Restaging the Past

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Historical Pageants, Neo-Romanticism and the City in Interwar Britain

Tom Hulme

In the 1920s and 1930s historical pageantry was especially popular in the urban heartlands of Britain. Before 1914 only two major cities in England (Liverpool and London) had staged an historical pageant and there are examples of urban pageants failing to take off due to a lack of local interest, particularly from the urban working classes. By 1939, however, the picture was strikingly different, with 14 of the 20 biggest cities having staged at least one pageant. Northern and Midlands manufacturing cities had now emerged as pageantry’s new and appreciative home, while casts of thousands were regularly raised with ease in the name of civic history. Accompanying this shift to cities was the rise of a new breed of pageant-master and producer, particularly inspired (or at least influenced) by Frank Lascelles and straddling the worlds of theatre, government and business. From their earliest days pageants had possessed a commercial motive, as small historic towns tried to stimulate a growing market for tourism. But interwar coalitions of city councils and industrialists took this to a new level, using historical pageantry to encourage the local economy in a time of economic depression. This tactic arguably emerged from the nascent ‘civic publicity’ movement, which originated in wartime government propaganda, but was catalysed especially by the 1924 British Empire Exhibition in London. Municipally-led ‘Civic Weeks’ held at the Exhibition then spread across heavily industrialised areas of Britain, joining popular entertainment with economic boosterism – of which pageants became an important element.

In this chapter I expand more specifically on the historical themes and ideas that were portrayed in the episodes of urban pageants in the late 1920s and 1930s. In doing so I argue that the vogue for the performance
of the past can tell us much about a complex and often contradictory topic: the place of Neo-Romanticism, and its relationship to modernity, in mid-twentieth-century urban Britain.

The Neo-Romantic city

When Romanticism emerged as an artistic, literary and intellectual movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was primarily rooted in commitments to nature, natural life and the medieval past. As such, it can be seen as a reaction to rapid industrialisation and accompanying urbanisation, as well as to scientific rationalisation and the Enlightenment. However, Romanticism also shaped the experience of the burgeoning modern city to which it could seem diametrically opposed. The city, in turn, set the stage for many of Romanticism’s achievements in literature and culture. Romanticism was therefore ‘not a movement against the city’, but rather ‘an aesthetic that developed along with – and contributed to – the ascendancy of metropolitan life’.

A key concern of Romantic thinking was thus the mutual interdependence of the individual and society, and the search for solutions to the individual’s alienation from, and in, the city. William Wordsworth, for example, was not just the ‘Poet of Nature’ and extoller of the supposedly untainted Lake District, but also an ‘avid metropolitan’ who could find stimulation and beauty in London. Meanwhile William Blake, perhaps more obviously a ‘city poet’, could see the urban as ‘a node, a fissure, through which the true nature of society can be glimpsed’ – which included ‘a vision of the new, renovated millennial city of the New Jerusalem established through a “mental fight” in the minds of “England’s green & pleasant Land”’. Transcendental Romantic art, shaped through collaborative networks of often city-based or visiting artists, actualised the urban and rural tension. Yet at the same time it could also function as a site and symbol of inclusion, in a moment of rapid social change, by envisaging an ‘ideal’ city.

Urbanisation continued unabated in the nineteenth century and, at the turn of the twentieth century especially, was accompanied by debates about the effects of the city on the life, morality and health of its inhabitants. As Britain’s ability to compete in an age of global economic and military competition came under increasing scrutiny, these debates grew in intensity. In the ensuing intense search for an ideal society, in which ideal ‘citizens’ could live healthy, happy and co-operative lifestyles, anti-urban ‘Neo-Romantic’ artists and social reformers looked
again to the landscape. More than just a muse for art and literature, the countryside was seen both as a fruitful source of a usable identity based on idealistic notions of ‘Englishness’, and a recuperative environment, which fostered health and community. For the proponents of rural preservation or the advocates of increasingly popular leisure ‘rambling’, the ‘degenerative’ city was thus in tension with the romantic countryside. Accordingly there were ‘loud and influential’ calls for a reversal of urbanisation and a concurrent revival of traditional rural communities. These were led by organisations such as the National Trust (formed 1895) and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (formed 1926) and individual campaigners, such as the architect Clough Williams-Ellis. A significant part of the logic of Neo-Romanticism, then, was its turn towards ‘home’ and history, as artists and writers – in reaction to the revolutionary artistic manifestos of modernist groups such as the Futurists, or their British counterpart the Vorticists – wondered how to ‘reconnect with the heavily abandoned past’. As with the original Romantics, however, the relationship between Neo-Romanticism, modernity and urban life could be a complex one. The city, of course, did not disappear in the twentieth century – neither in reality nor in representation – and an anti-urban and anti-modern notion of ‘Englishness’ was not embraced by all. Rural preservationists, too, were not always exclusively motivated by anti-modernism. Both Neo-Romantics and vociferous urban critics, and individuals who belonged to both categories, could accept that they were inescapably living in an urban-industrial age; pragmatists realised that simply ‘dispersing urban life’ to idealistic rural communities was not feasible.

Alternatives included the construction of new sorts of cities and the changing of cities from within. The former category included Ebenezer Howard’s turn-of-the-century ‘Garden City’ model, which attempted to reconcile the benefits of country and city in a new synthesis and informed town planning discourse until the mid-twentieth century, and, in a similar vein, William Morris’s vision, in his utopian novel News from Nowhere (1890), of a socialist society where London and other large centres of manufacturing had been replaced by smaller, better-built and more cohesive urban settlements: here inhabitants were liberated, rather than enslaved, by the beneficent use of mechanisation. In the latter category, on the other hand, we could see the 1930s demolition of inner-city slums and the concurrent enthusiasm for ‘cottage-style’ social housing – or, as will be argued here, the staging of popular and participatory theatre. Such events sought to locate present-day cities in their pre-industrial and rural history, thus providing a sense of belonging and continuity at
a time of change and dislocation. Indeed, targeted at urban and suburban audiences, the emotive power of the interwar ‘conjured village of the mind’s eye’ was harnessed just when the values and traditions of the country were arguably being lost.\textsuperscript{18} Rural-inflected ideals of Englishness, then, despite often being conceived as anti-industrial and anti-modern, could also be found in various methods of regenerating the city and its culture.\textsuperscript{19}

**Historical pageantry and adaptive modernity**

Scholarly debates about the contradictions and complexities of the relationship between modernity and Neo-Romanticism have been reflected, if only implicitly, in the growing historiography of historical pageantry. Performances of a utopian, pre-industrial and ‘Merrie England’ past could be seen as conservative reactions to change. Louis Napoleon Parker, the inventor of modern pageantry, moved in early Neo-Romanticist circles (particularly those clustered around the folk revival). He was open about his hope that the ‘community bonanza’ of pageantry would both relieve class tensions and kill off ‘the modernising spirit’ that he believed was destroying ‘all loveliness and has no loveliness of its own to put in its place’ and which signalled the ‘negation of poetry [and] romance’.\textsuperscript{20}

Into the interwar period, pageantry could certainly be ‘an ideal bed-fellow to expressions of rural nostalgia and the projections of a bucolic “deep” England’ – expressed particularly in the pageants of villages and towns that feared the urban ‘ribbon development’ famously lamented in rural preservationist tracts such as Williams-Ellis’s\textit{England and the Octopus} (1928).\textsuperscript{21} David Glassberg has seen the Parkerian tradition as a protest against modernity by means of the deployment of ‘historical imagery in a format that glorified a remote golden handicraft past’.\textsuperscript{22} Although Parker may have originated the format, however, his version of pageantry was only the beginning rather than the end of the movement. Indeed it underwent several divergent evolutions – almost as soon as it had been ‘invented’ – which complicate a simplistic conservative/modern binary.

Deborah Sugg Ryan, for example, has shown how the actor and director Frank Lascelles, who staged huge and popular pageants from 1907, developed his own distinctive style of visual spectacular. Unlike Parker, Lascelles prioritised the dramatic movement of large groups of people in colourful dances and processions rather than spoken dialogue, and arguably ‘embraced modernity’ instead of rejecting it.\textsuperscript{23} His
pageants, Ryan posits, should be seen in the context of other contemporaneous mass events that depended on the visual impact of thousands of people gathered together in one space – such as the spectacle plays of Max Reinhardt, ‘toga plays’, huge exhibitions and the cinema epics of D. W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille. Also in contrast to Parker, who had a tendency to downplay the importance of scenery (he thought it was often a distraction), Lascelles encouraged the creation of entire historical landscapes, informed by his practice as a painter, his interest in the Pre-Raphaelites and his enthusiasm for the Arts and Crafts movement.

From a somewhat different perspective, Jed Esty has shown how authors associated with the English late-modernism of the 1930s, such as Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster and T. S. Eliot, actually found the pageant-play format a means of composing ‘valedictions’ to modernist modes of thought. In the performance of the past, they believed, was a positive ‘spontaneous folk authenticity’ and an ‘acceptable’ version ‘of national art’ – one that responded to their increasing sense of cultural isolation. New political organisations, too, from the internationalist League of Nations Union to the Women’s Institute, were able to adapt the basic elements of pageantry to promote progressive and forward-looking ideas.

Historical pageantry as a form, then, can arguably be better defined by its sheer adaptability and malleability than by any inherent conservatism. In Britain’s industrial cities during the Great Depression, pageantry could accordingly be used to stimulate the local economy and – more importantly for the argument put forward here – provide a rooted sense of continuity, stability and future prosperity. To achieve this, pageant-masters of the interwar period adopted a Neo-Romantic perspective. In doing so, they attempted to overcome potential contradictions or tensions between the reality of modern urban life and the pre-modern historical past(s) that their pageants celebrated.

As Kitty Hauser has shown in her study of archaeological photography from the 1920s to the 1950s, ‘Neo-Romanticism may be thought of as a way of seeing as well as a style’, encompassing ‘Neo-Romantic viewers as well as Neo-Romantic artists’. For Hauser, this Neo-Romantic ‘way of seeing’ entailed the ways in which contemporaries could identify the Romantic symbolic importance of the depiction of topics such as local scenes, nature and landscape in a variety of media forms. Hauser further delineates what might be seen as the two prevalent – and antithetical – discourses of Neo-Romanticism: a strictly ‘preservationist’ mindset on the one hand and a more reflexive ‘archaeological imagination’ on the other. In the former, modernity is deemed an ‘irremovable barrier in
the way of aesthetic pleasure’; in the latter, it is ‘a barrier that can be seen through, over, or round’: the past may have lost visibility in the modern landscape, but it was not ‘sensuously un-recoverable’. The past could, consequently, operate as a ‘consoling sensibility’ in the present. Modernity, by the same token, could be reconciled with an increasingly impossible ideal historical landscape or culture, so long as the essential destructibility of history and historical culture was recognised or – better still – portrayed. It was this function of historical pageantry, its ‘archaeological imagination’, which enabled or allowed pageant-masters to stage historical spectaculars that looked both backwards and forwards in a way that Neo-Romantic viewers may have recognised. As Hauser points out, modernity did not remove the historicity of a place; it was simply the latest stage in that place’s history. 29

Historical pageantry, I would argue, was a visual representation of this reality. Indeed, as Paul Readman and others have shown, the interest in the past signified by the pageant movement did not necessarily imply a wish actually to *return* to a pre-industrial society or its values. On the contrary: the past provided inspiration for a new future, positively accommodating rapid and frightening change and progress alongside the preservation of historic landscapes, customs and culture. 30 Mick Wallis, for example, has demonstrated how historical pageantry in village settings was seen as having the potential to create a new rural community through recourse to the life and history of the common labourer, rather than the landed gentry. The interwar village pageant-master Mary Kelly, ‘unlike many of her more nostalgic contemporaries’, still ‘recognised the class conflicts and history of deprivation of the rural poor, and blended such elements into the pageants she devised.’ 31 At a time when the countryside, idealised by some, did not tally with the impression from others of continuing economic and moral rural malaise, Kelly’s pageants arguably bridged this gap. 32

For the great urban pageants of the late 1920s and 1930s, however, the evocation of the rural and pre-industrial worked in other ways. By this point Parker had all but stopped producing historical pageants. In his 1928 autobiography he complained that a whole host of unworthy imitators had sprung up and commercialised his invention, with only one ‘honourable exception’: Charles Hawtrey, who had died in 1910 after acting as pageant-master for only three pageants. 33 Other new and ambitious pageant impresarios were still connected to Parker’s ethos in many respects, but they arguably had more in common – both personally and professionally – with Lascelles. He was now responsible for many of the
hugely successful pageants in the cities of the Midlands and the North until his death in 1934.  

Municipal autonomy

For an industrial town or city, dependent on trade and thus suffering hard times, the romantic pre-industrial past needed to serve as a reasurance that the place could survive – and indeed prosper – through the vicissitudes of the present. In tune with pre-1914 pageants, the historical events of pre-modern civic life were celebrated – not because authors and participants yearned to turn the clock back, but because including a long chronological range enabled the construction of a genealogical lineage for contemporary civic institutions and the power that such institutions now wielded. What may have seemed unique or atemporal was instead portrayed as the cumulative result of a process that had begun many centuries before. Pageants in cities were thus often staged to commemorate their past incorporation, with episodes demonstrating the historical roots of government and urban growth.

The massive Pageant of Manchester in 1938, part of the city’s centenary celebrations, which had 10,000 performers and was seen by perhaps 100,000 people, offers a notable example. It was directed by Nugent Monck, the pageant-master and creator of the Norwich Maddermarket Theatre, who claimed to have developed his style without influence from Parker. Assisting Monck was Edward Baring, a businessman and pageant producer with 30 years of experience; in the 1920s and 1930s he had formed something of a double act with Lascelles. Episodes in Manchester’s pageant included the founding of a Roman fort at ‘Mancunium’ in AD 79; the inclusion of ‘Mameceaster’ in the dominions of Edward the Elder, king of the Anglo-Saxons, in AD 924; and Manchester’s receipt of its first charter from Thomas Gresley in 1301. In an era of central state growth, with fears mounting of a declining societal interest in municipal matters, the celebration of the bestowal of charters in medieval times – with all their associated pomp and ceremony – was aimed at encouraging local people to think of their municipal government as a body with both a long and a noble history. Choosing medieval episodes that demonstrated a city’s importance and autonomy reflected the continuing power of what David Matthews has dubbed the ‘civic Middle Ages’ – despite his contention that this aspect of British culture had declined in the early twentieth century.
Other pageants also highlighted the medieval heritage of urban governance, but demonstrated its evolution in later periods as well – especially when there was a charter anniversary to be celebrated. The Pageant of Birmingham in 1938, for example, was organised explicitly to commemorate the centenary of the granting of the town’s civic charter: its second episode portrayed the granting of a market charter to Peter de Birmingham in 1156, while the penultimate scene showed the ceremonial welcome that the mayor and council gave Queen Victoria upon her visit in 1858. The pageant had a cast of 8,000 and was seen by almost 140,000 people. It was directed by Gwen Lally, an increasingly important pageant-master in the 1930s. Lally had strong connections with Lascelles: as an actress under the management of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree (himself Lascelles’ mentor), she had performed in Lascelles’ 1907 Oxford pageant and took on board his preference for minimal dialogue and maximum spectacle. A similar ethos was apparent in the Salford pageant of 1930, staged by a cast of 6,000 in the year of the 700th anniversary of the granting of a charter to make the town a ‘free borough’. Unsurprisingly one episode featured ‘Ranulf the Good’ (Ranulph de Blondeville), the sixth Earl of Chester (1153–1232), conferring this charter. Other episodes also showed the royal patronage that confirmed both Salford’s long and more recent history of autonomy – from King Alfred the Great declaring the town to be the ‘capital of Salfordshire’ in the ninth century, to Bonnie Prince Charlie being blessed at Salford Cross in the eighteenth.

‘Inventing’ a history of local governmental autonomy proved particularly attractive for towns in the home counties. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries transport developments and suburbanisation fuelled the rapid expansion of ‘Outer London’. At first critics were wary of the impact this might have on non-urban Britain. C. F. G. Masterman, a settlement house worker and later Cabinet-ranking politician, ably brought these fears together in *The Heart of the Empire* (1901). When Masterman described London’s suburbia as a ‘gigantic plasmodium: spreading slimy arms over the surrounding fields’, he vividly evoked contemporary worries that the capital’s evils were seeping out beyond its borders. Less dramatic analyses of London’s growth, such as those of the planner Patrick Geddes, called instead for more comprehensive governmental systems to join together urban areas within reach of the capital. Some of the politicians and administrators of the London County Council (LCC) agreed. During the First World War the coalition between the Progressives and the Municipal Reform Party included a commitment to extending the boundaries of
the County. In response to the passing of a resolution to this effect in 1919, a new Royal Commission was set up to consider how London’s government might be expanded.\textsuperscript{44}

With the expansionist tendencies of the LCC now more apparent, district councils increasingly petitioned for new charters of municipal borough incorporation as a way to provide ‘freedom from attack by a neighbouring authority’.\textsuperscript{45} Such efforts were informed by a desire to encourage local inhabitants to think less of their town as a ‘dormitory’ of London and more as a discrete place with a venerable and important history, with local pageants being the perfect demonstration of such a history.\textsuperscript{46} In the Walthamstow pageant of 1930, performed by 600 children to commemorate the granting of the municipal borough charter the previous year, episodes aimed to demonstrate the length of time that the settlement had existed – all the way from the Normans and Lord Ralph de Toni of the Manor of Wilcumestou to ‘the Coming of the Charter’ in 1929, an event presented as a ‘notable landmark in Walthamstow’s progress’.\textsuperscript{47} Scenes in between the main episodes emphasised the importance of Walthamstow to the nation as a whole, particularly through portraying the visits or residence of famous figures (Samuel Pepys, Richard Turpin, Benjamin Disraeli and William Morris).

The Barking pageant of 1931 was likewise staged to celebrate the granting of a municipal charter of incorporation, which in this case had taken place in the same year as the pageant.\textsuperscript{48} Directed by Lascelles, with a relatively small cast of 2,000, the pageant made much of Barking’s

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\caption{Postcard of the Pageant of Barking (1931). Reproduced by kind permission of the Ellie Reid Collection.}
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glorious past. Episodes included the foundation of Barking Abbey, a visit from Charles I and the Great Barking Fair of 1746 (Fig. 7.1), patronised by the Lord Mayor of London and other notables such as Captain Cook (who had married locally, in St Margaret’s Church). But its epilogue consisted of a march-past by the costumed performers, finally joined by municipal representatives of the new borough, as ‘Long Live Barking’ was cried out. This was an obvious attempt to connect the great deeds and men of the past with the successful corporation and councillors of the present. A very similar ethos was evident in the episodes of the Dartford pageant (1932), which featured William the Conqueror being forced to accept terms of privilege by Kentishmen in 1066, Edward the Black Prince visiting Bexley Hall and praising the area, and Henry VIII enjoying local revelries on May Day 1515. Thus although not as large as the civic pageants of Northern and Midlands cities, ‘Outer London’ pageants shared with them a desire to demonstrate how present-day power and prestige rested on a much longer historical record.

Economic boosterism

Parker would perhaps have recognised and approved of this continued emphasis on the origins and autonomy of local civic institutions. But there were other developments of which he might have been less appreciative. Pageants, in the interwar period, became far more comfortable with portraying the industrial past and present – and highlighting (implicitly and sometimes explicitly) the connection between the two. In doing so they contributed to a growing desire to boost the fortunes of the local economy, while simultaneously cooling the temperature of working-class discontent. Lascelles’ Bradford pageant of 1931, for example, which had 7,500 performers and was seen by around 120,000 people, was organised by the city’s elites in the context of the socio-economic instability of the Great Depression. After a narrative that started in Roman times, and passed through the Normans, Plantagenets and Stuarts, the final episode featured ‘Bradford of the Industrial Revolution’. Scenes depicted the development of woollen production in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the triumphant election of the town’s first MPs after the 1832 Great Reform Act (Fig. 7.2). In presenting such a story, the organisers hoped to rally a fractious local society around the city and its governors.

Birmingham’s centenary pageant (mentioned above) offers an even more striking example of this agenda in action. Here the second episode
Figure 7.2  


showed the granting of a market charter followed by a scene from the buoyant market that resulted. The final scene also returned to the economy of the city, but this time it portrayed ‘Birmingham Today’, complete with representations of the important trades of the city such as electrical trades, firearms and motor vehicles.\(^{51}\)

In Stoke-on-Trent’s pageant of 1930, staged by Lascelles with 5,000 performers, the historical narrative proved a useful way of connecting the manufacturing innovators of the past with the industrial power of the present. The story told how ‘a one-time insignificant spot’, as the pageant handbook put it, came ‘to be one of the most famous industrial centres of the world’.\(^{52}\) The first half of the pageant was fairly standard fare, depicting early Britons resisting Romans, John of Gaunt (a powerful figure in Staffordshire) at Tutbury Castle in 1374, and the dissolution of Hulton Abbey in 1549. However, given that the year of its performance was also the bicentenary of the birth of Josiah Wedgwood, the second half concentrated on the rise of the pottery industry in the Midlands town. One episode showed the ‘personalities’ associated with pottery, as ‘pioneer peasant potters’ were depicted ‘at work and play’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; another showed some of the ‘incidents in the life and time of Josiah Wedgwood’; and a third offered an ‘allegorical portrayal of
the modern potteries industry’. As the handbook explained, allegory was necessary in this episode – the final one in the pageant – both because it was ‘impossible to depict the development of the Potteries by referring to individuals, or even individual firms’, and also because ‘the drab facts of the industrial machine’ were better brought to life through ‘the play of the imagination and the skill of the artist’. Thus instead of direct depictions of industries such as ceramics, coal mining and metallurgy, the episode featured a Ceramic Queen with attendants, King Coal and his ‘offsprings’ and Tubal Cain (the biblical blacksmith). The Stoke pageant was, as the president of the North Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce put it, an attempt to ‘help’ local industry as it went through ‘hard times’ and became ever more ‘in desperate need’ of business.

Perhaps the apotheosis of industrial depiction in historical pageants came with Matthew Anderson’s Lancashire Cotton Pageant, performed by 12,000 performers in 1932. Staged in Manchester in the Belle Vue stadium, it was a county-wide affair led by regional industrial bodies such as the Cotton Trade Organisations. When Ellis Green, the Lord Mayor of Manchester, opened the pageant, he declared that ‘behind all’ the ‘showmanship was’ an ‘underlying’ idea: Lancashire’s cotton industry had to be ‘advertised, and advertised flamboyantly, [and] vociferously … The industry had to “bang the drum”, and bang it hard’. To achieve this perspective, the pageant offered a hotchpotch of events, themes, countries and fiction. It featured a Persian cotton market in ‘Ancient Times’ and Flemish weavers being welcomed to England by William the Conqueror, before skipping eight centuries to ‘Lancashire at the Dawn of the Industrial Revolution’, which bizarrely included Macbeth-style witches flying on broomsticks and casting magic spells before being driven off by Lancashire farmers. Other scenes featured the North American cotton fields (with actors in blackface) and the achievements of famous inventors in the textile industry such as John Kay, Richard Arkwright and Samuel Crompton. As the Manchester Guardian quipped, the pageant ‘stuck to cotton all the time … The thread is never off the bobbin’.

The common people

Evocations of historical continuity could also go beyond the city’s institutions and industries. Parker had been keen for his pageanters to take historical roles that reflected their current social positions – a mayor playing a mayor of the past, a vicar or priest playing a monk, an agricultural labourer playing a medieval peasant, and so forth. Parker’s pageants thus
gave attention to all sections of local society. But the focus was on what he saw as the most important historical actors – kings, queens, archbishops and the like – and on confirming social hierarchies rather than challenging them.\footnote{59} In the interwar period, however, it became increasingly common to celebrate the lives of ordinary folk. They were given enhanced visibility and more speaking roles, and were also depicted as having a key importance in the unfolding of local life. In Anderson’s cotton pageant, for example, barely a real historical figure was portrayed. Instead, in the second half, scenes such as ‘Market Day’, ‘Lancashire at Work’ and ‘Lancashire at Play’ concentrated on the lives of representative working people. For Edward Genn, Anderson’s producer, the change in style was about producing a lively, people-oriented production that would ‘bear no resemblance’ to the ‘artistic abomination’ of the ‘civic history pageant’ and its ‘tiresome … tradition of Romans, Saxons, monks and knights, wandering like lost, unshepherded sheep across a field in front of a flimsy property castle’. Instead he wanted the pageant to show ‘Lancashire as a great province of heroic achievement built up on the struggles, sufferings and sacrifices of the men, women and children’.\footnote{60}

Genn’s somewhat flippant disregard for civic history may have been out-of-tune with broader interwar trends, but his emphasis on ‘the people’ had greater resonance. Indeed, according to Nugent Monck, the ‘central theme of modern pageantry’ in the 1930s was the increased importance accorded to the ‘influence of the crowd in municipal government’:

From law and order by the Romans, through the breaking of the Feudal Barons, the establishment of the Constitution, and so gradually to universal suffrage and state ownership, it is the increasing power of the man in the street to organise his life and it is these men and women who become the principal performers in pageants.\footnote{61}

F. E. Doran, a local theatre producer, clergyman and pageant-master, made similar points to Monck. His Manchester pageant in 1926, seen by around 100,000 people, aimed to

symbolise the growing power of the people through the centuries, to indicate the part played by Manchester people in moulding the thought, institutions and commerce of the country, to emphasise that beyond the veil of smoke and the forest of chimneys our civic life is based on heroic and romantic incidents, the endeavours and struggles of the common people.\footnote{62}
As the Lord Bishop of Rochester said of the Dartford pageant of 1932, re-enactment helped ‘to recall the splendour of past history, the great deeds that had made this country what it is to-day’ – including those of the ‘common or ordinary men and women of days gone by who had done their share towards making this nation of ours what it is’.

In one sense, scenes of pre-urban life also reflected an already established tendency to identify the peasant as ‘the nostalgic embodiment of noble, Anglo-Saxon virtues and an exemplary figure in an authentic and stable golden age entirely unaffected by change’.

But interwar pageants also reflected a more recent growth of interest in histories of ‘everyday life’, one propagated by social historians such as the Quennells and institutions such as the BBC.

Romanticising the role of the common man was about creating an affinity between the present-day urban-industrial worker and his (or, less consistently, her) rural forebears in the past, as well as projecting such values forward in time.

Monck’s mentioning of suffrage and signalling of the role of women, in addition, is instructive. By the interwar years, and in contrast to the pre-war period, women had a much higher visibility in the organisational structure of pageant committees; they also increasingly made up a larger proportion of the cast. Both individual women and women’s organisations saw the pageant format as one way of fitting themselves into a non-contentious role of active citizenship following suffrage extension in 1918 and 1928.

As one local newspaper put it in 1929, pageants were ‘probably the ideal form of dramatic expression for Women’s Institutes’, since both sought to ‘bring a wider culture and a comradeship to the countryside’ as well as providing a chance for women to develop their practical skills in the making of costumes and properties, and offering an opportunity to express teamwork. Organising a pageant was thus ‘the dramatisation’ of the Institute’s ‘ideals’.

At the same time pageants in both rural and urban areas could draw attention to the domestic lives of women and the parts they had played in past conflict and politics; they could even signal contemporary women’s associational opposition to varied issues, such as hunting or war. Romanticising the common people was also an exercise in demonstrating a less elitist sense of society in the context of the mass participation and sacrifice of the First World War. Such an aim coalesced with hopes and fears about the supposed susceptibility of the working classes to political radicalism in the context of continental fascism and communism.

In an often class-torn society, the authors and organisers of historical pageants tended to emphasise common history and achievements, while smoothing over antagonistic debates and interests. Not all
performers or spectators, it should be said, were either fooled or even necessarily interested in this narrative. Pageant-masters could face challenges from left-wing organisations if it was felt they had occluded urban working-class history or revolt. During the 1938 Manchester Pageant, for example, much debate took place over the omission of Peterloo from the narrative; the Communist Party eventually staged their own alternative pageant that celebrated the labour movement’s role in the life of the city.\textsuperscript{70} Similarly, at Bradford in 1931, there was controversy over the depiction of the Luddites, with the local Communist Party claiming that the pageant attempted to subvert the goal of workers’ rights.\textsuperscript{71}

Mainstream pageants were not always shy about including still-sore conflicts, however. The Lancashire Cotton Pageant, for example, also included Luddites attacking factories, as well as a surprisingly bloody re-enactment of Peterloo (which ended with ‘dead and dying men and women, and items of clothing scattered across the scene’).\textsuperscript{72} Moreover, we must acknowledge the multiplicity of responses that pageants could engender in spectators and performers – from fun and adventure to subverting the message for their own ends. Crowds could misinterpret serious scenes for humorous ones; use the gathering of masses of people for social or criminal behaviour; or, quite simply, enjoy the spectacle rather than the educational ethos.\textsuperscript{73}

**Conclusion**

I have argued here that the performance or re-enactment of the past did not result solely from backward-looking and anti-modern impulses. For cities dealing with difficult problems in the present – whether they be challenges to municipal autonomy, the expansion of the citizenry at the same time as a perceived decline in civic interest or the fluctuations in economic fortunes caused by depression – the past provided a wellspring of usable evidence for how towns and cities had adapted throughout their history.\textsuperscript{74}

To make this argument, I have demonstrated how the specifically modern city – with its democratic government and industrial basis – could rest upon both the pre-urban and pre-industrial. Curating a 1987 exhibition on the Neo-Romantic imagination in Britain between 1935 and 1955, David Mellor usefully opened out the definition of Neo-Romanticism from a narrow history of art to include a wide range of media, such as photography, poetry and films, thus illustrating the prevalence of a more general Neo-Romantic sensibility throughout British
Urban pageantry, as I have shown here, can be added to this list. Pageant-masters, authors and organisers may not have been Neo-Romantic in any strict or self-defining sense, but they were dealing with – and overcoming – similar shifts in thought and artistic practice. Historical pageantry could achieve a balancing act by allowing a Neo-Romantic rural or conservative impulse to be expressed within the modern city, rather than only beyond its borders.

Seeing the ‘traditional’ and ‘the modern’ as binary opposites in the interwar period has proved to be simplistic in a variety of cases – from the cultural memory of the First World War to the branding of the London Underground. This also holds true for urban culture more broadly. The place of the city in interwar Neo-Romanticist currents of thought was a complex one, but it was not necessarily wholly negative or contradictory. Andrew Radford has rightly noted that both the definition and cultural legacies of Neo-Romanticism are ‘notoriously tricky to delimit, given the tangle of the movement’s theoretical strands and elusive periodisation’.

In a different vein, Alan Powers has pointed out the dangers of always associating certain motifs or symbols with a cultural tradition – such as landscape or countryside being always a ‘cipher for conservatism and nostalgia’. By the same token, it is now worth pointing out that industrial cities in the 1920s and 1930s were not always associated with the death of romantic ideas of the national or local past – despite the prevalence and power of the English countryside in the construction of ‘Englishness’.

Notes

1. This chapter is an expansion of an article published in Informationen zur modernen Stadtgeschichte 2 (2016): 19–34. The author wishes to acknowledge and thank the editors of that journal for their permission to reprint here.
2. See, for example, the failure of the Nottingham pageant to get off the ground in 1908 – seemingly a victim of the apathy of the ‘workers’ rather than the ‘gentlemen’ who had committed the guarantee money needed: ‘District Intelligence’, Grantham Journal, 23 November 1907, 3.
4. For more discussion of this shift to cities, see Tom Hulme, “A Nation of Town Criers”: Civic Publicity and Historical Pageantry in Inter-War Britain', Urban History 44 (2017): 270–92.


11. Martin J. Wiener has been particularly influential in cementing the notion that the countryside was the place in which the British looked for their values: see Martin J. Wiener, English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980 (2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004 [1981]).


13. Harris, Romantic Moderns, 11.


16. Ward, Britishness, 60.


21. See entries on pageants in Selborne (1926 and 1938), Abinger (1934), Ashdown (1929) and Chittlehampton (1936) in Angela Bartie, Paul Caton, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Tom Hulme, Alex Hutton, Paul Readman, The Redress of the Past, http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/pageants (accessed 22 January 2019). Somewhat ironically, villages and towns staging these pageants that idealised the rural in opposition to London often depended on metropolitan authors and spectating visitors, enabled by the development of comprehensive modern rail and road networks.


28. Hulme, ‘“A Nation of Town Criers”’.


32. It is worth noting that an entirely negative interpretation of interwar agriculture and rural life has been challenged recently, with historians emphasising regeneration as well as decline. See *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. Paul Brassley, Jeremy Burchardt and Lynne Thompson (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006).


36. For these aspects of pageantry in relation to small towns in Britain in particular, see Bartie et al., ‘Performing the Past’.


45. According to William F. Blay, former chair of the Urban District Council of Dartford: ‘The Effect of Incorporation’, West Kent Advertiser, 17 March 1933, 3. In reality, however, the collapse of the wartime coalition in the post-war period greatly dampened the Council’s political desires for expansion.


51. Bartie et al., ‘Birmingham Historical Pageant’.


53. Handbook of the Stoke-on-Trent Historical Pageant, Military Tattoo, Pottery Exhibitions, and Bi-centenary Celebrations (Stoke-on-Trent, n.p. 1930).


57. Bartie et al., ‘Lancashire Cotton Pageant’.


60. Cited in Bartie et al., ‘Lancashire Cotton Pageant’.


62. F. E. Doran, Producer’s preface, in Historical Pageant of Manchester (Manchester, 1926), 4.

63. ‘Kent’s Great Historical Pageant’, West Kent Advertiser, 22 July 1932, 2.


68. See, for example, the entries for Dorset (1929) and Dorset (1939) in Bartie et al., Redress of the Past.

69. The Association for Education in Citizenship, for example, was formed by the politician, industrialist and philanthropist E. D. Simon due to his belief that the young needed to be guided away from the temptations of fascism: Guy Whitmarsh, ‘The Politics of Political Education: An Episode’, Journal of Curriculum Studies 6 (1974): 133–42. It is also notable that many pageants depicted the First World War in this period from an angle that commended the bravery and sacrifice of both soldiers and mourners. On this, see Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Tom Hulme, Paul Readman and Charlotte Tupman, “And Those Who Live, How Shall I Tell Their Fame?” Historical Pageants, Collective Remembrance and the First World War, 1919–1939, Historical Research 90 (2017): 636–61.
70. Bartie et al., ‘Manchester Pageant’.
71. Bartie et al., ‘Historical Pageant of Bradford’.
72. Bartie et al., ‘Lancashire Cotton Pageant’.
73. For more on responses to pageants, see Ryan, ‘Staging the Imperial City’, 128–30.

**Bibliography**


Hulme, Tom. 2017. ‘“A Nation of Town Criers”: Civic Publicity and Historical Pageantry in Inter-War Britain’, *Urban History* 44: 270–92.


