

CHAPTER 8

HISTORY OF THINGS

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History of things or history *through* things?

Things are traces of the past, however recent or remote. As such, they can offer information and suggest ideas unavailable through written sources. These may not invariably lead directly to large-scale historical revelations, but the nuances and insights they offer can alert historians to issues they might otherwise overlook. These, in turn, can illuminate matters of considerable import in the making of history. Historians can learn about the behaviour of people who use things from those very things themselves. Historians can thereby learn things unavailable by other means.

In this chapter, I first look at some general issues in respect of the practice of history as it relates to tangible things, including whether, and, if so, in what sense, things can be agents. In the second section, I then outline – far from exhaustively – a number of areas of scholarship that fruitfully address the interpretation of the past using tangible things, and discuss what might be a distinction between *objects* and *things*. *Meaning* is a term scholars often use in relation to things. I explain briefly that I focus, rather, on the *point* of things, exemplified by their making and their use – in particular, on this occasion, on their use as items of exchange within and among social groups. I explore some aspects of how things change hands in the third section, before turning in the fourth and final section to my case study. This is an account of how perceiving that a piece of fabric has been mutilated – that a scrap of silk is missing – can lead directly from the consideration of that thing itself to that of large-scale tensions among social groups in a complex society.

This chapter does not so much concern history *of* things as history *through* things. History of things implies two distinct modes. One entails putting things first as the focus of critical investigation. This leads to a practice analogous to the discipline of art history whose practitioners engage artworks as things fit for critical evaluation and explanation (see Kemal and Gaskell 1993). The other is a history of technologies in a broad sense, focusing on the various ways in which humans have adopted, made, and adapted things for purposive activities so that the changes to things themselves take precedence. This includes not only the changing ways of, for instance, spanning bodies of water through ever-developing bridge design, but the gathering and preservation of things in museums.

Histories of things in these two senses have increasingly, though not invariably, entertained an often loosely applied notion of things having what is often termed *agency*. It is important to notice the specific affordances of things that affect and in some cases determine how humans and things behave and change in reciprocal relationships, and

Debating New Approaches to History

not to assume a human–thing relationship that relegates the thing to a purely passive role. However, unless one accepts various non-Euro and some Euro¹ (miraculous or magical) accounts of the capacity – sometimes described as the animacy – of things, we must recognize the ascription of agency to things as catachresis: that is, an attempt to describe an otherwise fugitive phenomenon by metaphorical means. Things – even such things that appear to affect other things directly, such as a magnet that attracts iron filings – are not imbued with agency in any strict Euro philosophical sense, for that sense confines agency per se to distinctively human action. Some philosophers, such as Charles Taylor (1977), though, have drawn a distinction between human and non-human agents thereby acknowledging the possibility of non-human agency in some indistinct sense. Non-philosophical theorists have proposed that some or even all non-human things are agents that can act within networks that can also include humans.² If we acknowledge that such descriptions are purely metaphorical, the way is open for some rhetorically effective manoeuvres, but only at the expense of a philosophical precision that itself appears to remain beyond reach. I have therefore chosen to focus on making history *through* things, a choice that puts the people who make and use them at the centre of attention. In doing so, I acknowledge that things may have animate or numinous properties, but not in a Euro material–semiotic or actor–network sense. The property of things that concerns me here is their capacity to mediate human relationships among individuals and social groups across space and time. That capacity is the principal source of their interest for historians.

Some scholarship concerning history and things

Most numerous among those scholars who interpret the past by appealing to material things are archaeologists. Archaeologists appeal to material things, often, but not exclusively. Some would claim that the principal difference between archaeologists and historians is that the former predominantly appeal to things found beneath the surface of the earth or sea and related surface features, whereas historians rely on written texts. Yet historians can also appeal to material things, whether excavated or not. There would seem to be a fuzzy distinction between the practices of history and archaeology, even though the educations of adherents of both disciplines remain largely separate. Although this chapter inevitably takes some archaeological practices into account, it focuses on interpretations that do not depend on formal archaeological techniques and procedures. Nonetheless, some of those who have engaged in historical archaeology, in which the examination of things can often, though not invariably, be conducted in conjunction with the interpretation of documents, have been among the most successful in promoting a distinctively historical approach to material traces of the past. Some of that historical work has been mediated and stimulated by ethnographic scholarship. In North America, unlike in most other parts of the world, the discipline of archaeology is closely linked with that of anthropology. This made it institutionally feasible for scholars with an anthropological education to adopt archaeological procedures leading to a manner

of approaching material traces of the past that opened the door to historical enquiry. The single most influential text in this regard is arguably *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*, by James Deetz ([1977] 1996). If anthropologically inflected archaeology was one disciplinary source of work on the things of the past in North America, folklore studies was another. The folklorist Henry Glassie, whose attention is far from confined to North America, has provided another source of inspiration for those who use material traces of the past to create history, notably in his major study, *Material Culture* (1999).

Routes to the American past have not been confined to traces of settler colonialism in a patriarchal register (most famously, perhaps, New England gravestones of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, cf. Deetz 1996: 64–90) but have come to include feminist perspectives, including on Indigenous topics. Prominent examples include Janet Spector's discussion of the roles of women in a Native community in present-day Minnesota, *What This Axl Means* (1993), and Laurier Turgeon's exemplary study tracing the repurposing of metal cooking items by the Indigenous inhabitants of New France (1997). Increasingly, though, there are calls from Indigenous scholars for others not to interfere. Some have emulated such uncompromising advocates of Indigenous values as Vine Deloria, Jr. (Yankton Dakota of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation) whose publications, including *Custer Died for your Sins* (1969), may not have specifically addressed material things, but who made clear his concern for their cultural significance by his long-term board membership of the National Museum of the American Indian. The growth of Indigenous scholarship on Indigenous things is nowhere stronger than in Aotearoa New Zealand, where activist Māori scholars such as Ngahuia Te Awēkotuku (2007) and Paul Tapsell (2015) have set examples. The future of history through things lies as much with Indigenous scholars as with anyone.

Europeans have also engaged in material culture history – some, like David Gaimster, as museum scholars, and others, like Giorgio Riello, within the academy. If Gaimster's catalogue of German stoneware in the British Museum and other London museums far transcends the catalogue genre (1997), Riello has investigated a host of commodities from footwear to cotton (2006, 2013). Riello and others, notably Paula Findlen, have edited collections addressing material things that admirably aim at cosmopolitanism of attention, inviting consideration of things from Indonesia, Japan, and the Ottoman Empire as well as Western Europe (Gerritsen and Riello 2015; Findlen 2012). However, few of the contributing authors are from beyond the homogeneous European and North American world. The incorporation of scholarly voices from elsewhere entails going against the academic grain that predominates in that North Atlantic world.³ Yet innovative work in material culture history that blurs the boundaries of archaeology and history is being conducted by scholars in many other places, from Central and South America to Asia. For instance, the University of Michigan-trained historian, Uthara Suvrathan, is advancing a new, far-reaching interpretation of long-term political formation in south India that shifts the focus from successive territorially extensive empires of relatively limited duration to the smaller regional polities that constituted them, but that exhibit far greater stability and longevity. Her work is based on archaeological surveys, the study

Debating New Approaches to History

of surviving inscriptions (mostly on copper plates), and colonial maps. The relatively obscure town of Banavasi in the present-day state of Karnataka is her principal case study.⁴

Much work by historians addressing tangible things that does not intersect with archaeology treats things not as rich traces of the past that careful and appropriate examination and analysis using techniques employed by anthropologists and art historians, among others, can elucidate for historical ends, but as mere illustrations entirely subordinate to arguments they derive from written sources. Other kinds of historical enquiry that appear to appeal to tangible things, while often illuminating in their fields, do not usually include sustained attempts to elucidate historical questions much beyond their immediate subject. The genre of collection history, dealing with the epistemological consequences of the European gathering of natural and artificial things first into cabinets of curiosities in the sixteenth seventeenth centuries, and subsequently into museums of various kinds in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, boasts many distinguished studies, but rarely involves close attention to individual things or groups of things in such a way as to illuminate broader historical concerns not directly concerning those collections themselves.

Some make the case that things can be treated as traces of the past even if they only survive – if they can be said to survive at all – as no more than representations in language. An example is inventories of various kinds. Historians who analyse inventories, whether from, for instance, colonial New England or late medieval Mediterranean Europe, can certainly uncover designations and, on occasion, descriptions of material things, their circumstances, and their uses that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Such work – for example, that of Peter Benes (1989) and others in New England, and Daniel Lord Smail (2016) in Marseille and Lucca – can therefore considerably enhance the interpretation of the past, whether in conjunction with surviving tangible things or not.⁵ But, invaluable as such work can be, it is not in itself what I mean by history through things.

Far closer to what I have in mind as an instance of making history through material things is the ‘Making and Knowing Project’ at Columbia University led by Pamela Smith. Ironically, the starting point for Smith and her colleagues is a text: an untitled late-sixteenth-century manuscript in the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, whose author describes a wide variety of processes of making in what would now be designated arts, crafts, and technologies. The scholars engaged in investigating these techniques work in three groups dedicated, first, to mould-making and metal-making; second, colour-making; and third, natural history, practical optics, and medicine. Much of their work involves reconstructing and actually practising the techniques described in the manuscript. The things thus made may be contemporary, but are the result of past processes in which practitioners – then and now – acquire and transmit knowledge by the very acts of making those things. While the progress of the project can be followed on its website, Smith and her colleagues have published several collections on the claims that inform and arise from it (Smith, Meyers and Cook 2014; Anderson, Dunlop, and Smith 2015).⁶

Some of the authors I have mentioned write of *objects*, some of *things*. Paula Findlen uses both in the title of her edited volume, *Early Modern Things: Objects and their*

Histories, 1500–1800 (2012). I have written of both, too. Although my fellow authors and I sought to pay attention to the nuanced meanings of the material world in our book, *Tangible Things: Making History through Objects*, we chose to follow convention by using the terms *object* and *thing* interchangeably (Ulrich et al. 2015: 2). However, in this chapter I prefer to write of *things*. But my *things* are not the unbounded things of recent ‘thing theory’; that is, linguistically constituted disembodied theoretical entities (Brown 2004). They are the material things of this world that can lead existences independent of human perception or cognition. That we might not know them independent of our perceptual and cognitive processes is no reason to assume that they do not exist in their own right. Further, I use the term *thing* in order to acknowledge that any given thing may have animate or numinous properties, even if dominant Euro opinion does not recognize those properties. That things are materially embodied before they are linguistically distinguished does not mean that they are necessarily exclusively material entities. Many things have immaterial aspects, too. Further, things may be capable of agency in some range of catachrestic – that is, rhetorical – as well as in the aforementioned literal senses. Such objects are *things*.

One might choose to focus on any among a number of aspects and associations of things, including their selection from among the materials of the world, their modification or making, their initial use, and their subsequent uses. I omit all mention of their meaning. Although people ascribe meaning to things – different meanings at different times and in different places – many commentators assume that any given thing has some kind of original meaning that takes precedence over all others. I have sought to query dependence on attempts to ascertain meaning elsewhere, preferring to establish the *point* of any given thing (Gaskell 2006). Here, I hold no more than that the ascription of what I prefer to term *significance* to a thing is but one form of use.

Neither shall I discuss the selection or making of things in my case study in this chapter, though this is not because I consider them unimportant. They are vital, but here I shall focus on use, and specifically on two aspects: continuities and changes in use when a thing changes hands. This is best understood in terms of mutability or instability, though instability does not preclude continuity. Things are unstable in two principal senses. First, their physical constitution changes, whether slowly or swiftly, with or without direct human intervention, deliberately or inadvertently. Things go through a wide variety of material changes, some cyclical (as discussed, for instance, by Michael Thompson [1979]) and others arbitrary in a social, if not in a material, sense.⁷ The thing in the case study that follows has suffered inadvertent wear and tear, and deliberate alteration amounting to mutilation. Without denying the importance of changes in the material constitution or condition of things, in this chapter I focus on changes in use, which is not a property of things themselves, rather a characteristic of human behaviour in respect of things. Changes of use can entail changes in significance.

Next, I give some examples of consistency and continuity of use of things within coherent social groups even as those things change hands. Then I give an example of a change of use when a thing changes hands between social groups: a single artefact changing hands during the American Civil War. This case study reveals that in some

Debating New Approaches to History

instances social groups between which an item changes hands can share some values and not others. This affects how the groups relate to each other as expressed by things changing hands.

The principal character in my case study is a twenty-two-year-old volunteer lieutenant of artillery from Massachusetts named William W. Carruth. I introduce this case by mentioning not things but a person, yet the thing he used is our portal to the past.

In preparation for turning to my case study, let us consider how things can change hands without changes of use or of significance. These transfers take place within, rather than between, culturally distinct social groups, and reinforce existing use and significance.

Things changing hands: Some distinctions

When on the Northern Plains of North America a medicine bundle changes hands from one Niitsítapi (Blackfoot) man to another by mutual agreement, the transfer concerns a package of material items: various animal or bird skins, claws, or bones, for instance. Yet associated with each of these items is a body of knowledge expressed in song or chant. The new possessor or guardian of the bundle has to learn these expressions of this knowledge perfectly from his predecessor. The bundle also brings with it a number of obligations regarding its proper care. Passing on the medicine bundle is not merely a transfer of a material thing, but of an entire body of knowledge, and an onerous set of obligations. Within the Niitsítapi realm, the material thing cannot be dissociated from its immaterial components, such as chants and obligations, and retain its identity as a medicine bundle. This is not to claim that a medicine bundle is no more than the signifier or embodiment of an abstraction – of a culture. Rather, it has affordances that are specific to its various material properties. A medicine bundle and its associated chants are specific things in their own right, and are, in Bjørnar Olsen's phrase, 'indispensable constituents of the social fabric' that act in the world (Olsen 2010: 37–8). That acknowledged, within the Niitsítapi realm, any such transfer is likely to occur within a framework of shared cultural understanding: the parties to a transfer of guardianship know what is going on, and usually conform.⁸ The same can be said of a transfer of a thing with material aspects within any culturally homogeneous society. When I visit a supermarket to get food in New York City, I know to take the items to the register and proffer sufficient cash or my credit or debit card. I know to press certain buttons on a device overseen by the clerk. Again, both parties know what is expected of them, and usually conform.

Exchange in what is generally termed the market may well be the dominant mode of transfer of things in the contemporary world, whether on the small retail scale of the supermarket, or on the world's leading commodity exchanges where contracts in pork bellies, orange juice, and a host of other things, or in instruments derived from them, are traded in dizzying bulk. The art market is different again. Buying a Rembrandt or a Rothko is not like buying a box of breakfast cereal or orange juice futures. The process of identifying the properties of the thing is different in each case. Is the market the only exchange mechanism? Citing ritual gift exchange in any number of settings,

anthropologists will confirm that the market is far from the only way in which things change hands. For all its sophistication and variety, it is not necessarily any more culturally complex than other human mechanisms of exchange, such as reciprocal gifting.⁹

All the kinds of transfer of things that I have mentioned so far – Niitsítapi medicine bundles, supermarket groceries, commodity futures, fine art paintings, and reciprocal gifting – occur within single cultural systems in which everyone concerned – those who part with things and those who receive things – know what is going on and know how to conduct themselves. Each kind, of course, admits of misunderstandings or abuse. For instance, I might choose to shoplift in a supermarket, or an art dealer might attempt to pass off forgeries as original works by leading artists.¹⁰ But, generally speaking, these systems work. They can be quite complicated, and no one formal explanation can account for the variety of behaviours they occasion. Can we imagine how complicated things can get when the participants in a transfer of things belong to different societies with different cultural conventions and expectations? Yet those different societies with different cultural conventions need not be as far apart as, say, people of European origin and the Indigenous inhabitants of the Northern Plains of North America who encountered one another as the former moved seemingly inexorably westwards. They can be superficially similar, and even share some ostensibly fundamental values, like the inhabitants of the Northern and Southern sections of the United States during the antebellum years, the Civil War, and Reconstruction in the nineteenth century.

In seeking to cast light on aspects of the transfer of culturally charged material items between societies that have different cultural values, I do not wish to imply that the things changing hands are no more than ciphers or tokens that serve solely to signify those cultural values. Rather, such things are parties to the process of changing hands each with its own set of materially grounded, specific affordances. However, I want to focus not so much on those affordances as on how users accommodate such things on their own culturally specific terms. Even when neither party to an exchange can compel the other, matters are complicated. They become more complex yet, and assume a greater urgency epistemologically, ethically, and aesthetically, when the societies to which the parties concerned belong are likely to develop, or are already in, an unequal power relationship, or are contesting their claims to autonomy or to exercise power by recourse to violent confrontation.

At times, tensions between or among social groups do not lead to outright confrontation, but find accommodation within a single social institution. Some institutions exist solely to promote rivalry among constituent groups as expressed foremost in formal competition, such as sports teams in a league, whether baseball, football, soccer, or hockey, to cite North American examples. Other institutions promote competition among hierarchically conceived units in the belief that their efficiency is thereby increased. An example is the rivalry often found among regiments in the army of a nation state. The latter are the circumstances of my case study, in which military units from different geographical parts of a single polity, serving under the same command, exhibited not only the cooperative behaviour necessary for success – indeed, for survival – but also rivalries and tensions symptomatic of cultural differences among regions or

Debating New Approaches to History

sections that, if not checked, might have threatened the coherence and viability not only of the command, but of the entire polity. The thing I have chosen to discuss in detail changed hands in unusual, even enigmatic, circumstances. I chose this case because it strains the definition of differences between cultural groups, and brings to light tensions that might not otherwise be so vividly apparent. As in my brief examples of things changing hands within cultural groups above, the two groups in this case study – military units – shared certain values as well as professed some differences. Furthermore, I chose this case because it depends on identifying and describing specific properties exhibited by the thing in question. This is a factor that I consider vital to the thorough, as opposed to the superficial, use of things by historians as traces of the past.

One thing that changed hands: A flag

The specific thing to which I appeal to act as the prompt to clarify potentially destructive divisions within a military command and, by extension, an entire polity is found in the collection of the General Artemas Ward House Museum in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. Major General Ward was a military commander during the Revolutionary War. His namesake descendant gave the property to Harvard University in 1925. Ward family history is, in part, local, but it is also the history of the progress of white American colonial settlement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in personal detail. From that fine-spun thread historians can weave large stories.



Figure 8.1 Guidon of the Sixth Independent Battery, Massachusetts Volunteer Light Artillery, c. 1862, silk, General Artemas Ward House Museum, Shrewsbury, Massachusetts.

The thing that concerns us is a perished US flag (Figure 8.1).¹¹ It is currently framed and protected under glass. The number of stars in the canton accords with the number of states in the union, thirty-four in this instance. This form was in use only between July 1861 and July 1863. Adam Goodheart has suggested that the proliferation of the popular use of the US flag did not begin until after the opening episode of the Civil War, the bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor in April 1861.¹² Following its surrender, its commandant, Major Robert Anderson, brought the garrison flag with him to New York where it began its career as the focal point of patriotic rallies in northern cities. The flag entered the national imaginary, not only by this means, but by adoption and adaptation. The artist Frederick Edwin Church almost immediately made a painting in oils in which he used the contemporaneous symbolic conventions of landscape painting to produce an image of heavenly patriotism, *Our Banner in the Sky*. This was the basis of a popular edition of lithographic prints, published in New York in June 1861, that sold widely in the North, and an emulative edition of lithographs, published in New York three months later after a painting by William Bauly, *Our Heaven Born Banner* (Figure 8.2).

The flag in the Ward House, though, is clearly no ordinary flag. One edge is indented to form a swallowtail. This form of flag is a guidon, a military flag of the kind associated with a small unit, such as a company or battery. Embroidered on it are 'BATON ROUG[E]', '6th - ', and 'ASS BATY'. The name of the capital of Louisiana is a battle honour, awarded when a military unit has acted with distinction. The '6th' and the letters below it associate it with the 6th Independent Battery, Massachusetts Volunteer Light Artillery. But the disfigured abbreviation presents a puzzle. The 'M' has been deliberately



Figure 8.2 Sarony, Major, and Knapp after William Bauly, *Our Heaven Born Banner*, 1861, chromolithograph, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.



Figure 8.3 Guidon of the Sixth Independent Battery, Massachusetts Volunteer Light Artillery, c. 1862, silk, General Artemas Ward House Museum, Shrewsbury, Massachusetts (detail).

cut out (Figure 8.3). Why? What is the significance of the new word – ‘ASS’ – formed by the excision? Was this mutilation a deliberate insult? Regimental flags and battery guidons – colours – symbolized a unit. They were, and remain, the focus of individual unit ritual, and esprit de corps. To lose one in combat was a calamity. Men gave their lives in attempts to retain them. Others died trying to capture them. Unit pride was represented by the aggregation of hard-won battle honours inscribed on the flag – names that each member of the unit could recite with pride.

Who could have been responsible for the deliberate damage to the guidon? Had Confederates seized and mutilated it to humiliate the New England artillerymen? When might a Confederate force have seized the battery’s guidon? This puzzle led me from a scrap of missing silk to a threat to the coherence of the Union. It is a puzzle that arises not from consideration of written words of any kind – the things that usually prompt historians – but from the physical properties of a material thing. This is what properly distinguishes history through things from other historical practices. Although remarking on the physical properties of the thing is necessary for the inquiry, such scrutiny is not sufficient. No answer can be adequately disclosed by examination of the thing in question – the mutilated guidon – alone. From the thing we must pass to words used in conjunction with it. Finding an answer to the puzzle means sketching a brief history of the battery from its muster to its arrival in Baton Rouge.

The 6th Independent Battery, Massachusetts Volunteer Light Artillery, was a unit equipped with four six-pounder guns and two rifled cannon. It was part of the contingent raised by Massachusetts lawyer, woollen cloth magnate, and politician Benjamin Butler. It was mustered at Lowell, Massachusetts, in January 1862, and was part of the force commanded by Major General Butler that captured and occupied New Orleans three months later. He remained as military governor. The battery was part of the occupation force attached to the Second Brigade of the Department of the Gulf. The section of the battery commanded by Lieutenant William Carruth subsequently took part in two actions, first, seizing railroad rolling stock at Brashear City, 90 miles west of New Orleans; and, second, at Houma, about 60 miles to the southwest, where civilians

had ambushed Union soldiers of the 21st Indiana Volunteer Infantry, killing two. Unable to identify those responsible, Union troops destroyed houses and an outlying plantation to punish the whole town (Winters 1963: 150–1). On both occasions, the section of the battery operated with the 21st Indiana, a collaboration that continued when Lt. Carruth's section of the battery accompanied that regiment on two expeditions up the Red River, capturing two steamboats.¹³ In the meantime, the two other sections of the battery under the battery commander Captain Charles Everett had participated in a month-long reconnaissance up the Mississippi to the Confederate stronghold of Vicksburg. The various sections of the battery were reunited in June at Baton Rouge. Further actions led to its first fatal casualty, while others succumbed to sickness. In the words of the official report of the Massachusetts adjutant-general, William Schouler, 'nearly the whole command was prostrated by swamp fever' (*Public Documents of Massachusetts* 1863: 410). Captain Everett departed in late July for New Orleans to procure supplies, leaving the whole battery under the command of Lieutenant Carruth.

The Confederates had designs on Baton Rouge. Confederate Major General John Breckinridge led a force south from Vicksburg. The ironclad ram *Arkansas*, having damaged the Union flotilla of ironclads during her descent of the Yazoo River to Vicksburg, steamed down the Mississippi. There was to be a coordinated attack on Tuesday, 5 August by Breckinridge's two divisions from the east, and by the CSS *Arkansas* on the river to the west. Piecing together what happens in the fog of war is notoriously difficult. This is especially so when the ground is literally covered by fog, as it was on the morning of 5 August. The tension between extremes of order and chaos in human affairs is nowhere greater than on the battlefield. One has to rely on official but self-serving reports written in the immediate aftermath and on first-hand accounts by others, sometimes written long after the events they describe.

The Union troops in Baton Rouge were almost all inexperienced. Some had seen limited action. Others, such as the 7th Vermont, were green. They had no idea of what was about to hit them. Most of Breckinridge's Confederate troops were seasoned veterans. The Confederates attacked from the east, forcing the Union troops to retreat. The Union commander, Brigadier General Thomas Williams, was killed. Colonel Thomas W. Cahill of the 9th Connecticut Infantry took command. He organized a further retreat to defences near the penitentiary where his position could be covered by fire from the Union gunships on the river to the west. Meanwhile, as the CSS *Arkansas* approached, her engines failed as she was preparing to engage the USS *Essex* four miles above the town. Rather than risk her falling into Union hands, the captain fired the crippled vessel (see Smith, Jr. 2011). Without her support, Breckinridge could make no further progress, so he withdrew, leaving the Union forces in control of the town.

What was the role of the Massachusetts 6th Battery? Like other units that day, it was badly under strength, many of its men being sick with fever. The battery was in the thick of the fighting from the outset at about 4.00 am, at times firing canister at advancing Confederates only thirty yards distant. The Massachusetts adjutant-general's report for 1862 states: 'In this action the battery had only between thirty and forty men for duty, and three officers. Out of this number thirteen were killed or wounded. ... In this action

Debating New Approaches to History

the battery fully upheld ... the honor and reputation of the old Commonwealth' (*Public Documents of Massachusetts* 1863: 411).

Lt. Carruth is tactfully guarded in his own immediate post-battle report. He gives a succinct account of how he ordered his battery to fall back along a road onto a line formed by the 14th Maine and one company of the 21st Indiana (Company F, under Captain Francis Noblet). The width of the road allowed only two guns to bear. Carruth continues this part of his report dramatically, implying that his quick action saved the position:

Three cannoneers were shot dead and 3 more wounded at these guns, leaving only the two sergeants to work them, and had it not been for the bravery of these two sergeants and the gallant conduct of some of Captain Noblet's company who in answer to my appeal came forward and acted as artillerymen, it is probable that the left flank of our whole line would have been turned. (*The War of the Rebellion* 1880–1901: 65)

Let us try to look a little more closely at what, in a subordinate clause, Carruth terms 'my appeal'. An unnamed former soldier of the 21st Indiana gives a vivid account of this incident published just one year after the end of the war. Describing the Confederate attack, he writes:

At the same time the Rebel batteries opened, first just clearing the tree tops, then a little lower and a little lower, until they began to plough through our ranks. Carruth's battery replied. In return a shell was hurled at him, killing a pair of horses and several men, and throwing his whole command into confusion. With difficulty he held a few men together until the battery was moved back to the camp of the Fourteenth Maine. At this moment company F [21st Indiana] was retreating, fairly beaten off the ground; Carruth rode up to the company and cried, 'For God's sake, Indianians, man a Massachusetts battery which Massachusetts men have deserted!' The appeal was responded to by several of the company, who threw away rifles and ammunition, mounted the horses and manned the guns, while the rest of the company acted as a support. In less than ten minutes the battery that would have destroyed our regiment was silenced. (Anon., 'Eighteen Months of the Twenty-First. – By a Member of the Regiment', in [Merrill] 1866: 562)

The Indianian suggests that only the prompt and heroic response by members of Company F of his regiment, acting in the place of cowardly Massachusetts men who had deserted their posts, had saved the day. As one might imagine, there is no hint of cowardice in any official account of the incident, least of all in Carruth's own.

What the truth of the matter might have been is likely impossible to know. What can be ascertained is that the battery continued to serve in close action, losing a further five men wounded, in addition to the three already killed and three wounded, and one listed as missing (*The War of the Rebellion* 1880–1901: 51). It is just possible that in the single

man listed as missing we catch a glimpse of a desertion in the face of the enemy that may have given rise to Carruth's speech as reported by the Indianian, but this can only be pure surmise. We also learn from the Massachusetts adjutant-general's report, published in 1863, that 'the peculiar circumstances under which the battery was recruited necessitated the enlisting of a class of men, many of whom proved physically incapable of enduring a soldier's life, and were consequently discharged' (*Public Documents of Massachusetts* 1863: 411). Running through all accounts of the battle, though, is a consistent pattern of distrust between the regiments of New Englanders and Westerners. It seems likely that the relationship forged earlier in the campaign between the men of the battery and the men of Company F of the 21st Indiana, and between their commanding officers, led to their overcoming that mutual distrust. Their earlier cooperation at Brashear City, Houma, and on the Red River may have disposed Capt. Noblet and the men of Company F to come to the aid of Lt. Carruth and the Massachusetts artillerymen more readily than might otherwise have been the case, just as their earlier shared experiences may have emboldened Lt. Carruth to seek the Indianians' aid.

What forms did the distrust among units take? Both Confederates and some Easterners suspected Western regiments from Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan of wavering in their loyalty to the Union. The unnamed member of the 21st Indiana whom we have already seen impugning the valour of the 6th Massachusetts Battery, scouted the advance of the Confederates before first light under cover of fog. He claims to have heard Maj. Gen. Breckinridge encourage his men by saying that 'the Indianians were tired of the war, and would lay down their arms at the first opportunity' ([Merrill] 1866: 561). Such claims were hopeful magnifications of known divisions within Indiana. Like its western neighbour, Illinois, the state was culturally divided between the northern counties that had seen an influx of settlers from New England and other northeastern states, and the southern counties, settled mainly by Southerners from neighbouring Kentucky and Tennessee. The best-known Southern settler in Indiana during the first half of the nineteenth century was Abraham Lincoln, who, as a seven-year-old boy, was brought by his parents from Kentucky to southern Indiana in 1816 (Warren 1959: 11). As Eric Foner (2010: 6) has remarked, 'this region retained much of the cultural flavor of the Upper South' in terms of speech, building styles, settlement patterns, foodways, and family connections. All but the members of one of the ten companies of the 21st Indiana – just over one thousand officers and men – were from west-central and southwestern counties. Capt. Noblet and the men of Company F were nearly all from Martin County, one of the two southernmost Indiana counties represented in the regiment (Faller 2013: 6–8). Whether incomers from Tennessee or Kentucky, or sons of such immigrants, they had far more in common culturally with the Southerners in the Confederate forces facing them than with the New Englanders. Crucially, though, these southern Indianians appear to have identified primarily not as Southerners but as Westerners.

The men of the Western regiments at Baton Rouge enjoyed a bond of shared Western identity and mutual solidarity going back to the organization of the Northwest Territory in 1787 from which were formed the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, and part of Minnesota.¹⁴ They expressed this even during the battle by welcoming one

Debating New Approaches to History

another vociferously when taking adjacent positions. When Brig. Gen. Williams ordered the 6th Michigan to reinforce the right flank of the 21st Indiana, the Indianians gave three cheers, proclaiming their affinity with their fellow Westerners (Faller 2013: 58). Such Westerners could not conceal their contempt for certain error-prone New England troops. The official report of the 21st Indiana departs from customary sobriety and tact to criticize the 7th Vermont. Captain James Grimsley, to whom command of the 21st Indiana fell when all officers senior to him had been killed or wounded, wrote scathingly: 'To add to the danger and desperation of our situation, the Seventh Vermont, from their camp back of us, opened a fire in the direction of all engaged, and which killed many of our own men outright and wounded several more'. He added: 'At the most critical period of the fight, ... the Seventh Vermont Regiment, which was ordered by General Williams to support us, refused to do so' (*The War of the Rebellion* 1880–1901: 74). These are very strong accusations in an official report. A board of inquiry exonerated the 7th Vermont, but Maj. Gen. Butler shamed the regiment by ordering that no battle honour for Baton Rouge should be added to its colours (*The War of the Rebellion* 1880–1901: 50). Rumours circulated that Butler had made a scapegoat of the Vermont regiment for political reasons, the state being the least politically powerful represented at Baton Rouge, and his order was subsequently rescinded, but by then damage had been done to its reputation.

In this act of shaming, once again the importance of colours comes to the fore. This brings us back to the guidon in the Ward House Museum, and the puzzle of the missing 'M'. The three Massachusetts batteries were not the only artillery units at Baton Rouge. Among the others was the battery of the 21st Indiana, commanded by Lieutenant James Brown. The itinerant newspaperman, George Harding, then serving as a lieutenant in the 21st Indiana, gave an account of his own experiences during the battle, including being fired on by the 7th Vermont (Harding 1882: 295, 298). Without explaining how it came about, he also reported that, although his own company (Company F) had 'been detached from the battalion to support a section of Everett's battery [6th Massachusetts Battery] in another part of the field', he fell in with Capt. Grimsley's company (Harding 1882: 302). That is, although his company was the one that came to the aid of the 6th Massachusetts Battery following Carruth's appeal, Lt. Harding did not take part in that relief. Of the artillery, he only mentions that the various batteries 'did excellent service. They poured in destructive charges of canister and grape at ranges in distances less than thirty yards'. Among them was what he terms 'our own mule battery', that is, Lt. Brown's battery of the 21st Indiana (Harding 1882: 299). Its guns and limbers were drawn not by biddable horses, as was normal practice, but by stubborn mules. This unusual distinction stood out among regiments wherever the 21st Indiana served, giving rise to the nickname by which the regiment was known. That nickname, borne with pride by the members of the regiment, was the Jackass Regiment.

A likely connection with the guidon now becomes clear. It was not captured and disfigured by Confederates, but likely adapted by the Jackass Regiment to become the colour of the 'ASS BATY'. It was a gesture of regimental pride and – we might say – derisive teasing, presumably executed after the battle honour had been bestowed, but before

the colour was returned to the newly promoted Captain Carruth (*Public Documents of Massachusetts* 1863: 411). On 4 July 1863, with the admission of West Virginia to the Union, a guidon with thirty-five stars superseded the one now in the Ward House Museum. It seems reasonable to assume that the old guidon fell to its commanding officer, Capt. Carruth. Colours continued to be things held in the highest esteem by those serving under them. At Baton Rouge, one cause of the disgrace of the 7th Vermont had initially been thought to be its loss of its colours, though this turned out to have been only its camp colour when the Confederates overran its camp. Its regimental colour was saved, though not by the Vermonters, for it was reportedly 'brought off the field by the Massachusetts battery' (*The War of the Rebellion* 1880–1901: 50). Another report specifies that the 6th Michigan, which, as we have seen, had come to the aid of the 21st Indiana, captured the colours of the Confederate 4th Louisiana, 'but', according to the official report of the chief engineer officer on the field, 'only after they had shot down four successive color-bearers' (*The War of the Rebellion* 1880–1901: 51). Colours mattered.

After the Battle of Baton Rouge, Carruth continued to serve with distinction in the Gulf and the James campaigns. At war's end, he entered Harvard Law School, graduating in 1869. He practised law in Boston, and became the first judge of the Municipal Court of Newton, Massachusetts. He died in 1906 and is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, where his gravestone reads: 'William Ward Carruth. Minute Man of 1861. Civil War Veteran'. How, though, might the guidon have entered the General Artemas Ward House Museum? Carruth, whose full name, as recorded on his gravestone, was William Ward Carruth, was a member of the Ward family. His mother, Sarah Anne Henshaw Ward, was the daughter of Thomas Walter Ward, sheriff of Worcester County, Massachusetts. In 1831, Sarah Ward married Francis Sumner Carruth, a successful Boston merchant, treasurer of the Boston Lead Company, and an original director of the Safety Fund, subsequently first National Bank of Boston. William Ward Carruth, born in 1840, was the fifth of eight children, three of whom died in infancy (Martyn 1925: 354–5). William Ward Carruth was the first cousin of two Ward brothers who had also served as officers in Massachusetts regiments in the Civil War: Charles Grosvenor Ward, killed at the second Battle of Drewry's Bluff, Virginia, in 1864, and Thomas Walter Ward, III, who survived the war, and moved with his family soon after to homestead in Nebraska. All three officers were great-grandsons of Major General Artemas Ward. Charles and Thomas's sisters, Elizabeth and Harriet, remained unmarried, and lived at the Ward House until their deaths in 1900 and 1909 respectively. They tended it carefully as a memorial to their great-grandfather, the general, turning it into an informal house museum before that term existed. They likely welcomed any Ward family memorabilia. They may especially have welcomed items associated with Maj. Gen. Ward's successors in military service as part of the elaborate preparations for the visit to the house by none other than General of the Army William Tecumseh Sherman in September 1881.¹⁵ This would have been a most suitable occasion for the display of family items associated not only with Maj. Gen. Ward, but with his descendants who had fought in the war for the preservation of the Union.

This is a story of conflict and reconciliation, distrust overcome, and regimental pride in which a symbolic thing that held a similar significance for two distinct cultural groups –

Debating New Approaches to History

one from urban, industrial eastern Massachusetts, the other from rural, agricultural southern Indiana – changed hands between them. A ‘MASS’ guidon likely passed into the hands of the 21st Indiana to be returned an ‘ASS’ guidon. The members of the two units shared values that were not confined to recognizing the symbolic status of a guidon. They were staking their lives on a shared perceived need to preserve the integrity of the Union by force of arms. Yet they differed considerably in others, such as social organization, labour practices, and foodways. In spite of cultural differences, the Indianians assumed that the guidon meant much the same to the Massachusetts men as it did to them. Were this not the case, the modification they presumably made – the removal of the ‘M’ – would have failed to signify between them. Further, it seems likely that the two groups were able to overcome their cultural differences in part because of the trust built up between them during their time together as a combined and dangerously exposed independent military unit in largely hostile territory at Brashear City, Houma, and on the Red River. As a result, sympathy prevailed.

Close examination of the physical properties of the altered guidon that changed hands twice between two distinct cultural groups reveals it to be an up-until-now unrecognized symbol of the pride of two units that in the heat of battle overcame sectional differences, east and west, that at times could threaten the cohesion of the Union Army. Only by overcoming such sectional differences within that army could the war for the preservation of the Union be won.

The way this guidon changed hands, like innumerable others, reveals aspects of human behaviour in the past otherwise inaccessible to historians. Careful attention to the way things that are often complex, and physically and cognitively unstable, change hands between and among social groups, large or small, is one way of making history through things. This observation has consequences that historians, who are usually wholly dependent on documents, can ignore if they so choose, but only at the expense of accepting unnecessary limitations on the historian’s craft. If historians are to use tangible things more than merely illustratively, they have to acquire a range of skills more readily associated with disciplines other than history, including but not confined to anthropology, archaeology, art history, folklore studies, museum studies, religious studies, and sociology. This is far from beyond the competence of historians, for, after all, many have long practised history as a magpie discipline, adapting procedures from these and other fields of study for their own purposes. Therefore, why not acquire the varied skills necessary for the interpretation of tangible things of many kinds, and embrace what those many tangible things can tell us of the past?¹⁶

Comment

Bjørnar Olsen

Introducing his well-written chapter, Ivan Gaskell pertinently explains why his concern is not so much ‘history of things’, as suggested by the title, but ‘history *through* things’. In

other words, a history informed by things, that is, the material remains of past societies, however recent or remote. Such history, he notes, has not played any prominent role in the discipline. Indeed, as Gaskell comments, ‘Much work by historians addressing tangible things ... treats things not as rich traces of the past ... but as mere illustrations entirely subordinate to arguments they derive from written sources’. I find it easy to agree with his observation. Despite some signs of change (see, for example, Trentmann 2009; Gilbert 2017, in addition to Gaskell’s references), there has been and still is a profound neglect of things both as an issue for more general historiographic reasoning and as significant sources for historical analyses of the past. In a discipline that likes to pride itself as *the* study of the past, and whose very name is consistently confused with its object of study, Gaskell’s criticism and concern for things are thus most welcome and pertinent.

There are, however, also points where I feel we are in less agreement and also issues that I find are missing or not accentuated in Gaskell’s chapter. This will of course always to some degree be a matter of preferences and interest but addressing them may hopefully provide some interesting points for discussion. These include general issues related to theory, especially thing theory and the conception of agency, but also more concretely the role things play in Gaskell’s own case study. Yet another issue I want to bring to the table is to what extent things can be conceived of as pliable and ready-at-hand sources for historical analyses, or whether their very ontological difference enact a resistance that affect our study and conception of the past?

Theory: Agency and thing theory

Gaskell presents his points of view in an admirably clear manner. Nevertheless, he seems somewhat reluctant to engage in explicit theorizing about his subject matter. This ‘avoidance’ is visible in his review of scholarship concerning things and history; for example, when the work of James Deetz and Henry Glassie are presented as moulded only through a disciplinary framework (anthropological archaeology and folklore, respectively), without mentioning the crucial theoretical impact from structuralism on their work (e.g. Glassie 1975).

More intriguing, however, is that Gaskell does not expose his own position and the philosophy that grounds it more clearly; not the least since his text nevertheless contains an implicit, though somewhat ambivalent, subtext of theoretical likes and dislikes. At places he flags his distaste for ‘thing theory’, including those scholars who ascribe agency to things, but at other places he himself articulate viewpoints closely kindred with the positions he otherwise distance himself from. Thus, on the one hand, he emphasizes things’ active role and their ‘specific affordances ... that affect and in some cases determine how humans and things behave and change’. On the other hand, he speaks rhetorically against the idea of ascribing them agency, allegedly because Western philosophy ‘confines agency *per se* to distinctively human action’, and which thus only can happen ‘at the expense of a philosophical precision that itself appears to remain beyond reach’.

The problem with doctrinal statements like this is the taken-for-granted assumption about what Western philosophy and thinking *is*, a pigeonholing that does not allow

Debating New Approaches to History

for different positions and changing epistemologies and ontologies. Quite a few Western philosophers of today would accept – and indeed have proposed – various notions of thing agency (including Michel Serres, Graham Harman, and Levi Bryant, just to mention a few), reflecting perspectives emerging from the ongoing withering of the bifurcated Cartesian ontology. And which also have roots in phenomenological thinking, and more generally in the work of thinkers such as Benjamin, Whitehead, Bergson, and others.

I also find Gaskell's portrayal of 'thing theory' (and theorists) to be all too narrow and unjust, and with a tendency to scapegoat positions. This also acts as a kind of self-positioning through negation, such as when he declares that the things of recent thing theory, are just 'linguistically constituted disembodied theoretical entities'. Though there may be a few examples of things being conceived of as linguistically (or rather semiotically) constituted (e.g. Law 1999), far the majority of recent thing theorists would argue fiercely against such a view. In fact, most of them would rather agree with Gaskell's well-expressed point that things 'exist in their own right', and very well, 'independent of human perception or cognition' (see, for example, Barad 2007; Bryant 2011; Morton 2013; Harman 2016). One may only recall Bruno Latour's (1988: 193) famous statement about things-in-themselves and the galloping zebras:

Things-in-themselves? But they're fine, thank you very much. And how are you? You complain about things that have not been honored by your vision? You feel that these things are lacking the illumination of your consciousness? But if you missed the galloping freedom of the zebras in the savannah this morning, then so much the worse for you; the zebras will not be sorry that you were not there, and in any case you would have tamed, killed, photographed, or studied them. Things in themselves lack nothing, just as Africa did not lack whites before their arrival.

Clearly, how we understand things, how we conceive of their *being* (i.e. ontology), will also affect their epistemological potential as sources to the past. The persistent modern ontological divide for long rendered knowing and interpretation an act of reaching that which is beyond things and data, attending to a presumed extra-material domain devoid of objects and non-humans. Much epistemological and methodological debate in archaeology, such as the question of how to bridge the gap between a static archaeological record and the dynamics of past societies, has been rooted in this bifurcated world. Though Gaskell may be hostile towards it, the current turn towards a more egalitarian or 'flat' ontology has clearly opened for a different take. When no longer treated as epiphenomenal residues of society but as indispensable constituents of the world, societies included, the epistemological status of things *as data* cannot remain unchanged. Gaskell's concern is 'history through things' and I think that concern would have benefited from a clearer exposition of his own take on the ontology and epistemology of things. What we can say, or not say, *through* things largely depend on that.

Small things forgotten?

Let me illustrate this through a rereading of James Deetz's archaeological study of the profound changes that took place in the colonies along the eastern seaboard of North America from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards (Deetz 1977, see Olsen 2010). These changes revealed a clear tendency: the communal, common, and heterogeneous were losing ground to the individual, private, and ordered. For instance, the communal infrastructure of eating was replaced by individual plates and cutlery and by individual chairs for people to sit on around the dinner table. As this took place, congested communal burial grounds were gradually replaced by small, individual family graveyards. Increasingly, houses were symmetrically organized and divided into separate rooms, with public and private spaces separated. Bunks were replaced by beds, clothes became increasingly differentiated, people acquired personal effects, chamber pots, musical instruments, books, and so on. According to Deetz, these material changes reflected an accommodation to a new conception of the world and the individual's place within it, 'an expression of a newly emergent world view characterized by order, control, and balance' (Deetz 1977: 61).

Deetz saw this as an *idea* being carved out and embodied in solid material. He believed that a mental concept of order, individuality, and privacy emerged prior to (and consequently was the cause for) its material realization. Thus, what the diverse material changes really tell us, 'in ways great or small', is about a change in the American way of thinking. This change, Deetz asserts (1977: 127), 'must have been at a very deep level of the Anglo-American mind, since it is so abstract as to manifest itself on the surface in so many different ways. The entire social order must have been similarly affected'. In this scheme, things faithfully execute this change, and as such constitute trustworthy sources to recall it, but are themselves assigned little causality or effects on 'what happened'.

From a more thing-oriented or 'flat' perspective, the emphasis on a 'prior' mental template or worldview becomes far less important than the 'how to'. How could a subject-centred society emerge? How could a new order become effective and stable? How many different types of actors were gathered and mobilized in creating it? Instead of any central hero subjects – human, worldview, mind – we should envisage a regiment of actors: plates, forks, gravestones, humans, houses, chamber pots, garbage pits, and so on acting together. In each settlement these entities joined forces, acting together as entangled assemblages.

While things in Deetz's scheme act as *intermediaries*, which obediently transport meaning without transformation, they may rather be conceived of as *mediators*: as innumerable interactors that transform, translate, distort, and modify (Latour 2005: 39–40). Through processes of delegation and translation forming many and complex hybrid relations, they prescribed new bodily practices and programmes of action, which effectuated and over time stabilized a new social configuration. Any mental conception of the individual, the private, and the pure may as well be seen as the outcome of these programmes rather than their cause. In any event, such conceptions would have been impossible to think and implement without the collaboration of things. Thus, and not

Debating New Approaches to History

without a certain irony, the individual was made possible by the collective work of an army of actors.

History through things?

Explaining his own take on things' role in historical research, Gaskell writes that the property of things that concerns him is 'their capacity to mediate human relationships among individuals and social groups across space and time. That capacity is the principal source of their interest for historians.' While it may be debated which thing capacity is the primary source of interest to historians, this is still a vital concern to many students of material culture. Thus, I was excited to see how this perspective would spell out in Gaskell's case study.

To summarize very briefly, this study deals with rivalries between two units within the Union Army; one from urban, industrial eastern Massachusetts, the other from rural, agricultural southern Indiana, and where the focus of attention is how regimental tension, pride, and distrust were negotiated and overcome through active engagement with things. Or to be more precise, with one symbolic thing, a US military silk flag – that changed hands between them and which itself became altered through these transactions. Passing into the hands of the Indiana men, the M was removed from the embroidered 'MASS' inscription to be returned as an 'ASS' guidon.

Gaskell writes interestingly about how the flag both expressed and negotiated conflicts between the groups, and also how the effectiveness of the mutilation was based on certain shared values. What interests me here, however, is why he chose this particular case to exemplify a more thing-oriented historical approach? Gaskell explains that the case 'strains the definition of differences between cultural groups, and brings to light tensions that might not otherwise be so vividly apparent', and, moreover, asserts that the case was chosen 'because it depends on identifying and describing specific properties exhibited by the thing in question. This is a factor that *I consider vital to the thorough as opposed to the superficial use of things by historians as traces of the past*' (emphasis added). Later he declares that it was 'close examination of the physical properties of the altered guidon' that disclosed its status as a regimental symbol of pride.

My immediate reaction is to what extent was it 'close examination' of the altered flag that revealed this? Or was it rather the case that the encounter with the modified guidon in the Ward House Museum in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, triggered a curiosity; created a historical enigma that could only be solved through examining historical sources? To an archaeologist close examination of the physical properties would involve technical investigation of the flag, traces of use, how the embroidered letter was removed (carefully or hastily), chemical investigations, and so on. Nothing of this is implied here, and also the emphasis on 'careful attention' to the way things change hands, seems not to necessitate much concern with the actual thing itself and its material affordances.

What Gaskell's case study offers is an exciting, interesting, and alternative account of social interaction between different units of the Union Army. It is clearly *inspired* by the

observed museum object but is otherwise entirely based on historical sources. It is texts, not things, that are scrutinized. Even the clue to the only object of attention – the silk guidon – is linguistic, a word embroidered on it – and the removed letter (M). It is thus quite telling when Gaskell acknowledges that ‘no answer can be adequately disclosed by examination of the thing in question – the mutilated guidon – alone Finding an answer to the puzzle means sketching a brief history of the battery from its muster to its arrival in Baton Rouge’. Thus what we end up with is largely history as conventionally understood and performed.

Gaskell chose a single item for his study and though close archaeological examination likely would have revealed important new insights, the choice may be revealing for some of the differences between a historical and an archaeological approach. Archaeologists work with masses of things, with things soiled and broken, and closely examining the archaeological record involves careful attention to the contexts, characteristics, and identities of these myriads of things. Given Gaskell’s vision of a ‘history through things’ one may speculate how it would have benefited and differed through such an approach? For example, how material from archaeological investigations of the battlefields from the Revolutionary War could have informed his concern with how things mediate relations and differences between social groups and perhaps brought to light ‘tensions that might not otherwise be so vividly apparent’? Or would that have turned the case study into something else than history; in other words, making his more restricted choice disciplinary imperative?

Past through things: Still history?

The comments above relate further to the question about the compatibility of history and things. While often ‘ontologized’ as *the* past, it is important to keep in mind that history represents only one, albeit in modern thought dominant, mode to conceptualize the past. This is a mode closely associated with and deeply affected by its records (i.e. texts and narratives), and thus, at least traditionally, with linear cultural historical plots. Though things can be domesticated to inform and sustain also such plots, as illustrated by archaeological periodization and chronologically and culturally ordered museum collections (Olsen and Svestad 1994), there is an immanent resistance in things that object to the pace and passing of history. Things persist, many of them, at least, and although ageing and transforming, these ingredients and residues of supposedly ended or replaced pasts stubbornly linger on and gather around us. Just imagine what any place, city, or landscape would have been without the things of the past; a present past still involved in – and constitutive for – all our conducts.

If we take these properties seriously, how would they affect our conception of historical time and succession; of the past itself and the modern conception of it as ‘gone’? May it be that things opt for a different past that does not necessarily comply well with the historical project as traditionally understood, and thus the tropes of linearity and continuity, succession and replacement, often associated with it? A past that evidently and always already is both present and chronologically mixed, and which thereby defies

Debating New Approaches to History

modernity and historicism's wished-for ideal of completeness, order, and purified time. This furthermore raises the question whether one just can incorporate things in history (themselves being 'blasted' out of history, as Walter Benjamin claimed) without history itself becoming affected, perhaps even shattered?

This reasoning may seem somewhat off target and irrelevant to the topic of Gaskell's chapter and I should add that this is not any criticism but more a point of general interest that became accentuated by his proposal of 'history through things'. I should also immediately add that archaeologists, despite their concern and care for things, have done little to explore the alternative conceptions of the past strongly suggested by their hybridized material record (Olsen 2012; Nativ 2017). Rather than taking it seriously as an expression of how the past actually gathers in every 'now' or present, we have tended to see it as a distortion of an originally pure historical order supposed to exist beyond and prior to the entangled mess we excavate and which we thus need to restore.

Things' untimely presencing is, however, also in another way reflective of the way their very being differs from that of texts and language. Though the latter are inevitably parts of our society, they are in the world in a very different way than things. While past texts clearly may be more than historical sources and still make an impact on our lives, *past things* make up the world, constituting the omnipresent minutiae of the everyday. They are not here primarily as sources or communicative devices to be consciously interpreted or read; their very being and presence involves all our conducts and also constitutes a ready-to-hand existential reassurance. Strangely, despite the new concern in historiography with 'presentism', 'afterlife', 'mnemohistory' and 'effective history' (e.g. Lorenz 2014; Tamm 2015), this abundant material self-presencing of the past has hardly become a serious matter of concern.

And perhaps the concept of self-presencing is crucial here because the material accumulation and exposure of the past is not driven for the most part by some human-initiated agendas of restoring, selecting, or editing the past. In fact, it happens mostly according to material and natural trajectories that are beyond human control and intervention, and which accordingly also care for the unwanted and stranded, the failed or never-completed undertakings; in short, an unruly heritage that exposes us to an abundance of uncanny and involuntary memories. Gaskell touches upon this when he asserts that things 'can lead existences independent of human perception or cognition', but unfortunately without discussing any possible consequences of such unruliness. His focus is consistently on how things are used and controlled by humans, and above all, how they mediate human relationships among individuals and social groups. But many things have the capacity of escaping human control and stewardship; many of them outlive us. Such released things do not change hands anymore, but rather become 'out of hand' (Pétursdóttir 2014) and disclose unforeseen potentials and abilities to act in their afterlife. Just think of waste, sea-born debris, toxic residues in soil and water. They are no longer mediating relationships between individuals and social groups, but in their releasement enact their own unruly agency. To what extent are these undisciplined things an issue for the historian?

Response

Ivan Gaskell

Before addressing Bjørnar Olsen's comments on my chapter, I should like to mention that we distinguish similarly between *history* and *the past*, or – better yet – *pasts*.¹⁷ The past, also conceivable in the plural, is that which has occurred. This may be partly recoverable in the form of history, the discourse historians make, although, as Olsen notes, 'history, though often confused with the past, represents only one (albeit dominant) way to conceive of the past', a point made eloquently by Raphael Samuel (2012) who described other ways of doing so. Work with tangible things qualifies as a way of addressing the past to make history. My conception of history is 'an articulation of the ever-changing relationship between the present and its pasts' (Gaskell 2013: 41). I believe that Olsen and I agree on this point.

Olsen observes that the survival of things from the past to the present makes that past present. (In using the singular *past* I stipulatively imply the plural.) In perduring, things may undergo exaptation, or adaptation through purposeful modification, as well as other changes often grouped together as the effects of time.¹⁸ Insofar as humans play an indirect role – at most – in at least some of these changes, I agree with Olsen that things can escape human control and stewardship. Some things may never have been directly subject to them. Some accounts of the past accommodate the perdurance and exaptation of such things independent of human existence, be they mountains or molecules. Yet I choose to practice an anthropocentric history in which things that endure are of interest to the extent that they impinge on human lives.

Olsen's remarks concerning my chapter fall under two headings. The first is a questioning of what he perceives to be my lack of clear commitment to a theoretical position (in particular, my reluctance unreservedly to endorse thing theory and actor network theory). The second is a claim that my case study – the 1861–63 guidon of the 6th Independent Battery, Massachusetts Volunteer Light Artillery – depends on purely textual analysis, rather than on an examination of the thing itself that takes its supposed capacity to act over time into account. I shall address the second of these claims first.

Olsen points out – quite rightly – that in my case study I appeal to texts, including official campaign reports, and eyewitness accounts of combat. Because I focus on the words embroidered upon it, he further claims that I treat the guidon itself not as a material thing but as a text.

When making history from things, I never hesitate to appeal to pertinent texts. Although one can often learn a great deal from the careful scrutiny of the material aspects of a tangible thing, sooner or later – usually sooner – examiners come up against the limits of the warrantable inferences they can draw from a thing alone. To their credit, archaeologists – and Olsen is an archaeologist – spend a great deal of effort ingeniously attempting to overcome the absence or paucity of documentary material related to the things they analyse. However, just as the examination of, say, an orchid herbarium specimen sheet soon reaches the limits of warrantable historical inference, prompting the

Debating New Approaches to History

historian to relate it to documents, so the inspection of the guidon similarly has inherent limitations as a means of making historical claims (see Gaskell 2015). Yet in spite of those limitations, careful scrutiny of a thing itself prior to any appeal to documents can reveal aspects of the past that are not otherwise available.

The salient property of the guidon now is deliberately inflicted damage. That damage may have been to an embroidered text, but the embroidery was an original, integral part of the guidon. This is not to put text first, but to bring silk, needlework, and inferred purposive human action with a cutting instrument – knife or scissors – to the forefront of attention.¹⁹ The entire guidon in its perished and mutilated state, not the mere emendation of ‘MASS’ to read ‘ASS’, matters, though that very emendation, in particular, is what prompted my consideration of divisions within a Union military command, and, by extension, of tensions within the Union more generally. This guidon, though, offers what no other trace of these divisions can: the physical trace of a relationship between two small bodies of men, as different from one another as they were similar, forged in the repeated agony of combat.

I chose to explore the ramifications of just this one feature of the guidon, yet a more thorough study would treat other features as equally revealing of human relations. Where did the silk come from? How was it spun, dyed, and woven, and by whom? Are the stitches machine or hand sewn?²⁰ What place did silk and machine sewing play in the provision of textiles, North and South, during the years of conflict? Can the guidon be said to be imbued with agency in any sense, and, if so, how?

The latter question raises the issues that together I describe above as Olsen’s first objection: that I am ambivalent about the ascription of agency to things. I am attracted to modes of explanation that acknowledge – at least initially – the likelihood that all identifiable factors in a relational network can potentially contribute equally to its capacities and that of its parts. However, in accounting for such networks some scholars elide distinctions among what should properly be described as different kinds of actors, whether human, material, or numinous. Without realizing it, some scholars offer explanations for phenomena by ascribing a capacity to an entity by means of catachresis. That is, in the absence of any other means of capturing the capacity in question, they use a metaphor. Yet they fail to recognize this. The ascription of agency to things can be just such a catachresis.

There is a further difficulty in appeals to agency. Much usage of *agency* ignores the variety of actions that one can describe under this term. Agency is a term subject to what W.V.O. Quine calls *semantic ascent* (Quine 1960: 270–6), which gives rise to what Ian Hacking terms *elevator words* (Hacking 1999: 22–4). One of their characteristics is instability of sense.²¹ That instability permits imprecise usage as when some thinkers elide the distinctions among the various senses of what is actually not a single predicate but a number of them identically termed, leading to the erroneous assumption that their respective properties are interchangeable. At the very least, agency involving human volition and intention must be accounted distinct from the agency of natural forces, such as the tides, and different again from the agency of the numinous realm, such as that of a deceased ancestor, spirit, or a creator god.

Certain kinds of agency may appear implausible to certain kinds of people. Unlike some who work with Western philosophy, I do not find it especially troubling to hold in my mind simultaneously two or more apparently mutually exclusive, culturally distinct explanations of a set of phenomena denoted as agency. I am not intent on establishing an ontological definition of agency. Further, I resist any notion of multiple ontologies. However, I am fully prepared to work with – and, at times, within – a wide variety of standpoint epistemologies.²²

Olsen suggests that I do not lay out my theoretical cards plainly. That may be so in large part because I enjoy no unquestioning confidence in any one method or set of explanations. For some scholars, their theory of choice can be so self-evidently true as to be common sense. Most of all, I distrust common sense, and, like Henry David Thoreau (my guide to many puzzles), I would have it that ‘my facts shall all be falsehoods to the common sense. I would so state facts that they shall be significant shall be myths or mythologic. Facts which the mind perceived – thoughts which the body thought with these I deal – I too cherish vague and misty forms – vaguest when the cloud at which I gaze is dissipated quite & nought but the skyey depths are seen’ (Thoreau 1992: 170–1). Or, as he put it more famously in *Walden*: ‘The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which they express by snoring’ (Thoreau [1854] 1862: 347).

If I were to return to the guidon in a theoretical mode that Bjørnar Olsen may find congenial, I might suggest that it is no less an actor than are the officers and men of the Massachusetts battery or of the Indiana infantry company whose actions I describe; and that, in a certain measure, the guidon brought about its own fate. As a tangible thing, the guidon has prominent immaterial as well as material constituents, for it is invested with the pride of two military units that might readily have led men to sacrifice their lives for it. Furthermore, it is also invested with the pride of the Ward family in whose secular memorial it has assumed its place. Yet I cannot regard it as other than a thing that people have made, used, and continue to use. In stating this, I readily acknowledge that this guidon has acted throughout its existence in accordance with its nature, just as the Zuni twin Ahayu:da figures act according to their nature, and the icon of the *Virgin of Vladimir* acts according to its nature.²³ To describe these locutions as catachreses is not to detract from the role these things have played and might yet play; but the respective capacities of these things differ in kind, and cannot be reduced so as to be accounted for by a single theory. I might wish that the present and its pasts were that tidy, but – to be frank – I don’t.

Notes

1. By *Euro* I mean the hegemonic tradition emanating from Europe that has spread worldwide, especially that adhering to communities of colonizers and their settler descendants.
2. The most influential thinker in this respect is the sociologist Bruno Latour (see, e.g. Latour 2005).
3. I know this only too well from my efforts, with Sarah Anne Carter, often unsuccessful, to include scholars from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and South America in the *Oxford Handbook of History and Material Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Debating New Approaches to History

4. Uthara Suvrathan is preparing a book, 'Persistent Peripheries: Archaeological and Historical Landscapes of an Early City in South India, 3rd c. BCE–18th c. CE.' See also Suvrathan (2014a,b).
5. A selection of early American probate inventories is available, together with examples from the United Kingdom and Jamaica at *Historic Probate Inventories Online*: <http://www.angelfire.com/md3/openheartcooking/aaInventories.html> (accessed 2 February 2017).
6. For the website, see *The Making and Knowing Project: Reconstructing the 16th-Century Workshop of BnF Ms. Fr. 640 at Columbia University*: <http://www.makingandknowing.org/> (accessed 2 February 2017).
7. I assume that material changes conform to definable laws within a dominant Euro paradigm, though I also acknowledge that other explanations can on occasion be valid, whether miraculous in the Euro sense or as a result of things having the properties of living beings in various other belief systems.
8. For an early appreciation of this phenomenon by a sympathetic, observant, and trusted outsider, see McClintock (1910: 76–112, 251–70, 1935).
9. The Kula exchange system of red shell disc necklaces and white shell armbands in the Massim archipelago east of Papua New Guinea is a well-known example of complex gift exchange, as described by Malinowski (1922), though in recent years market practices have affected some Kula exchanges, which, in any case, are more complex and varied among the communities concerned than Malinowski allowed, see Leach and Leach (1983).
10. Such accusations led to the closure of the long-established New York dealer, Knoedler in 2011. See Gaskell (2013a).
11. Guidon, c. 1862, plain weave silk, General Artemas Ward House Museum, Shrewsbury, Massachusetts (HU3484).
12. Goodheart (2011: 20–2, 179–80). The Fort Sumter flag is one of four designs used between July 1859 and July 1861 which has thirty-three stars, following the admission of Oregon as the thirty-third state.
13. For the official report of the actions, which describes the destruction and depredations at Houma as the units 'having done all that circumstances required', see *Public Document No. 7: Annual Report of the Adjutant-General of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, with Reports from the Quartermaster-General, Surgeon-General, and Master of Ordnance for the Year Ending December 31, 1862*, in *Public Documents of Massachusetts* (1863: 409–10).
14. Much has been written on the disaffection of parts of the former Northwest Territory, its exacerbation owing to the disruption of trade routes to the south down the Mississippi on which many were economically dependent, support for the anti-war Northern Democrats or 'Copperheads', and the statements both in and out of Congress of Ohio politicians such as Clement L. Vallandigham (tried by a military court for disloyalty in 1863, expelled to the Confederacy from where he sought refuge in Canada until returning to the Union the following year), Alexander Long, and Samuel S. Cox. The creation of an independent republic in the Northwest, a separate section with its own privileges within the Union, or even in association with the Confederacy, were all discussed. See, in the first instance, Weber (2006).
15. General Sherman's visit on Thursday, 8 September 1881, is described in a letter dated 10 September 1881 by Elizabeth Ward to her sister-in-law, Clarinda Clary Ward, wife of Civil War veteran Thomas Walter Ward, III, in Norfolk, Nebraska (in the collection of the General Artemas Ward House Museum, Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, kindly made available by the curator, Paula Lupton).

16. The material on the guidon is the substance of a paper I presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Denver in January 2017. I should like to thank Laurel Thatcher Ulrich for her invitation to participate, and for her priceless companionship in the course of our explorations with our students of the General Artemas Ward House Museum. I should like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of the curator of the General Artemas Ward House Museum, Paula Lupton. My thanks also go to the editors of the present volume for invaluable comments on earlier drafts. As always, Jane Whitehead is my inspiration and editor of first resort.
17. I should like to thank Bjørnar Olsen for his thoughtful comments, and also to acknowledge the support for my work by my permanent senior fellowship at the Lichtenberg-Kolleg (Advanced Study Institute in the Humanities and Social Sciences), Georg-August University, Göttingen.
18. 'Exaptation' is a term from evolutionary biology to account for features 'evolved for other uses (or for no function at all), and later "coopted" for their current role' (Gould and Vrba 1982: 6; see, further, Eaton and Gaskell 2009: 252, 260). Material change over time, its aesthetics, and its consequences for the study of the past is the subject of my ongoing collaborative research with A.W. Eaton.
19. Further examination of the guidon at the General Artemas Ward House Museum on 22 August 2017 confirms that the damage to the embroidered lettering was deliberately inflicted with a cutting instrument so as to leave the newly exposed edges uneven. The strokes, whether with knife or scissors, were sufficiently precise to remove the 'M' alone. The guidon is in a severely perished state. It adheres to a non-acid-free board sealed within a glazed, black, simple profile wooden frame. For anyone other than a specialist conservator to remove it from its frame outside of a conservation lab would be the height of irresponsibility, so the kind of tests Olsen recommends have to date remained beyond my reach. The guidon awaits conservation examination and treatment that the senior official responsible for arts and culture at Harvard has assured me she will follow up on and will keep me informed (emails to the author, 28 and 31 August 2017).
20. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and I have been exploring issues raised by early sewing machines for some time. Most recently, this led to her publication: Ulrich (2017).
21. I repeat this claim from Gaskell (2006: 327) where the term in question is 'meaning'.
22. Feminist philosophers have led the way in recent years in defining standpoint epistemologies, though in part by expanding on questions first raised conspicuously by Robert Hooke in his *Micrographia* (1665).
23. On the Ahayu:da, see Isaac (2011); see, also, on Zuni thought and scholarship, Enote (2015) (Jim Enote is executive director of the A:shiwi A:wam Museum and Heritage Center, Zuni, New Mexico); on the *Virgin of Vladimir*, see Gaskell 2003.

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