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ROUNDTABLE

Historians and the Decade of Centenaries in Modern Ireland

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The Irish 'Decade of Centenaries' is, at last, drawing to a close, ending the 'interminable round of national soul-searching' which one prominent historian warily anticipated in 2013.[1] The final major event to be commemorated is the Civil War of 1922–3, when the Irish republican movement split bitterly and violently over the terms of the treaty granting the southern part of Ireland partial independence from Britain. As it turns out, the government in charge of overseeing that commemoration is a coalition made up of the two principal political parties that emerged from the aftermath of that civil war. Where for a century these parties had formed the binaries of the Irish political division, now their peaceful cooperation in government could be seen as proof of the 'end of history', Irish-style. Even erstwhile political enemies – whose ancestors one hundred years ago executed and assassinated each other – could unite in a shared project of 'inclusive' and 'ethical' commemoration informed by an expert advisory panel made up of prominent academic and public historians. Their unprecedented political cooperation would be encapsulated by the peaceful swapping of the position of Taoiseach (Prime Minister) half-way through the government's term. The third great strand of the Irish Revolution, the labour movement, was fortuitously represented by the election to the Irish Presidency in 2007 of Michael D. Higgins, an academic sociologist and former Labour Party TD (member of parliament). *Casann an roth*, as Higgins declared in one of his many addresses during the 'Decade', as it is colloquially known in Irish history parlance.[2] The wheel turns, and this time had come full circle, repairing the fractures in the national movement and restoring national political unity.

A nice vision, perhaps, but too good to be true. As we approach its end, the 'Decade' can be divided into two parts. The first was a highly segmented and dizzyingly quick procession of commemorations: the Third Home Rule Bill for those who cherished the 'constitutional nationalist' parliamentary tradition (and the parliament in question is of course Westminster), including a strong grouping within the then-governing Fine Gael party; the 1913 lockout for socialists, a boon for those critical of the punitive austerity measures imposed on Ireland by IMF and EU institutions in the wake of the financial crisis; and the outbreak of the Great War, more for constitutional nationalists, unionists, genealogists, and those who favoured a 'shared history' vision of the past, however ephemeral, and however bloodstained this vision was. This all climaxed with the centenaries of 1916: the Easter Rising, when a small group of separatist nationalists staged a short-lived rebellion in Dublin, and the Battle of the Somme, when the 36th Ulster Division fought with exceptional bravery and sacrifice. Both, as Guy Beiner has pointed out, have formed twin foundational myths for modern Irish nationalism and modern Ulster unionism.[3] The close proximity of these two events raised the tantalising prospect of 'good commemoration', as suggested by the philosopher Richard Kearney: 'a way beyond either/or binaries

1 David Fitzpatrick, 'Historians and the Commemoration of Irish Conflicts, 1912–1923', in John Horne and Edward Madigan, eds., *Towards Commemoration: Ireland in War and Revolution* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2013), 129.

2 Speech by President Michael D. Higgins, 28 Mar. 2016, available at https://president.ie/en/diary/details/president-gives-an-address-at-the-live-broadcast-of-centenary/speeches (accessed 5 Sept. 2022).

3 Guy Beiner, 'Between Trauma and Triumphalism: The Easter Rising, the Somme and the Crux of Deep Memory in Modern Ireland', *Journal of British Studies*, 46, 2 (2012), 366–89.

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toward an inclusive culture of both/and'.[4] Of course, between the centenary of the Rising and that of the Somme, another event took place, which brought the present and the past roaring back towards each other: the United Kingdom voted by 52 per cent to 48 per cent to leave the European Union. While the precise degree to which British (or English) nationalist politics will continue to destabilise Northern Ireland is still unfolding, almost every Irish politician, commentator and historian recognised the danger from the outset.[5] Suddenly, the second half of the Decade of Centenaries – covering the War of Independence, the partition of Ireland and the Civil War – took on a much more fraught aspect. These were the hard yards of the Decade in any case: when the segmented 'you have your commemorative moment, and we'll have ours' was no longer possible. These were the centenaries of assassinations, ambushes and towns burned in reprisal by British forces. This was when the messy reality of revolution, of anti-colonial war, of liberation, of counter-insurgency, and of counter-terrorism, confronted us all. Here there was little room for inclusive history.

'Inclusive history', 'shared history', 'ethical remembering'; these are all concepts which the Irish history public (professional and civilian alike) has heard repeatedly over the last ten years. Brian Cowen, the then Taoiseach, introduced the government's vision for the centenary decade in 2010:

> We want to see full acknowledgment of the totality of the island's history and the legitimacy of all the traditions on the island that draw their identity and collective memory from our shared history. We want the process of commemoration to recognise the totality of the history of the period, and all of the diversity that this encompasses.[6]

In its first communique, the Expert Advisory Group for the Decade of Centenaries identified its aim for commemoration – 'to broaden sympathies without having to abandon loyalties' – and urged that 'commemorative events should reflect or explore history with a true integrity, and the particular arrangements for each event should enable the acknowledgement by different traditions, without recrimination, of a shared history'.[7] Simultaneously, they warned that 'there should be no attempt to contrive a historical or retrospective consensus about the contemporary impact and legacy of divisive events.'[8] President Michael D. Higgins has been one of the foremost promoters of 'ethical remembrance', in his assiduously published speeches, and especially in his addresses to his 'Machnamh' seminar series.

> Commemoration itself can therefore be an important aspect of ethical remembering. . . . Ethical remembering requires us to include those who may hitherto have been excluded from official, formal accounts of history, and to shine a light on overlooked figures and actions in an attempt to have a more comprehensive and balanced perspective on the independence struggle.[9]

North of the border, the Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund drew up 'Principles for Remembering' in 2010: '(1) start from the historical facts; (2) recognise the implications

[4] Richard Kearney, 'Can We Commemorate 1916 and the Somme Together?', *The Irish Times*, 16 July 2016.

[5] Roy Foster, 'The Return of the Repressed: Brexit and the Irish Question', *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 July 2017; Peter Leary, 'Negotiating Ireland's Decade of Centenaries in the New Age of Brexit', *History Workshop Journal*, 85 (spring 2018), 295–301.

[6] 'A Decade of Commemorations Commemorating Our Shared History', speech by An Taoiseach, Mr Brian Cowen TD, Institute for British Irish Studies, University College Dublin. Available at: https://www.community-relations.org.uk/sites/crc/files/media-files/Brian%20Cowan%20Speech%20A%20Decade%20of%20Commemorations%20Commemorating%20Our%20Shared%20History%20Institute%20for%20British%20Irish%20Studies%20UCD%2C%2020%20May%202010.doc.

[7] Initital Statement of the Advisory Group on Commemorations. Available at: https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/wp-content/uploads/publications/Initial/Initial/index.html.

[8] Ibid.

[9] President Michael D. Higgins, 'Of Centenaries and the Hospitality Necessary in Reflecting on Memory, History and Forgiveness', 4 Dec. 2020. Available: at https://president.ie/en/diary/details/president-hosts-machnamh-100-event/speeches (accessed 5 Sept. 2022). See also Michael D. Higgins, *When Ideas Matter: Speeches for an Ethical Republic* (London: Head of Zeus, 2016).

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and consequences of what happened; (3) understand that different perceptions and interpretations exist; (4) show how events and activities can deepen understanding of the period; all to be seen in the context of an inclusive and accepting society.'[10] As Jonathan Evershed has noted, a suggestion lingered in some parts of the community relations sector in Northern Ireland that commemorating partition and the foundation of Northern Ireland could provide some anticipatory reconciliation for the even more vigorously contested memory and legacy of the recent Troubles.[11] Some of the commentary around this suggests something of a straw man, where scholars believe they have found, at last, proof positive that the Irish Decade of Commemorations has been fatally compromised by presentism. But these criticisms are misguided: Irish historians (as well as colleagues in other fields) have long recognised that commemoration is intrinsically about the present at least as much as it is about the past.

Commemorations, as President Higgins alluded to, have in and of themselves a long and contested history in Ireland and have been the subject of much historical scholarship. The commemoration of the Battle of the Boyne of 1690 began in the late eighteenth century, amidst heightened sectarian and political tensions. The centenary of the 1798 rebellion in the late nineteenth century was a focal point for a political and cultural radicalisation that culminated in the Irish Revolution. In the twentieth century, although the perception that the commemorations to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising contributed to the outbreak of the Northern Ireland troubles has been shown to have been overstated, it was a powerful myth nonetheless.[12] After the military parade by Irish Defence Forces was cancelled in 1972, commemorations grew more muted, as violence engulfed the North. The seventy-fifth anniversary of the Rising in 1991 was barely marked. It was not until 2006 that the military parade was restored, by a Fianna Fáil Taoiseach anxious to shore up his republican flank from the electoral threat posed by the growth in popularity of Sinn Féin. The Northern Troubles continued to provide the fundamental lens through which commemorations of all sorts in Ireland were viewed. The 150th anniversary of the Famine was briskly commemorated from 1995–7, including symbolic reenactments of walks along Famine roads and a concert of Irish and Irish-American music at Millstreet, County Cork, at which Irish actor Gabriel Byrne read out a statement of regret from then British Prime Minister Tony Blair.[13] Of course, by then the new Labour government was preparing to put its weight behind the burgeoning peace process. The almost-apology was welcomed by their Irish counterparts as part of the delicate two-handed reel which accompanied the political process. Hot on the heels of the Famine commemoration came the bicentenary of the 1798 rebellion. Heralded by the Irish government as 'the birth of democracy in Ireland', much emphasis was given to the rebels, particularly in Ulster, comprising Presbyterians along with Catholics (and a much smaller number of Anglicans). Here, then, was an apparently perfect alignment with the climax of the peace process, symbolised by the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998. Before long, though, the commemorations – underpinned by a bonanza of government funding as the Celtic Tiger began to roar – degenerated into a noted historiographical bust-up. The charge was that the historical integrity of the events commemorated had been compromised by present-day political expediency, that the democratic credentials of the rebellion were over-exaggerated to provide historical ballast for the peace process, and that the unsavoury sectarian elements – far more discomfiting to notions of reconciliation – were being airbrushed from the historical record.[14]

[10] 'Principles for Remembering in a Public Space'. Available at: https://www.community-relations.org.uk/sites/crc/files/media-files/Decades-principles-2021.pdf (accessed 5 Sept. 2022).

[11] Jonathan Evershed, 'A Matter of Fact? The Propaganda of Peace and Ulster Loyalist Hauntology during the "Decade of Centenaries"', in Fiona Larkin and Fiona Murphy, eds., *Memory and Recovery in Times of Crisis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 13–15.

[12] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (Dublin: Hutchinson, 1972); see also Mary Daly and Margaret O'Callaghan, eds., *1916 in 1966* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007).

[13] It was revealed in 2012 that the 'apology' was in fact penned by civil servants, without Blair's approval. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/20/tony-blairs-apology-for-irish-famine-written-by-aides-papers-reveal. As a young teenager I was present at this concert, but my abiding memory is of singer Shane McGowan having his cigarette replaced between his lips by a flunkie running on stage between songs.

[14] See Tom Dunne, *Rebellions: Memoir, Memory and 1798*, 2nd edn (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2010) and Thomas Barlett, David Dickson, Daire Keogh and Kevin Whelan, eds., *1798: A Bicentenary Perspective* (Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2003).

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Importantly, although many historians participated in the 1798 bicentenary events, only one, Kevin Whelan, was an official historical advisor to the National Commemoration Committee, which assumed responsibility for both the 1798 and Famine commemorations. As such, it was easy for the criticisms of the official messaging surrounding the 1997–8 commemorations – and defences – to take on a distinctly personal tone. As Guy Beiner has noted, however, despite what might be thought of as a Gramscian model of commemoration, with historians acting as hegemonic agents, in reality the commemorative model in 1798 was contested from the outset, both within and outside the academy.[15]

The official interpretative framework of the centenary of the Irish Revolution, then, can only be understood within the context of these previous, politicised centenaries and within the context of the evolution of Anglo-Irish and North-South relations since the 1990s. The first reciprocal state visits between the United Kingdom and Ireland occurred in 2011 and 2014 respectively, with the visit of Queen Elizabeth in particular to Ireland in 2011 notable for the inclusivity, balance and historical sensitivity in the official schedule (the Queen laid a wreath at the Garden of Remembrance, which commemorates all those who died for Irish independence, before laying a second wreath at the Islandbridge War Memorial, which commemorates those who died fighting for the United Kingdom during the Great War). These were widely understood as part of the preparatory work for the centenaries. But even within that more optimistic atmosphere, there were some missteps. 'Inclusive history' had its limits. In 2014, an official video to advertise the upcoming Rising centenary eschewed the historical events themselves in favour of forward-looking motivational slogans and a montage featuring the Queen and the then Prime Minister David Cameron (among others):

> Remember where we came from; Reconcile our different journeys; Imagine our future together; Present our best to the world; Celebrate our past, present and future; in 2016, let's build a new legacy of hope, belief, possibility, and confidence. Ireland 2016.[16]

This was corporate Ireland speaking, positioning the centenary as part of the economic recovery (tellingly, the logos of major software companies also featured in the video). 'Unhistorical shit', declared a member of the Expert Advisory Group – speaking in a personal capacity – and there was a furious public reaction, including outrage from 1916 relatives' groups. The video was indeed very bad, so much so that I remember where I was when I saw it for the first time. But the reaction was also interesting: what many people found objectionable was the instrumentalisation of history for a national PR campaign and the shoving of reconciliation down people's throats. The centenary was being treated again as a 'teaching moment' for wayward national(ist) children on how to focus on a better future. The government was forced to withdraw the offending video, and pledged to 'do better'.

The perils of trying to combine a historical commemoration with a national marketing campaign might have been foreseen, but arguably what the episode ultimately allowed was for much more active participation by the public in the commemorative events. In April 2016, the Reflecting the Rising hit the streets of Dublin, a vibrant public history festival-come-roadshow, mirrored across the country, in which academic historians were just one component. This of course was further facilitated by modern communications and especially social media, but it is of a piece with the counter-hegemonic tendency identified by Beiner in 1998. Irish public history, then, was becoming more visible, more active (or activist) and more collaborative, bringing together heritage professionals, old and new media, those working in the archives sector, along with a large number of history enthusiasts in the Irish public. Ciarán O'Neill and Thomas Cauvin identified this trend in 2017 as the 'democraticisation' of Irish history, and it has been accelerated by largescale digitisation projects funded by the Irish state at both

[15] Guy Beiner, 'Commemorating 1798 in 1998', in Terry Botherstone, Anna Clark and Kevin Whelan, eds., *These Fissured Isles: Ireland, Scotland and British History, 1798–1848* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2005), 221–41. For parallels with the controversies surrounding the bicentenary of the French Revolution, see Stephen Laurence Kaplan, *Farewell, Revolution: The Historians' Feud, France, 1789/1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

[16] https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/don-t-mention-the-war-1916-video-fails-to-mention-rising-1.1999460.

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central and local levels.[17] The Expert Advisory Group had identified digitisation projects as a key aspect of the Decade of Centenaries, and from 2011 significant funding was devoted to continuing digitisation work. This has had a transformative effect on the ability of 'amateur' historians to engage in their own historical research in and around the commemorative period. Local archives, too, have begun digitising their materials in substantial quantities, benefiting from further rounds of government funding. Funds have also been allocated to appointing 'Historians in Residence' at a number of county councils, generally tasked with creating and curating a public engagement programme, including in the digital sphere.

The 1916 video was merely a clearing of the throat before a second, much more explosive commemorative controversy, when in January 2020 it was proposed to hold an official service of remembrance to commemorate those who served in the Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police (in other words, the British-controlled police forces, also including the notorious 'Black and Tans', reinforcements to the RIC who had carried out a campaign of reprisals against the civilian population) prior to Irish independence.[18] A political storm erupted, with an election pending just a month later: the governing Fine Gael party (descended from those who supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty) defended the proposals from fierce criticism from almost every other part of the political spectrum, although it was privately acknowledged that the affair was something of a solo run by then Minister for Justice Charlie Flanagan. Sinn Féin, then at the crest of a wave of popularity, decried the plans as 'Fine Gael revisionism', defeated by 'people power'.[19] The Expert Advisory Group of historians was also dragged into this controversy. Their guidance for the 'Second Phase' of the centenary decade had suggested 'specific initiatives to commemorate' the RIC, although they were careful to disaggregate this suggestion from the recommendation for an official commemoration of the foundation of the Garda Síochána (the Irish police service) in 1922.[20] Some spoke publicly to criticise the government; others preferred silence. In a subsequent general election, Fine Gael lost fifteen seats, and Sinn Féin gained fourteen. After lengthy negotiations, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil (the two dominant parties arising from the civil war division) formed a coalition alongside the Green Party. Sinn Féin are now the main opposition party, and widely expected to form the next government.

This, then was the commemorative context in which the Covid-19 pandemic began in Ireland: a recent historiographical storm, and a sense in which a commemorative line had been crossed. Commemorating an oppressive colonial counter-insurgency force (the Black and Tans) was too much to ask, even in the framework of 'inclusive' history. The upheaval surrounding Brexit and attempts to reach a withdrawal agreement were also part of this backdrop: a widespread sense that, a century on, the island of Ireland was being destabilised by the machinations of a group of Tory 'die-hards'. But the pandemic had commemorative effects of its own. As events moved largely online, historians along with other academics formed part of the 'Zoomocracy'. Although the shift online made it possible for the history public to attend many events, conferences, and seminars, these online events became (perhaps unavoidably) elitist. Speakers frequently could not see the audience, questions from the audience, when allowed, could be

[17] Ciarán O Neill and Thomas Cauvin, 'Negotiating Public History in the Republic of Ireland: Collaborative, Applied and Usable Practices for the Profession', *Historical Research*, 90, 250 (2017), 810–28.

[18] Both forces had been disbanded when the Irish Free State was formed. The RIC in particular is the subject of an extensive historical literature, ranging from that emphasising their colonial origins and facilitation of a widespread system of surveillance of the Irish population, to work stressing the change in the character of the RIC by the turn of the century, and recent work exploring the connections between the RIC and other colonial police forces. For examples of each of these themes, see Margaret O'Callaghan, 'New Ways of Looking at the State Apparatus and the State Archive in Nineteenth Century Ireland: Curiosities from that Phonetic Museum -– Royal Irish Constabulary Reports and their Political Uses, 1879–91', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Section C*, 104c, 2, 37–56; Elizabeth Malcolm, *The Irish Policeman, 1822–1922: A Life* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008); and Seán William Gannon, *The Irish Imperial Service: Policing Palestine and Administering the Empire, 1922–1966* (London: Palgrave, 2019).

[19] Tweet by Mary Lou McDonald, President of Sinn Féin, 7 Jan. 2020, available at https://twitter.com/MaryLouMcDonald/status/1214610397023670273?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1214610397023670273%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bbc.co.uk%2Fnews%2Fworld-europe-51026428.

[20] Expert Advisory Committee on Centenary Commemorations, *Decade of Centenaries: Second Phase Guidance, 2018–2023*, 17.

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screened, sifted and left aside, and the informal space before, around and after events disappeared. The Machnamh seminars, mentioned above, are a good example of this: despite thought-provoking contributions from leading scholars, the format was closed and slightly sterile.

Other global events also buffeted the Decade: the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd and the Rhodes Must Fall campaigns protesting the persistence of colonial imagery in the public sphere had an effect on Irish public history. Orientalist statues of 'Nubian princesses' outside the Shelbourne Hotel (a building with its own revolutionary history and the site where the Irish Constitution of 1922 was drafted) were momentarily removed, in turn prompting an outcry. More generally, there was a renewal of academic and public interest in the question of Ireland's relationship with the British Empire: again, the binary of 'colonised or coloniser' obscured much nuanced historical scholarship since at least the 1990s, and online commentary was frequently abusive and hostile. Into these stormy waters came the centenary of the partition of Ireland and the foundation of Northern Ireland. As Marie Coleman has pointed out, two partitions occurred in 1920–2: one of the island of Ireland, and the other of the United Kingdom as it was then constituted.[21] These events were just as consequential for 'east-west' political arrangements (encompassing Britain and Ireland) as they were for 'north-south'. Yet the British government has adopted a largely hands-off approach to the centenaries. This is true for both the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010–15 and the subsequent Conservative governments. Whereas participation in the Taoiseach's Expert Advisory Panel was largely uncontroversial, the same cannot be said of the Historical Advisory Panel to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, of which I was a member. The announcement of the formation of the panel was covered in the press, and it was reported that unnamed historians had declined to participate. Matters were complicated further by the persistent confusion of the Centenary Forum (comprised of political representatives, to which nationalist parties had refused to nominate) with the Historical Advisory Panel. The pandemic also affected our work, making planned events impossible and informal conversations, including with our counterparts south of the border, more difficult. But it also provided, perhaps, a welcome distraction from full-throttle commemoration wars which, in the context of increasingly febrile Northern Irish politics, are a proxy for wider debate about contemporary and future direction for that polity.

Trying to step back from all this, what can we say about the role of historians in these commemorations? The first is to note the visibility of historians in official advisory groups: their advice about which events to commemorate and the overall approach has shaped government policy. But advisors advise, and ministers decide. Both historical advisory panels have strictly emphasised their independence, and key decisions about how, when, and what to commemorate seem to have been taken by politicians and officials. So, while acknowledging the part historians have played in the commemorations, we must be careful not to blow our own trumpet too much, even in the context of the 'impact' agenda of the current higher education landscape. Secondly, we should acknowledge the impact of contemporary events both on the commemorations and historical scholarship, whether it be Brexit, the pandemic, or Black Lives Matter. Doing so does not invalidate the content of our arguments: we are all products of our environment. But we should be alert to what seems to be an emerging physical and analytical gap between the 'history public' and the historical profession, a gap which might also be visible elsewhere in European history. Lastly, in spite of all this, or perhaps as a result of it, the Decade of Centenaries has been notable for an outbreak of historiographical peacefulness within the academy. In part, this is due precisely to the idea of 'inclusive history' built on 'narrative hospitality'. When all narratives are to be welcomed, the stakes decline precipitously. There is no grand interpretative dispute akin to the revisionist debate of the 1980s and 1990s, probably to everyone's relief. Whether or not this is healthy for the historical profession remains to be seen.

[21] Marie Coleman, 'The Creation of Northern Ireland: Home Rule for Unionists', available at https://www.agendani.com/the-creation-of-northern-ireland-home-rule-for-unionists/.

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