

# IE Conference 11-14 April 2025 in Sulejówek, Poland

## Heroes, anti-heroes and villains: How we (re)create, use and dismantle them

### Call for papers

We all have our 'heroes', personally or as a community. In common understanding, 'heroes' are significant people, or animals, that have done something brave, new or good. Whether it's a popular person or a group of silent heroes – there are always stories to tell. And this points to the second meaning of 'hero': in fiction, poetry and films, 'heroes' are the protagonists, the main characters of a captivating story. Both meanings of 'hero' may overlap; both matter for interpreters of natural and cultural heritage.

Interpreters seek stories that trigger meanings beyond mere facts. Sometimes, a fictional character who engages with the heritage is used to create an interpretive story. Such idealised creations allow us to condense historical, socio-cultural or ecological knowledge and arrange it into a sequence of events which resonate with universal values. Fictional 'heroes' typically face up to an adverse environment or antagonists who represent another set of values. This technique helps people to relate more easily to the heritage but it may also raise questions: do interpreters who invent 'heroes' or 'villains' risk perpetuating clichés and stereotypes, and would this always be problematic?

Historical people are considered 'heroes' because they symbolise particular community values which may change over time. Traditional stories about established 'heroes' frequently convey an idealised image by highlighting certain traits while omitting others. Should heritage interpretation challenge collective stereotypes by confronting clichés with counter evidence and reinterpret the heroes of the past? Should interpreters spearhead the replacement of old 'heroes' by new ones who represent progressive values? Or, rather, should we deconstruct the entire concept of 'heroes' and create interpretive stories around anti-heroes, or even depersonalise our interpretations?

### Let's share good practice and lessons to learn from various case-studies, e.g.

- of using fictional heroes for interpretive stories: is there a difference between interpretation for children (e.g. 'Ben the bear' type of stories) and for adults;
- of interpreting controversial personalities who are admired as heroes by one group and; considered villains by others;
- of re-interpreting earlier heroes in the light of shifting values and priorities, or of deconstructing and dismantling 'heroes' of the past.

### **Let's consider the balance between, or even a shift from, idealisation to critical approach?**

- How do we navigate among the tensions between interpretive idealisation and critical deconstruction, between fact and myth?
- What is the role of 'heroes' and 'villains' for identification and moral orientation in complex societies, and what follows for value-based interpretation?
- How can we discern proper use from abuse of captivating characters? Are there differences between interpretation of nature and interpretation of cultural and historical heritage?
- Are heritage interpreters morally obliged to confront positive 'hero' and negative 'villain' stereotypes?
- To what extent is it problematic to work with heroes? What opportunities do they offer to encourage critical reflection?
- What about personalisation through anti-heroes instead of heroes?
- What are the responsibilities of heritage interpreters towards biographical narratives?

### **Let's talk about the diversity of meanings associated with 'hero,' 'anti-hero' and 'villain' in different interpretive settings and different cultures. What kind of deeds and traits make someone a 'hero'? Is a 'hero' ...**

- an iconic figure who made a positive impact on the common cause of a group, a community, a nation?
- someone who has tried to make a difference, perhaps failed, but still tried something selflessly?
- a silent and forgotten hero? A heroes of everyday life who doesn't have a famous name?
- always an unselfish, 'good' person?
- always an outstanding person?

### **Finally, let's find a way of dealing with values and meanings that resonate with interpretive stories that are created around a hero-protagonist.**

- Are we as interpreters always aware of the implicit values conveyed by 'hero-villain' plots?
- Could thoughtless interpretations inadvertently strengthen anti-democratic values or exclusionary attitudes?
- How can we interpret aspects of historical people's lives that may trigger critical reflection about human value priorities without misrepresenting those people and keeping their dignity?
- What is the role of 'heroes' and 'villains' for identification and moral orientation in complex societies, and what follows for value-based interpretation?

Apart from dealing with the main conference theme, we also welcome contributions that aim to advance theory and practice of heritage interpretation as a professional discipline.