

At Home in the Community?

Kathleen McPhilemy thinks about what home means.

For me, having a home is to have a place where I can be private, where I can feel safe and where I can have around me the familiar and the familial. Yet though I hanker after privacy, I would not want a home where there was no surrounding community, no shared activity or interests, no society. Nevertheless, the demands of the private individual and those of the wider group often come into conflict. Although we seem to believe that having a home is a human right, it brings with it moral dilemmas revolving around property and identity. Article 17 of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights states:

1. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

This right can come to seem more of a privilege when we consider those who do not have a home, or whose homes are inadequate, or those who have been deprived of their homes because of territorial disputes over land, when the apparently benign concept of community is twisted into the conflict of groups at war because of differences in ethnicity or religion. Thus the apparently cosy ideals of home and community or commonwealth become problematic as individuals and groups pursue the realisation of self and identity.

The insistence on the right to property in the UN Declaration might seem a very 'Western' or Eurocentric way of thinking about property, at odds with, for example, the way Australian aboriginal people or many Native American tribes regard or used to regard their relationship to the land. Political thinkers have debated the idea of private property for centuries; for Rousseau, it was the source of inequality. However, he did not believe that there should not be private property, more that it should be equitably distributed. While we may agree with Proudhon's perception that 'property is theft', there is

no doubt that the desire to have your own place runs deep, at least in British society.

'An Englishman's home is his castle' was a sentiment exploited by Margaret Thatcher with her 'right to buy' policy in the 1980s, which resulted in many, many people buying their council houses, the collapse of social housing, inflation of house prices and a subsequent crash, which left many of the would-be castle proprietors homeless and penniless as well. The crash of 2008 stemming from the sub-prime mortgage boom was the consequence of financiers exploiting the desire of the poor to own their own homes.

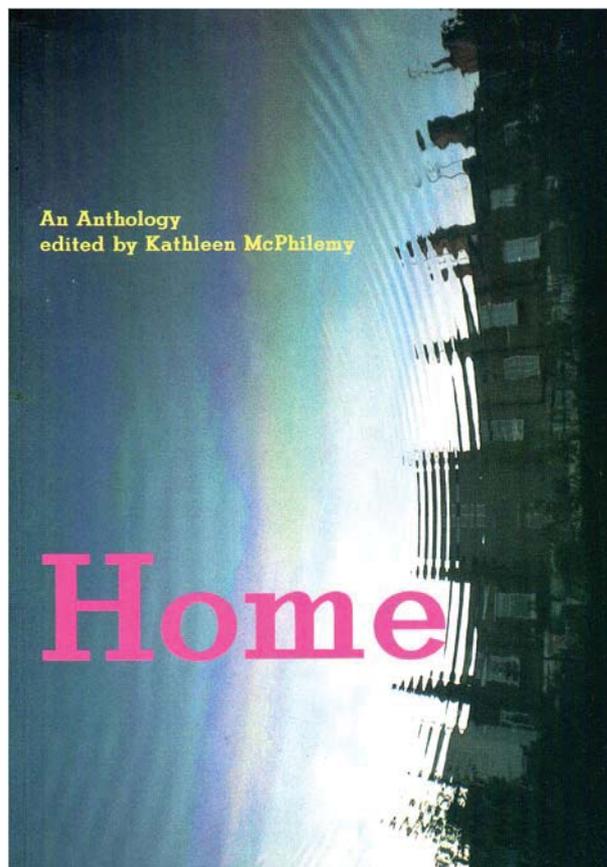
We might ask why people need to own their homes, rather than rent them through social housing. Leaving aside the Tory propaganda and, of course, the fact that in the UK home ownership is the central or only investment strategy for most people, one reason for the desire to own, to have a freehold, is security. I remember from my childhood, families who expected to inherit the council house of their parents, often a substantial, well-built property with a decent garden. Today, if the circumstances of social housing tenants change, they may have to move out or pay the so-called 'bedroom tax'.

The right to privacy is recognised in Article 12 of the UN Declaration: 'No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence...'. However, privacy can be seen as the failure to share. One alternative to private homes is communal living, whether in a rural commune, a city squat, a monastery or a kibbutz. Unfortunately, experiments in communal living frequently founder on the resurgent need of individuals, couples and families for a private life and for something they can call their own. Many of the Israeli kibbutzim either folded or modified their systems, for example, by allowing parents a much greater role in the bringing up of their children. Today, we have new virtual collectives hosted by social media.

There is considerable evidence to show that young people, in particular, are suffering from the deprivation of privacy that comes from living in the public eye of the webcam or mobile phone, even in their bedrooms.

I have had many different homes since I was born in Northern Ireland: the four different houses my parents lived in as our family expanded, and then different places where I have lived as an adult. Some of these places I would call home in a relative sense, some are more absolutely home. For example, as a student in London I shared a flat and at the end of an evening, when I decided to go home, that was where I meant. On the other hand, at the end of term, when I had to decide whether to go home for the holidays, in this case, I meant home to my parents' house outside Belfast. Even when I got married and my children were still small, I still went home for Christmas. The moment when the parental home is no longer the child's home must vary enormously from individual to individual and, of course, there are a huge number of people who have never had a family home in any real sense.

The ideas of home and community go together. We are social beings and the concept of the free, individual, noble savage has never been more than a hypothesis on which to base political theory. Community can be as small as a couple or a family, or it can extend to an entire network based on kinship, shared activities, culture or belief. The interests of the individual and the family may often come into conflict with those of the wider community. For example, when it became known that I had married a Catholic, one of my father's Protestant business partners greeted him with the phrase, 'I'm sorry for your trouble,' an expression normally used when someone has died. Our transgression of community barriers would have been much more difficult if I had come from a less liberal background and if we had stayed in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, there have been difficult moments and conflicts of loyalties. This may all seem like tame stuff when it is compared with the apparently irreconcilable differences between Israelis and Palestinians, or between Islam and those with different faiths or those with none. You can build your home inside these different commun-



ities; it is much more difficult for those who seek to create a home across boundaries.

Britain, more specifically England, for whatever historical reasons, is now a society with many diverse groupings and cultures. Somehow, this society has to be made to work so that people from different communities can live safely in their homes and, if they wish, create new homes with those from other groups. The present government policy is 'British Values', summarised by Ofsted as: 'democracy; the rule of law; individual liberty; mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith.' All teachers are charged with delivering these values – tricky in a lesson on simultaneous equations or photosynthesis.

However, although susceptible to mockery, this strategy merits exploration. The values listed, like the rights listed in the UN Declaration, spring from the post-Enlightenment liberal tradition and depend on relativism and fudge; they are easily discounted by fanatics and absolutists of every kind. The dominant culture, which privileges the rights of the individual, will often conflict with the beliefs of sub-cultures within it.

For example, if we respect the individual Catholic minor by offering her a ‘morning-after’ pill, are we not flouting the beliefs of her immediate community? Again, when we outlaw Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) we are concerned to protect individuals, but we are intruding on the privacy of the home and failing to respect culture or belief. I would argue that FGM is absolutely wrong because of the harm it does to the physical and mental health of women. However, why do we not make a fuss about male circumcision, which is nearly always medically unnecessary, painful at whatever age it is carried out and which has been shown frequently to impair sexual function. Is it because it is a practice to which we are culturally more accustomed?

If we consider a less sensitive issue, planning law, we can again see the liberty of the individual pitted against the wishes of the community. In Oxford, a number of years ago, there was a long-running dispute between Bill Heine and the local council about whether he could have a sculpture of a shark apparently plunging into the roof of his terrace house. Eventually, Heine won, the shark was recognized as a legitimate work of art and his right to do as he wished with his own home was preserved. Here the community swung round to support the individual, but when my son (in his parents’ absence) decided that he could use his home as the venue for a very noisy party, the Noise Abatement Officer was soon on the scene, upholding the rights of the community. The rights of the Englishman over his castle are always held in balance with the expectations of the community; often a fudge, or an agreement not to enquire or disagree, allows individuals of very different backgrounds and beliefs to co-exist in civic harmony, just as, within the family, individuals will have no-go areas which others understand not to intrude into in order to preserve the integrity of the family.

Having a home brings with it obligations. Some are compulsory, like paying your council tax and your utility bills. Others are voluntary, such as joining a residents’ association or volunteering to maintain a park or a garden or a library. Ideally, of course, we would expect our libraries and our public parks to be maintained by properly paid workers out of our taxes. However, in this time of austerity, the contribution of local volunteers has become increasingly important. I

was very impressed recently, when visiting friends in London to see two local parks where people in the neighbourhood had worked to create and maintain a beautiful space for all. Home extends into the community and is enhanced through being available to others; there is no moat and no drawbridge.

I would find it difficult to be at home outside the British Isles. The shared language and culture are too important to me. Yet it would be simplistic to think of ‘home’ as a point inside a circle which is community inside a larger circle called the nation state. Most of us belong to different communities, some territorially based, some connected to shared activities or interests. Some people are stateless, some people have mixed heritages or dual nationalities. They will still have a home or the right to a home and it is surely the mark of a healthy society than it can welcome such people and allow them to be ‘at home’.

If we are fortunate enough to have a home and to be at home we must be conscious of those who are homeless or whose homes are under threat or are inadequate. The scandal of Grenfell Tower has scarred the collective consciousness. The tower may have been shoddily built and maintained but it was a home for many families and it appears that it was also part of a strong and diverse local community. Heartbreaking photographs and videos have shown families, friends and individuals who had created homes out of their flats but who were cheated of one of the prime constituents of home – safety and security.

It is easy to lump the tenants together as migrant and poor, the kind of family likely to be allocated the least attractive housing. No doubt there were some people there who shouldn’t have been; no doubt they were not all angels. Nevertheless, they represented the part of society that keeps London functioning, many of them workers too poorly paid to dream of owning their own houses. They also represented London in a different way; the many young people from hugely diverse backgrounds were growing up to be the fabric of a new society. Charles Olson, the American poet, exploring Gloucester, the Massachusetts seaboard community, at the centre of his *Maximus Poems*, wrote:

As the people of the earth are now, Gloucester
is heterogeneous, and so can know *polis*
not as localism...

(Letter 3, *The Maximus Poems*)

The notion of *polis* contains both home and community but it is more about building the good society, than simply looking back to origins and roots. In the New Testament we are told: 'For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.' For the Christian, therefore, *polis* or the *civitas* is in the future.

Placing home in the past results in the bleak and mistaken vision of Philip Larkin: 'Home is so sad. It stays as it was left.' A more appealing but still static idea is found in Donne's 'Valediction: Forbidding Mourning':

If they be two, they are two so
As stiffe twin compasses are two,
Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the'other doe.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth rome,
It leanes, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as it comes home.

Although the beloved is 'the fixt foot', this poem recognises that people are as important as place in creating home. Our memories and values might be what we think of retrospectively as 'home' but they are what we bring along with us as we seek to create home and *polis* in the present. The home which is founded in the common weal needs to be prospective and social, a work in progress.

Kathleen McPhilemy edited the anthology *Home*, a substantial collection of accounts, essays and poems (Katabasis, London 2000). Katabasis also published her poetry collections *A Tented Peace* (1995) and *The Lion in the Forest* (2005).

SPECIAL CHRISTMAS OFFER:

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