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Geography, landscape and memory

On a grey, wet Sunday in October 2001 the bodies of nine men executed and buried in Mountjoy gaol in Dublin were exhumed and reinterred at Glasnevin cemetery.1 Thousands of people lined the streets of Dublin to watch the passing of the funeral cortege, while tens of thousands witnessed the event as it was broadcast live on the national television network. With full state honours, the coffins, draped in the Irish tricolour, were publicly paraded from the gaol to the Catholic Pro-Cathedral in central Dublin where a concelebrated requiem mass was held before the bodies were transported for burial to Glasnevin cemetery. A graveside oration, delivered by the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister), was accompanied by the sounding of three rounds of ammunition and the playing of the Last Post and national anthem. While some controversy surrounded the day’s events, by and large the ceremony was deemed a fitting, dignified and noble occasion of reconciliation and remembrance. The men concerned were Irish Republican Army (IRA) Volunteers executed eighty years earlier, under British authority, at Mountjoy gaol during the War of Independence 1920–21.2 Their bodies had been buried in the grounds of the prison and their re-interring at Glasnevin cemetery had been mooted over subsequent decades. The final symbolic recognition of their sacrifice through the performance of a state funeral on a rainy autumnal day in 2001 reinforces the significance of the dead in the arousal of the collective and personal memories of the living.

In the Taoiseach’s oration he claimed that: ‘The big powers had said that it was for the small nations that the First World War was fought. The people of Ireland were determined that the principle of national self-determination must also be extended to the Irish nation.’3 The lexical juxtaposition of the First World War

1 There were actually ten men’s bodies exhumed but Patrick Maher, at the request of his family, was re-interred in a cemetery in his home county of Limerick.

2 The men executed were Kevin Barry, Thomas Whelan, Patrick Moran, Patrick Doyle, Bernard Ryan, Frank Flood, Thomas Bryan, Thomas Traynor, Edmund Foley and Patrick Maher.

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with the question of Irish independence reminds us of the real proximity of the global conflict that was the Great War and the local conflict that was the Irish independence movement. The overlapping of these powerful political moments would be crucial for the development of a memorial landscape in Ireland to those who died in the Great War. Where the dead are concerned Verdery reminds us that ‘Remains are concrete, yet protean,’ and it is precisely the protean nature of the rituals of remembrance dedicated to Irish men and women killed in the First World War that is the central concern of this study. This book situates efforts to publicly remember those who sacrificed their lives in the war within the context of a set of competing narratives of cultural identity evident in Ireland in the years preceding and following the war. This context acted both as a theatrical stage in which remembrance took place and a temporal stage in which rituals of public commemoration would be marked, rehearsed and repeated in the decades following the war.

Time, memory and representation

The central preoccupation of Al Pacino’s late twentieth-century documentary movie Looking for Richard is making sense of a play written four centuries ago about an English king who reigned for two years. As an exercise in translation, Pacino’s treatment of the play brings into sharp relief the challenges and possibilities presented by attempting to re-enact, re-stage, re-interpret and re-memorise an historical drama. The interpretation and performance of the play by an American cast, the location of the play in New York city and the conversations held between the cast, Shakespearean specialists, construction workers, high-school students and taxi drivers all underpin the questions that the movie raises about how the meaning of past events can be conveyed to contemporary audiences. The adverb of present time – Now – which dramatically introduces the opening speech of the play, delivered by Gloster, immediately unfetters the temporal chain of sequence usually deployed to evoke time’s past and past times. To remember the past is to remember it now and each rehearsal of Richard III arises from the perspective of ‘Now’, and Pacino’s search for meaning is one moment in that quest for meaning. From discussions of iambic pentameters, the internecine intrigue of the English court, the psycho-political and sexual motivations of the characters, the costuming of the actors, the War of the Roses, Pacino’s documentary film makes transparent both the process of interpretation and the interpretation itself as it is represented by this particular cast. In so doing it makes visible the complex relationship between the context and text in any rendition of the past.

The translation of meaning across space and time is central both to the rituals of everyday life and to the exceptional moments of remembrance associated with

birth, death and other key events in personal and collective histories. Memory as re-collection, re-membering and re-presentation is crucial in the mapping of historical moments and in the articulation of identity. As Jonathan Boyarin has put it ‘memory is neither something pre-existent and dormant in the past nor a projection from the present, but a potential for creative collaboration between present consciousness and the experience or expression of the past’.  

Maurice Halbwachs’ work On Collective Memory was the first critical attempt to give some sort of definition to the idea of social memory. For Halbwachs, collective or social memory was rooted in his belief that common memories of the past among a social group, tied by kinship, class or religion, link individuals in the group with a common shared identity when the memories are invoked. Social memory is a way in which a social group can maintain its collective identity over time and it is through the social group that individuals recall these memories. But, as Withers has commented, this analysis itself is ‘rooted in that concern for continuities evident in the longue durée tradition of French Annaliste historiography and in acceptance of a rather uncritical, “superorganic” notion of culture’. While Halbwachs is right to socialise the concept of memory his analysis fails to historicise memory and embrace the notion that the very concept of the ‘social’ may itself have a history and indeed a geography.

Conventionally the ‘art of memory’ since Romanticism has been ideologically separated from history in Western historiographical traditions where memory is subjective, selective and uncritical while history is objective, scientific and subject to empirical scrutiny. With the demise of peasant societies, Nora suggests that true memory ‘which has taken refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body’s inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories’ has been replaced by modern memory which is self-conscious, historical and archival. More recent work on social memory has emphasised the discursive role of memory in the articulation of an identity politics and in particular the role of elite and dominant memory, mobilised by the powerful, to pursue specific political objectives. The distinction between ‘authentic’ and  

7 C. Withers, ‘Place, memory, monument: memorializing the past in contemporary Highland Scotland’, Ecumene, 3 (1996), 326.  
10 There is a vast literature covering this theme but included as some of the most important are P. Hutton, History as an art of memory (Burlington, VT, 1993); J. Le Goff, History and memory, trans. S. Rendall and E. Clamen (New York, 1992); D. Krell, Of memory, reminiscence and writing (Bloomington, 1990); G. Lipsitz, Time passages: collective memory and American popular culture (Minneapolis, 1990); D. Middleton and D. Edwards, eds., Collective remembering (London, 1990). P. Nora, ed., Realms of memory: Vol. 11: Traditions (Chichester, 1997).
modern memory is particularly persuasive when connected with a style of politics associated with the rise of the national state. The development of extra-local memories is intrinsic to the mobilisation of an ‘imagined community’ of nationhood, and new memories necessitate the collective amnesia or forgetting of older ones. In particular, where elites are concerned Connerton suggests that ‘it is now abundantly clear that in the modern period national elites have invented rituals that claim continuity with an appropriate historic past, organising ceremonies/parades and mass gatherings, and constructing new ritual spaces’. In a fascinating study of the emergence of nationalist politics in Germany, Mossé investigates how the ‘new politics’ ‘attempted to draw the people into active participation in the national mystique through rites and festivals, myths and symbols which gave concrete expression to the general will’. Resisting analyses which focus primarily on the political and economic transformations which precipitated the evolution of the nation-state, Mossé’s study shifts the historical emphasis towards the cultivation of a collective memory by focusing on the aesthetics and symbolism central to German nationalism. He claims: ‘it [nationalism] represented itself to many, perhaps most people, through a highly stylised politics, and in this way managed to form them into a movement’. As such, the role of re-membering the past – the putting together of its constituent parts into a single, coherent narrative – has been profoundly significant for the emergence of a popular nationalist identity. The deployment of the body as an analogy of the nation-state, a genealogy of people with common origins, co-exists with a claim that the state acts as a guarantor of individual rights and freedoms that transcend historical time and the constraints of the past. Paradoxically, then, in the context of national identity, social memory as mediated through political elites both legitimates and simultaneously denies the significance of remembrance of things past.

While, at its most basic level, memory can be said to operate at the scale of the individual brain and thus avoid a concept of memory that suggests it has a superorganic quality, it is also necessarily the case that memories are shared, exchanged and transformed among groups of individuals. In this sense there are collective memories which arise from the inter-subjective practices of signification that are not fixed but are re-created through a set of rules of discourse that are periodically contestable. This can be seen, for instance, in the collective memory of the American Civil War as expressed through the erecting of public statues. Rather than reflecting the serious division between pro- and anti-slavery lobbies in the United States, they were gradually perceived ‘as part of a healthy process of sectional reconciliation – a process that everyone knew but no one said was for and...”

12 On the idea of the invention of national traditions, see the seminal work E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., The invention of tradition (Cambridge, 1983).
15 Ibid., 214.
between whites'. The context of signification in this case was the reconciliation of northern and southern whites in the rules of a discourse, which denied black memory and thus blurred the South’s defence of slavery. This visual interpretation of the Civil War, however, did not exist completely uncontested and there were three statues erected to represent blacks. Two of these monuments displayed a single black soldier amongst a group of combatants. The third – the Shaw memorial – erected in Boston in 1897 and designed by the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, was of the commander Robert Gould Shaw surrounded by his regiment of black troops. This facilitated ‘opposing readings of its commemorative intent’ and underlines the periodic capacity for memories to be contested in the public sphere.

There is a considerable literature emphasising the politics of memory, especially where dominant groups in society are concerned, vis-à-vis their shaping of interpretations of the past. Yet it is increasingly clear that the social process involved in memorialisation is hotly contested with respect not only to form and structure but also to the meaning attached to the representation. Popular memory can be a vehicle through which dominant, official renditions of the past can be resisted by mobilising groups towards social action but also through the maintenance of an oppositional group identity embedded in subaltern memories. The deployment of local and oral histories in the formation of group identities can be a powerful antidote to both state and academic narratives of the past, especially where marginalised groups are concerned. The controversies surrounding the remembering of the Holocaust through the conversion of death camps into ‘memorial’ camps to the genocide of the Second World War is a case in point. In Auschwitz, for instance, the competing aspirations of Polish nationalists, communists, Catholics and Jews to control the representation of the Holocaust there has influenced the physical structure of the site and the meaning attached to it by these various groups. In this sense, rather than treating memory as the manipulative action of the powerful to narrate the past to suit their particular interests, a fuller account might follow Samuel who suggests that one ‘might think of the invention of tradition as a process rather than an event, and memory, even in its silences, as something which people made for themselves’. The capacity which people have to formulate and represent their

18 Ibid., 136.
20 See, for instance, K. Armstrong and H. Benyon, eds., Hello are you working?! Memories of the thirties in the northeast of England (Durham, 1977).
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own memories, however, is regularly constrained by the discursive field in which they operate and literally the space in which their pronouncements, both figurative and literal, are made. As Sherman reminds us, ‘commemoration is also cultural: it inscribes or reinscribes a set of symbolic codes, ordering discourses, and master narratives that recent events, perhaps the very ones commemorated, have disrupted, newly established, or challenged’.23 If memory is conceived as a recollection and representation of times past, it is equally a recollection of spaces past where the imaginative geography of previous events is in constant dialogue with the current metaphorical and literal spatial setting of the memory-makers.

Space, memory and representation

The role of space in the art and the act of memory has a long genealogy in European thought. In the ancient and medieval worlds memory was treated as a visual rather than a verbal activity, one which focused on images more than words. The immense dialectal variation and low levels of literacy perhaps account for the primacy of the visual image over other types of representation. Visual images like the stained glass window and other religious icons came to embed a sacred narrative in the minds of their viewers. They became mnemonic devices in religious teaching where sacred places became symbolically connected to particular ideal qualities. Networks of shrines, pilgrimage routes and grottoes, sited for commemorative worship, formed a sacred geography where the revelations of a Christian God could be remembered, spatially situated and adored.24 A mapping of the narrative of Christianity through a predominantly visual landscape formed the basis of memory work through the Middle Ages.25

While during the Renaissance and Enlightenment the conception of memory work altered scale (to the astral) and focus (towards the scientific rather than the religious), and was expressed at times architecturally by viewing the world from a height,26 it was during the period of Romanticism that a more introspective, personal and localised view of memory came into focus. Memory in this guise came to be seen as the recovery of things lost to the past, the innocence of childhood and childhood spaces, for instance, and this divorced memory work from any scientific endeavour to make sense of the world or the past. It transformed the role of memory to the scale of the individual and perhaps created the preconditions for divorcing history from memory and separating intellectually the objective spatial narratives of history from the subjective experience of memory places. But as Samuel persuasively argues, ‘far from being merely a passive receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past, [memory] is rather an active, shaping force; that it is dynamic – what it contrives symptomatically to forget is as important as

26 Yates, *The art of memory*.
what it remembers – and that it is dialectically related to historical thought, rather
than being some kind of negative other to it’.27

By treating memory as a dialectic of history, in constant dialogue with the past,
we begin to see how the dualistic thinking underwriting the division of history and
memory becomes more problematic. This is particularly the case in relation to the
spatiality of history and memory. The gradual transformation of a sacred geography
of religious devotion to a secularised sacred geography connected with identity in
the modern period destabilises the rigid lines of demarcation drawn between objec-
tive/subjective narration; emotional/abstract sources of evidence; local/universal
ways of knowing. Treating memory as a legitimate form of historical understand-
ing has opened new avenues of research where subjective renderings of the past
become embedded in the processes of interpretation and not as a counterpoint to
objective facts. Nation-building exercises, colonial expansion in the non-European
world, regional, ethnic and class identity formation, all embrace an imaginative
and material geography, made sacred in the spaces of remembrance and continu-
ously remade, contested, revised and transmuted as fresh layers of meaning attend
to the spaces. Geographers, historians, anthropologists and cultural theorists are
increasingly paying attention to the processes involved in the constitution and
routing of memory spaces, and especially to the symbolic resonances of such
spaces to the formation, adaptation and contestation of popular belief systems.

In particular, studies have focused on the role of commemorative spaces and
memory making in the articulation of national identity. In the context of the United
States, the intersections between vernacular and official cultural expressions have
been demonstrated to create a series of commemorative sites and rituals which
attempt to combine some of the divergent sources of memory (e.g. local, ethnic,
gender) with nationalising ones. The vocabulary of patriotism is particularly im-
portant ‘because it has the capacity to mediate both vernacular loyalties to local
and familiar places and official loyalties to national and imagined structures’.28

Similarly, because of the divergent allegiances generated by specific sites of mem-
ory, they operate multivocally and are read in divergent and at times contradictory
ways. The commemoration of the American Civil War points to the underlying
fissures evoked by remembrance of a divisive episode in a state’s history. The
spatiality of memory is not only mirrored in the physical distribution of com-
memorative sites but also in the interpretative apparatus embedded in them. For
instance, the commemorative statue to General Lee in Richmond, Virginia focuses
on his role as an American hero who fought out of loyalty to his home state and
obscures the larger political and racial politics which undergirded the war.29

28 J. Bodnar, Remaking America: public memory, commemoration and patriotism in the twentieth
29 For a discussion of Civil War monuments see S. Davis, ‘Empty eyes, marble hand: the Confederate
monument and the South’, Journal of Popular Culture, 16 (1982), 2–21; G. M. Foster, Ghosts of the
Confederacy: defeat, the lost cause, and the emergence of the new South (Oxford, 1987); H. E. Gulley,
equestrian statue on Monument Avenue was part of a larger speculative real-estate venture where an expensive residential subdivision of property was laid out along the long avenue. Linking business, art and memorywork, the ‘legitimation of Lee in national memory helped erase his status as traitor, as “other”, leaving otherness to reside in the emancipated slaves and their descendants, who could not possibly accept Lee as their hero’.30 The controversy surrounding the siting, design and iconographic effect of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Washington DC is also an exemplary case. The public’s ambiguous response to America’s role in the war was further highlighted in attempts to commemorate the event. The heated debate underpinning the choice of design and designer, combined with the siting of the memorial along the Mall – a thoroughfare of national remembrance – reveals the regional, ethnic, social and gender tensions that this act of memorialisation brought to the surface.31

Discussions of nation-building projects and the memory spaces associated with them have been analysed as a form of mythology – a system of story-telling in which that which is historical, cultural and situated appears natural, innocent and outside of the contingencies of politics and intentionality. Drawing from semiology and linguistics such work claims that ‘the apparent innocence of landscapes is shown to have profound ideological implications…and surreptitiously justifies the dominant values of an historical period’.32 Geographers have extensively explored the promotion of specific landscape images as embodiments of national identity.33 Historians have paid attention to the evolution of particular festivals, rituals,


public holidays and so on in the evolution of the ‘myth’ of nationhood. Others have explored the social relations underpinning a particular landscape. Schorske’s exploration of the nineteenth-century redesign of the Ringstrasse in Vienna as a ‘visual expression of the values of a social class’ meshes a discussion of the economic and political with the aesthetic in the reconceptualisation of the urban form. While Harvey’s analysis of the Basilica of Sacr´e-Coeur in Paris refashions our understanding of that space by emphasising its connections with the tumultuous class politics of that city in the nineteenth century, it also reminds us that what the basilica stands for is not readily clear from the representation itself. The materiality of a particular site of memory sometimes masks the material social relations undergirding its production by focusing the eye on its aesthetic representation independent of the sometimes less visible ideas (social, economic, cultural power relations) underlying the representation. It is often then in the realm of ideas, however contested and contradictory, that the meaning of memory spaces is embedded. What idea or set of ideas are stimulated by memories made material in the landscape?

The emphasis on visual interpretations of the memory landscapes that undergirded medieval sacred geographies continues to animate discussions of landscape interpretation today. The treatment of a landscape as a text which is read, and actively reconstituted in the act of reading as the ‘context of any text is other texts’, including conventional written texts as well as political and economic institutions, reinscribes the visual as the central action of interpretation. While offering a more nuanced understanding of the act of reading any landscape and the possibility of decoding the messages within any space, the text metaphor may overemphasise the power to subvert the meaning of landscape through its reading, without necessarily providing a space in which to change the landscape itself. Hegemonic and subaltern readings, in other words, may take precedence over hegemonic and subaltern productions. In the context of the First World War, for instance, the


desire to forget, erase and bury the memory of the war among veterans may have
run contrary to the desire to remember, erect and exhume the memory of the war
among non-combatants. The focus on the metaphor of the text also tends to un-
derestimate the aural dimension of texts where, in the past, reading was a spoken
activity. Reading texts aloud where the sounds, rhythms and syntax of the words are
collectively absorbed directs attention to the social nature of interpretation which
embraces senses other than the purely visual. Treating the landscape as a theatre or
stage broadens the imaginative scope of interpretation by suggesting that life gets
played out as social action and social practice as much as it does by the reading
implied by the text metaphor. As Cosgrove argues, ‘landscapes provide a stage for
human action, and, like a theatre set, their own part in the drama varies from that
of an entirely discreet unobserved presence to playing a highly visible role in the
performance’. This notion of landscape as theatre could be further extended, not
solely as the backdrop in which the action takes place but as actively constituting
the action. The stage acts more than as the context for the performance; it is the
performance itself.

The idea of life as drama played out through spectacle is particularly helpful
when considering the memory of war. Where spectacle is concerned, ‘It could
take on the sense of a mirror through which truth which cannot be stated di-
rectly may be seen reflected and perhaps distorted.’ To make sense of the drama
of intense physical conflict and the human losses attendant on it requires both
dramatic and silent modes of remembrance. That romantic notions of memory
seemed inadequate to deal with the losses of the First World War is evidenced
by the fact that enormous collective and individual efforts were made to articu-
late that sense of loss through public performance. From literary texts that had
widespread circulation to the massive war cemeteries created in France and else-
where, the very technology of modernity that facilitated such a massive loss of
life also facilitated acts of mass commemoration. Nonetheless, to represent such
events was to try to make sense of them while simultaneously engaging in the very
crisis of representation that the pain of war engendered. This book is precisely
concerned with the variety of ways in which the First World War was repre-
sented – the silent and noisy spaces of remembrance which constituted the Irish
context.

40 D. Cosgrove, The Palladian landscape: geographical change and its cultural representations in
sixteenth century Italy (University Park, PA, 1993), 1.
41 S. Daniels and D. Cosgrove, ‘Spectacle and text: landscape metaphors in cultural geography’, in
Duncan and Ley, Place/culture/representation, 58.
42 For studies dealing with mass commemoration see for Britain A. Gaffney (1998), Aftermath: re-
membering the Great War in Wales (Cardiff, 1998); A. Gregory, The silence of memory: Armistice
Australia see K. S. Inglis, Sacred places: war memorials in the Australian landscape (Melbourne,
1998); for France see A. Prost, ‘Monuments to the dead’, in Nora, ed., Realms of memory, vol. II,