

The Disappearing Act: Heritage Making in Charlotte Riddell's Novels

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Abstract This article examines the strategies of heritage making in Riddell's City novels, popular in the 19th century, but little known today. Drawing on late Victorian debates about the preservation of the past and its material remains, the article focuses on the relationship between fictional and non-fictional elements, in Riddell's urban realism, which frequently pivots on heritage concerns. The main argument is twofold: 1) heritage discourse provides an apt framing for the self-validation of the author's daring narrative choices; 2) Riddell's understanding of heritage changes as her vision of capitalism darkens, culminating in a vocal denunciation of the destructive forces at work in the very idea of progress. Her novels generate heritage value in the very gesture of recording the many disappearing acts mournfully witnessed by the narrator.

Keywords Heritage. City of London. Realism. Preservationism. Business.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The novelist of the City of London. – 3 Heritage Making. – 4 The Disappearing Act. – 5 Preserving the Past. – 6 Conclusion.



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‘Heritage’ is a nomadic term
(Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 1994)

1 Introduction

The current notion of heritage emerged in Europe, particularly in France, Germany and Britain, in the nineteenth century. Concerns with the past and its material remains have a much deeper history, of course, but the nineteenth century saw the rise of a specific discourse of heritage interlaced with the developing narrative of nationalism and a new sense of historical consciousness.¹ In tension with ideas of progress and development, heritage discourse placed much emphasis on the urgent need to conserve and manage historic buildings and ancient monuments, threatened by the massive transformations in the built environment consequent upon industrialisation and urbanisation. In England, John Ruskin’s philosophy, expounded in *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *Stones of Venice* (1851-1853), inspired the activism of William Morris, Octavia Hill and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Building (SPAB), founded in 1877. The SPAB had a crucial role in challenging existing architectural and conservationist practices, especially the extreme forms of restoration associated with the Gothic Revival. The integrity of monuments, Morris argued, was best preserved by means of minimal interventions and repairs that kept buildings as untouched as possible, while protecting them from further decay (Donovan 2008).

But heritage is not just a physical thing; it is also a “performance”, “a cultural and social process” (Smith 2006, 2), “an actively constructed understanding, a discourse about the past which is ever in fluctuation” (Moody 2015, 113). In Victorian England, the expert knowledge of architects, antiquarians and archaeologists oriented this process of meaning making and value creation. Civic participation, however, also played a major part in it, increasingly so as the century was drawing to a close: “emerging ideas of heritage protection”, Cowell explains, “often built upon strong levels of public sympathy and support for the relics of the past” (2008, 55). A popular culture of heritage developed alongside antiquarian and archaeological debates about the future of the past. Heritage awareness, in other words, was widespread. Its traces can also be found in novels of the period: Charlotte Riddell’s City novels are a telling case in point.

¹ In Cowell’s definition “heritage is perhaps best understood as a way of seeing or appreciating the past in the present, in the interests of both the present and the future. A simple definition of heritage [...] might therefore be: an ongoing concern for the tangible and intangible remains of the past, for the benefit of present and future generations” (Cowell 2008, 10). On the discourse of heritage, first formalised in the nineteenth century, see Smith 2006, 16-30, Swenson 2013 and Cowell 2008.

My aim in this article is to explore how Riddell's fiction contributed to the practice of heritage making. Resolutely focused on the present of commercial and financial modernity, on the new realities of nineteenth-century capitalism, Riddell's novels may seem poor candidates for an investigation into concerns, interests and practices related to the preservation of the past. Yet, as Harrison suggests, "heritage is not primarily about the past, but instead about our relationship with the present and the future" (2013, 4). Riddell's urban realism provides ample evidence of heritage in the making, or "past presencing", which Macdonald defines as "the empirical phenomenon of how people variously experience, understand and produce the past in the present" (2013, 58). The first section of this article contains a broad overview of Riddell's City novels, popular in the nineteenth century, but little known today, focusing on recurring themes and approaches.² In the subsequent sections, I analyse Riddell's narrative strategies in relation to the preservationist impulse and the creation of heritage value through fiction. Some of these strategies – topographical realism, for example – are shared by many novelists and are well known to produce an immediate effect of "immersivity" (Ryan 2001, 129). Others are specific to Riddell's unique imaginative commitment to narrating capitalism and business life in the hyper-modern setting of the City of London, the international hub of commerce, trade and finance. Riddell's understanding of heritage changes as her vision of capitalism darkens, culminating in a vocal denunciation of the destructive forces at work in the very idea of progress. Concerns for heritage often develop as "a response to a perceived or actual threat" (Cowell 2008, 20). Riddell's novels are no exception in this respect. Remarkable, however, is the extent to which the heritage idea informs her realism. The rich history of the City of London, strongly evoked at the onset of her stories of modern life, is translated into heritage through repeated acts of imaginative communion with the past that reclaim it as a legacy for all to share and enjoy.

² As I have argued in my book (Colella 2016), Riddell's novels stand out in the canon of nineteenth-century realist fiction for their unique and sustained focus on the City of London, the commercial and financial centre of British capitalism. The expression 'City novels' is meant to capture this specific aspect of Riddell's imaginative engagement with the world of business, trade and finance. The present article looks at Riddell's fiction from a different angle, bringing into sharper focus the articulation of heritage concerns in her novels.

2 The novelist of the City of London

Riddell's City novels are, in a way, forgotten heritage - literary objects that have long remained hidden in the dusty archives of cultural memory. Riddell's popularity peaked in the 1860s and 1870s but did not prove long lasting. In those decades, she was able to command high prices in the market for fiction (Tinsley 1900, 1: 98); her novels captured the attention of both established journals and metropolitan and provincial newspapers, and the editorship of the *St. James's Magazine*, which Riddell held for seven years (1867-73), further contributed to consolidating her media identity. Born in Carrickfergus (Northern Ireland), Charlotte Eliza Cowan (later Riddell) moved to London in 1855 in pursuit of a literary career. She made her mark in the crowded literary marketplace of mid-Victorian England by narrating stories that are mostly set in the City of London, the centre of commerce and finance, and revolve around the *homines novi* of commercial modernity: City men, accountants, manufacturers, clerks, merchants, traders, and businessmen. "I was and still am heartily in love with the City", she declared in an interview (Blathwayt 1890, 3). Although some publishers tried to dissuade her from pursuing such unconventional topics, Riddell persevered: "All the pathos of the City, the pathos in the lives of struggling men entered into my soul", she explained, "and I felt I must write, strongly as my publisher objected to my choice of subject, which he said was one no woman could handle well" (Blathwayt 1890, 3).

The hallmark of her fiction is a unique and striking combination of financial and literary writing; her "wonderful and fearful knowledge of matters financial", as one reviewer described it (Noble 1885, 371), coexists with psychological realism and the exploration of affects related to the changing dynamics of both the business world and the domestic sphere. The City novels published in the 1860s - *Too Much Alone* (1860), *City and Suburb* (1861), *George Geith of Fen Court* (1864), and *The Race for Wealth* (1866) - explore the plights of individuals caught in the "vortex of business" as Victorian commentators liked to describe the hectic world of entrepreneurial capitalism (Smith 1876 and Anon. 1861). Her fiction zooms in on small capitalists, rather than larger-than-life figures of speculators, drawing inspiration from what historians have defined as British "personal capitalism" - the capitalism of small family firms or partnerships which were the preferred form of enterprise throughout the nineteenth-century (Rose 1994; Colli 2003). More systematically than her fellow novelists, Riddell offered readers paradigmatic stories of self-help based on a model of economic individuality in which the acquisitive urge is neither moralistically condemned nor entirely condoned.

On 26 September 1871, her husband, Joseph Hadley Riddell, a relatively unsuccessful businessman, declared bankruptcy. This

traumatic event was to cast a long shadow on their existence: while Joseph never resumed trading, his wife increased her productivity and diversified her output, going on to write the profitable ghost stories for which she is still best known today.³ Novels too kept coming. However, Riddell's early belief in the promises of commercial modernity and the liberal dream of self-determination gave way to a darker outlook, partly determined by her personal crisis, but also aligned with contemporaneous debates about economic decline and the spectre of a permanent deterioration in the fortunes of the nation. *The Senior Partner* (1881) and *Mitre Court* (1885) register late nineteenth-century anxieties about stagnation and lack of progress. In both novels the prevailing mood is one of disillusionment, as a new generation of market players struggle to achieve even a modicum dose of success, and a story of their own in the City, while antiquated figures of senior merchants continue to hold sway.

How does Riddell's imaginative commitment to narrating capitalism intersect with heritage concerns? As I argue in the following pages, the urban realism of her novels (*Too Much Alone* and *George Geith*) relies on narrative strategies that create a space of continuity between the old and the new, the aristocratic past of the City and its bourgeois present. Riddell was breaking new ground when she elected the City as her narrative turf; she went against the grain of a deeply entrenched culture of prestige by opting for 'vulgar' business as her speciality;⁴ finally, she pushed gender boundaries in pursuing what were mostly perceived as masculine topics, hardly the province of lady novelists. These bold experiments necessitated some form of cultural legitimization. My contention is that the acts of heritage making, disseminated in her novels, provided a symbolic frame within which to recalibrate the resolutely modern orientation of her stories in ways that would appeal to the growing public fascination with remains of the past. I would also claim that those acts contributed to generating cultural value around the modern stories Riddell favoured, enshrining them as a legacy worth preserving. In *The Race for Wealth* and *Mitre Court*, a preservationist aesthetic comes to the fore, spurred by the accelerated rate of urban transformations she documented in her fiction. As heritage concerns become more insistent, Riddell's narrative tone veers towards the polemic, echoing the public campaigns organised by the SPAB. The stories she creates attempt to undo in fiction the vanishing of cherished buildings and

³ Nancy Henry has investigated the financial vicissitudes of the Riddells in some detail in her book, see Henry 2018, ch. 6.

⁴ As a vocational trajectory, business lacked the prestige of older and more traditional callings. On the cultural critique of capitalist pursuits, deemed vulgar for their proximity to money making, see Wiener 1981, McKenderick 1986 and Blake 2009.

landmarks she witnessed in reality. Repopulating these sites with imaginary characters, Riddell directs attention to the experiences and feelings associated with historic objects and buildings, thereby enriching the City's repertoire of intangible heritage.

3 Heritage making

Too Much Alone is Riddell's first narrative incursion into the "terra incognita" of the City (Riddell 1860, 1). It sets a pattern that Riddell will revisit in nearly all her City novels: before the commencement of the story, the narrator dons the hat of a tour guide and, by a skilful combination of topographical accuracy and heritage awareness, takes the reader for an instructive walk around narrow streets, dirty lanes and old houses once inhabited by "dukes and earls and young popinjay springs of nobility" (Riddell 1860, 2). The history of the City is only evoked in the vaguest of terms - "heads that once were held high in the land have rolled aside", "women's hearts have been broken", "men's tears have flowed" - while the narrator insists on one truth: "Here, where we stand" history has happened and is still happening (Riddell 1860, 2). The communal "we" is to appreciate not the details of historical vicissitudes but the act of sensing the past, feeling its presence and recognising its affective value. Only after this rite of passage is completed, can the reader be introduced to the modern denizens of the City and their occupations. "Heritage turns the past into something visitable", writes Macdonald (2013, 18). In Riddell's rhetoric, visiting the past is the necessary prelude to engaging with the present.

In *George Geith of Fen Court*, Riddell's most acclaimed novel, the initial strategies of heritage making are even more pronounced. With increased self-confidence, the narrator gathers her readers around Fen Court: "we have paced the City pavements together before now, and I am glad to be threading the familiar streets and alleys in good company again" (Riddell 1864, 1). Visiting the City acquires the features of an immersive experience of communion with the past. Inviting readers to "sit down for a moment on the churchyard wall", the narrator sets the stage for an experiment in time travelling: "we are not looking from the present into the past, we are for the moment existing in the years gone by. It is the din of our day which is the dream, and the memories of the olden time that are the reality" (Riddell 1864, 5). Fragments of historical knowledge pepper the pages of this chapter, bearing testimony to the "ancient glory" of the City, its "romance", which no amount of "Pickford wagons" can destroy (Riddell 1864, 2). But the most significant lesson the chapter conveys pertains to the realm of affect: the narratorial voice speaks to reader-tourists, already versed in the art of contemplating the

remains of the past exhibited in museums, galleries, and country houses, preparing them to elicit the right response to the story about to unfold:⁵ “here, in this August evening, it is quite dark, and an increasing feeling of solemnity creeps over us as we sit by the graves in the gloom, whilst the evening breeze stirs softly and mournfully the leaves above our heads” (Riddell 1864, 7). The solemnity of the past suffuses the present moment with the warm glow of continuity.

Anticipating marketing schemes that would become popular in the twentieth century, with the explosion of what Hewison (1987) has called the “heritage industry”, Riddell offers here a fictional simulation of living history, teletransporting her readers to a physical location, resonant with echoes of past glories, and nudging them to experience the full force of an intimate connection with the ‘olden times’. Replete with direct reader addresses, her rhetoric creates a sense of community among like-minded souls, enchanted by the past of the City and all the more willing, therefore, to credit the value of its present existence. The immersive heritage experience, which introduces the story of George Geith, an accountant in the City, produces the illusion or the impression of continuity in the face of drastic changes and transformations affecting the modern City. Heritage is instrumental in promoting the literary value of a modern life devoted to business pursuits, tainted by association with money making and sorely in need of symbolic legitimization. Judging by the popularity of *George Geith*, Riddell’s approach proved successful. In her review of *Too Much Alone* and *George Geith*, Anne Thackeray Ritchie writes:

It seems strange as one thinks of it that before these books came out no one had ever thought of writing about City life: there is certainly an interest and a charm about old London, its crowded busy streets, its ancient churches and buildings, and narrow lanes and passages with quaint names, of which dwellers in the stucco suburbs have no conception [...] all this queer sentiment belonging to old London, the author feels and describes with great cleverness and appreciation. (Ritchie 1865, 635)

This “queer sentiment” is also thematised in *Too Much Alone*, where two characters, the upper-class, West-End dweller Herbert Clyne, and the struggling man of business Matson, embody two different versions of historical knowledge. Clyne shows an antiquarian interest

⁵ As Gilmore (2013, 7) has argued, in Victorian novels the “authorial maneuvers and interrogations around the subject of readerly response” are often located “at sites where the literary turns to art and issues surrounding artistic reception”. Riddell’s attempts to manage her readers’ response similarly occur in conjunction with an appreciation of the tangible remains of the past.

in the history of the City, which he shrewdly deploys as a seductive strategy to woo Lina, a married woman. Matson, on the other hand, while feigning disinterest for “old ruins, or old houses, or old anything but trees” (Riddell 1860, 88), is far more knowledgeable about the vernacular heritage of the City and the efforts of London tradesmen to safeguard it. “Each man”, Matson claims, “knows the history of his own warehouse and his own shop, also of his parish church; and it is a surprising thing to see the sums of money men, who live away in the suburbs, and never cross the threshold of their ward church, will yet pay for its beautification, preservation and all the rest of it” (Riddell 1860, 89). While antiquarianism is presented mostly as an upper-class pursuit, Matson and his fellow tradesmen cultivate an interest in the local history of warehouses and shops, the vernacular architecture of the commercial City, which appeals to a broader constituency of citizens whose active participation in the preservation of this heritage is a mark of distinction.

Like the London tradesman, Riddell too contributes to the creation of heritage by writing business novels. She implies that much in the daring gesture of self-authorization that inaugurates her series of City novels. This is how the narrator-author explains her poetics in Chapter 4 of *Too Much Alone*:

Business people rarely analyse their feelings and still more rarely express them in words. A novel about business, about their hopes, anxieties, joys and troubles throws a new mental light across the page of their life's history [...] After a fashion, the author turns into poetry the monotonous prose of their existence. (Riddell 1860, 30)

What connects this poetics with heritage making is the awareness that the business world still lacks its bard. “The woes of governess”, Riddell argues in *George Geith*, “are drugs in the market”; explorers, hunters and gold-diggers have all found words to “interest the public ear”: “It is only trade [...] the backbone of England [...] which can find no writer worthy of it, no one who does not jeer at business and treat [it] with contempt” (Riddell 1864, 123). By framing business as an area of life still unrecorded in the annals of literary history, Riddell defines her specialization as a long-overdue act of chronicling and preserving for posterity the “queer sentiment” of the present, the struggles, aspirations, hopes and anxieties of the “business people” whose experiences she deems worthy of literary commemoration. Immersing oneself in the past of the City of London, as readers are solicited to do, is propaedeutic to a full appreciation of the potential heritage value of the modern City, with its rich archive of yet untold stories.

One could object that the features of Riddell's narrative style I have presented as heritage making can hardly be distinguished from realism

tout court. Yet two aspects in particular attest to the significance of heritage awareness for Riddell's representational strategies. First, the evocation of the rich history of the City, at the beginning of her stories, is framed as past presencing; it is not history per se that the narrator is keen to recall, but the vicarious experience of sensing the past, rendered "visitable" via direct appeals to the reader's imagination. Secondly, this understanding of the past as heritage is instrumental to a reconfiguration of the present (the specific segment of reality Riddell is interested in exploring) as future heritage. Just as the past is threatened by oblivion, so too are the experiences of business people, the denizens of the City, who have failed to attract the attention of writers, as Riddell claims. Her poetics, in other words, is a conscious attempt to create a literary legacy for the business world that draws on the history of the City while viewing the present - the "monotonous prose" of business - as equally valuable and deserving of memorialisation. In later novels, the built environment will come to play a non-negligible role in the representation of urban and suburban space. The fast pace of re-development projects, documented in her fiction, will give fresh impetus to Riddell's heritage aesthetic, motivating her attempt to salvage in fiction old London's landmarks vanishing before her very eyes.

4 The Disappearing Act

Riddell's embrace of the cause of business, forcefully defended in *Too Much Alone* and *George Geith*, ran into some troubles as her novels delved into the murky territory of business malpractice - food and drink adulteration, for instance, which is central in *The Race for Wealth* (1866). Adulteration was a widespread practice in the late 1850s, when the novel is set. Sparked by the scientific findings of Arthur Hill Hassal (1855), the public debate on gastronomic frauds was framed by a larger set of concerns about the immorality of the market: "commerce itself", declared *The Leader* in 1860, "as well as the wares transferred in commerce, is adulterated" ("Adulteration of Credit" 1860, 911).⁶ While Riddell's adulterators, Perkins and Sondes, are likeable characters, and "even kind-natured men",⁷ the novel registers fears about the relentless march of urban improvement,

⁶ The issue of the (im)morality of the market was a subject of intense public scrutiny in Victorian Britain, see Searle 1998 and Robb 1992. For a perceptive reading of literary responses to the adulteration debate see Stern 2008.

⁷ Victorian reviewers did not fail to notice the positive connotations associated with the adulterators in this novel: "With a praiseworthy superiority to superficial and obvious view of character, Mrs. Riddell makes both these adulterators anything but bad people [...] they are very honourable and even kind-natured men" ("*The Race for Wealth*" 1866).

the widespread appeal of financial speculation, and the moral tenor of commercial life. Fast and unscrupulous, the capitalism portrayed in this novel can hardly be squared with ideals of honesty, dignity and fair dealing, though they still survive in the actions of most characters. In this fluid context, destabilised by adulteration in the commercial sphere and adultery in the private one,⁸ it is noteworthy that the narrator's most pressing concern is not moral bankruptcy but the threat of annihilation that sprawling urban developments posed to cherished landmarks in the geography of the City and its suburbs. Put differently, heritage concerns take precedence over moral ones.

In terms of narrative rhetoric, this translates into a peculiar type of 'writing to the moment' that attempts to salvage in fiction what the march of progress is destroying in reality: "we are now living at such a pace", the narrator affirms, "that actually the things which are here today, are away tomorrow. We let a week slip by without passing through some familiar thoroughfare, and when we enter it again, behold the old place seems strange to us!" (Riddell 1866, 1: 105). Urgent, therefore, is the work of a novelist whose ambition is to offset the disappearing acts of modernity: ordinary houses, mansions, streets, locales, and landmarks swept away by unrelenting capitalist expansion, but recorded for posterity in the pages of her novel. To convey to her readers this sense of urgency, Riddell replicates the external threat within the story world: "before these pages are finished", the narrator warns, even the "old-fashioned mansion in which Olivine Sondes has spent all the years of her young existence" (Riddell 1866, 1: 51) may no longer stand. The story we are reading could be disrupted in unforeseen ways by the rapidity of change.

Throughout the 1860s, "London was in the possession of the surveyors and masons and was undergoing a continuous process of demolition and reconstruction. Familiar landmarks and streets disappeared in clouds of dust, but the new London never seemed finally to emerge" (Nead 2005, 29). To fully appreciate the sense of impending doom that hovers over nearly every building in *The Race for Wealth*, it is worth recalling that the novel was originally published in part issues in *Once a Week*. With a few exceptions, each weekly instalment begins with a prolonged excursus on the impermanence of the built environment, and the loss of intangible heritage that goes with it. As the plot moves forward, readers are encouraged to take stock of the disappearing acts that, week after week, mark the passage of time. The third instalment is a good case in point. Stepney, the locality where Mr. Sondes and his niece

⁸ The novel features a sub-plot revolving on the adulterous relationship between Lawrence Barbour and Etta Gainswood. This sub-plot suggests that the domestic sphere is not a sacred enclave, untouched by fraud and dishonesty. For a more in-depth discussion of the role adultery plays in Riddell's fiction see Colella 2016, chs 3 and 6.

Olivine (both central characters) live, is altered beyond recognition: "Gone are the palaces, and the ancient mansions - gone the men and women, gone the green fields and the country" (Riddell 1866, 1: 47), gone too are the records, if they ever existed, of what Stepney once was: "there is no famous ground here - for we know not why or wherefore the palace was ever famous" (Riddell 1866, 1: 48). To further emphasise the accelerated temporality of modernity, Riddell informs her readers that Mr. Sondes's home, "six doors south of the railway", has already been repurposed as a "common lodging-house" (Riddell 1866, 1: 49). Nothing stays still for long. As the present quickly morphs into the past, heritage making becomes a frantic activity, which the narrator pursues with indiscriminate ardour, whether etching in her readers' memory the abodes and streets where honest East Enders used to live, or providing precise descriptions of the grand house, in the West End, where Mr. Alwyn (the novel's millionaire running a corrupt business) has taken up residence.

Riddell opens this house to the public of readers, replicating a practice that was popular in Victorian heritage culture: "The first half of the nineteenth century", Cowell remarks, "saw the democratisation of the cult of the country house and the opening up of some mansions to truly mass audiences for the very first time" (2008, 57). Not a country house, Alwyn's residence is nonetheless presented as a tourist destination for the hypothetical reader, with a vivid imagination, who could enjoy walking around "the now deserted rooms", noticing the "ornamented ceilings", the "richly-carved doorways", the "old-fashioned chimney pieces" and enjoying the company of phantom figures: "What more could a dreamer desire than to sit in such a room, in the firelight, and bid the men and the women who formerly peopled it appear again unto him?" (Riddell 1866, 1: 131). In Riddell's rhetoric, heritage value trumps moral considerations: whether associated with good characters or villainous ones, with honesty or corruption, the local patrimony is worth saving, at least in fiction. Heritage discourse, so prominent in this novel, shifts attention away from the much-debated issue of the immorality of the market, to foreground questions of cultural memory against a backdrop of excessive capitalist growth. Impelled by the fast pace of change, Riddell's self-appointed task to chronicle the life of business becomes hurried, mimetically reproducing the quick tempo of urban modernity in the constant anxiety to catch up with a present marked by transience. Even the houses she invented for her characters, in previous novels, are not immune from the forces of transformation:

In a book written not very long ago I described a house with every room in which I was familiar [...] In all save its name Marsh Hall was a reality - well now there is a street through the mansion where those I knew so well lived and suffered; the gable end of Alan

Ruthven's factory still remained a few weeks ago, but even that is now, no doubt, level with the ground [...] there is nothing - nothing left to indicate where the house stood, in which the men and the women whose story I told, lived out the most important years of their lives. (Riddell 1866, 1: 51)

The act of referencing specific locales, and using toponyms to anchor fiction in physical geography, is a staple of Riddell's realism. Her simulations of reality acquire thereby an immersive quality, comparable to similar effects in Balzac's or Dickens's descriptions.⁹ In this novel, however, the geography named in the text is changing as the story is being written - or so the narrator implies, time and again, in her comments. Fiction, therefore, comes loaded with a new responsibility directly linked to the discourse of preservation, which became prominent in the 1870s. If Marsh Hall is no more, the novel in which this building was immortalised (*City and Suburb*) gains further value as the only extant record of the vernacular heritage Riddell is so keen to conserve. Neither an ancient edifice nor a monument of public interest, Marsh Hall is nonetheless glorified as heritage - the type of ordinary, everyday heritage to which Riddell's readers are consistently solicited to respond. Among the many functions novels can perform, creating testimonials of things too quickly gone is the one Riddell self-consciously pursues in this text. Heritage discourse contributes in no negligible manner to reinforcing the authority of her voice.

The Race for Wealth tackles thorny topical issues in ways that eschew the overt moralism of much Victorian thinking about the market. The pro-business and pro-capitalist stance Riddell had already expressed in previous novels still orients much of the story, though awareness of malpractice dents the heroic image of business pursuits finessed in *George Geith*, *Too Much Alone*, and *City and Suburb*. Significantly, as the murky side of capitalism comes to the fore in the twists and turns of a plot involving frauds and reckless speculation, the narrator's discourse draws increasing attention to the built environment, to heritage issues, and the urgent need to create lasting memories of what is about to disappear, including Riddell's own heroic take on the business world. Heritage awareness, in other words, intensifies as capitalist modernity comes to be perceived as a threat. In Riddell's later novels, her fascination with the City takes on negative connotations, while her stance becomes recognisably preservationist, in terms that directly evoke the heritage crusade of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.

⁹ "Through the instantaneous character of the act of reference, the use of a place name teletransports the readers to the corresponding location [...] The most immersive toponyms are the names of real places" (Ryan 2001, 129).

5 Preserving the Past

If the whole of London was in the thrall of redevelopment projects which, by the end of the century, had reduced London's past "to little more than fairground scenery in the ongoing staging of metropolitan improvement" (Nead 2005, 34), the square mile corresponding to the City of London was the site where modernisation occurred in a most extreme form, driven by the demands of an expanding commercial and financial sector with global ramifications. By the 1840s, the renovation of local architecture had drastically changed the face of the early-Victorian City, as insurance companies were busy "erecting a series of grandiose headquarters in the grand Italian manner" (Kynaston 1996, 139). In subsequent decades, traditional landmarks (taverns, houses, churches, banking establishments) continued to be pulled down to make room for purpose-built office buildings. The old City "passed into the historical ether" (244) with alarming celerity.

This context helps to understand Riddell's militant tone, in *Mitre Court*, as she inveighs against the loss of cultural heritage, tangible and intangible, with which the romance of the City was interwoven. Chapter 3, entitled "A Complaint", interrupts the unfolding of the plot to make the case for a preservationist policy, which administrators and public bodies in the City seemed to her uninterested in implementing. Once again, the narrator paces the City streets where the "destroying angels" of modernisation – the "speculative builder" and the "clamorous shareholder" (Riddell 1883, 1: 51) – have left indelible marks. The initial focus is on the intangible cultural heritage of the City – rituals, customs and traditions, some of which have survived, while others have been discontinued. Riddell evokes the intangible in its absence. The annual procession of the Fellowship porters¹⁰ was no longer a live tradition, but the novelist, in full heritage mode, appeals to the senses to recreate the atmosphere of a ritual "which need not have been forgotten":

It is perfectly easy to picture that solemn march to the altar where every porter deposits his benevolence for the use of the poor [...] The scent of those old-world flowers fills the church [...] the air is sweet with stocks and lavender and cabbage roses and all those fair vanished flowers that once went to make a perfect bouquet. It was a fanciful and charming custom which need not have been forgotten even in these days of hard utility. (Riddell 1883, 1: 56)

10 The fraternity of tackle-porters and ticket-porters was established in 1603. "By ancient custom a sermon is preached to the fraternity on the Sunday after Midsummer-day at the church of St. Mary-at-Hill. The members assemble in the morning at their hall, and each carrying a nosegay, go in procession to the church" (Weatley 1891, 2: 34).

This evocation is only mildly polemical. Riddell's full-fledged preservationist protest concerns more specifically the tangible heritage of old London, passing under the hammer as she writes. One particular spot captures her attention: the house in Botolph Lane, designed by Sir Christopher Wren, which provides the setting for this novel. Unlike Marsh Hall, this house is a real building, in a precise location, with its own biography documented in history books: "To pass out of the City streets", writes Riddell, "into that spacious hall paved with black and white marble is like stepping back a couple of centuries in England's history" (Riddell 1883, 1: 60). Readers are again invited to revisit the past by noticing features and particulars ("see the massive balustrades"; "notice the easy ascent of the oak steps") no longer part of the architectural style of the present. Observing the "wonderful old mansion" from the perspective of a conservationist, the narrator directs attention to the signs of neglect that attest the passage of time: boards prized from their nails; "strained and cracked" wooden panels, and other marks of dereliction which, however, do not diminish the ancient "dignity" of the place: "Why does not the City buy such houses and preserve them intact?" (Riddell 1883, 1: 63), asks the narrator. Safeguarding heritage is a responsibility that local administrators and public bodies should shoulder. Cranking up the polemical tone, Riddell imagines what she would do, if she had the power to intervene:

Methinks were I, the writer of this book [...] in any capacity free of the City of London - say liveryman, common councillor, deputy sheriff, sheriff, alderman, Lord Mayor - I would make the City [...] my study; I would know every court, lane, alley, house, exhaustively; and were there still left an old mansion hallowed by fact or tradition, I would try to save it; and if I could not I would enter my protest. (Riddell 1883, 1: 66)

If public policy is beyond the novelist's reach, cultural interventions are not. *Mitre Court* has a preservationist platform, which includes not only the heart-felt plea articulated in Chapter 3, but also a narrative campaign to protect Wren's house that leverages the ability of fiction to increment the house's intangible patrimony of associations and imaginary stories. At the time of writing, the house had already been repurposed as a school, a choice Riddell disapproved. Her novel reverses this process, repopulating the old mansion with inhabitants who are instinctively able to appreciate its heritage value and quaint charm. The plot revolves around two locales: Mitre Court, where a new breed of foreign speculators (the German Mr. Katzen) have set up offices to conduct their shady businesses, and the house in Botolph Lane, where the past survives in the present in the shape of slightly antiquated character types - the foundling (Abigail) and the

misanthropic recluse (Brisco) – whose residual narrative presence matches the house's precarious existence. As the narrator explains, Brisco and Katzen “embody the spirit of the Past and the Present” respectively: when the former appears in Mitre Court, his figure looks as much out of place as “a dingy ‘old master’, its frame tarnished and broken, would seem in the drawing room of a *nouveau riche*” (Riddell 1883, 1: 272).

Still interested in chronicling City life and financial activities, Riddell narrates Katzen's grandiose speculations, admirable for their ingenuity, in a crescendo of disillusion. His rascality is more productive, in terms of plot development, than the feeble narrative energies associated with residual character types. Yet, their function is not negligible at the level of “scene”, as Fredric Jameson defines it: “the painterly moment in which the onward drive of narrative is checked if not suspended altogether” (2013, 8). For Jameson realism combines in a symbiotic bond a “pure form of storytelling with impulses of scenic elaborations, description and above all affective investment” (2013, 11). These impulses support the heritage making that goes on in *Mitre Court*. Brisco's presence, for example, does not contribute much to the plot, but his appearances are functional to creating the sense of place associated with the house in which he lives: “Between the old mansion and its occupant there existed a subtle sort of fitness not always to be found” (Riddell 1883, 1: 80), remarks the narrator. In several scenes, Brisco is described as he wanders “like a ghost through the building – flitting from room to room in the twilight” (Riddell 1883, 1: 81), haunted by memories of his own troubled past. Abigail, the waif he saved from destitution, lacks a formal education, but has a keen sense of aesthetic beauty and derives much pleasure from contemplating the architectural features of Wren's house: “The old house – with its leads, its long passages, its steep back-stairs, its brewhouse, its inlaid circles on the drawing-room chimney piece, its panelling – was to her a kingdom, the resources of which seemed inexhaustible” (Riddell 1883, 1: 176). For Frank, a struggling man of business, later revealed to be Brisco's prodigal son, the house is a living organism: “Somehow, as he stood, the fancy struck Frank in its stately separation from the surrounding meanness and turmoil it was like some great soul on the earth, but not of the earth; associating with things vile, yet remaining untainted by them” (Riddell 1883, 3: 91). These and other scenic moments, with very little plot significance, contribute to the creation of that “eternal affective present” that exists in tension with the “chronological continuum” of the action being narrated (Jameson 2013, 83). They provide a space for heritage values to emerge in relation to characters whose ability to appreciate and care for historic remains is a mark of distinction.

Riddell has a keen eye for the kind of heritage that does not fall into the category of the monumental and is, instead, the by-product of

everyday, ordinary history, sustained by the untrained, uncultivated interests of non-experts. In *Mitre Court*, two episodes bring this to the fore, by focusing on the reactions of characters puzzled and fascinated, in equal degrees, by the works of art exhibited in the house in Botolph lane. Decorated by Robert Robinson (1653?-1706) in 1696, the Painted Room was the most valuable artistic item in the old house. The exotic scenes painted on wooden panels feature an imaginary assortment of human and non-human entities – pavilions, pagodas, palm trees, Indians, rhinoceros – and were presumably inspired by the myth of the El Dorado, by travellers' narratives of the time, and Aphra Behn's descriptions of the natives of Surinam in *Oroonoko* (1688), as Mireille Galinou suggests (2002, 5). In the novel this room is the object of much curiosity: bewildered by the strangeness of these visual representations, some characters attempt to describe what they see. Katzen, for example, notices "two funny fellows riding on rhinoceros, and there are others gathering tobacco leaves, and there are chariots drawn by some deer and something like a church, and white people and sea and mountains" (Riddell 1883, 1: 41). His fragmented list of mismatched exotic items does not add up to a full story, but is interpreted by Katzen as a prophetic anticipation of his future appointment as promoter of the New Andalusia Loan. In the second episode, Mrs. Jeffley (who runs a boarding-house) wanders "hopelessly from scene to scene" noticing disparate details: "something like a church", a cat in a boat, a lady among "savages", "a particular jolly-looking savage riding with a companion on a rhinoceros" (Riddell 1883, 1: 126-7). Unable to decipher the whole picture, she asks Abigail for an explanation, which the latter too is incapable of providing.

In the novel, Riddell represents the Painted Room only from the point of view of baffled visitors who lack the expertise to decode the exotic scenes they contemplate, but are drawn to the paintings, puzzling as they are. Capturing this experience of appreciation in all its amateurish confusion, Riddell emphasises not so much the artistic value of Robinson's paintings, but their ability to mesmerise the viewer, to arouse curiosity and invite interpretations. In Victorian England, museums and galleries – the new spaces for exhibiting heritage – had a marked top-down educational mission.¹¹ In Riddell's

11 "Museums and expositions, in drawing on the techniques and rhetorics of display and pedagogic relations developed in earlier nineteenth-century exhibitionary forms, provided a context in which the working- and middle-class publics could be brought together and the former [...] could be exposed to the improving influences of the latter" (Bennett 1995, 73). While Bennett and Black (2000) underscore the disciplinary function of the Victorian museum, other scholars, in more recent years, have investigated how civic participation contributed to making museums more inclusive (see Hill 2016 and Swenson 2013).

novel, the instructive component of looking at art is marginalised, while the enchantment of ordinary viewers comes to the fore. The absence of a pre-determined understanding of the Painted Room allows for the 'visitor's experience' - so central in today's heritage discourse (see Staiff 2014) - to emerge as an integral component of the preservationist approach the novel promotes.

This approach bore some fruit in reality. In the aptly titled volume *London Vanished & Vanishing* (1900), Philip Norman mentions the house in Botoph Lane as one of the artistic gems in the City that should be preserved for posterity: "The house is eloquently described in the pathetic novel *Mitre Court*. Here Mr. Brisco suffered and Abigail Weir passed her innocent girlhood. Their joys and sorrows are true - to human nature at least [...] Can something be done to save it from destruction?" (Norman 1900, 87). Prompted by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the London County Council did save the Painted Room, before the house was finally pulled down in 1906; the panels were re-installed in the boardroom of the Sir John Cass's Foundation school. Whether Riddell's heritage campaign affected in any way this decision is difficult to say. But her novel certainly contributed to keeping alive the memory of the old mansion in the City, enriched with fresh associations.

6 Conclusion

Heritage studies is a blossoming field of research attracting in its orbit a vast array of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences remit. While questions of conservation have long dominated the field, over the last two decades scholars have directed increased attention to the politics and phenomenology of heritage. How heritage is experienced and apprehended in "moments of encounter" (Tolia-Kelly, Waterson, Watson 2017, 5); how people engage with and mobilise the past; what everyday structures of historical narration and awareness subtend different forms of past presencing in the "memorylands" of the present (Macdonald 2013); these are some of the questions posed by the phenomenology of heritage, which have oriented my readings. In Riddell's novels, the relationship between fictional and non-fictional elements frequently pivots on heritage concerns. Past presencing is an integral part of her mimetic representational mode. Riddell's urban realism does not simply document the waves of demolition and reconstruction affecting London and its surroundings. Her novels, I have argued, generate heritage value in the very gesture of recording the many disappearing acts mournfully witnessed by the narrator. Significantly, it is the vernacular heritage of the City that Riddell is most keen to safeguard, the everyday, non-monumental, unsanctioned heritage associated with trade, business and other

prosaic occupations. Of course, the glories of the ancient City are not lost on her; they are powerfully evoked at the beginning of her novels so as to induce her readers to acknowledge the significance of this locality even in its modern incarnation. Riddell's poetics of business has a dual affective orientation: the charm of the past is interlaced with the potential heritage value of modern life in the modern city, which her novels strive to establish. Heritage discourse, in other words, provides an apt frame within which to validate the author's daring narrative choices, as *Too Much Alone* and *George Geith* testify.

In later novels, as the material traces of the old City were being erased, Riddell's narrative strategies became even more attuned to public concerns with the fate of ancient buildings and relics, her preservationist outlook extending to fictive as well as real houses fast disappearing under the hammer of the speculative builder. In *The Race for Wealth*, these concerns affect the very structure of the novel and the style of narration, which anxiously seeks to catch up with the quick tempo of metropolitan transformations. In *Mitre Court*, heritage-making strategies are explicit: as the financial plot unfolds, according to the usual pattern of speculative bubbles followed by a spectacular crash, several scenes are introduced which re-create the lost intangible heritage of the old house in Botolph Lane, thus reversing, at least in fiction, the process of vanishing.

It is slightly ironic that Riddell, so alert to the value of preserving the past for the future, should later incur in the kind of amnesia frequently reserved to 'minor' women writers, her novels encountering the same vanishing fate as the houses she described in her fiction. Yet literary heritage, like other types of heritage, is in flux. Riddell's novels are enjoying a new season of visibility in the works of scholars interested in tracing the many interconnections between finance and fiction (Stern 2008; Michie 2009; Colella 2016; Henry 2018). In this article, I have adopted a different frame of attention to reactivate the memory of her novels, emphasising Riddell's engagement with topical issues of her times, related to capitalist modernity, but centred on heritage concerns. Riddell's acute awareness of these concerns motivates her plea, addressed to the City in *Mitre Court*, which concludes with a question that brings the future to bear on the present: "In the future who will be found possessed of sufficient courage to write a novel about your present?" (Riddell 1883, 1: 72).

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