Book review of John Schofield, Aftermath: Readings in the Archaeology of Recent Conflict

Adrian Myers, Stanford University

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In the preface to his 2009 volume, *Aftermath: Readings in the Archaeology of Recent Conflict*, John Schofield states, ‘The archaeology of recent conflict has emerged as a credible, popular and significant field of archaeological endeavour and heritage concern in the past decade’. Schofield continues, ‘I should be quite clear about this from the outset: I make no claim to have initiated this development, or driven it in any sense’. While Schofield’s assessment of the status of conflict archaeology within contemporary archaeology and heritage management is spot-on, in his second statement he is overly modest. Though he may not have ‘initiated’ the sub-discipline, he certainly has been a driving force in its development and maturation. Over the last decade or so, Schofield has output a significant and diverse body of research that has already influenced the next generation of archaeologists interested in the archaeology of recent conflict.

*Aftermath* brings together a diverse collection of 14 of Schofield’s articles (some co-authored), all previously published in the years since 1995. The articles are republished in this volume with the hope of making them more accessible, since some of them originally appeared in more obscure publications. As Schofield explains in his introduction, the significance of this assemblage of articles is that it characterizes and represents a particular period in which the archaeology of recent conflict became ‘accepted, mainstream and professionalized’. The book is composed of four sections, entitled ‘Frameworks in Conflict Archaeology’, ‘Memory and Place’, ‘Landscapes of Events’ and ‘Further Directions’. Each section includes a short introduction followed by two to four chapters; the sum is bookended by an overall introduction and an afterword.

In ‘Frameworks’, Schofield discusses the ways that a heritage professional might approach the materiality of recent military and social conflict through topics such as Second World War bomb sites in London and Second World War control towers, and a very personal account of his visit to Capetown’s infamous District Six. Schofield echoes Buchli and Lucas (2001) when he reminds us that, when dealing with the recent past, what we assume to be familiar might in fact not be familiar at all. Ironically, in this archaeology, concrete—that ubiquitous material of 20th century fortifications—turns from insignificant and everyday to the centre of our academic and professional attention. Concrete bunkers from the Second World War and concrete behemoths of the Cold War (erstwhile eyesores), precisely because they have been thought of as ugly and perhaps quotidian, have, until recently, not been considered significant or
worthy of protection. Increasingly, however, the public value these monuments, use them as loci for remembrance and commemorative events and support their preservation. Ultimately, these opening chapters are about why the remains of conflict matter, to whom they matter and what steps can and should be taken to preserve them. Schofield makes the case for an ethic of informed conservation that protects representative examples of these concrete monuments from the recent militarized past.

In ‘Memory and Place’, Schofield struggles with places and landscapes that carry with them complex, weighty pasts and contested understandings and valuations: a Berlin divided by its notorious Wall (where Schofield spent some of his formative years); Cold War military bases and the ‘peace camps’ that emerged on their margins; Twyford Down, a palimpsest of a landscape where prehistoric and recent monuments vie for space and attention; and Strait Street, an alley in Malta with an iniquitous reputation. Chapter 4, ‘Views of the Berlin Wall’, exemplifies one of the strengths of this volume: Schofield’s dexterous intertwining of considered scholarly analysis with deeply personal and emotive anecdotes. The author finds just the right balance of the two, with his account of his early years spent in Cold War Berlin informing the reader’s overall understanding and appreciation of the author’s admittedly developing idea of a heritage of the recent, conflicted past.

An original contribution of Schofield’s is his development of the archaeology of social movements crystallized in the form of ‘protest camps’. These were sometimes temporary, sometimes more long-term, sites inhabited by diverse people and groups united in their opposition to state-level structures of power and violence: nuclear testing in the Nevada desert; a motorway expansion in an English chalk downland; the installation of cruise missile silos at an airbase. In each of these cases, Schofield demonstrates not only that material remains of protest are extant, but that these remains constitute an integral component of the stories of the wider, often military, landscapes. Any interpretation and presentation of these landscapes then must include the voices of opposition that equally left their marks.

In the penultimate Section 3, ‘Landscapes of Events’, Schofield shifts slightly to a more impersonal voice. Here he is less intimate and less specific and, as he suggests, in a sense writes as a representative of his employer English Heritage. Section 3’s chapters deal with the WWI Home Front, the WWII Battle of Britain, D-Day preparations and the landscapes of the Cold War. The focus is on broader themes and implications such as social and cultural change and the impact of foreign wars and nuclear stalemates on populations at home.

The landscapes of the First and Second World Wars in Continental Europe and elsewhere have been widely studied, discussed and commemorated. Far less
studied but equally important, Schofield points out, are the landscapes of the
Home Front. Total war brought with it new landscapes of defence, training and
manufacturing in Britain. Some might find it ironic that just as concrete bunkers
have become an unlikely form of monument, WWI practice trenches on the
Salisbury Plain have become unlikely earthworks. Both are worthy of informed
consideration for legal protection. Hinting at another irony, Schofield suggests
that the material remnants of Cold War landscapes are perhaps particularly
important to conserve since much of the documentary record pertaining to
them is still classified and not available to historians. Strangely, the buildings
are available but the documents are not—a rare case in which more recent does
not translate into more records.

In the final section of the book, ‘Further Directions’, Schofield returns to a
slightly more personal perspective. As he suggests, the title of the book hints at
a move away from traditional approaches to military archaeology. There is a
shift here from a focus on specific sites and artefacts, to a broader archaeology
of militarism and, importantly, its cultural and social significance as heritage.
Ultimately, as with much of Schofield’s work, this book is about what places and
traces matter, why they matter and to whom. The interest is clearly in past and
present people and places, not just the physical remains.

Schofield is specifically interested in shifting the heritage management and
planning process from a ‘top-down’ to a ‘bottom-up’ approach. What this means
in practice, is that the people are being consulted. Previously, heritage management
professionals imposed their rulings on communities, telling them what they
should and should not value. Now, Schofield and others are interested in finding
out what places matter to the local stakeholders and community members.
Schofield discusses cognitive maps as one tool for getting at a community’s
priorities, as a way of identifying social spaces and values attributed to them.

In recent years Schofield has turned to artistic practice as another means of
dealing with concepts of heritage, significance and value. In Chapter
14, ‘Constructing Place: When Artists and Archaeologists Meet’, the author suggests that
art and archaeology are more closely related ‘than one might think’, since artists
and archaeologists both approach recording and understanding the world in sim-
ilar ways. Schofield outlines three ways in which art and archaeology intersect:
art as an archaeological record, archaeological investigations as performance and
art as interpretation.

The concept of art as a part of the archaeological record is rather straightforward,
and certainly plausible. Schofield uses the examples of contemporary graffi-
ti and murals painted on the walls of military bases. Urban graffiti is a medium
that gives voice to subcultures and intimates the ethos of particular times, places
and peoples. War murals are part of the wider record of a particular time and
place in a military setting. Just as a Napoleonic graffito in an Egyptian tomb is archaeology, so are the casual scribbles or elaborate murals of 20th century urban teens and military men.

Schofield’s argument for archaeological investigation as performance is less coherent and, I would argue, misses the mark. He uses as examples instances in which artists have replicated the archaeologist, such as a performance artist staging an elaborate faux excavation. Though such a performance certainly might have value in its own right, as artistic practice, it is difficult to see how such a performance is as important to the discipline of archaeology as Schofield implies.

Schofield’s most convincing argument for the integration of art and archaeology is in his call for ‘art as interpretation’. As archaeologists struggle with ways to present work to the public and to stay relevant, art might be one more way of interpreting and presenting the past. As he suggests, ‘Art can provide a new dimension to understanding and interpreting space’. **Artists may be better able to capture the character (Zeitgeist) of an era than archaeologists ever could.** This is the notion of using art and archaeology towards building understanding, an important and relevant aspect of what we do (or should be doing) as archaeologists dealing with the recent past.

Schofield closes his volume with an afterword entitled ‘Ghosts’. Here the author returns to an intimate, personal perspective as he recounts his boyhood experience of seeing a ghost. The result of the experience for Schofield is that it is now impossible for him to dismiss ghosts as something that cannot exist. The author states:

The ghosts of place exist. The places I describe are not mere physical constructions devoid of human interest and social meaning. They have both of these in abundance, and the ghosts of place are a constant reminder of this.

For Schofield, the material remains of the recent past matter because they matter to people. Much of his work, and much of *Aftermath*, elaborates on this basic conviction. But is this really the primary reason that the recent militarized past matters? Or, is this as far as we are willing to take conflict archaeology? Perhaps it is not enough to say that the recent past matters because it matters to people, and thus we should preserve a representative sample of the sites of the recent past. As archaeologists—professionals and academics trained in critical thinking and ethical reasoning—should we not also forcefully deconstruct and critique those militarized landscapes and conflicted sites? The fact that Schofield undertakes the archaeology of protest in the first place—that a protest camp is seen as just as important as a missile silo—is a critique of sorts. I argue for an approach that is more explicit and outspoken.
Ultimately, that *Aftermath* was published does demonstrate that conflict archaeology is, in a sense, coming of age. Schofield, a leader and mentor in the development of this type of archaeology, is clearly the right person to have written this important volume. The fact that English Heritage even considers the remains of the recent past for statutory protection is partly, if not largely, owed to Schofield. The perhaps humble goal of making more accessible these sometimes obscure, but always relevant, articles was certainly a worthwhile motivation for its publication.

Adrian Myers

Works Cited