble charts" were often out of date and annotated in ways that foregrounded personal working relationships and practices, creating continuity in the face of dislocation, and undercutting the panoptical visualisation such technologies lend themselves to.

Whilst our focus is on how the institution unfolds through practice, it is important to briefly outline who we worked with and where. Undertaking fieldwork in phases over the course of five years, we spent time with conservation practitioners with a range of disciplinary backgrounds and technical or practical training. These include architectural and art history, archaeology, architectural conservation, conservation science, applied technical conservation, collections management, traditional crafts and building trades.

As we show, these forms of education and training are cultivated and aligned through institutional roles and the traditions associated with them. We worked with stonemasons in the Monument Conservation Units (“works teams”) and district and regional architects who co-ordinate conservation work at PiCs and advise on casework and grant aid for privately owned designated sites. We also worked with cultural resource officers who specialise in significance assessment of sites. We encountered interpretation officers but did not do fieldwork with other teams focusing on Operations and Visitor Services in the Commercial Directorate.

Those we worked with came from a range of backgrounds. Employees working at the headquarters in Edinburgh were generally university educated. By contrast trades and craft professionals doing manual work in the MCUs generally trained through apprenticeships either at HS or prior to joining the organisation. Class distinctions were rarely openly acknowledged but were sometimes implicit in interactions between these different parts of the organisation. While employees in the works teams were mostly Scottish, the civil servants and experts at Longmore house came from a range of nationalities, including a significant number of people from England and other home nations. A number had previously worked in the national heritage organisations of these other countries. At the time of our research, ethnic diversity within the organisation was extremely limited. While this was not a focus of much explicit attention during the time of our research it since become a source of institutional concern, as with heritage, arts and cultural sector organisations more generally.

Mostly we conducted fieldwork together. In the final season (2013), SJ focused on the work of stone and painting conservators in Applied Conservation and the Collections Team who document, archive and curate the assemblages of historic artefacts associated with PiCs. Meanwhile, TY worked with the teams responsible for the designation and regulation of listed buildings and scheduled monuments in the Directorate of Heritage Management. We also conducted fieldwork with some of those who occupied, used, or were otherwise attached to historic buildings and monuments, principally during a dedicated “stakeholder” field season at Glasgow Cathedral in 2011.

Geographically, a substantial proportion of our work was based at HS’s headquarters, Longmore House, a large Neoclassical Victorian building close to the centre of

Edinburgh, with some at the Technical Conservation Unit in South Gyle. From here we followed various actors on site visits to different parts of the country. We undertook fieldwork with people in Heritage Management (known as the Inspectorate in 2010 but renamed in 2012 following restructuring) engaged in designation and casework relating to listed buildings and scheduled monuments in private ownership (mainly in Argyll and the Borders). Most of the monuments and buildings we focused on were PiCs, although we did also accompany architects and heritage managers in some of their regulatory work focusing on designated monuments in private ownership. We participated in Annual Monument Audits (AMAs) at PiCs in Dumfries and Galloway and Fife. During two field seasons, Glasgow Cathedral was the primary locus of much of our ethnography: the first (2010) based with the stonemasons engaged in a 30-year maintenance project; and the second (2011) focusing on those who visit, use and worship in the Cathedral. We also worked with applied stone conservators at Linlithgow Palace, and collections managers at Melrose and Jedburgh Abbeys and on collections audits in Argyll. We visited numerous other PiCs, whilst observing and participating in the everyday lives of our research participants, not least Lochmaben and Cadzow Castles, which were the focus of an HS workshop envisioning radical heritage futures for these highly compromised monuments.

Through these contexts we examined how different forms of expertise intersect in relation to specific buildings, monuments and collections. We attended meetings on scaffolding and in offices and made site visits to different parts of the country. We conversed with those involved as they worked, on long car journeys, during lunch breaks, over coffees and sometimes in pubs. Additionally we undertook around 90 focused semi-structured recorded interviews with people purposively selected to reflect the range of expertise and roles within the organisation. Together these experiences, observations and conversations help explicate some of the key differences of perspective and approach of different actors and shed light on the dynamic ways in which these are negotiated and resolved in practice.

The book engages with issues that relate to broad processes through which heritage conservation and management practices participate in the production of historic environments. Our scope is broad, including everything involved in constituting the object of conservation as a matter of attention, understanding, concern and care, yet our

methodological window is specific. We do not present the ethnography in this book as representative of the heritage sector as a whole, and neither can we claim it represents HS in its entirety. Our efforts to understand how knowing unfolds through the lens of practice entail a necessary partiality. Since practices are always specific, they cannot be aggregated to be understood as a totalising whole. Our account does not exhaust the possible contexts and perspectives through which heritage works, even within the organisation.

Our research is restricted temporally, reflecting the concerns of an organisation at a particular period in time. The institutional change and organisational re-structuring summarised above led to shifts in terminology, institutional structure, role and procedure that complicate the so-called 'ethnographic present'. By the end of our fieldwork, we were aware that much of the material collected during earlier phases already spoke of contexts that had been significantly superseded. This unexpectedly longitudinal perspective highlights how efforts to produce continuity in various forms of heritage object emerge against, and often in tension with, various forms of change, including to the institutional contexts through which conservation itself operates. If the moment we encountered was one of specific and perhaps exceptional transformation, it is worth highlighting that change has itself been a constant in the heritage sector (Thurley 2013). Moreover, the issues we explore through this book, including institutional restructuring and the management of change, transcend the historic and geographical specificities of this ethnographic context. From this ethnographic perspective, we aim to shed light on the complexities involved in making and managing objects of conservation within a national heritage organisation, so often regarded as a bastion of undifferentiated, "top-down", authorised heritage.

### **Note on the text**

The book is divided into two parts: people and things. This heuristic distinction is as much about conceptual orientation as it is substantive focus. Both parts are about the entanglements of people and things in the process of conserving and caring for the past, exploring how distinctions between subjects and objects are recursively enacted through these practices. However, in each part we situate ourselves differently in terms of how we explore and explain this. Part One is methodologically more humanistic

focusing on how people explicitly conceptualise relations between themselves and the conservation objects they care for. Part Two is more oriented by post-human approaches, foregrounding the more-than-human dimensions of their work.

Part One centres analysis on the making and shaping of “people”. Focusing on the forms of professional “self” that develop through conservation practice we foreground the central paradox that people are necessary for the conservation of historic objects and yet a potential threat to them. We approach these from a classically ethnographic perspective, highlighting the terms, concepts and discourses through which conservation professionals conceptualise their work. From this perspective, our discussion of conservation objects centres on people’s understandings of these material remains: what they say about them; how they trace agency in relation to them; and the forms of personal and professional identity that arise in relation to them. Chapter one examines how recent institutional transformations are associated with forms of memory and nostalgia that express a range of ambivalences to changes in the work of HS employees. Chapter two explores how they articulate the personal and professional virtues that are central to their work, through the linked ideas of humility, humbleness, sensitivity, pragmatism and patience. Chapter three centres on meetings, highlighting how these act as institutional spaces to negotiate and reconcile differences of institutional knowledge and perspective on the object of conservation. Chapter four extends this analysis to consider how the ideal of “objectivity” is situated and enacted. Chapter five explores narratives about the relationship between work and life, foregrounding the ambivalent status of “personal interests” as a source of professional legitimacy and yet as professionally problematic. Throughout these chapters, our analysis foregrounds how conservation professionals understand themselves as conduits of the past, describing their work as subsidiary to the objects they seek to conserve.

Part Two gives priority to “things”, paying close attention to the material contexts that heritage professionals engage with and manipulate, and to the actions these set in train. Focusing on the more than human elements of these practices, we explore how the object of conservation is materially mediated and realised. In doing so, Part Two foregrounds the implacability of things, how they slip and slide away from people’s efforts to control and understand them and in this sense act in ways that are not

reducible to the meanings that people make of them. Chapter Six explores the dynamics at play between ordering practices involving classification and related documentary infrastructures on the one hand, and the (dis)order created by profusion and the mutability of things on the other. Chapter Seven shifts attention to the different kinds of multisensorial, skilled practice involved in the conservation of a particular site, Glasgow Cathedral, revealing how the commitment to a singular object is pursued in the face of multiplicity. Chapter Eight extends this analysis to material transformation, exploring how scientific conservation intervenes in the “look of age” and the ethics and micro-politics of such acts of stabilisation. In Chapter Nine, we return to Glasgow Cathedral and explore how forms of perspectivalism underpin HS employees’ attempts to understand and manage other “stakeholders”, whose different understandings of the Cathedral, framed by faith and other contemporary affective attachments, create diverse forms of concern and care. Finally, after a concluding chapter, we reflect on the implications of this account for conservation practice in a brief epilogue, asking whether understanding conservation differently also offers perspectives on how it might be done differently.

Our approach to collaborative ethnography and writing is elaborated in detail in the Preface. Here, suffice to say that the authorial conventions that force a choice between the singular “I” and the multiple “we” do not adequately capture the complexities of the subject position/s from which we speak. As a negotiated outcome of experiences and ideas shared and debated for over ten years, we speak in a voice that is more than one, but less than two (paraphrasing Mol 2002). If this is not quite the singular voice of the lone fieldworker of conventional ethnography, neither is it the deliberately unresolved multi-vocal juxtaposition that has been a celebrated part of the postmodern text in anthropology and beyond (e.g. Harrison et al. 2020). Where we describe specific events, conversations and interviews in which only one or other of us are present, we designate this presence through the use of our initials (SJ/TY). We write in the “ethnographic present” of our fieldwork (2010-14), specifically about Historic Scotland. Our account does not discuss HES despite the transfer of powers and significant continuities of personnel and practices. Where institutional structures (and names) changed during our fieldwork, we note these changes where relevant in the text and footnotes.