

**Roisín Higgins, 'Commemoration' in J. Crowley, D. Ó Drisceoil and M. Murphy, *Atlas of the Irish Revolution* (Cork University Press, 2016).**

Commemorations take moments of rupture and attempt to reshape them into representations of tradition or continuity. The fractious nature of the revolutionary period in Ireland has created many possibilities for commemorative events as well as a great deal of potential for division. The signature events of the period all, in various ways, exacerbated political differences in the country and ended in the partition of the island. The challenge for those commemorating, therefore, has been to find ways to remember the revolutionary period that do not aggravate tensions in the present. It is a challenge that has often ended in defeat.

The revolution was being commemorated before it had ended. Moreover, as it unfolded it was inscribed with memories of the past. The signing of the Solemn League and Covenant, performed with extraordinary ceremony in September 1912, drew on biblical and Scottish historical references. The Proclamation of the Irish Republic in April 1916 also derived its legitimacy from previous historical moments and from both the living and the dead. At the Somme losses were understood in historic terms as the devastating numbers of casualties became apparent in July 1916. The fact that the date of the first day of fighting coincided with the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne in the Julian calendar (1 July 1690, O.S.) helped some unionists to read greater meaning into the sacrifice. It was described by Bishop Charles F. D'Arcy as an event, 'the most glorious in the annals of Ulster...they have, indeed, surpassed all ancient records of chivalry', and showed, as David Officer has noted, an impulse to take an event which had happened only days before and ascribe it long historical significance. [1] The Rising, too was mythologised as it happened, its radicalism masquerading as ancient tradition. Therefore, in mid-flight, the revolutionary period was replete with commemorative references.

### **The First World War**

Divisions were also written into the memory of events and were solidified by the competing narratives that emerged of the period. Commemorations are deeply political events and, as nationalists and unionists undertook the task of consolidating their partitioned jurisdictions the dead served the political projects of state-building (just as they would later be conscripted, as

Keith Jeffrey noted, to serve in the project of reconciliation at the end of the twentieth-century).

[2] Despite the awkwardness of commemorating the First World War within a nationalist schema in the years following its ending, an appeal was made in 1919 for public support to commemorate the men and officers who had died and £50,000 was raised. An Irish War Memorial Committee was set up and favoured a scheme to erect a memorial in Merrion Square. The plan was voted down by the Irish legislature by 40 to 13 who objected to the prominence of the memorial. [3] In Parliamentary debates, Kevin O’Higgins, Minister for Justice, argued that the Irish Free State had come into being through the activities of those who had fought in Dublin during Easter Week. Independence, he said, had not drawn its birth from the deaths of the 50,000 men who had fought for the Allies in the Great War. [4] O’Higgins argued in the Dáil in March 1927 that a visitor might conclude that the origins of the State were connected with Merrion Square and its proposed memorial: ‘That is not the position. The State has other origins, and because it has other origins I do not wish to see it suggested, in stone or otherwise, that it has that origin.’ [5] The Executive Council found it difficult to participate in any commemorative gestures towards the dead of the First World War. Turning down an invitation for a state representative at a temporary wooden memorial in St Stephen’s Green in 1924, Taoiseach W.T Cosgrave believed that ‘it would be hypocritical of him, having regard to the fact that he was imprisoned by the British Government during the world-war, to accept’. [6] There were clear contradictions between the position of leaders within the new state and a memorial which was seen to enshrine the memory of an imperial war in a central location close to government buildings. Therefore, it was hardly surprising that one tradition was raised above the other in the first decades of the Free State.

Nonetheless, in 1929 land was made available for a memorial by the Liffey at Islandbridge which was completed in 1938. This was an elaborate construction by the well-known architect Edwin Lutyens who had also designed the Cenotaph in Whitehall in London and the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme. The Garden is dedicated ‘To the memory of the 49,400 men who gave their lives in the Great War, 1914-18’. It incorporates a public park including a Garden of Remembrance, which was paid for by the Government, and a War Memorial funded by the Memorial Committee.

The workforce for the project was made up of fifty per cent of ex-British Army servicemen and fifty per cent of ex-servicemen from the Irish National Army. The government had funded the Garden and, as Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera did not seem averse to being present at its opening in April 1939. However, growing international tension in that year led to the postponement of an official ceremony and the Garden was not formally dedicated until 1988 in an event involving the four main churches in Ireland. In the intervening years Islandbridge fell into a state of considerable disrepair and came to be seen as a memorial to Independent Ireland's forgotten past.

The memory of the First World War lived differently in the north of the island. As a symbol of Ulster's commitment to the British empire it became a predominantly unionist commemorative event and was central to the historical narrative of the revolutionary period in Northern Ireland. During the years of the Troubles, however, the anniversary of the Somme became increasingly associated with 'blood and thunder' bands and the flying of loyalist paramilitary flags and during the Drumcree standoffs of the 1990s commemorations of the Somme played a central part in the performance of unionism's sense of both victimhood and resolve. The Boyne Church Service, which had been held in Drumcree from 1807, was refashioned as a Somme Anniversary Church Service in an effort to underline the legitimacy of the tradition. [7] Perhaps the most dramatic shift, however, in how the First World War was remembered across the island, came in 1987 after the IRA's Remembrance Day bomb in Enniskillen. The following year the Islandbridge Memorial in Dublin was formally opened and, in subsequent years, the memory of the First World War became an important vehicle for acts of reconciliation between north and south on the island.

### **The Easter Rising**

The entrance to the Memorial Garden at Islandbridge is on Con Colbert Road, which carries the name of one of those executed during the Easter Rising. For many nationalists, the events of Easter 1916 became the centrepiece of the commemorative calendar of the revolutionary period. It represents the moment of possibility, the imagined Republic before it was tarnished by civil war and peace-time politics. In 1929 the IRA ordered its units to observe Easter Sunday as a 'Day of National Commemoration' for 'the memory of all who gave their lives for the Sovereign

Independence of Ireland'. During the fiftieth anniversary in 1966 memorials were unveiled to all events which had taken place during the fight for independence so that the jubilee of the Rising provided an opportunity for communities to remember figures from the revolutionary period within their locality. Eyre Square in Clones was renamed Matt Fitzpatrick Square in honour of the famous local patriot who was shot in 1922. Five thousand people turned up in Crossbarry for the unveiling of a monument to the Kilmichael and Crossbarry engagements in 1920 and 1921. In Sligo, the Old IRA gathered to lay wreaths at the graves or memorials of those who had died in the War of Independence and indeed the Civil War. A spokesman for the brigade said, 'It is intended that the brief informal ceremonies should be a public gesture of reunion, a burial of past dissension in the true spirit of the martyrs of Easter Week and, as such, an acceptable tribute to their ideals and an example to those who follow them.' The Easter Rising had become, for many, the moment into which all other historical events were collapsed and could be remembered. Yet it, too, has had an often difficult commemorative history.

As a potent expression of the Irish nation and an event which, for some, represented a standard by which all subsequent Irish history should be judged, the Easter Rising commemorations have consistently attracted those who oppose the nature and actions of the state. Therefore, the Easter Rising has always been a somewhat problematic opportunity for those in authority. In 1917 the first anniversary of the Easter Rising was marked by a riot. Twenty thousand people gathered on O'Connell Street to watch the hoisting of a Republican flag on the rubble of the GPO and clashes with the police ensued. The first formal military commemoration of the Rising took place in 1924 under the Cumann na nGaedheal government but, although invitations were issued to all the relatives of the executed leaders, due to the divisive politics of the civil war, only Michael Mallin's widow attended. Riots and divisions were more consistent themes of commemoration than harmony and unity.

On the tenth anniversary of the Easter Rising, Eamon de Valera and Seán Lemass participated in an unofficial commemoration which was organised by anti-treaty republicans in Glasnevin cemetery. This year also saw a riot in the Abbey theatre during a production of Seán O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*. In 1935 when de Valera, as Taoiseach, unveiled the statue of Cúchulainn in the GPO in 1935, members of the Cumann na nGaedheal opposition party were

not invited to the event, while, also that year, an estimated one thousand people marched to Glasnevin cemetery for an alternative commemoration which was addressed by the Chief of Staff of the IRA, Maurice Twomey. The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Rising in 1941 took place against the background of the Second World War. The display was a demonstration of Independent Ireland's strength in remaining neutral rather than its military weakness. Twenty-thousand members of the Defence Forces were joined by the nursing service and fire-fighters while aeroplanes flew overhead. [9]

Official commemorations often, by accident or design, generate a unifying narrative, and with varying degrees of success. When Oisín Kelly was designing a sculpture for the Garden of Remembrance, which was to be opened in 1966 as part of the fiftieth anniversary commemoration (it was not unveiled until 1971), he struggled to find a unifying theme for his statue, 'a gimmick' as he called it. There is a sense in which all commemorations need a gimmick. By 1966, Independent Ireland was adjusting its economic relations with Britain and the European Economic Community. The official commemoration of the Rising reflected this agenda and attempted to promote a version of Ireland which was modern and harmonious. Battlefield myths, in order to survive, are refashioned with peace-time messages. By its fiftieth anniversary the Rising was being used to promote a practical form of patriotism which emphasised the value in working hard for the economy. However, the southern state had many economic and social problems and these could not be overwritten by the elaborate commemoration of the Rising in its history. Artists, Irish language groups and educationalists all criticised the failure of the state to honour fully the legacy of the leaders of the Easter Rising. Republicans and socialists were also very vocal critics of the government. The signing of a Free Trade Agreement with Britain in January 1966 was described as the second Act of Union by people on the left who were heavily critical of Seán Lemass's economic strategy. Therefore, the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising exposed many of the problems within Irish society even as it bonded the public in a shared commemoration.

Partition was introduced during the revolutionary period and the failure to undo this created one of the greatest pressures on its commemoration. In 1966 the cracks within Northern Irish society were already visible. The fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising was not the spark for the

Troubles which broke out two years later, however, it put increased pressure on an already tense society. Republicans attempted to use the commemoration to re-politicise the population in the North. Liam McMillen, organising secretary on the commemoration committee, judged later that ‘although no great material benefit accrued to the IRA from this stirring among the people, there was general satisfaction that progress had been made in dispelling the deadening apathy that had immobilised the people for so many years’. Terence O’Neill, who was Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in 1966, described it as ‘not a very easy year’. He expressed frustration at Catholics in Belfast who had ‘insist[ed] on celebrating the Dublin rebellion’ and recorded, ‘It was 1966 which made 1968 inevitable and was bound to put the whole future of Northern Ireland in the melting pot.’[11] A general election in Stormont in November 1965 and in Westminster in March 1966 encouraged unionist leaders to talk up the threat of trouble from nationalists, for electioneering purposes. July 1966 was also the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of the Somme and the months leading up to this saw the emergence of a paramilitary group calling itself the Ulster Volunteer Force. By the summer of 1966 RUC intelligence reports assessed the threat from ‘extremist Protestant groups’ to be greater than that of the IRA.[12] In June, the UVF claimed the first victims of the Troubles with the shooting dead of John Patrick Scullion and Peter Ward in Belfast.

The fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising, coming as it did during a critical period in the politics of Northern Ireland, has at times been held responsible for that society’s collapse. This indicates the extent to which commemorations are seen as far from innocent events, and also why they are seen as potentially explosive in Ireland. Significant anniversaries do not represent a danger to otherwise stable societies, but they can certainly be disruptive where the political system is already under pressure.

Violence in Northern Ireland made commemoration of the Easter Rising problematic for the Irish state and the traditional military parade down O’Connell Street in Dublin was suspended in 1971. By the seventy-fifth anniversary in 1991 there was a muted observance in the GPO attended by the Taoiseach Charles Haughey and President Mary Robinson. Refurbishment of the GPO was reliant on the National Lottery Fund, to the disgust of Labour TD Toddy O’Sullivan, who was not alone in arguing that it was a national shrine. [13] John McGahern wrote a piece in

the *Irish Times*, on 3 April 1991 entitled, 'From a Glorious Dream to a Wink and a Nod' which made clear the extent to which the Easter Rising had fallen out of favour in the official commemorative calendar.

By the twenty-first century, however, with peace in the north and prosperity in the south, the dead of the Easter Rising, along with those of the broader revolutionary period, were once again of political value. The ninetieth anniversary of the Easter Rising, in 2006, saw a reinstatement of the military parade down O'Connell Street in Dublin and a range of art works, debates and newspaper supplements to mark the anniversary. The celebratory nature of the commemoration was linked to the burgeoning economy in the Irish Republic. Two years later the true nature of that economy was exposed and the country faced an economic crisis. In the midst of the devastation, which included the arrival of the International Monetary Fund in 2010, the Easter Rising served as a potent symbol of Irish sovereignty. In the Irish consciousness, it transcended party politics and the state and was referenced in the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Examiner* as representing an ideal which had been betrayed by political and financial elites.

### **War of Independence and Civil War**

Memory of the war of independence was complicated by the fact that it was followed so quickly by the civil war. The Free State struggled to find a suitable way to honour its heroes, and an attempt to celebrate Independence Day on 6 December two years after the inception of the state was a dreary failure that was not repeated. In May 1923 an attempt was made literally to plaster over the cracks with the construction of a cenotaph on Leinster Lawn. Two thousand guests were invited for the unveiling of a forty-foot high Celtic cross which was flanked by two panels on each of which rested a medallion of Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith. The structure, of wood and plaster, was covered in cement and the medallions were painted to look bronze. The cenotaph in London had also been built of temporary materials in 1919. However, the public's response created the demand for a more permanent memorial. An urgency to create a permanent memorial to the founders of the new Free State came from neither public nor politicians. The structure fell into its final collapse during the tenure of Fianna Fáil, and de Valera, in a gesture of magnanimity, consulted with Michael Collins's family and agreed to replace the monument in July 1939. It would take almost ten years to complete the project and John A. Costello was

Taoiseach for its unveiling in 1950. Of the new memorial, Anne Dolan has written, ‘For the celebration of the state, it is a strange and embarrassed totem of independence. ... this ill-fitting Cenotaph is a monument to unease – an unease with a past that no longer seems to suit’. [14]

It seems logical to assume that the building of a memorial will somehow stabilise the memory, and therefore meaning, of an event. However, the process is always more complicated than this. Arthur Griffith’s wife did not want to be associated with the Cenotaph on Leinster Lawn and wanted instead to concentrate on her husband’s grave and her private grief. She asked that ‘her husband’s name [be] erased from such a senseless show. It is more important to finish his grave, his remains are there in consecrated ground. This stunt is not at all in concord with his life of sacrifice and honesty’. David Fitzpatrick has noted, ‘The private distress caused by public approbation of the dead has seldom been so clearly exposed.’[15] Mrs Griffith wrote to Seán Lester in 1924, ‘shows and stunts are all that is the thing now. When something is done to honour my husband’s memory alone, I’ll help and take part’. [16]

Their families were acutely aware that the dead were being used to underscore certain political positions by the living and relatives were not going to yield their influence easily. Cathal Brugha’s widow wrote to the *Irish Times* in 1939 to protest at the unveiling of a statue to him in the Dáil in 1939: ‘I must emphatically protest on behalf of my late husband’s family as well as myself against this threatened insult to his memory. I consider it a piece of gross impertinence, to say the least of it, for men who have abandoned the ideals for which Cathal Brugha died to attempt to shelter themselves in the reflected glory of one who died for the Republic’. *Irish Times*, 26 Jan 1939. The sisters of Seán MacDiarmada also made clear their objection to the State’s appropriation of their brother’s memory, and wrote to the Minister of Defence in 1966, ‘We are true to the 32 –county Republic for which ... Sean, died and we object to Commemoration ceremonies organised by those who have accepted less.’

The bitterness of the civil war clung to its commemoration and lurked in the memories of the War of Independence and, indeed, the Easter Rising. Partition represented a continued failure, and disappointment in the reality of the new state also complicated commemorations of its origins. When Kilmainham Gaol Museum was being renovated it was agreed by the restoration



committee, instigated in 1958, that ‘in order to preserve unity of purpose nothing relating to the events after 1921 would be introduced into any activity, publicity or statements in connection with Kilmainham’. The Troubles of the late twentieth-century led the southern state, and many within, to avoid commemorations of Republican violence. However, just over three years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, Kevin Barry and nine others who had been shot by British forces during the War of Independence were reinterred in Glasnevin cemetery following a state funeral.

### **Decade of Centenaries**

In the twenty-first century, commemorations of the revolutionary period have been framed as a ‘Decade of Centenaries’. This has been variously understood as beginning with the sinking of the Titanic, the introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill or the signing of the Ulster Covenant. The connection between economics and commemoration are often closely aligned. Two thousand and twelve was promoted as ‘Our Time Our Place’ by the Northern Irish Tourist Board which argued that, ‘With so many events, celebrations, commemorations and amazing projects coming to completion, this is our time to turn the tide and confidently put Northern Ireland on the global tourism map.’ Central to the campaign was the opening of the Titanic Building in the newly designated Titanic Quarter in Belfast. Of all the convulsions in Ulster one hundred years previously, it was the sinking of the luxury ocean liner which was the signature commemorative event in the city during 2012. This had the virtue of marking Belfast’s industrial heritage without highlighting its sectarian undercurrents, but it also signalled the city’s ability to find a post-conflict identity through a commemorative device.

The following year saw Dubliners meditate on the history and legacy of the 1913 Lockout. Re-enactments, dramas, debates, conferences and documentaries examined the city’s industrial heritage and again suggested ways in which war and revolution cannot be understood without this economic underpinning. Intellectually and historically, the decade-long commemorative period has allowed for a fruitful and complex examination of the past. Politically, too, the ‘Decade of Centenaries’ is a very useful designation. It has the advantage of allowing for the political traditions of the parties in government (Fine Gael and Labour) to be recognised and, in casting its net over a ten year period, the programme has been framed by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht as ‘offering fresh insights and constructive dialogue, and aims to

foster deeper mutual understanding among people from different traditions on the island of Ireland'. Objections to the concentration on political events has led to a more expansive interpretation of the commemorative programme to include projects such as the redevelopment of the National Concert Hall (particularly the Kevin Barry Room where the Treaty Debates took place), and 'Yeats 2015', a year-long programme of poetry, literature, drama, music, fine art and craft to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Nobel prize winning poet. Ireland's 'Decade of Centenaries' and the preparations for 'Ireland 2016' demonstrate very well the many ways in which commemorations are driven by contemporary preoccupations and are about the commodification of history and culture as much as they are about celebrations or reflections on the past.

## **Conclusion**

Commemorations of the revolutionary period have been at times very difficult because they remember a difficult history. The impulse within a society is often to seek out the heroic in its past, whether that be located within success or sacrifice. Indeed, societies often gravitate towards the historic failures because in them lies the skeleton of other possibilities and also it is thought, perhaps, a lesson for the future. It is less easy for societies to agree on who the heroes are and how they should be remembered. For politicians on both sides of the Irish border there is no way of controlling the public's response to the commemorative period, purse-strings notwithstanding. The erection of a cross over the grave of Michael Collins in Glasnevin cemetery was subject to explicit restrictions laid out by de Valera while he was Taoiseach in 1935. The inscription had to state that the family alone had erected the cross, which was to be made of limestone and cost no more than £300. This did not stop Collins's grave becoming a site of pilgrimage and it is his image which has been printed on tea towels and mugs in the Glasnevin Museum shop. The dead can be good for business. Both the Garden of Remembrance and the Memorial Garden at Islandbridge (as mentioned earlier) fell into disrepair in the years after their openings and both have since been restored. Memory ebbs and flows. Commemorations of the revolutionary period expose the full range of Ireland's capacity for sentiment and self-loathing, animosity and amnesia. Statues, poems, songs, plays and parades have attempted to express something of the significance of the period to Irish people but perhaps the most lasting commemorative act was carried out by those who lived through the events. The witness statements collected by the

Bureau of Military History speak loudly of the nature of historical memory. It is deeply partial, personal and complex.

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