

The Invention of Tradition

Edited by

ERIC HOBSBAWM

and

TERENCE RANGER

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Contents

<i>Contributors</i>	<i>page vi</i>
1 Introduction: Inventing Traditions ERIC HOBSBAWM	1
2 The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland HUGH TREVOR-ROPER	15
3 From a Death to a View: The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period PRYS MORGAN	43
4 The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the 'Invention of Tradition', c. 1820–1977 DAVID CANNADINE	101
5 Representing Authority in Victorian India BERNARD S. COHN	165
6 The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa TERENCE RANGER	211
7 Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914 ERIC HOBSBAWM	263
<i>Index</i>	309

Contributors

DAVID CANNADINE is Professor of History at Columbia University. His books include *Lords and Landlords: The Aristocracy and the Towns, 1774–1967* (1980) and *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (1990).

BERNARD S. COHN is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Chicago. He is the author of many articles on the interactions of history and anthropology and on the study of Indian society.

ERIC HOBSBAWM is Emeritus Professor of Economic and Social History at Birkbeck College, University of London, and a founder-member of the journal *Past & Present*. Among his many publications is *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (1990).

PRYS MORGAN is Reader in History at University College, Swansea. He has published extensively in Welsh and has contributed chapters to many books on Welsh history.

TERENCE RANGER is Rhodes Professor of Race Relations at the University of Oxford, and a Fellow of St Antony's College. He is the author of *The Historical Study of African Religion* (1972) and *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa* (1975).

HUGH TREVOR-ROPER (Lord Dacre of Glanton) was Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge, from 1980 to 1987. He was previously Regius Professor of History at the University of Oxford, from 1957.

I. *Introduction: Inventing Traditions*

ERIC HOBSBAWM

Nothing appears more ancient, and linked to an immemorial past, than the pageantry which surrounds British monarchy in its public ceremonial manifestations. Yet, as a chapter in this book establishes, in its modern form it is the product of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. 'Traditions' which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented. Anyone familiar with the colleges of ancient British universities will be able to think of the institution of such 'traditions' on a local scale, though some – like the annual Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols in the chapel of King's College, Cambridge on Christmas Eve – may become generalized through the modern mass medium of radio. This observation formed the starting-point of a conference organized by the historical journal *Past & Present*, which in turn forms the basis of the present book.

The term 'invented tradition' is used in a broad, but not imprecise sense. It includes both 'traditions' actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period – a matter of a few years perhaps – and establishing themselves with great rapidity. The royal Christmas broadcast in Britain (instituted in 1932) is an example of the first; the appearance and development of the practices associated with the Cup Final in British Association Football, of the second. It is evident that not all of them are equally permanent, but it is their appearance and establishment rather than their chances of survival which are our primary concern.

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. A striking example is the deliberate choice of a Gothic style for the nineteenth-century

rebuilding of the British parliament, and the equally deliberate decision after World War II to rebuild the parliamentary chamber on exactly the same basic plan as before. The historic past into which the new tradition is inserted need not be lengthy, stretching back into the assumed mists of time. Revolutions and 'progressive movements' which break with the past, by definition, have their own relevant past, though it may be cut off at a certain date, such as 1789. However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the 'invention of tradition' so interesting for historians of the past two centuries.

'Tradition' in this sense must be distinguished clearly from 'custom' which dominates so-called 'traditional' societies. The object and characteristic of 'traditions', including invented ones, is invariance. The past, real or invented, to which they refer imposes fixed (normally formalized) practices, such as repetition. 'Custom' in traditional societies has the double function of motor and fly-wheel. It does not preclude innovation and change up to a point, though evidently the requirement that it must appear compatible or even identical with precedent imposes substantial limitations on it. What it does is to give any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history. Students of peasant movements know that a village's claim to some common land or right 'by custom from time immemorial' often expresses not a historical fact, but the balance of forces in the constant struggle of village against lords or against other villages. Students of the British labour movement know that 'the custom of the trade' or of the shop may represent not ancient tradition, but whatever right the workers have established in practice, however recently, and which they now attempt to extend or defend by giving it the sanction of perpetuity. 'Custom' cannot afford to be invariant, because even in 'traditional' societies life is not so. Customary or common law still shows this combination of flexibility in substance and formal adherence to precedent. The difference between 'tradition' and 'custom' in our sense is indeed well illustrated here. 'Custom'

is what judges do; 'tradition' (in this instance invented tradition) is the wig, robe and other formal paraphernalia and ritualized practices surrounding their substantial action. The decline of 'custom' inevitably changes the 'tradition' with which it is habitually intertwined.

A second, less important, distinction that must be made is between 'tradition' in our sense and convention or routine, which has no significant ritual or symbolic function as such, though it may acquire it incidentally. It is evident that any social practice that needs to be carried out repeatedly will tend, for convenience and efficiency, to develop a set of such conventions and routines, which may be de facto or de jure formalized for the purposes of imparting the practice to new practitioners. This applies to unprecedented practices (such as the work of an aircraft pilot) as much as to long-familiar ones. Societies since the industrial revolution have naturally been obliged to invent, institute or develop new networks of such convention or routine more frequently than previous ones. Insofar as they function best when turned into habit, automatic procedure or even reflex action, they require invariance, which may get in the way of the other necessary requirement of practice, the capacity to deal with unforeseen or inhabitual contingencies. This is a well-known weakness of routinization or bureaucratization, particularly at the subaltern levels where invariant performance is generally considered the most efficient.

Such networks of convention and routine are not 'invented traditions' since their functions, and therefore their justifications, are technical rather than ideological (in Marxian terms they belong to 'base' rather than 'superstructure'). They are designed to facilitate readily definable practical operations, and are readily modified or abandoned to meet changing practical needs, always allowing for the inertia which any practice acquires with time and the emotional resistance to any innovation by people who have become attached to it. The same applies to the recognized 'rules' of games or other patterns of social interaction, where these exist, or to any other pragmatically based norms. Where these exist in combination with 'tradition', the difference is readily observable. Wearing hard hats when riding makes practical sense, like wearing crash helmets for motor-cyclists or steel helmets for soldiers; wearing a particular type of hard hat in combination with hunting pink makes an entirely different kind of sense. If this were not so, it would be as easy to change the 'traditional' costume of fox-hunters as it is to substitute

a differently shaped helmet in armies – rather conservative institutions – if it can be shown to provide more effective protection. Indeed, it may be suggested that ‘traditions’ and pragmatic conventions or routines are inversely related. ‘Tradition’ shows weakness when, as among liberal Jews, dietary prohibitions are justified pragmatically, as by arguing that the ancient Hebrews banned pork on grounds of hygiene. Conversely, objects or practices are liberated for full symbolic and ritual use when no longer fettered by practical use. The spurs of Cavalry officers’ dress uniforms are more important for ‘tradition’ when there are no horses, the umbrellas of Guards officers in civilian dress lose their significance when not carried tightly furled (that is, useless), the wigs of lawyers could hardly acquire their modern significance until other people stopped wearing wigs.

Inventing traditions, it is assumed here, is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition. The actual process of creating such ritual and symbolic complexes has not been adequately studied by historians. Much of it is still rather obscure. It is presumably most clearly exemplified where a ‘tradition’ is deliberately invented and constructed by a single initiator, as for the Boy Scouts by Baden-Powell. Perhaps it is almost as easily traced in the case of officially instituted and planned ceremonials, since they are likely to be well documented, as in the case of the construction of Nazi symbolism and the Nuremberg party rallies. It is probably most difficult to trace where such traditions are partly invented, partly evolved in private groups (where the process is less likely to be bureaucratically recorded), or informally over a period of time as, say, in parliament and the legal profession. The difficulty is not only one of sources but also of techniques, though there are available both esoteric disciplines specializing in symbolism and ritual, such as heraldry and the study of liturgy, as well as Warburgian historic disciplines for the study of such subjects. Unfortunately neither are usually familiar to historians of the industrial era.

There is probably no time and place with which historians are concerned which has not seen the ‘invention’ of tradition in this sense. However, we should expect it to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable, or when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove

sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated: in short, when there are sufficiently large and rapid changes on the demand or the supply side. Such changes have been particularly significant in the past 200 years, and it is therefore reasonable to expect these instant formalizations of new traditions to cluster during this period. This implies, incidentally, against both nineteenth-century liberalism and more recent 'modernization' theory that such formalizations are not confined to so-called 'traditional' societies, but also have their place, in one form or another, in 'modern' ones. Broadly speaking this is so, but one must beware of making the further assumptions, firstly that older forms of community and authority structure, and consequently the traditions associated with them, were unadaptable and became rapidly unviable, and secondly that 'new' traditions simply resulted from the inability to use or adapt old ones.

Adaptation took place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes. Old institutions with established functions, references to the past and ritual idioms and practices might need to adapt in this way: the Catholic Church faced with new political and ideological challenges and major changes in the composition of the faithful (such as the notable feminization both of lay piety and of clerical personnel);¹ professional armies faced with conscription; ancient institutions such as law-courts now operating in a changed context and sometimes with changed functions in new contexts. So were institutions enjoying nominal continuity, but in fact turning into something very very different, such as universities. Thus Bahnson² has analysed the sudden decline, after 1848, of the traditional practice of mass student exodus from German universities (for reasons of conflict or demonstration) in terms of the changed academic character of universities, the rising age of the student population, its embourgeoisement which diminished town/gown tensions and student riotousness, the new institution of free mobility between universities, the consequent change in student associations and other factors.³ In all such cases novelty is no less novel for being able to dress up easily as antiquity.

¹ See for instance G. Tihon, 'Les religieuses en Belgique du XVIIIe au XXe siècle: Approche Statistique', *Belgisch Tijdschrift v. Nieuwste Geschiedenis/Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine*, vii (1976), pp. 1-54.

² Karsten Bahnson, *Akademische Auszüge aus deutschen Universitäts und Hochschulorten* (Saarbrücken, 1973).

³ Seventeen such exoduses are recorded in the eighteenth century, fifty in 1800-48, but only six from 1848 to 1973.

More interesting, from our point of view, is the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes. A large store of such materials is accumulated in the past of any society, and an elaborate language of symbolic practice and communication is always available. Sometimes new traditions could be readily grafted on old ones, sometimes they could be devised by borrowing from the well-supplied warehouses of official ritual, symbolism and moral exhortation – religion and princely pomp, folklore and freemasonry (itself an earlier invented tradition of great symbolic force). Thus the development of Swiss nationalism, concomitant with the formation of the modern federal state in the nineteenth century, has been brilliantly studied by Rudolf Braun,⁴ who has the advantage of training in a discipline ('Volkskunde') which lends itself to such studies, and in a country where its modernization has not been set back by association with Nazi abuses. Existing customary traditional practices – folksong, physical contests, marksmanship – were modified, ritualized and institutionalized for the new national purposes. Traditional folksongs were supplemented by new songs in the same idiom, often composed by schoolmasters, transferred to a choral repertoire whose content was patriotic–progressive ('Nation, Nation, wie voll klingt der Ton'), though it also embodied ritually powerful elements from religious hymnology. (The formation of such new song-repertoires, especially for schools, is well worth study.) The statutes of the Federal Song Festival – are we not reminded of the eisteddfodau? – declare its object to be 'the development and improvement of the people's singing, the awakening of more elevated sentiments for God, Freedom and Country, union and fraternization of the friends of Art and the Fatherland'. (The word 'improvement' introduces the characteristic note of nineteenth-century progress.)

A powerful ritual complex formed round these occasions: festival pavilions, structures for the display of flags, temples for offerings, processions, bell-ringing, tableaux, gun-salutes, government delegations in honour of the festival, dinners, toasts and oratory. Old materials were again adapted for this:

The echoes of baroque forms of celebration, display and pomp are unmistakable in this new festival architecture. And as, in the baroque celebration, state and church merge on a higher plane, so

⁴ Rudolf Braun, *Sozialer und kultureller Wandel in einem ländlichen Industriegebiet im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ch. 6 (Erlenbach-Zürich, 1965).

an alloy of religious and patriotic elements emerges from these new forms of choral, shooting and gymnastic activity.⁵

How far new traditions can thus use old materials, how far they may be forced to invent new languages or devices, or extend the old symbolic vocabulary beyond its established limits, cannot be discussed here. It is clear that plenty of political institutions, ideological movements and groups – not least in nationalism – were so unprecedented that even historic continuity had to be invented, for example by creating an ancient past beyond effective historical continuity, either by semi-fiction (Boadicea, Vercingetorix, Arminius the Cheruscan) or by forgery (Ossian, the Czech medieval manuscripts). It is also clear that entirely new symbols and devices came into existence as part of national movements and states, such as the national anthem (of which the British in 1740 seems to be the earliest), the national flag (still largely a variation on the French revolutionary tricolour, evolved 1790–4), or the personification of ‘the nation’ in symbol or image, either official, as with Marianne and Germania, or unofficial, as in the cartoon stereotypes of John Bull, the lean Yankee Uncle Sam and the ‘German Michel’.

Nor should we overlook the break in continuity which is sometimes clear even in traditional *topoi* of genuine antiquity. If we follow Lloyd,⁶ English Christmas folk carols ceased to be created in the seventeenth century, to be replaced by hymn-book carols of the Watts–Wesley kind, though a demotic modification of these in largely rural religions like Primitive Methodism may be observed. Yet carols were the first kind of folksong to be revived by middle-class collectors to take their place ‘in novel surroundings of church, guild and women’s institute’ and thence to spread in a new urban popular setting ‘by street-corner singers or by hoarse boys chanting on doorsteps in the ancient hope of reward’. In this sense ‘God rest ye merry, Gentlemen’ is not old but new. Such a break is visible even in movements deliberately describing themselves as ‘traditionalist’, and appealing to groups which were, by common consent, regarded as the repositories of historic continuity and tradition, such as peasants.⁷ Indeed, the very appearance of movements for the defence

⁵ Rudolf Braun, *op. cit.*, pp. 336–7.

⁶ A. L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (London, 1969 ed.), pp. 134–8.

⁷ This is to be distinguished from the revival of tradition for purposes which actually demonstrated its decline. ‘The farmers’ revival (around 1900) of their old regional dress, folk dances and similar rituals for festive occasions was *neither* a bourgeois *nor* a traditionalistic feature. On the surface it could be viewed as

or revival of traditions, 'traditionalist' or otherwise, indicates such a break. Such movements, common among intellectuals since the Romantics, can never develop or even preserve a living past (except conceivably by setting up human natural sanctuaries for isolated corners of archaic life), but must become 'invented tradition'. On the other hand the strength and adaptability of genuine traditions is not to be confused with the 'invention of tradition'. Where the old ways are alive, traditions need be neither revived nor invented.

Yet it may be suggested that where they are invented, it is often not because old ways are no longer available or viable, but because they are deliberately not used or adapted. Thus, in consciously setting itself against tradition and for radical innovation, the nineteenth-century liberal ideology of social change systematically failed to provide for the social and authority ties taken for granted in earlier societies, and created voids which might have to be filled by invented practices. The success of nineteenth-century Tory factory masters in Lancashire (as distinct from Liberal ones) in using such old ties to advantage shows that they were still there to be used – even in the unprecedented environment of the industrial town.⁸ The long-term inadaptability of pre-industrial ways to a society revolutionized beyond a certain point is not to be denied, but is not to be confused with the problems arising out of the rejection of old ways in the short term by those who regarded them as obstacles to progress or, even worse, as its militant adversaries.

This did not prevent innovators from generating their own invented traditions – the practices of freemasonry are a case in point. Nevertheless, a general hostility to irrationalism, superstition and customary practices reminiscent of the dark past, if not actually descended from it, made impassioned believers in the verities of the Enlightenment, such as liberals, socialists, and communists, unreceptive to traditions old or novel. Socialists, as we shall see below, found themselves acquiring an annual May Day without quite knowing

a nostalgic longing for the old-time culture which was so rapidly disappearing, but in reality it was a demonstration of class identity by which prosperous farmers could distance themselves horizontally relative to the townspeople and vertically from the cottars, craftsmen and labourers.' Palle Ove Christiansen, 'Peasant Adaptation to Bourgeois Culture? Class Formation and Cultural Redefinition in the Danish Countryside', *Ethnologia Scandinavica* (1978), p. 128. See also G. Lewis, 'The Peasantry, Rural Change and Conservative Agrarianism: Lower Austria at the Turn of the Century', *Past & Present*, no. 81 (1978), pp. 119–43.

⁸ Patrick Joyce, 'The Factory Politics of Lancashire in the Later Nineteenth Century', *Historical Journal*, xviii (1965), pp. 525–53.

how; National Socialists exploited such occasions with liturgical sophistication and zeal and a conscious manipulation of symbols.⁹ The liberal era in Britain at best tolerated such practices, insofar as neither ideology nor economic efficiency were at issue, sometimes as a reluctant concession to the irrationalism of the lower orders. Its attitude to the sociable and ritual activities of Friendly Societies was a combination of hostility ('unnecessary expenses' such as 'payments for anniversaries, processions, bands, regalia' were legally forbidden) and toleration of events such as annual feasts on the grounds that 'the importance of this attraction, especially as respects the country population, cannot be denied'.¹⁰ But a rigorous individualist rationalism dominated not only as an economic calculus but as a social ideal. Chapter 7 will investigate what happened in the period when its limitations became increasingly recognized.

These introductory notes may be concluded with some general observations about the invented traditions of the period since the industrial revolution.

They seem to belong to three overlapping types: a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority, and c) those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour. While traditions of types b) and c) were certainly devised (as in those symbolizing submission to authority in British India), it may be tentatively suggested that type a) was prevalent, the other functions being regarded as implicit in or flowing from a sense of identification with a 'community' and/or the institutions representing, expressing or symbolizing it such as a 'nation'.

One difficulty was that such larger social entities were plainly not *Gemeinschaften* or even systems of accepted ranks. Social mobility, the facts of class conflict and the prevalent ideology made traditions combining community and marked inequality in formal hierarchies (as in armies) difficult to apply universally. This did not much affect traditions of type c) since general socialization inculcated the same values in every citizen, member of the nation and subject of the crown,

⁹ Helmut Hartwig, 'Plaketten zum 1. Mai 1934–39', *Aesthetik und Kommunikation*, vii, no. 26 (1976), pp. 56–9.

¹⁰ P. H. J. H. Gosden, *The Friendly Societies in England, 1815–1875* (Manchester, 1961), pp. 123, 119.

and the functionally specific socializations of different social groups (such as public school pupils as distinct from others) did not usually get in each others' way. On the other hand, insofar as invented traditions reintroduced, as it were, status into a world of contract, superior and inferior into a world of legal equals, they could not do so directly. They could be smuggled in by formal symbolic assent to a social organization which was de facto unequal, as by the restyling of the British coronation ceremony.¹¹ (See below pp. 282–3.) More commonly they might foster the corporate sense of *superiority* of élites – particularly when these had to be recruited from those who did not already possess it by birth or ascription – rather than by inculcating a sense of obedience in inferiors. Some were encouraged to feel more equal than others. This might be done by assimilating élites to pre-bourgeois ruling groups or authorities, whether in the militarist/bureaucratic form characteristic of Germany (as with the duelling student corps), or the non-militarized 'moralized gentry' model of the British public schools. Alternatively, perhaps, the *esprit de corps*, self-confidence and leadership of élites could be developed by more esoteric 'traditions' marking the cohesiveness of a senior official mandarinat (as in France or among whites in the colonies).

Granted that 'communitarian' invented traditions were the basic type, their nature remains to be studied. Anthropology may help to elucidate the differences, if any, between invented and old traditional practices. Here we may merely note that while rites of passage are normally marked in the traditions of particular groups (initiation, promotion, retirement, death), this was not usually the case in those designed for all-embracing pseudo-communities (nations, countries), presumably because these underlined their eternal and unchanging character – at least since the community's foundation. However, both new political régimes and innovatory movements might seek to find their own equivalents for the traditional rites of passage associated with religion (civil marriage, funerals).

One marked difference between old and invented practices may be observed. The former were specific and strongly binding social practices, the latter tended to be quite unspecific and vague as to the nature of the values, rights and obligations of the group membership they inculcate: 'patriotism', 'loyalty', 'duty', 'playing the game', 'the school spirit' and the like. But if the content of British patriotism

¹¹ J. E. C. Bodley, *The Coronation of Edward the VIIth: A Chapter of European and Imperial History* (London, 1903), pp. 201, 204.

or 'Americanism' was notably ill-defined, though usually specified in commentaries associated with ritual occasions, the *practices* symbolizing it were virtually compulsory – as in standing up for the singing of the national anthem in Britain, the flag ritual in American schools. The crucial element seems to have been the invention of emotionally and symbolically charged signs of club membership rather than the statutes and objects of the club. Their significance lay precisely in their undefined universality:

The National Flag, the National Anthem and the National Emblem are the three symbols through which an independent country proclaims its identity and sovereignty, and as such they command instantaneous respect and loyalty. In themselves they reflect the entire background, thought and culture of a nation.¹² In this sense, as an observer noted in 1880, 'soldiers and policemen wear badges for us now', though he failed to predict their revival as adjuncts to individual citizens in the era of mass movements which was about to begin.¹³

The second observation is that it seems clear that, in spite of much invention, new traditions have not filled more than a small part of the space left by the secular decline of both old tradition and custom; as might indeed be expected in societies in which the past becomes increasingly less relevant as a model or precedent for most forms of human behaviour. In the private lives of most people, and in the self-contained lives of small sub-cultural groups, even the invented traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries occupied or occupy a much smaller place than old traditions do in, say, old agrarian societies.¹⁴ 'What is done' structures the days, seasons and life-cycles of twentieth-century western men and women very much less than it did their ancestors', and very much less than the external compulsions of the economy, technology, bureaucratic state organization, political decision and other forces which neither rely on nor develop 'tradition' in our sense.

However, this generalization does not apply in the field of what might be called the public life of the citizen (including to some extent

¹² Official Indian government commentary, quoted in R. Firth, *Symbols, Public and Private* (London, 1973), p. 341.

¹³ Frederick Marshall, *Curiosities of Ceremonials, Titles, Decorations and Forms of International Vanities* (London, 1880), p. 20.

¹⁴ Not to mention the transformation of long-lasting rituals and signs of uniformity and cohesion into rapidly changing fashions – in costume, language, social practice etc., as in the youth cultures of industrialized countries.

public forms of socialization, such as schools, as distinct from private ones such as the mass media). There is no real sign of weakening in the neo-traditional practices associated either with bodies of men in the public service (armed forces, the law, perhaps even public servants) or in practices associated with the citizens' membership of states. Indeed most of the occasions when people become conscious of citizenship as such remain associated with symbols and semi-ritual practices (for instance, elections), most of which are historically novel and largely invented: flags, images, ceremonies and music. Insofar as the invented traditions of the era since the industrial and French revolutions have filled a permanent gap – at all events up to the present – it would seem to be in this field.

Why, it may be asked finally, should historians devote their attention to such phenomena? The question is in one sense unnecessary, since a growing number of them plainly do, as the contents of this volume and the references cited in it bear witness. So it is better rephrased. What benefit can historians derive from the study of the invention of tradition?

First and foremost, it may be suggested that they are important symptoms and therefore indicators of problems which might not otherwise be recognized, and developments which are otherwise difficult to identify and to date. They are evidence. The transformation of German nationalism from its old liberal to its new imperialist–expansionist pattern is more exactly illuminated by the rapid replacement of the old black–red–gold colours by the new black–white–red ones (especially by the 1890s) among the German gymnastic movement, than by official statements of authorities or spokesmen for organizations. The history of the British football cup finals tells us something about the development of an urban working-class culture which more conventional data and sources do not. By the same token, the study of invented traditions cannot be separated from the wider study of the history of society, nor can it expect to advance much beyond the mere discovery of such practices unless it is integrated into a wider study.

Second, it throws a considerable light on the human relation to the past, and therefore on the historian's own subject and craft. For all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion. Frequently it becomes the actual symbol of struggle, as in the battles over the monuments to Walther von der Vogelweide and Dante in South Tyrol in 1889 and

1896.¹⁵ Even revolutionary movements backed their innovations by reference to a 'people's past' (Saxons versus Normans, 'nos ancêtres les Gaulois' against the Franks, Spartacus), to traditions of revolution ('Auch das deutsche Volk hat seine revolutionäre Tradition' as Engels claimed in the first words of his *Peasant War in Germany*)¹⁶ and to its own heroes and martyrs. James Connolly's *Labour in Irish History* exemplifies this union of themes excellently. The element of invention is particularly clear here, since the history which became part of the fund of knowledge or the ideology of nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so. Oral historians have frequently observed how in the actual memories of the old the General Strike of 1926 plays a more modest and less dramatic part than interviewers anticipated.¹⁷ The formation of such an image of the French Revolution in and by the Third Republic has been analysed.¹⁸ Yet all historians, whatever else their objectives, are engaged in this process inasmuch as they contribute, consciously or not, to the creation, dismantling and restructuring of images of the past which belong not only to the world of specialist investigation but to the public sphere of man as a political being. They might as well be aware of this dimension of their activities.

In this connection, one specific interest of 'invented traditions' for, at all events, modern and contemporary historians ought to be singled out. They are highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the 'nation', with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest. All these rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative, if only because historical novelty implies innovation. Israeli and Palestinian nationalism or nations

¹⁵ John W. Cole and Eric Wolf, *The Hidden Frontier: Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley* (N.Y. and London, 1974), p. 55.

¹⁶ For the popularity of books on this and other militant historical subjects in German workers' libraries, see H.-J. Steinberg, *Sozialismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie. Zur Ideologie der Partei vor dem ersten Weltkrieg* (Hanover, 1967), pp. 131–3.

¹⁷ There are perfectly sound reasons why participants at the bottom do not usually see historic events they live through as top people or historians do. One might call this (after the hero of Stendhal's *Chartreuse de Parme*) the 'Fabrice syndrome'.

¹⁸ E.g. Alice Gérard, *La Révolution Française: Mythes et Interprétations, 1789–1970* (Paris, 1970).

must be novel, whatever the historic continuities of Jews or Middle Eastern Muslims, since the very concept of territorial states of the currently standard type in their region was barely thought of a century ago, and hardly became a serious prospect before the end of World War I. Standard national languages, to be learned in schools and written, let alone spoken, by more than a smallish élite, are largely constructs of varying, but often brief, age. As a French historian of Flemish language observed, quite correctly, the Flemish taught in Belgium today is not the language which the mothers and grandmothers of Flanders spoke to their children: in short, it is only metaphorically but not literally a 'mother-tongue'. We should not be misled by a curious, but understandable, paradox: modern nations and all their impedimenta generally claim to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest antiquity, and the opposite of constructed, namely human communities so 'natural' as to require no definition other than self-assertion. Whatever the historic or other continuities embedded in the modern concept of 'France' and 'the French' – and which nobody would seek to deny – these very concepts themselves must include a constructed or 'invented' component. And just because so much of what subjectively makes up the modern 'nation' consists of such constructs and is associated with appropriate and, in general, fairly recent symbols or suitably tailored discourse (such as 'national history'), the national phenomenon cannot be adequately investigated without careful attention to the 'invention of tradition'.

Finally, the study of the invention of tradition is interdisciplinary. It is a field of study which brings together historians, social anthropologists and a variety of other workers in the human sciences, and cannot adequately be pursued without such collaboration. The present book brings together, in the main, contributions by historians. It is to be hoped that others will also find it useful.