‘Imagining the past to remember the future’?: EASTER 1916 IN 2016

WHAT DO WE REMEMBER WHEN WE REMEMBER 1916?

By Fearghal McGarry

In ‘Easter, 1916’, Yeats identified the sacrifice of the insurgents with resurrection, just as Patrick Pearse had intended: ‘Life springs from death’. Many veterans also recalled the rebellion as transformative. ‘Then came like a thunderclap the 1916 Rising’, recorded Ernie O’Malley, a medical student at the time. ‘Before Easter Week was finished I had changed.’ He described ‘the strange rebirth’ that followed Pearse’s execution: ‘blood sang and pulsed, a strange love was born that was for some never to die till they lay stiff on the hillside or in quicklime near a barrack wall’. In his final memoir, published posthumously, O’Malley reflected more stoically on his life’s cause: ‘I had given allegiance to a certain ideal of freedom as personified by the Irish Republic. It had not been realised except in the mind.’ He had devoted years of his ‘broken’ life to recording the testimony of revolutionary veterans, compiling ‘notebook after notebook of material’ in the National Library in an effort to reconstruct the era. Preparing for his death (as Roy Foster has observed), O’Malley ‘first left instructions to be buried upright, facing eastwards towards his enemies the British, but added a coda: “in fact they are no longer my enemies. Each man finds his enemy within himself”.’ O’Malley’s experiences convey the protean nature of 1916, even for those who lived through it. His generation, more often than not, recalled the Rising from the perspective of the futures that they had anticipated prior to 1916, and

Below: *WHAT’S WRONG? with the New Post Office, Sackville Street, Dublin, 1818–2016*, by Seán Hillen.

the disappointments that they subsequently endured. For every generation that followed, the Rising meant something different, leading one ethnologist to ask: 'When was 1916?'

Commemoration tells us more about the present than the past

As the pre-eminent symbol of Irish nationhood rather than the week-long battle for Dublin, the Rising has lent itself to endless reinterpretation, with new meanings ascribed in response to events that occurred long after 1916; the Rising, as Pearse anticipated, transcended its context, its iconic representation 'across time and cultures' assuming greater weight in public discourse than the original event. It is often observed that commemoration tells us more about the present than the past: the militaristic tenor of the 25th anniversary was framed by the 'Emergency'; the elaborate golden jubilee in 1966 reflected Seán Lemass's efforts to fashion a constructive patriotism for a modernising state; and the muted 75th anniversary was shaped by the Troubles. Lewis Namier famously suggested that we imagine the past to remember the future. But, although more clearly shaped by the needs of the present, commemoration is—like history—the product of a dialogue between past and present, a process involving the retrieval rather than invention of aspects of the past that speak to us now.

How does the centenary differ from previous major anniversaries? While earlier anniversaries focused on 1916 or the wider War of Independence (a period that came to an abrupt end with the Truce of 1921), the centenary has been framed within a 'Decade of Centenaries' encompassing the Home Rule crisis, the First World War and the conflicts that followed. Another difference is the extensive preparations that began in 2012 with the formation of an All-Party Consultation Group on Commemorations and an Expert Advisory Group. In Northern Ireland, such was the significance

'Rising. No rent paid!'

My first memory of 1916 is of being beaten for not being able to name the signatories of the Proclamation, a less effective method of inculcating patriotism than our elderly schoolteacher assumed. Growing up in Bray, Co. Wicklow, the meaning of 1916 was absorbed through other, not particularly ideological, perspectives. Playing with my cousin in the dilapidated Victorian house owned by my maternal grandmother, a member of the Royal Dublin Society who regarded London as the centre of civilisation, we discovered a rent-book for one of the inner-city tenements she had inherited from her father. Turning to the records for April 1916, we found scrawled across the page: 'Rising. No rent paid!', an entry conveying something of the Rising's impact on 'Castle Catholics'. A framed postcard of Michael Collins on her mantelpiece testified to the family's accommodation to the new realities ushered in by the Rising, although she recalled vivid—if probably not direct—memories of soldiers killed during Easter Week.

My paternal grandmother, who lived in a terraced house in a working-class part of Bray, came from a republican family. Her Fenian husband, Mick, had helped land rifles at Howth, and led the IRA's campaign in the revolutionary backwater of Bray. Among the family papers is a notebook of press cuttings from the revolutionary period, compiled by his mother, which begin with the executions of 1916, and an almost entirely faded photograph of my grandfather in Rath internment camp. Although his pride in his activism seems evident from a photograph of him drilling elderly comrades in a re-enactment of the Rising in the 1950s, his children have no recollection of him discussing the conflict. Nor was the fact that the families took opposing sides in the Civil War mentioned when both grandmothers met. Most Irish families have similar stories, illustrating how the political abstractions of the period were subsumed into everyday life and how the legacy of 1916 was shaped by forgetting as well as by remembering, by generational memory, and by differences between public and private forms of remembering.

Above: My maternal grandmother, Moya Corcoran, and her husband, P.J. A member of the Royal Dublin Society, she regarded London as the centre of civilisation.

Below: My paternal grandfather, Mick McGarry (centre), inspecting Old IRA comrades at a 1916 commemoration in Bray, Co. Wicklow, in the 1950s.

(or anxiety) attached to it that the Executive assigned to itself the lead role in overseeing the commemorative programme. Another divergence, at least from the Troubles-era commemorations between the 50th and the 90th (when the military parade was restored to O'Connell Street), is the revived desire to remember 1916. As recently as 1994 John Waters could complain that 'We no longer talk, as a society, about 1916. The whole thing is all a bit embarrassing.'

The emphasis on pluralism marks another shift. The Irish government's 'broad and inclusive' programme encompasses social conditions, the diaspora, unionists and constitutional nationalists. It seeks to promote 'constructive dialogue' and 'foster deeper mutual understanding among people from different traditions on the island of Ireland'. The extent to which this agenda (originating, presumably, from the Department of Foreign Affairs) has been embraced across Britain and Ireland is also novel. In March 2012 the British prime minister, David Cameron, and Taoiseach Enda Kenny met at Downing Street to announce an 'intensive programme of work' to mark the beginning of the decade 'of events that helped shape our political destinies', emphasising the need for 'mutual respect, inclusiveness and reconciliation'. Notwithstanding Jim Allister's (Traditional Unionist Voice) memorable allusion to 'some foreign old grubby rebellion', the same rhetoric is echoed, if less convincingly, by the Executive's commitment to the commemorative principles of 'inclusivity, tolerance, respect … and interdependence'.

Above: The Garden of Remembrance, which opened in 1966. The elaborate golden jubilee of that year reflected Taoiseach Seán Lemass's efforts to fashion a constructive patriotism for a modernising state. (Aonghas Dwane)

'A chronicle of embarrassment'?

Who could object? Quite a lot of people, as it turned out. From 2012 to 2015, the Irish government's efforts provoked extensive criticism. In Northern Ireland, tensions between the major parties ensured a tone of bitterness rather than reconciliation, particularly on matters bearing on the local cocktail of grievances known as 'flags, parades and the past'. The low point in the South came with the launch of the government's commemorative programme in November 2014. The taoiseach's speech at the event—which was boycotted by some 1916 relatives' groups—was periodically drowned out by the noise of anti-austerity protestors banging on the windows of the GPO, while a heckler was bundled out of the building after denouncing Kenny as a 'traitor'. The video to accompany the launch, 'Ireland Inspires 2016', was appraised by a prominent member of the government's Expert Advisory Group as 'embarrassing unhistorical shit'.

In retrospect, none of this is very surprising. Ostensibly occasions of unity, commemorative processes are frequently shaped by division. Indeed, the criticism by relatives' groups, political parties, republicans and academics provides an obvious continuity with earlier anniversaries: 1916 has always been 'a chronicle of embarrassment'. The source of much of this tension is the nature of commemoration, a process that demands the subordination of the complexity of the past to the needs of the present. The difficulty of reconciling the historical event that occurred in 1916 with the conciliatory aims of the Peace Process accounted for the initially uncertain tone of official discourse. A violent insurrection by militants who aimed to destroy British power in Ireland, the Rising was not intended to deepen understanding, promote harmony or heal past divisions. Consequently, the government's video included only a fleeting glimpse of the Proclamation and, remarkably, no images of the rebel leaders or the destruction of Dublin, featuring instead Queen Elizabeth II, Ian Paisley and Katie Taylor. The *Irish Times*'s headline—'Don't mention the war'—conveyed the sceptical public response to this attempt to market violent insurrection as feel-good heritage. The débâcle was followed by the cabinet's decision to backtrack on a much-anticipated invitation to the British royal family.

Predictably, the government's struggle to find an appropriate register to commemorate the Easter Rising with historical integrity gifted its rivals an opportunity to exploit its legacy for their own ends. Supported by relatives' groups, Sinn Féin launched a rival commemorative programme to allow the Irish people—in the words of Gerry Adams—to rededicate themselves to

'the politics of … Pádraig Pearse, and James Connolly … and of Bobby Sands'. The shadow cast by partition has always complicated official commemoration of 1916. In 1966, the government's efforts to 'reverse ferret' decades of cultivating anti-partitionist grievance proved ineffective, its week-long jamboree becoming identified in popular memory—if largely erroneously—with Southern triumphalism and the subsequent outbreak of the Troubles.

A more positive view?

Such controversies might, however, be viewed more positively. The critical public response contributed to a recalibration of the government's now widely praised commemorative programme. Just as history is too important to be left to professional historians, commemoration should not be left to the state or its political parties: in Northern Ireland, where politics reinforces sectarian divisions, civic organisations are more effective in engaging with populist historical narratives. The public debates around 2016 have also raised significant issues. The Irish government's willingness to dedicate €48 million to 'flagship capital projects' and a lavish programme has been contrasted with the downgrading of history in the post-primary syllabus and the inadequate long-term funding of institutions such as the National Library. The assumptions underlying the demands made by relatives' groups may be 'un-republican' but their campaigning has helped to preserve the Rising's built heritage.

The shifting collective memory of 1916 is also noteworthy. Whereas Troubles-era remembrance was dominated by (now ebbing) ahistorical debates about the morality of republican violence, recent years have seen a willingness to acknowledge inconvenient facets of the Rising, such as the Irish nationality of many who fought for the British Crown. The last remaining victims of wartime Ireland's much-analysed collective amnesia may be the British Army soldiers killed during Easter Week. Close to a hundred, whose bodies were never claimed by their families, lie in lonely graves at Grangegorman, Kilmainham and elsewhere. Their commemoration serving no obvious purpose, they became an awkward memory: ignored, or discreetly incorporated into British memorials to the dead of the First World War. Their fate is mirrored by the neglect in British collective memory and historiography of the Rising's impact on the United Kingdom. How many British people realise that their state, in its current form, is a product of Irish revolutionary violence, or that the resulting territorial loss rivalled that of many defeated states? While Irish historians emphasise the centrality of the First World War to the attainment of Irish independence, historians of Britain still argue that the UK (as then constituted) escaped the destabilising pressures that reshaped post-war Europe. But it was not only in eastern Europe that multinational empires were torn apart by the forces unleashed by the Great War; disquieting as the thought may be, paramilitarism and state terror, sectarian conflict, and partition and secession formed part of the United Kingdom's experience of the First World War.

Despite its limitations, such as the vacuous notion of a 'shared past', the embrace of a pluralist agenda means that remembering the forgotten, including the unarmed Catholic policemen shot by rebels and the 40 children killed during Easter Week, is no longer seen as 'anti-nationalist', nor does acknowledging the rebels' idealism mark one out as a 'sneaking regarder'. The reintegration of Redmondites and nationalist servicemen into collective memory has narrowed the gap between scholarly historiography and popular history, with the Rising increasingly acknowledged to form part of (in Keith Jeffery's evocative phrase) the 'seamless robe' of Ireland's experience of the First World War. The Decade of Centenaries has contributed to this by broadening the focus from men with guns to labour activists, women and other previously overlooked groups. So, too, have archival developments such as the digitisation of the Bureau of Military History Military Service Pensions Collection, and the 1901 and 1911 censuses, which have democratised research and reinvigorated scholarship.

The impacts of the economic crisis, and of revelations about political corruption and the abuse of vulnerable citizens, have also prompted greater debate about the failure to achieve the ideals proclaimed in 1916. The collapse of clerical authority, underlined by the recent same-sex marriage referendum, has contributed to a reshaping of ideas about what it means to be Irish. Coinciding with the end of the conflict in the North, this has seen debate about 1916 shift—in a manner reminiscent of Ernie O'Malley's final epiphany—from a preoccupation with republican violence and with Ireland's relationship with England to more interesting questions about the aspirations of the revolutionary generation, and why they found it more difficult to change society than to win independence. As demonstrated by the 'Waking the Feminists' campaign, the most successful forms of commemoration, rather than merely re-enacting the past, harness its energies to allow us to imagine alternative futures.

Fearghal McGarry's The Abbey Rebels of 1916: a lost revolution *and a new edition of his* The Rising. Ireland: Easter 1916 *have recently been published.*

FURTHER READING

R.S. Grayson & F. McGarry (eds), *Remembering 1916. The Easter Rising, the Somme and the politics of memory in Ireland* (Cambridge, 2016).

R. Higgins, *Transforming 1916: meaning, memory and the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising* (Cork, 2012).

M. McCarthy, *Ireland's 1916 Rising. Explorations of history-making, commemoration & heritage in modern times* (Farnham, 2012).