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978-1-107-14590-0 - Remembering 1916: The Easter Rising, the Somme and the Politics of Memory in Ireland

Edited by Richard S. Grayson and Fearghal McGarry

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## Introduction

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*Richard S. Grayson and Fearghal McGarry*

### I

The year 1916 witnessed two events that would profoundly shape both politics and commemoration in Ireland over the course of the following century. Although the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme were important historical events in their own right, their significance also lay in how they came to be retrospectively understood as iconic moments in the emergence of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. The historical memory of both events shaped not only the identities of the two states but the political communities within them, so much so that a necessary starting point for understanding their commemoration over the past century is to distinguish between the historical events themselves and the subsequent ways their significance has been constructed, mythologised and revised.

The Easter Rising provided a source of legitimacy not only for the independent Irish state that emerged out of the Irish revolution but for subsequent republican movements, whether seeking to acquire political power or to justify the use of violence for political ends. From the 1960s, the Rising's contested legacy also became increasingly central to acrimonious debates about the writing of Irish history which, unusually for a historiographical dispute, were given wide public purchase by the outbreak of the Troubles. Despite the success of the peace process over the past two decades, commemoration of the Rising continues to provoke as much division as unity, both North and South.

In Ulster, a different form of blood sacrifice, the fatalities endured by the 36th Division on the Western Front, especially on 1 July 1916 on the Somme, provided the central foundation myth for the Northern Irish state. As with the legacy of the Rising for republicans, the Somme

These essays result from a Wiles colloquium, 'Remembering 1916', hosted by Queen's University Belfast on 27 March 2015. We would like to acknowledge the generosity of the Wiles Trust in funding this event, along with the support of the School of History and Anthropology at Queen's and the Department of History at Goldsmiths. We are grateful to all the participants, particularly Conor Campbell and Matthew Jackson.

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represented a potent source of both political capital and intra-communal tension within unionist and loyalist political culture. Although long identified with one political tradition in the Irish commemorative landscape, as witnessed by the ubiquity of Somme imagery in loyalist murals, the aftermath of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement has also witnessed the appropriation of the memory of the First World War to fashion a more conciliatory narrative of shared Catholic and Protestant experiences, a development bringing its own tensions in the North.

## II

That the significance of '1916' for both political traditions in Ireland rests on such radically different events illustrates the extent of the island's divisions, as do the communal tensions that arise from their major anniversaries, such as occurred in Belfast in 1966.<sup>1</sup> Until recently, this divide existed not only in popular memory but much of the scholarship. While many academics have produced narratives that encompass both the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, studies of the politics of memory have tended to focus on one or the other.<sup>2</sup>

The first aim of this volume is to explore the memory of the two events together, both to identify commonalities and differences and to consider how each commemorative tradition has shaped the other. A second is to widen the focus from 'official' commemoration, often narrowly conceived of in terms of the agency of the state or its political parties, to a broader framework loosely termed 'historical memory'. This reflects a growing understanding of the extent to which communities, families and even individuals make sense of their lives through ideas about the past, as well as an increasing awareness of the extent to which the meanings attached to the past are contested from below as much as imposed from above. Third, this volume aims to draw on the perspectives offered by a variety of disciplines such as history, political science, anthropology, cultural studies and museology. In doing so, we hope not merely to better understand how and why the events of 1916 came to assume such iconic importance but to provide a case study for exploring wider questions about the relationship between scholarly history, political identity,

<sup>1</sup> Mary E. Daly and Margaret O'Callaghan (eds.), *1916 in 1966: Commemorating the Easter Rising* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> An important exception and a key starting point for scholarly understanding of commemoration in Ireland is Ian McBride (ed.), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). A concise but valuable recent publication which considers the memory of this period within the context of the Decade of Centenaries is John Horne and Edward Madigan (eds.), *Towards Commemoration: Ireland in War and Revolution 1912–1923* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2013).

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communal memory and commemoration that will interest scholars of historical memory elsewhere.

Our project is timely considering how the commemoration of both events has become increasingly entwined as a result of the adoption of a shared commemorative framework by both Irish states and the UK government, a process which itself reflects a broader understanding of the interconnected nature of these events, along with more pragmatic political considerations. Previously in the South, major anniversaries of 1916 focused narrowly on the Easter Rising rather than the surrounding events of a decade of war and revolution. Official commemoration was shaped by the prevailing interests of the Southern state, as is clear from the now familiar commemorative narrative: the 25th anniversary was framed by ‘the Emergency’ (as the Second World War was known in Éire); the elaborate golden jubilee in 1966 reflected the efforts of the Taoiseach Seán Lemass to fashion a more constructive patriotism for a modernising state; while the muted 75th anniversary in 1991 was shaped by the sectarian violence of the Troubles. Following in the wake of the peace process and rise of the Celtic Tiger, the 90th anniversary was characterised by a more confident and celebratory approach.<sup>3</sup>

In the North, commemoration of the Rising has always conformed to a different pattern, one framed by the political context within that divided society. There was, for example, little danger of a triumphalist remembrance of the Rising in 1966 when loyalists demanded a ban on Easter commemorations. Widely ignored in the South until recent decades, commemoration of the Somme in Ulster fulfilled many of the same functions for the Northern state as the Rising in the South. As with the latter, the memory of the Somme also reflected political tensions within the majority community. In particular, the Troubles saw commemoration of the 36th (Ulster) Division – which has gradually come to displace King William and the battle of the Boyne as the pre-eminent focus of unionist historical memory – increasingly linked to paramilitarism and loyalist political identity.

More recently, the adoption of the Decade of Centenaries commemorative programme has resulted in both change and continuity. Encompassing the Home Rule crisis (1912–1914), the First World War (1914–1918), partition (1920), the War of Independence (1919–1921) and the Civil War (1922–1923), this approach is better placed to enhance public understanding of the broader historical context, particularly the

<sup>3</sup> For shifting historiographical and commemorative perspectives over the past century, see Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble. The Irish Revolution 1913–1923* (London: Profile, 2015), pp. 17–96, 319–408.

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interdependent nature of the often mimetic unionist and nationalist political traditions. It also encompasses a broader social context than previous anniversaries, with events such as the 1913 Lockout and the role of women receiving greater recognition.

Another departure is the extent of co-ordination between Dublin, Belfast and London, with expert advisory groups and planning bodies established at different levels. The most obvious consequence of this is the emphasis on the need for a more pluralistic remembrance, in terms of both the range of issues, events and participants considered and the tone in which such commemoration is conducted. The Irish government's Decade of Centenaries website, for example, discusses the need to promote 'constructive dialogue' and 'deeper mutual understanding among people from different traditions on the island of Ireland'.<sup>4</sup> A joint statement along similar lines was issued in March 2012 by the British Prime Minister David Cameron and Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny although, inevitably, this spirit has been much less in evidence in Northern Ireland where exclusivist commemorative impulses remain dominant, particularly in the political rather than civic sphere where more positive grassroots initiatives have emerged.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the radically different political context and much improved relations across the two islands, the current anniversaries are also characterised by considerable continuity. Notwithstanding the success of the peace process, squaring the need to remember with historical integrity the Easter Rising with the aim of enhancing relations between opposing political traditions remains a challenge. This difficulty lay at the heart of public disquiet at the Irish government's initial attempts to frame 1916 as an uncontentious celebration of Irish heritage, shorn of its associations with revolutionary violence.<sup>6</sup> Different commemorative tensions apply across the border. Although nationalists are increasingly willing to reclaim the memory of Catholic service in the First World War, commemoration of the Somme remains firmly embedded in unionist political culture, despite the role of the nationalist 16th (Irish) Division in the battle in early September 1916.

Another continuity is the extent to which commemoration of the iconic events of 1916 remains characterised by conflicts over ownership

<sup>4</sup> See: [www.decadeofcentenaries.com/about/](http://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/about/).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the initiatives of the Community Relations Council ([www.community-relations.org.uk/programmes/marketing-anniversaries/](http://www.community-relations.org.uk/programmes/marketing-anniversaries/)); the East Belfast and the Great War project ([www.eastbelfastww1.com/](http://www.eastbelfastww1.com/)); and The 6th Connaught Rangers, *Belfast Nationalists and the Great War* (Belfast: 6th Connaught Rangers Research Project, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Éanna Ó Caollai, 'Don't Mention the War', *Irish Times*, 3 December 2014: [www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/don-t-mention-the-war-1916-video-fails-to-mention-rising-1.1999460](http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/don-t-mention-the-war-1916-video-fails-to-mention-rising-1.1999460).

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which owe more to opportunistic present-day politics than differing interpretations of history. In proposing an alternative to the Southern state's commemorative programme, Gerry Adams explained that Sinn Féin sought to allow the Irish people to rededicate themselves to 'the politics of ... Pádraig Pearse, and James Connolly [and] ... Bobby Sands'.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary commemoration of the Somme in the North, meanwhile, remains similarly bound up with intra-unionist tensions, as is demonstrated by the ubiquity of murals linking the UVF of 1913–1914 and the battle of the Somme to Belfast's more recent loyalist violence.

## III

This volume is divided into four parts. The first steps back from a close focus on commemoration of 1916 to consider broader theories and practices relating to historical memory. Guy Beiner (Chapter 1) offers a critical discussion of some of the key terms used to conceptualise remembrance of the past, including myth, collective memory, public memory, popular memory, cultural memory, social memory and postmemory. He proposes a new concept, 'prememory', which he argues can be paired with 'postmemory' to advance explorations of historical memory. Dominic Bryan (Chapter 2), in contrast, challenges how terms such as memory, remembering and collective memory are used as conceptual tools in historical study. Arguing that what historians often regard as forms of memory are, in fact, manifestations of present-day politics, he suggests that commemorative rituals act as a 'time machine', enabling political actors to exploit the past in order to legitimise contemporary political practice and identity. Bryan's thesis questions the privileged role occupied by historians in events which, he argues, are not primarily about the past. Roisín Higgins (Chapter 3) examines the politics of memory in Ireland, placing commemoration of the Easter Rising in a wider framework, by considering the extent to which its tropes – including redemption, deliverance, resilience, heroic sacrifice and heroic failure – conform to commemorative practices elsewhere. She explores what, if anything, is distinctive about the practice in Ireland by examining its relation to territory, the state and the economy.

Part II more directly addresses the memorialisation of the events of 1916 by examining how historical narratives of 1916 have been

<sup>7</sup> Ronan McGreevy, 'Government "Embarrassed" by 1916 Rising, Adams Says', *Irish Times*, 6 February 2015: [www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/government-embarrassed-by-1916-rising-adams-says-1.2094281](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/government-embarrassed-by-1916-rising-adams-says-1.2094281).

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constructed, and evolved, over time. David Fitzpatrick (Chapter 4) investigates the ways in which actors and observers experienced contemporary events as if they were living out history and in history. Analysing how participants expressed and enacted this sense of being history-makers, Fitzpatrick proposes a tentative taxonomy to enable a future study of Ireland's 'instant histories'. In Chapter 5, Fearghal McGarry examines the commemoration of the Abbey Theatre's Easter rebels as a case study to demonstrate the complex and contested dynamics that shape commemorative processes. He explores how the individuals commemorated exerted agency over 1916 remembrance by constructing their own narratives of rebellion, and traces how family networks and the changing political context mediated the dissemination and reception of these narratives.

Richard Grayson (Chapter 6) explores the popular narrative of what happened to those members of the pre-war Ulster Volunteer Force who served in the British forces during the First World War. Drawing on data for 138 identified members of the UVF who were resident in West Belfast, his chapter argues that, if one is interested in the history of the UVF, then a focus on 1 July 1916 neglects a significant part of its experiences. Moving across the Atlantic, David Brundage (Chapter 7) examines how the Easter Rising was remembered in the United States between 1919 and 1963. Although a once powerful Irish-American republican movement shrank dramatically, the Rising continued to be remembered in different ways by Catholic churchmen, Irish-American labour activists, other ethnic communities and Hollywood film-makers. Remembering 1916 in America, Brundage argues, involved a diverse array of people, practices and motives, and the rebellion's legacy there sheds light on wider subjects ranging from African-American nationalism to representations of Ireland and the Irish in American popular culture.

Part III explores the relationship between remembering and literary and material cultures. Heather Roberts (Chapter 8) explores commemorative links between 1798 and 1916. She shows how the flurry of excitement surrounding the centenary commemoration of the 1798 rebellion contributed to the politicisation of a revolutionary generation, some of whom would go on to participate in the Easter Rising. She examines how, as a result of the impact of the Rising, the memory of the 'Rising generation' mingled with, and ultimately displaced, that of '98 in the Irish Free State's commemorative landscape. Nicholas Allen (Chapter 9) analyses a variety of cultural representations of the Easter Rising. He situates canonical texts by Yeats and Joyce within a complex process of cultural exchange stretching from Dublin and Belfast through London to the Western and Mediterranean fronts.

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Emphasising a diverse cultural background to the war and rebellion that places empire and its practices at the centre of Irish experience, Allen examines how literature and art have shaped our subsequent view of the Easter Rising and the Somme as formative of twentieth-century Irish culture. William Blair (Chapter 10) surveys the evolution of the Ulster Museum's approach to the challenges of interpreting the First World War. He demonstrates how new museological practices have recovered and revised the significance of the museum's artefacts within multiple contexts ranging from personal and family experiences to broader themes of technological, social, political and cultural change.

Since 1969, the memory of 1916 has become increasingly entangled with the impact and legacy of the Troubles, an historical era from which we are now emerging. Part IV explores how the memory of 1916 has been refracted through the prism of the Troubles and its immediate aftermath. Margaret O'Callaghan (Chapter 11) analyses commemoration as a site of contestation for the meaning and ownership of republicanism at the height of the Troubles. She explores how the Irish state altered its approach to commemorating 1916 in an effort to reshape public attitudes to physical-force republicanism and Irish history. Kevin Bean (Chapter 12) considers aspects of the public and political debates surrounding the commemoration of the Easter Rising since 1994. He demonstrates how the Rising remained a problematic site of memory, providing a battleground for debates about the legitimacy of contemporary political projects, as well as the extent to which 'the ideals of 1916' had been achieved. His chapter demonstrates how the peace process and consolidation of a new dispensation in Northern Ireland since 1998 has not lessened the impact of these questions of legitimacy and historical achievement in both Irish politics. Bean argues that current commemorative tensions are not simply revivals of old conflicts, but also attempts to resolve contemporary problems of political authority, ideological legitimacy and a popular disenchantment with mainstream politics evident beyond Ireland.

The final chapter in the volume (Chapter 13), by Jonathan Evershed, explores loyalist commemoration of the Somme. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Belfast, his chapter examines the subscripts of Loyalist resistance which underwrite the emerging norms of new 'official' commemorations and their emphasis on 'shared sacrifice'. He argues that the ghosts of the 36th (Ulster) Division continue to shape the politics of Ulster loyalism in an historical moment defined by a chronic sense of ontological insecurity. There is a need, Evershed suggests, to understand and engage with



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Loyalist memory of the Somme in a way which sees it not – as prevailing discourses suggest – as chiefly concerned with the past, but rather with an uncertain future.

#### IV

The contributors to this volume present a range of new perspectives rather than an overarching set of arguments, exploratory approaches rather than a model for understanding commemoration. Differences between disciplinary perspectives can be discerned. The historians, often adopting a diachronic perspective, allow greater space for the role of ideas about history – whether credible or misinformed – in shaping Irish political debate than the anthropologists who, applying a synchronic approach, are more inclined to interpret commemorative practices as rituals that mask political negotiations about power. While contributors may not always agree on the factors that shape historical memory, some key themes recur. There is a shared scepticism about the relationship between history and commemoration, and the need for sophisticated theoretical approaches to mediate between both of these forms of representing the past. The boom in memory studies over the past two decades has also witnessed a shift, particularly among historians, from a felt requirement to debunk popular memory to taking it seriously as a subject worthy of study in its own right.

These chapters also reflect a growing awareness of the complexity of the variety of ways in which the past is recalled and the need to utilise insights from a range of disciplines to understand these processes. This requires a broadening out of the idea of commemoration as a top-down process determined by the state or other official bodies to conceiving of it as a more diffuse, contested and contingent process shaped by diverse competing influences. The importance of tracing how ideas about the past are generated, transmitted and received, and identifying why some of these – within specific contexts – engender sufficient emotional resonance to shape popular understanding of the past is stressed by several contributors.

Commemoration, it has long been acknowledged, tells us more about the present than the past; it is a process driven more by emotional and political imperatives – particularly the desire to ‘imagine the past and remember the future’ – than by dispassionate scholarship.<sup>8</sup> Several contributors, however, emphasise the need to consider historical memory

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Namier, quoted in R. F. Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ireland* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), p. 33.



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within more open-ended temporal perspectives. Those who made history on Ulster Day or Easter Monday, for example, were shaped by their own consciousness of historical precedents, as well as their anticipation of how their actions would be understood in the futures they expected to create. Later representations of their actions were shaped by a variety of contexts, including disappointment at their failure to achieve these expectations, subsequent generational shifts and altered political contexts. Close attention to the unfolding narratives of 1916 suggest that they are not so much invented as recycled, with alternative meanings, rooted in discernible historical pasts, reviving as required.

It remains to be seen how the events of 1916 will be remembered in 2016, or the extent to which their popular memory will be informed by historical understanding. Whatever happens in 2016, our hope is that these chapters will provide a variety of ways to interpret the meaning and significance which will be attached by the public to the centenary of these two momentous events.

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