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THE CASKET OF MAGIC: HOME AND IDENTITY FROM SALVAGED OBJECTS

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ABSTRACT Frequent contact with objects and retelling of stories associated with them serve to construct and maintain travelers' identities and connections with the world. In this article I examine the role of collections of salvaged-object souvenirs in identity construction and home-making using the work of a little-known travel writer, journalist, and geographer, (George) Bassett Digby (1888–1962). Firstly I explore a section of his text with a view to demonstrating what this text about possessions tells us about Digby and his connections with people, objects, and places. This examination will illustrate how the role of objects in this one individual's life is linked to practices and objects in other cultures including Maori meeting-houses, Indian masks of the Pacific Northwest, autobiographical use of

objects by the Kodi tribe in Indonesia, North American quilters, and stories of objects and home by other writers. Secondly, I show that objects are used to conjure to their owner both a familiar, nurturing hearth and the wider cosmos; that is that objects can be mobilized to make a home in unfamiliar surroundings. For mobile people in particular, both in the past and today, this linkage of collections of salvaged-souvenir objects and their associated stories to processes of homemaking **functions to counter emotions of homelessness**. Thus, performances involving objects and placement of objects are potential aids to the successful rehoming of displaced persons.

INTRODUCTION



Questions and concerns involving mobility, homelessness, and identities have been brought into sharp focus by the economic and social changes of the last few decades. However, there is nothing uniquely postmodern about these concerns. This study of an inter-war travel narrative, and its resonance with other accounts, sheds light on the way in which mobility, identities, and place-making are negotiated through objects. My study of one person's relationship with objects, home, and travel lies at the triple intersection of work on souvenirs, place and identity, and study of travel narratives. Using this intersection to explore Bassett Digby's narratives, I aim to enrich understanding of the relationship between travelers, objects and writing about objects, and travelers' performances of homemaking.

In the last twenty years there has been a growing interest in "things;" their study has emerged from anthropology as a distinct entity (e.g. see Buchli, 2002; Miller 2001) that relates to many areas of study. Indeed, objects are enmeshed in many aspects of our social and individual lives (Appadurai 1986; Strathern 1988; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981) as well as in identity construction (**Marcoux 2001; Silver 1996**). Working at the intersection of non-commodity objects, identity, and homemaking on the part of travelers, my work draws upon contemporary ethnographic and anthropological studies of people/object interactions by scholars including Susan Pearce (1994; Pearce *et al.* 2002), Susan Stewart (1993), James Clifford (1997b), Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1998), and Janet Hoskins (1998). Closely related to possession of souvenir objects are **performances of place-making, specifically homemaking (Miller, 2001)**. In considering place-making within the experience of travel my work links the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard's (1994 [1958]) pairing of "house and universe" and Yi-Fu Tuan's (1996, 2001) "cosmos and hearth" to Digby's narratives. I extend from work on souvenir objects and place-making to demonstrate that mobile people use objects in performances that construct both home and away, elements that are necessary to "a balanced life."

Most contemporary analysis of travel narratives has focused on nineteenth-century colonial travels: the performances, literatures, and visual imagery that have produced popular imaginative geographies of “other” lands.¹ Informed by the influential work of Edward Said (1978) and Michel Foucault (1972), much of this analysis forms a productive critical reexamination of the heroics of the imperial era and its intertwined rhetoric of exploration, colonization, power, and representation. Analysis has predominantly focused on influential travelers and widely-read literary or scientific works representing colonized places such as Africa, India, and the Middle East. Texts and authors have been selected because their authors are distinguished in fields such as science or literature. Recently, analysis of travel and representations of travel have begun to expand to include such “small stories” of people who are not institutionally recognized, for the most part nineteenth-century women.² These texts are particularly interesting because as James Duncan and Derek Gregory (1999) comment, they often reveal more about the culture of the author than about their chosen subject. Yet still unexamined are the many early twentieth-century accounts of daily lives overseas written by long-term travelers escaping the high cost of living in England. Their work, published in British newspapers, provides a window into the everyday experiences of mobility, experiences that have continued relevancy.

SOUVENIRS

James Clifford claims that travel “denotes a range of material, spatial practices that produce knowledges, stories, traditions, compartments, music, books, diaries and other cultural expressions” (Clifford 1997a: 35). I suggest that collections of salvaged-object souvenirs and their inscription constitute one such spatial practice of travel and that their collection, together with practices associated with them, serves to reproduce knowledges and constitute identities. “Since time and space are intangible and dauntingly infinite, we cling intellectually and emotionally to our experiences and memories of the material world that is so reassuringly solid” (Adams *et al.* 2001: xiii). Souvenirs are not generally objects of need but items gathered, signified or created in response to nostalgia for other and past places. Souvenirs are metonyms for places and events; they act to trace a traveler’s trajectory through the world. Through them, places and actions can be revisited. **Salvaged-object souvenirs, in particular, are souvenirs that generally lack material value; they are “picked up” rather than bought, they are part of the detritus of living, saved perhaps by the attached memories, portability, degree of exoticism, or even audience appeal.** As with all souvenirs, salvaged-object souvenirs are considered to be nonessential to life; however, I suggest otherwise.

My thinking draws upon Bassett Digby's account of one box of such souvenirs. The passage is part of a short chapter titled "Casket of Magic" within a largely unpublished manuscript *Corsican Adventures*, a collection of column-length chapters written for the *Birmingham Post*. Earlier in his life he had been a war correspondent and an author, had traveled extensively in Europe and Asia, collected specimens for museums, and had written for a variety of American and British periodicals. Digby's work is of no great literary note; he was no D. H. Lawrence, nor was he a well-moneyed traveler; however, as one of many travelers who made a living in the difficult inter-war years writing columns for British newspapers, he provides insights into the experience of travel.

There has been another upheaval in my casket of magic, and I've had to scabble through it twice and irritably, to find the stump of pencil which is red at one end and blue at the other.

Wherever I happen to be, around the Mediterranean, small children find, on my table, a lidless tin box, teeming with fascinations. They never tire of daintily ransacking it, of getting to learn the use, or the history, of everything it contains.

The casket of magic was intended to concentrate nibs, scraps of pencil, paper-clips, stamps, drawing pins and suchlike gear of a writer and a student's trade which tend to stray. Soon its hospitality became extended to ever so much more . . .

Well, here it is, before me.

Picture Vera, Jeanette and tiny Mimi (who often roams many miles in one day and never seems the least bit "fatigado"), ranging themselves yet again along the couch, for a ransacking.

Atop is a morsel of candle. "And here's the funny blue eye that you look through!" says Mimi. The blue eyeglass, that I found on the beach somewhere, is a favourite of hers.

"No—we're not to open that!" Vera reminds Jeanette. "That" is the natty little metal stick containing the glass phial of iodine, the use (and abuse) of which has been explained.

Here's the little box which tells M. Anglais where the wind is coming from—see how the blue point goes round when you move it! (My compass.)

"and those funny rings" (they gaze through them at each other) "are what stops the water leaking out of the hot water bottle that M. Anglais puts in his bed on winter nights." (I improvised those washers from a scrap of motor tyre found in the sea, as the village shops could not cope with the emergency.) This is always the cue for another visit to the

hook on which hangs the green rubber bottle and its scarlet overcoat and another request for an informative address on *The Hot Water Bottle: Its Uses and Abuses, Securities and Dangers*. “*Oo-comme c’est jolie! How pretty it is!*” trills Jeanette, who covets it greatly.

“*Et voici les gros sous russes!* And here are the great big Russian pennies!” Those are the huge copper coins of the Tsarista Elizaveta’s reign that I found the natives still using, 137 years later, when I was exploring up in northern Siberia. “M. Anglais puts those on pieces of paper he has written on when the big wind blows in the door.” Then they come across the leather buttons I’ve been meaning for years to sew on to an old shooting jacket; Mediterranean children’s first guess about these is usually that they are a sort of holm oak acorn or eucalyptus seed.

Stamps—much admired, these, if they are gaudy enough. And hooora! a few bits of gummed paper. Loot to be claimed, to be stuck on the tip of chubby noses and then pulled off, competitively.

Sundry sea-shells, awaiting dispatch to the museum, are closely examined and lead to an infinity of questions about the vasty deep and its denizens. So is a surviving cachet of quinine, relic of a sojourn on a malarial coast. Lumps of glittering sliver ore have determined every child who has inspected them to take up geological prospecting and swap a mountain of sliver for a mountain of chocolate. A dangerous little spider, preserved in a phial of alcohol, is a Zoo in itself. A tiny mirror to receive grimaces. Sundry foreign coins which have been passed off on me are inspected with a close scrutiny that I myself ought to have exerted (Digby c. 1940).

When the “magic casket” passage was written, in the early years of the Second World War, Digby was in his fifties and living in a small two-story stone farm outbuilding just outside Calvi, Corsica. His meager possessions were easily accommodated in a small donkey cart. It is significant that of all his possessions, the item that he selected to write about was a **small tin box containing a collection of souvenirs, a “casket of magic.”**

PERSPECTIVES

I need to “come clean” about Digby and my own perspective on him. Bassett Digby was my grandfather, a man I never met, and about whom my family knew little. The passage is a selection from one of four unpublished manuscripts from the late 1930s and early 1940s. The time at which this was written is significant; Eric Hobsbawm (1987: 3)

opens *The Age of Empire* with the experiences of his parents before his birth. Hobsbawm claims that because of this personal contact, his book is partly autobiographical; it contains activities from “a twilight zone between history and memory.” Such a twilight zone, specific to each individual, is located “between the past as a generalized record, which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection, and the past that is remembered as part of, or background to, one’s own life.” It stretches from the start of each individual’s personal memories back to the earliest photograph that can be identified by the oldest member of the family. My particular twilight zone includes Bassett Digby together with the work of better-known travel writers from the early twentieth century who occupy a broader societal twilight zone for people of my generation. Hobsbawm suggests that history in this zone is hard to grasp because of the multiplicity of accounts and positionalities. There is both a “tantalizing proximity and an unbridgeable distance” (Mendelsohn 2003) to its events. Yet it is of utmost importance that we attempt to grasp events and forces in this mobile period; they directly affect the world as we experience and live it today. In accessing meaning in Digby’s passage, I turn to both contemporary thinking and other mobility-related texts.

SALVAGED-OBJECT SOUVENIRS

Before examining the narrative itself, it is helpful to consider aspects of objects, identity, and place associations. Susan Pearce comments that: “Objects hang before the eyes of the imagination, continuously re-presenting ourselves to ourselves, and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be impossible otherwise” (1992: 47). For Susan Stewart, souvenirs serve as a trace experience fulfilling “the insatiable demands of nostalgia” (1993: 135), where nostalgia is the desire to turn back time. David Lowenthal (1975, 1985) positions the return in time, not to an objective and meticulously re-created past, but to a selectively imagined past, a fictional return to where the world is, in many cases, Edenic. Personal memories, while not in the realm of the totally imaginary, have an element of the imagined. Although they are rarely questioned, as Lowenthal (1975), Stewart (1993), and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981: 87) suggest and DeLyser (2001) and Hampl (1999) demonstrate, our memories are unconsciously and consciously imagined, and, with time, we unknowingly rework our experienced world in a way that relates to our present self-images. Souvenirs serve as mnemonic devices to provide a physical presence, an access to the world of the past, a flexible and changeable world created through nostalgia. Souvenirs can be envisaged as building blocks of an imagined past.

Here I extend such thinking about souvenir objects to *salvaged*-object souvenirs, the contents of Digby’s casket of magic. The word “salvage,” derives from the Latin, *salver*—to save, and the primary meaning is that associated with compensation for saving a ship or

a cargo from the perils of the sea, or for lives and property rescued in a shipwreck. The meaning now extends beyond that to many situations where objects are extracted (as from rubbish) that are valuable. In terms of souvenirs, as mentioned earlier, salvaged-object souvenirs are not officially sanctioned objects exchanged for money in a store dedicated to selling hegemonic memories of a place; rather they are **salvaged encountered objects**. Salvaged-object souvenirs are commonly available; they consist of ticket stubs to a concert, a pebble from a favorite beach, perhaps a hood-ornament from a well-loved, but now-defunct, car. **They are objects to which individual meanings are attached, often seemingly of the everyday, plucked from anonymity or destruction. Attached stories are those from previous lives as well as those newly made, such as the story of the find and acquisition.** Object biographies convert objects into commodities, the subject of work by such scholars as Arjun Appadurai (1986). But to mobile people, travelers, and refugees, the overriding value of their own salvaged objects lies primarily in the attached stories.

COSMOS AND HEARTH

Turning to consider the concept of home as it relates to mobile people, I have found the concept of “cosmos and hearth” as discussed by Yi-Fu Tuan (1996, 2001: 319–39) and earlier work on “house and universe” by Gaston Bachelard (1994 [1958]) useful. They offer a framework for examining the place-making role of souvenirs, including Digby’s “casket of magic,” and the associated activities of conversation and writing. Tuan conceptualizes the “cosmos” as the world and beyond, involving civilization and humankind; the “cosmos” is a larger reality, in part an unknowable intellectual abstract that exists in opposition to the “hearth.” The “hearth” is a concept that embraces the local, familiar, and nurturing, sites of individual houses, family, neighborhood, and activities of habit and custom. As with the cosmos, the concept of hearth encompasses both the physical and the spiritual. The cosmos is infinite and the hearth bounded; the cosmos is an intellectual realm sometimes only accessible through the mind’s eye whereas the hearth is intimately knowable, a place we can navigate even in the dark. The hearth is local, cosy, familiar, nurturing, “accessible to the sort of direct experience in which all the senses are engaged” (Tuan 2001: 319). However, the cosmos can exist and even be nurtured within the home, the quintessential hearth. For instance, a parent and child reading a book of travel or browsing through an atlas are bodies nestled within a hearth, but their minds are elsewhere roving the cosmos. Gaston Bachelard (1994 [1958]: 6) put the case for inclusion of the cosmos within the hearth forcefully, arguing that the chief benefit of a house was its function as a place to dream of wide horizons through its protection of the daydreamer. He drew attention to the author Saint-Pol Roux’s use of the word “chrysalis”

to describe his cottage, a metaphor of repose, development, and preparation for flight into a wider world (1994 [1958]: 65). Forays into the cosmos are made possible through the mental and physical nurturing that takes place within a house; indeed, people may be propelled into the cosmos through both the hearth's nurturing and related feelings of confinement and repression. Tuan's position is that both hearth and cosmos are necessary to a balanced life and a sense of self. Digby, a traveler living away from his home country, achieves this balance and a sense of self through his performance of ritual activities associated with his box of souvenirs.

OBJECTS IN DIGBY'S "CASSET OF MAGIC"

A familiar, nostalgia-rich object consciously made using the associations of objects is the quilt. Traditionally the individual squares that form the top surface are taken from fabric from lesser-worn parts of worn out clothing from members of a family. Quilting groups within a community will share material so that a quilt not only brings back memories of when, for instance, "our Annie was six and got her jacket torn while blackberry picking across the field from our first house in Smithfield" but also of Mr Pennington next door. Perhaps associated with him is the story about spilling paint over a nearly new, birthday-gift shirt, paint that was being used to letter the name on the transom of his boat. Or perhaps the memories are non-epic, and are privately and intimately connected to a favorite item of clothing. These salvaged-material quilts hold spatially- and temporally-rich memories that are refreshed communally at quilting bees, regular gatherings where a group of women work on their own or communal quilts. Without these quilts, events large and small, and the trivia of the everyday would disappear without a trace, forever beyond recall. Quilts, whether traditional or contemporary as in the notable case of the AIDS quilt (Brown 1997), are objects that hold layers of societal and individual memory.

Bassett Digby's collection of salvaged-object souvenirs and the activities around it act in similar ways to the collection of quilting fabrics and the social engagements of both quilting bees and quilt displays. The similarity lies in the processes of memory recalling and reforming through telling stories linked to locations, many of which are distant in time and space. As with the quilt components, many of the meanings are not inherent in the objects; rather, meanings are invisible, attached only through stories. And like the quilt components—rags in the eyes of many—the contents of Digby's "casket of magic" would likely not be recognizable, then or now, as a valued collection. Whereas a completed quilt would have value without attached stories as a warm covering and perhaps as a work of art, Digby's tin of objects was not even a commodity. Even in the 1930s the tin was battered and worn and the objects in the tin had minimal intrinsic value. With the exception of a few coins

and stamps, to an outside person, the contents of Bassett Digby's tin would have appeared not as a "casket of magic" but as a tin containing the debris of living, "stuff" without meaning or "junk." Inspection would reveal a melange; a tangle of contents ranging from those in current use, to those of use in the past, together with those of no obvious practical use at any point in time. It had no commercial value.

However, I suggest that the tin that Digby carries with him from one dwelling to another, and which survives periods of great mobility when tramping or "roving,"³ contains items that are constituent to Digby's identity and provide a spatial mapping onto the landscapes of his travels. Rather than a random and disconnected variety of objects, that a first look at the contents of his "casket of magic" would seem, there are several distinct categories of items. Each has a role to play in the construction and maintenance of his identities during this period of mobility. There are items that represent Digby's occupations as both a writer and a collector, items connected to his past homes and identity as a traveler and man of science, items that connect him to his country of origin, England; and items he employs to connect him to his current community. Digby holds both cosmos and hearth in his tin.

Digby starts the discussion of the contents by signifying his identity as a writer, a person who writes and edits both professionally and extensively, as he looks for "the stump of [proof correcting] pencil which is red at one end and blue at the other," now so sufficiently small that it is hard to find in his box. Further signifiers are the "nibs, scraps of pencil," etc. that he says were initially the sole occupants of the box. The much-used pens and pencils have conveyed stories of life in other countries, accounts of both hearth and cosmos. Digby's accounts of the hearth include his domestic adventures in both Britain and other countries, most recently the French Riviera and Corsica. Stories from the cosmos are those of his early adventures in Siberia and Japan as well as his recent travels within rural Corsica.

A second identity that Digby rebuilds through his "casket of magic" is that of a traveler and explorer. The children comment on iodine, a symbol of travels to hazardous places and the need for self-reliance in lands without Western medicines. Similar hazards of travel in "exotic" places are hinted at in the mention of quinine. The compass, a universal signifier of travel, is examined by the children and comments passed on its use to determine wind direction. It gestures towards a sailing adventure some months earlier, and signals his interest in weather as part of the geography of Corsica. He writes of "huge copper coins of the Tsarista Elizaveta's reign that I found the natives still using, 137 years later, when I was exploring up in northern Siberia." The exotic, necessary to any explorer's identity, is established in both time, as he reaches back over a hundred years,

and in place to a Siberia far north of the trans-Siberian rail line. In these regions, some inhabitants had little or no experience of Europeans or modern material items such as flashlights (Digby 1928: 243), while diseases such as leprosy and smallpox were still alleged to be a hazard (Digby 1926a: 166). Within Digby's tin, the iodine and coins map for Digby both the known and the unknown of the cosmos.

A third identity is mapped by the box's contents, that of a man of science and knowledge. A few phrases, "...sea-shells, awaiting dispatch to the museum..." and a discussion with his visitors concerning the "vasty [sic] deep and its denizens," signal contact with established and ordered places of science, museums. Digby's deep interest in science and collecting also appears in early accounts of specimen collecting, his book on mammoths (1926a), and in numerous columns. His interest in science is not unexpected; an intense interest in natural history extended across all classes in Britain (Pearce et al. 2002; Taylor 1997). Museums were rapidly expanding and loomed large in popular imaginations; an advertisement for Lifebuoy Soap in 1927 featured a mother looking at her sleeping child with the opening line "His pockets are like a museum."⁴ In addition to these influences, Digby's headmaster at the University College School had been J. L. Paton (Usher et al. 1981) who helped run rational holidays in the countryside as part of the Co-operative Holidays Association (CHA), a socially and educationally improving holiday scheme.

For Digby, collecting, as implied by the phrase "Sundry sea-shells, awaiting dispatch to the museum...", likely signals his search for revenue from a source other than his pen. Corsica was rich in marine exotics, and the continuing demand for specimens early in the inter-war era can be seen from issues of the *Museums Journal*.⁵ Thus Digby's identity as a man of science and knowledge is intimately intertwined with his identity as an impoverished exile. Some years earlier Digby wrote of traveling with very little money at various times in his life and concluded by saying: "The best region in the world, indubitably, for the young rover without much money is the shores and islands of the Mediterranean. He can live and travel a year there in comfort, ranging hither and yonder as the whim pleases him, from Spain to Syria, from Port Said to Algiers, on less than a hundred and fifty a year" (Digby 1926b). In 1933, Digby followed his own advice and that of others in moving from a tiny caravan on the moors of southern England to Menton on the French Riviera, and from there he moved to Corsica in 1939. However, the difficulty of making a living providing short stories to British newspapers during the depression continued⁶ and intensified after the outbreak of war owing to both newsprint restrictions and Corsica's isolation. Through his provision of knowledge about the cosmos, Digby is working to maintain a hearth in a very real and physical sense.

Digby's British identity was reenacted most practically through an item of comfort, an item of the hearth, the rubber hotwater bottle washer. In Digby's description of his salvaged-objects the connection to his homeland through rubber washers is especially intimate. Few items could be more British, and "of the hearth" than a hotwater bottle, evoking as it does the domestic and nocturnal comforts of infancy when hotwater bottles were provided by an Edwardian nanny. The hotwater bottle's scarlet coat conjures a well-worn hand-knitted cover, perhaps made by a favorite aunt; it speaks of familial care. The objects are inextricably linked to dank and bleak Novembers and the smoldering coal fires of the North London of his youth, rather than with Corsica, an island imagined as twinkling in the Mediterranean azure, regardless of the reality of frigid winter winds. And what is more stereotypical of the image of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British traveler than the ingenuity displayed by improvising washers from discarded tires? A recurrent trope in travel books of the late nineteenth century, such as those written by Sir Richard Burton, is the resourcefulness of the British traveler.

Coins and stamps provide the most obvious spatial mapping in Digby's casket of magic. The "sundry foreign coins which have been passed off on me," call up a small handful of coins from Siberia and other sites of his travels: China, Japan, Egypt or Bulgaria. As Digby reexamines the coins, places could not only be revisited in name through the symbols, dates, and words, but landscapes could be reimagined, footsteps retraced, and episodes in which transactions have taken place relived. Exotic commodities or perhaps services such as a ferry crossing or a night's accommodation at some remote inn might be remembered. A chronology of life could be imaginatively and internally performed. At the same time mapping of the cosmos extends from the past to the present and on into the future through stamps, some of which were new and awaiting use as indicated by the margins of "gummed paper." Stamps symbolized a web of contacts that extended far beyond Corsica; articles were sent to newspapers, letters to family and friends. Cosmos and hearth are mapped in both time and space through stamps.

Finally there is a section of Digby's narrative that deals with mapping his life into the space of the present and the future. In addition to the stamps, objects relating to the present are kept specifically for the amusement of the three small children who visit. These objects are of no visible value other than that of entertainment and amusement specific to Mimi, Vera, and Jeanette. The first of these salvaged objects is specifically reserved for three-year-old Mimi. Digby writes "The blue eyeglass, that I found on the beach somewhere, is a favourite of hers." It is not kept as an attachment to the beach; it is an attachment to a person very much in his present. Also saved in his box for the children's entertainment are the bits of gummed paper that surround stamps: "Loot to be

claimed, to be stuck on the tip of chubby noses and then pulled off, competitively.” The objects that link to the children are important because they form a **link to the local community**; their parents are the owners of the farm outbuilding that Digby rents, people with whom he drinks wine of an evening. More importantly, perhaps, the children provide a noncritical, accepting audience, a “family” for the narrative performance associated with the salvaged objects.

LAYERS OF STORY-TELLING

I turn now to the **act of writing through which identity-forming memories are miniaturized and made portable** (Stewart 1993: 10). We only know Digby’s souvenirs through this passage; they do not exist as material objects in a museum. However, the text of a journal or book itself is a complex and meaning-dense souvenir that is, as Stephen Graham suggests, “part of the equipment of life” (Graham 1927: 217), an item not of luxury but of necessity.

Performances of telling enrich and rework stories associated with objects. Digby’s act of writing is a retelling, by pen in minute and tidy handwriting, of the earlier performance of telling. It is a double inscription of the objects. The first oral telling and interactive performance is to the small audience of the three young girls. The second serves both to capture the first act and the girls’ response to it, and to “fix” the performance through the written word. Additionally the written performance was aimed at the large newspaper audience of the *Birmingham Post*, with whom Digby had a decade-long rapport as a periodic columnist.⁷ If *The Magic Casket* were to exist in print as he intended,⁸ it would represent a third performance, a telling that through its distribution in an international newspaper would inscribe Digby’s identities within cosmos and hearth. Through the newspaper, Digby would have appeared not only as a writer, traveler, and collector of the wide world but also as a favorite “uncle,” an identity fashioned within the framework of the communal warmth of story-telling. These multiple performances of integrating cosmos and hearth, firstly the actual story-telling performance, secondly the writing of the story-telling, and thirdly its hoped-for transmission to newspaper readers, served to revive, rework, and inscribe Digby’s memories and identities that otherwise would fade with time. Multiple performances also strengthened the objects, adding a layer of memories involving Mimi, Vera, and Jeanette and his life in Corsica.

IDENTITIES, COLLECTIONS AND COMMUNITIES

Digby can be viewed as a strange, aging Briton, an eccentric “odd duck;” however, his performative mapping and re-vision of self and the roles of his objects are by no means unique to Digby or to British inter-war travelers. Objects act as interfaces between individuals and

the world. In the case of sumptuous private possessions displayed to the public in renaissance collections, Anthony Shelton observes: “Private biography was ... magnified and projected through public exhibition” (Shelton 1994: 187). But although objects reach outwards providing information about themselves and their owners, objects also function to reach inwards “... helping the collector—and, to a certain extent the viewer—to develop their sense of self...” (Bal 1994: 105). Beyond the rarified world of institutionally recognized collectors, Yi-Fu Tuan makes a more general observation about the human condition: “If, for some reason, one’s sense of self dims, one can simply rekindle it by foraging in the attic: everything needed—photographs of dead worthies, discarded objects—is already there” (Tuan 1996: 322). David Parkin (1999) notes the process of self-inscription and cultural knowledge in objects salvaged by fleeing refugees. Identity constitution through objects and story-telling about objects is common to many people, in many parts of the world, in both the past and the present.

Object-based story telling is also part of the human condition.

For instance, Digby’s oral story-telling based on his tin of objects plays a similar role in identity construction to that of the *Hinemihī*, a Maori meeting house, within the Maori culture (Hooper-Greenhill 1998). These houses, one to a community, are made of carved wood which provides both a functional and a symbolic construction. Discourses are integrated into the key structural supports in the form of carvings. To a Western eye a *Hinemihī* appears merely as a highly decorative house, an interesting cultural artifact to be looked at; its performative importance is invisible to a casual eye. However, to the Maori a *Hinemihī* is a powerful and meaningful structure to be actively engaged through story-telling performances. Like a box of treasured possessions, the *Hinemihī* is not a single object; it is both multiple and complex and its value lies in associated stories. Additionally, as a meeting-place its meaning-rich structure enfolds individuals; it is a box that contains and spiritually nourishes people.

A box with a similar purpose is encountered in Herman Melville’s novel *Moby Dick*. Inscriptions of meanings on, and in, a container are seen in the account of Queequeg’s coffin. Queequeg, said to be from the unmapped island of Kokovoko “far away to the West and South” (Melville 1944 [1851]: 79), i.e., from Melanesia, copied the tattoos on his body into the decoration of his coffin/seaman’s chest.⁹ The tattoos “had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island ... so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold...” (Melville 1944 [1851]: 691). The story relates that Queequeg was unable to read the hieroglyphic marks; the link between object and meaning had been broken. Detached from known specific meanings and knowledges, the formerly assumed wealth of stories changed to a more generalized, but still vital, discourse of homeland for Queequeg; he intended to return to the home of his

ancestors by dying in this coffin. But instead, by lying in this meaningful coffin-box, he recovered from a life-threatening illness.

The similarities between the role of objects associated with the Hinemihi for the Maori, Queequeg's coffin, and the box for Digby are seen through their use in performances. In his story-telling performance with the three young girls, Digby reviews selected episodes from his past, keeping the stories alive by remembering and retelling. Talk surrounds the objects. However, it is not a simple telling. Questions are asked by his visitors and stories, some of them fictional, are woven around the objects. The "talk" served to weave his past mobile life into the present of the start of the Second World War, a time of isolation from country and family. Additionally, like the Maori who used the Hinemihi as a means of passing on knowledge and traditions to younger generations, and Melville's prophet who hoped to pass on knowledge to Queequeg, Digby's retelling serves to pass his knowledge of the outside world to the three young girls living in an insular society. The objects in the box thus reaffirm his role in society as a holder and conveyor of exotic knowledge. The objects serve not only to reaffirm a person to themselves, they serve to integrate and position a person within a community, in Digby's case as an "extra" uncle in an extended family.

MOBILE AND POWERFUL STORIES

Stories connected to souvenir objects are not static; rather they are mobile and fluid. The interactive telling is a performative mapping during which alterations in and evolutions of the stories can be expected to occur. In a study of tourist responses to the ghost town of Bodie, California, Dydia DeLyser (2001) found that in the months and years between visits to the town, people's memories of places evolved often to provide more than what physically existed; the imagined place replaced the actual, memory gaps were creatively filled. A related flexible attachment between stories and objects is evident from museum studies. James Clifford recounts experiences that shed light on the linkage between the past and the present through objects, in this case, North American Indian artifacts amassed in the 1920s, that were being installed in a Pacific Northwest museum some seventy years later (Clifford 1997b). Firstly the Indians de-centered the physical objects in favor of narrative; the telling of the stories associated with the objects was more important than the objects themselves, regardless of the fact that the objects in question had significant market value. Secondly, the stories told to Clifford in 1989 had contemporary elements that postdated the objects. Thus objects act as containers for stories, they are "wild things" to which a variety of meanings can be attached.¹⁰

Because they can be mobilized to tell a variety of stories, objects are powerful. For the Maori and the Indians of the Pacific Northwest the power is spiritual and exercises control over tribal continuance.

Queequeg's coffin had the power to cure its owner and occupant. In today's world objects are used by the Kodi, an Indonesian island tribe, as biographical vehicles for thoughts and surrogate companions. The objects feature in rhymes to metaphorically convey information about people and incidents in their daily lives (Hoskins 1998). In the case of Digby's "casket of magic" he exerts power and control over his own life, his own past and his own future, by selecting the way in which he is "read" by others through his choice of objects and associated stories.

CREATING A HEARTH IN THE COSMOS

The objects in Digby's box also play a key role in the creation of home, a place of refuge. Digby called his worn and battered tin and its hodge-podge of contents a "casket of magic;" are these story-telling words simply for the benefit of his audience of three little girls and the potential newspaper readers of this story, or does this term reflect its identity-constituting position and home-producing powers for Digby himself? The term "casket of magic" conveys the existence of a hidden and very special world where things are not always what they seem. I suggest the "casket of magic" writings constitute a conjuring trick in which Digby produces himself and his life, and who he is or would like to be, for our viewing, through his description of stories about objects. Digby's use of the word "magic" hints at meanings that may mysteriously dissolve and re-form. It also hints at his awareness of the trick of gathering personally significant yet miniature items from both the cosmos and the hearth into a box, which then magically expand when opened to create a hearth, a place of spiritual refuge with links to the less-confining cosmos, a place where wonder is ever replenished. This magic trick was much needed at a time when Digby was lacking both a long-term home and a familiar social network, and when his travel and income were severely constrained by the war.

Writing itself also serves as a homemaking activity. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1994: 16) maintains that for writers in exile "the true home is to be found not in houses but in writing." Indeed, we see "homemaking through writing" on contemporary change-of-address cards augmented by handwritten descriptions of the new home. Digby's writing performs the same function; through establishment of his collection, the story-telling surrounding the objects, and then his inscription of the event, Digby is triply constructing a home.

Lest we find ourselves thinking the value of found-object souvenirs, in the construction of home as historical oddities, consider parallels in a section of Bruce Chatwin's published notes (1987: 232) about both his own life and that of Alan Brady. Chatwin writes of his own childhood experiences: "Home, if we had one, was a solid black suitcase called the Rev-Robe, in which there was a corner for my clothes and my Mickey Mouse gas-mask. I knew that, once the

bombs began to fall, I would curl up inside the Rev-Robe, and be safe.” Chatwin also recorded a meeting with Alan Brady (Chatwin 1987: 6), a perpetually traveling salesman with no living relatives or apparent home. Chatwin asks him: “Don’t you have anywhere you could call ‘home?’” Self-consciously Brady admits that he keeps a tin deed box in the safe of the London head office. The box contains two layers of objects; the lower relates to his early life as part of a family, now no longer living, and the upper one contains salvaged objects from his travels later in life. Brady occasionally revisits this box, replacing objects in the upper layer with new items linked to newer, brighter connections and removes objects whose stories have faded or become inaccessible over time. Brady’s visits are acts of homemaking. He creates home through performances with selected objects; objects are handled, gazed upon, and associated stories are recalled and reworked before being safely encapsulated to await another visit.

The relationship of objects to being homed is suggested in various contemporary studies of both homed and homeless peoples. The strong relationship between home and possessions as highlighted in a recent series of essays about home possessions (Miller 2001) is not unexpected; but the importance of objects to homeless people has yet to be fully investigated. From interviews with homeless men at a shelter in the south of England, Jon May (2000) concludes that absence of “home as place” is different from absence of “home as a residence.” May considers the absence of “home as a place” as considerably more serious than the absence of “home as residence” in terms of personal well-being; emphasizing that there is more to being homed than having a physical roof over one’s head. May’s interviews indicate that home as a place is created when a person has a sense of belonging, has safety and security, and has independence and control over their own interaction with others.

A study of over 500 homeless people by Jeanne Moore *et al.* (1995) revealed that decorating personal space, an activity that involves arrangement and display of personal possessions contributes to that sense of home through place-making. Security is implicated in this homemaking performance as it is only with security that the objects remain as placed by the individual. Without security, objects can be moved, damaged or taken, with the result that stories associated with objects are stolen or replaced with those of violation. Further work by Rivlin and Moore on supports and barriers to the process of homemaking (2001) found that a sense of home evolves from a variety of social performances and physical supports; whereas, most work on homes for the homeless has centered on physical attributes. I suggest that placement of meaning-rich objects in a room, objects associated with stories and place, creates a place that is home. Placement acts establish a person’s identity within a

space. It makes it *their* place.¹¹ The importance of objects has to be examined further in terms of homelessness; this work suggests that objects are crucial to the construction of home.

CONCLUSIONS

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this work. Firstly, written descriptions of possessions provide insights into both past popular cultures and the people who recorded them. Popular culture is little-archived; analysis of possessions is a technique that has the potential to open past or hidden worlds of the everyday. This is not a new concept. George Perec's novel *Les Choses* led a literary movement in France, *chosisme*, in which human life was portrayed largely by the characters' objects and the surrounding activities of acquisition, use, and disposal. *Chosisme* did not endure as a literary movement (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 17), but the approach has applications in cultural studies, particularly those involving largely undocumented people and popular culture. At the same time, a writer's description of possessions as part of object-based story-telling provides a sort of autobiography, one that is arguably less self-aware than a conventional autobiography. These autobiographies are valuable as a tool in understanding the imaginative geographies of many lesser-known writers and their cultural milieu.

Secondly, individuals use objects that are removed from the commodity cycle to construct and rework personal and social identities. Souvenir objects with their associated stories are particularly important during times of geographical transition in which familiar surroundings are replaced by new environments. The transitions may be as small as moving within a city, as far-reaching as traveling for a year, or as disruptive as moving without family or friends to a country with a different language and culture. To combat the dislocation, objects are evoked to maintain images of the self, to magically conjure up past worlds of comfort, and to negotiate a place within the new culture and place. Story-rich objects have enormous power to ensure successful transitions, a capability that leads to the most significant conclusion involving homes.

The selection and retention of identity-constituting objects over the period of a lifetime can function to construct a home. Breyten Breytenbach (1993) has listed "right to a home" as one of four human rights; homes are essential to the physical and mental well-being of people; there are few exceptions. Although the physical aspects of home may be considerably varied, ranging from boxes, temporary shelters under bridges, hostels, caravans, and mobile homes to suburban tracts and elaborate mansions, what makes these places "home" is their capability to securely contain objects. Within a secure space, performances involving objects and their stories create a personal space of home. Objects and their stories form an extension

to, and explanation of, the inhabitant. The anonymity of space is conquered and personalized, converted into a home.

Hence, in today's world the accumulation of apparently worthless, unsorted objects in the shopping carts of the homeless can be viewed as the fundamental components of home, lacking only mapping in a (larger) place. This act of creating a home, through use of objects, is a magical conjuring act in which the disorientation and isolation associated with being unhomed (May 2000) can be made to disappear. Consequently in resettlement plans involving mobile people, the homeless, and the elderly, provisions must be made for housing not only the person but also their significant possessions. Currently, resettlement plans pragmatically address issues such as physical facilities: the presence of beds, safe entrances, kitchen access, and medical services. This pragmatism needs to extend from issues involving the physical body of the person to selected salvaged souvenir objects that support identity and home-constructing storytelling. The well-being of people is intricately linked to story-rich possessions.

I suggest that homes are also important because it is only with a hearth that people can comfortably extend into the larger world, the cosmos. Successful home place-making may be the first step towards a greater degree of comfort and functionality *outside* a home. Viewed this way, suitable housing of the type that contains places for meaning-rich objects may be a cost-effective investment for housing agencies.

Lest we find ourselves restricting our consideration of found-object souvenirs, identity, and spatial construction of home as solely associated with Edwardian Britons, marginalized indigenous people, or the homeless, we might consider reflexively the contemporary world and our own experience. Many of us, I suspect, have kitchen or desk drawers or windowsills that resemble Digby's "casket of magic" in that they contain practical and non-practical items that link us to our past and our identities: higgledy-piggledy collections, items judged indispensable interspersed with a delicate litter of the debris of places visited and things seen. I suggest that for mobile people, and we all are temporally, if not spatially mobile, such collections function as "caskets of magic." They are part of our active engagement with identity building and spatial networking, acts of performative mapping that both construct homes and place us in the wider world. The contents of our collections, the litter of life, are crucial to a balanced hearth-cosmos existence.

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NOTES

1. M. Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis and London 1986), A. Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham N.C. 1994), A. Blunt, *Travel, Gender, and Imperialism: Mary Kingsley and West Africa*, (New York 1994), M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London 1992), J. R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: photography and the visualization of the British Empire* (London 1998).
2. For instance Alison Blunt (2000) examined the Lucknow siege using the journals and letters of officers' wives, Karen Morin (1998) examined the representations of Native Americans in the travelogues of British women, and Marjorie Morgan (2001) investigated identities in published and unpublished English women's travel writing from Europe.
3. Roving is Digby's word for travels of weeks or months, in which he traveled on foot or by bus and stayed in small inns, with shepherds, or in abandoned buildings.
4. *Manchester Guardian*, September 6, 1927.
5. The professional journal of the Museums Association contained advertisements by importers of exotic zoological specimens in the 1920s. Importers were private companies that sold to both museums and a multitude of private collectors.
6. Some indication of the financial difficulties for writers, and the lack of a market for writings, is indicated by an essay (January 17, 1934) in the *Birmingham Post* titled "Author Turned Bagman: Musings on a Change of Occupation" in which the author, identified only as C. B., reflects on the necessity of finding other work.
7. Silvester (1997: xxii) comments on the relationship that exists between readers and columnists; for instance, when McIntyre wrote about the death of his dog he received 30,000 sympathy letters.
8. The existence of this story in print is unlikely. By late 1939, the *Birmingham Post* was reduced to two sheets due to wartime newsprint restrictions; space for travel narratives effectively disappeared. Consequently, only a few stories from *Corsican Adventures* appear to have been published; whereas, most of the stories in an earlier manuscript from the French Riviera were published between 1933 and 1937.
9. The character of Queequeg has been shown by Greg Denning (2002) to be derived from earlier illustrated geographical accounts by travelers to that region.

10. Attfield (2000) has coined the phrase “wild things” for objects that can assume various meanings.
11. Michael R. Curry, personal communication, 2002. Related ideas can be found in Curry (1996).

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