

Welcome address

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The Association for Heritage Interpretation and Interpret Europe welcome you all to Scotland and the UK.

Both organisations felt it was time we took landscapes as a conference theme and Scotland had a number of things going for it – dramatic landscapes, active members of both AHI and IE based here, and a desire from IE to have a conference in the west of the continent.

We cannot ignore the political landscape of Brexit while we are here. Despite the UK deciding to leave the EU, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are still part of Europe – geographically, culturally, economically and politically. Regardless of Brexit we wish to show that it is important to co-operate and we have a responsibility as European citizens to think about what is Europe.

With the rise of nationalism in many countries, of which Brexit is one dramatic result, it is more important that we gather together to reinforce the idea that people from many countries can openly meet, share and debate. It is essential that we keep the borders of our discipline open and receptive, rather than closed and hostile. The lights must not go out over Europe again.

Thinking about political landscapes, we need to ask ourselves: What is our actual role as interpreters? Are we neutral towards nationalism and protectionism? Are there values we would like to trigger – or we would like to avoid triggering? For example, do we feel responsible towards universal understanding and transnational solidarity and do we like to express this in our work?

Through the way we practice heritage interpretation, we can reinforce identities, convictions, values – or we can put them into question. We can send one message or we can suggest different perspectives. If we encourage thinking on our natural and cultural heritage, we will necessarily select information and raise some ideas more than others. How can we do this in a responsible way?

- We can praise the achievements of ancient emperors or we can trigger thinking about equality.
- We can celebrate our own rituals, or we can compare them to the rituals of others.
- We can commemorate war, or we can encourage thinking on the question of why people were not able to avoid it.
- We can suggest that nation states are entities, or we can interpret them as results of continuous migration.
- We can point at a house where a famous leader was born, or we can point at one from where a family has been expelled or deported.

Next year we will celebrate the European Year of Cultural Heritage and the motto will be 'Our heritage: where the past meets the future'. It is partly up to us what people learn from their heritage and which identities they define for themselves.

Landscape is an apt topic to discuss in light of current political events across Europe. Landscapes, natural and cultural, are often used to symbolise national and regional identity. This comes from an understanding of who we are being fundamentally bound up with the land we inhabit.

However, this symbolism risks always looking backwards, an attempt to preserve static ideals of landscape and who we are. In fact, we constantly recreate our relationships with landscapes,

whether finding the value of true wilderness, creating cultural spaces or sensing the day-by-day, season-by-season changes within our daily inhabited homes.

Is the meaning of landscape experiential or is it abstract? Social theorists would say that the nature of landscapes is not set but is actively created by the dynamic triangle of inter-relationships between the individual, our society and the land.

If so, our perceived associations with landscapes can be defined at varying scales – for example we can see Inverness as a distinct landscape, as we can the Scottish Highlands or the continent of Europe.

How is cultural identity created in relation to the different scales?

Leading on from this, how open or closed, overlapping or segregated might we define landscapes when we interpret them?

And here it is worth pointing out the obvious: landscapes are where everything is situated or derived from – geology and landforms, habitats and species, resources that sustain life and resources we make things from, places to live and places to create meaning.

They can have character and value that is beyond simple numbers or economic output.

Being here in Scotland and talking about relating people to landscapes might bring one of the most prominent quotes to the mind of some of us. Just a few kilometres east of Edinburgh, a unique character was born who felt more linked to landscapes than many others. John Muir, who later wrote: "I'll interpret the rocks, learn the language of flood, storm and the avalanche. I'll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens and get as near to the heart of the world as I can".

John Muir was not interpreting landscapes for someone else. He was interpreting them for himself and maybe the critical messages we should take from this is that we should more encourage people to interpret instead of interpreting for them; that we should more create the setting for doing so and focus on facilitating their encounters.

Let us be inspired during this conference with some fresh air blowing through our minds, to review our profession, making connections with outstanding landscapes and with attendees from 27 countries and so many different backgrounds, during parallel sessions as well as in the pubs of Inverness.

The warmest thank you, Ruth Coulthard and Bill Taylor, for providing the setting that allows all of us to do so.