CHAPTER 1

# Memory and national identity in modern Ireland

## Ian McBride

For national communities, as for individuals, there can be no sense of identity without remembering. In his pioneering essay, 'What is a nation?' (1882), Ernest Renan suggested that the principle of nationality is founded upon the desire to live together or, in his famous phrase, 'a daily plebiscite'. Yet this was only one of two essential constituents, for the existence of a nation also required 'the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories'.[1] None of the familiar objective criteria – racial origins, language, religious affiliation, natural frontiers – adequately explained the division of western Europe into nation-states. More fundamental, he reasoned, was the cult of ancestors, a shared heritage of glorious triumphs and common suffering. Forgetting, or 'historical error', was equally vital to the maintenance of communal solidarity; it was for this reason, Renan remarked, that the advance of historical studies posed a threat to the principle of nationality. French citizens were therefore obliged to erase from their minds such divisive episodes as the massacre of St Bartholomew or the brutal unification of northern France with the Midi in the thirteenth century.[2]

In Ireland, as is well known, the interpretation of the past has always been at the heart of national conflict. Indeed the time-warped character of Irish mindsets has become a cliché of scholarly and unscholarly writing. After the eruption of the Northern Irish Troubles, when the recrudescence of ancestral hatreds perplexed outside observers, there was renewed academic interest in the communal psychology of the protagonists. 'Ireland', one political scientist discovered, 'is almost a land without history, because the troubles of the past are relived as contemporary

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[1] Ernest Renan, 'What is a nation?', trans. Martin Thom, in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London, 1990), p. 19. The lecture was delivered at the Sorbonne, 11 March 1882.

[2] Ibid., p. 11.

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events.' The Ulster historian A. T. Q. Stewart agreed, suggesting that
the recurrence of older patterns of conflict could only be explained by
some 'mysterious form of transmission from generation to generation'.[3]
Thus loyalism had been constructed upon a grid of talismanic dates –
1641, 1690, 1912 – all underlining the durability of ethnic antagonism
in Ireland, the unchanging threat posed by Roman Catholicism and
the ultimate assurance of providential deliverance. For nationalists, on
the other hand, the myth of a pre-Norman golden age, the recollection
of conquest and persecution, and the pantheon of republican martyrs
which stretched from Wolfe Tone to Patrick Pearse have all performed
corresponding ideological functions.

What is so striking about the Irish case is not simply the tendency for
present conflicts to express themselves through the personalities of the
past, but the way in which commemorative rituals have become histori-
cal forces in their own right. An obvious example is the 1898 centenary
of the United Irish rebellion, which not only established Wolfe Tone as
the unrivalled icon of resistance to British rule, but accelerated the radi-
calisation of Irish nationalism at the turn of the century. Arthur Griffith
later claimed, that 1898, was 'the beginning of all modern efforts towards
a return to the ideals of independence'.[4] The self-sustaining character
of the republican cult of violence was neatly captured by Seósamh Ó
Cuinneagáin, an internee during the 'border war' of 1956–62, who ar-
gued that the only appropriate way to commemorate Wolfe Tone's death
was to avenge it.[5] When the 'armed struggle' was renewed in the 1970s,
the Provisional IRA mounted attacks to coincide with key dates in the
republican calendar such as Easter or the anniversary of internment. At
the same time, sites of remembrance also became targets for political
violence: an Irish custom of blowing up monuments and statues was re-
vived with the detonation of Nelson's Pillar (Dublin, 1966), the Walker
Testimonial (Derry, 1973) and a statue of the evangelical street-preacher
'Roaring' Hugh Hanna (Belfast, 1970).[6] One such attack, the horrific

[3] Richard Rose, *Governing without Consensus: An Irish Perspective* (London, 1971), p. 70; A. T. Q.
Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster* (Belfast, 1977), p. 16.

[4] Senia Pašeta, '1798 in 1898: the politics of commemoration', *Irish Review*, 22 (Summer 1998),
50.

[5] Seósamh Ó Cuinneagáin, *Lecture on the Tones in a Decade of Irish History: Delivered at the Curragh
Concentration Camp on Sunday, 27th April, and Sunday, 4th May, 1958* (Enniscorthy, 1970), p. 36. The
author was echoing Tone's own comment on the death of Lord Edward Fitzgerald.

[6] These acts continued a well-established tradition of explosive de-commemoration. An earlier
phase had seen the eradication of British symbols from the Free State, including Grinling
Gibbons' equestrian statue of William III, blown up in 1929, and John Van Nost's statue of
George II at St Stephen's Green, destroyed in 1937.

Enniskillen bombing of 1987, claimed eleven lives. During the Troubles worshippers have been killed in church, and mourners have been attacked at funeral processions, but no other act caused such profound revulsion throughout the island as the desecration of a Remembrance Day service.

For unionists, too, political life has revolved around the calendar of commemoration. The right to march on Orange anniversaries has been a source of inter-communal conflict for 200 years. As a number of observers have recognised, the ritualised parades of the marching season constitute an attempt to overcome the ideological contradictions of an embattled 'Ulster': with flags and banners, bands, bonfires and arches, Protestants have symbolically asserted their territorial presence in the absence of a stable national identity.[7] Narratives of the modern Troubles often take as their starting point the Twelfth of August 1969, when the Apprentice Boys of Derry, despite government requests to cancel their celebration of the seventeenth-century siege, commenced their annual circuit of the city walls. But historians have paid insufficient attention to the communal celebrations of the previous years, which saw both unionism and republicanism revitalised by the fiftieth anniversary of the Home Rule crisis. Rival claimants to the heritage of Carson and Craig clashed over the half-centenaries of the Solemn League and Covenant (1912) and the Larne gun-running (1914). Meanwhile the 200th anniversary of Wolfe Tone's birth (1763), and the centenary of the Fenian Rising (1867), brought nationalists onto the streets, challenging the unionist monopoly of the public sphere guaranteed by the Flags and Emblems Act. Above all, the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising, which laid to rest the spirit of 1916 in Dublin, spawned a new generation of republicans in Belfast, rekindling the fears of loyalist extremists who took for themselves another commemorative name, the Ulster Volunteer Force.[8]

In Ireland, perhaps more than in other cultures, collective groups have thus expressed their values and assumptions through their representations of the past. There is no evidence, moreover, that this preoccupation is abating; if anything, questions of collective memory and commemoration have assumed a new prominence in recent years. One novel source of disquiet is the exponential growth of the heritage

[7] See e. g. Desmond Bell, *Acts of Union: Youth Culture and Sectarianism in Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke, 1990).
[8] Bob Purdie, *Politics in the Streets: The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1990), p. 31.

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industry, which threatens to reduce the historical landscape to a series of
free-floating tourist attractions.[9] Seamus Deane has decried the repack-
aging of Ireland as a supermarket for overseas visitors, where neolithic
burial chambers, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Kilmainham prison are presented
as 'the exotic debris thrown up by the convulsions of a history from which
we have now escaped into a genial depthlessness'.[10] At the same time,
recent anniversaries of such pivotal events as the Easter Rising or the
1798 insurrection have prompted bouts of self-examination in the Dublin
media. The Great Famine which devastated Ireland 150 years ago has
re-entered Anglo-Irish relations, prompting an apology from Tony Blair.
Meanwhile the construction of a Peace Tower at Messines, in honour
of the Irish soldiers who fought for Britain in the First World War, has
been hailed as a symbol of reconciliation between the two countries. Not
content merely to remind us of ancient quarrels, then, Irish anniversaries
have an uncanny way of making history themselves.

   This book is about the relationship between the past and the present
in Irish society, and the ways in which historical consciousness has been
shaped and structured by oral tradition, icons and monuments, ritual cer-
emonies and re-enactments. Our understanding of such key moments as
the 1798 rebellion, the Famine and the Great War is not static, but has
been shaped by a complex interaction of individual actors, cultural pat-
terns, social forces and technological developments. Beginning with the
assumption that memory is itself historically constructed, the following
chapters address questions concerning the workings of collective recall.
How are particular political and social orders maintained or undermined
by the use of historical ideas and representations? Why does collective
amnesia work in some situations and not in others? What is the relation-
ship between academic historians and popular memory? It should also be
borne in mind, as Edna Longley has remarked, that 'one man's iconog-
raphy, commemoration or ritual is another's coat-trailing'.[11] Whenever
the Irish past is invoked we must therefore ask ourselves not only by
which groups, and to what end, but also against whom?

   The study of collective memory is a sub-field of the study of identity,
that most ubiquitous of topics, and the literature on the subject is vast

[9] Fintan O'Toole, 'Tourists in our own land', in his *Black Hole, Green Card: The Disappearance of
   Ireland* (Dublin, 1994), pp. 33–50.
[10] Seamus Deane, 'Wherever green is red', in Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha and Theo Dorgan (eds.),
   *Revising the Rising* (Derry, 1991), p. 98.
[11] Edna Longley, 'What do Protestants want?', *Irish Review*, 20 (Winter/Spring 1997), 109.

and bewildering. 'Remembering' is defined here in the broadest sense, encompassing not only events recalled from personal experience but also those inherited recollections that prompt feelings of collective shame, pride or resentment on behalf of our real or metaphorical ancestors. As we shall see, this 'social memory' also shades off into the areas of oral history, folklore, myth and tradition. The best documented, and consequently the most thoroughly researched aspects are the ceremonies and monuments of the nation-state, examples of which are discussed in this volume by David Fitzpatrick, Roy Foster and David Officer. Several of the essays below, however, notably those by Joep Leerssen and Niall Ó Ciosáin, show that we must balance institutionalised memories with oral or folk traditions if we are to understand the ways in which past events have been creatively reworked by different social groups. By way of introduction, this chapter will attempt to survey the literature on social memory, to sketch a brief history of commemorative occasions in Ireland, and to address the role of academic historians in the interpretation and representation of the past.

## MEMORY AND SOCIETY

That the remembrance of injustice and persecution, endurance and deliverance, has been fundamental to the shaping of modern Ireland is indisputable, but how should we characterise the relationship between past experience and present antagonisms? According to one view, reactivated by the conflict in the north, the Irish are prisoners of their past, impelled towards violent confrontation by their atavistic passions. The notion that the (northern) Irish are essentially tribal, driven to blood-sacrifice in order to appease the dark gods of their ancestors, has often coloured British journalism. Its implication – that Northern Ireland is an intractable, timeless problem, impervious to the solutions proposed by liberal policy-makers – lends it an unmistakable ring of self-exoneration. A similar tendency towards determinism, however, can sometimes be detected in the 'clash of cultures' interpretation of Irish history pioneered by F. S. L. Lyons, who examined the explosive juxtaposition of 'seemingly irreconcilable cultures, unable to live together or to live apart, caught inextricably in the web of their tragic history'.[12] What I would like to explore here is the possibility that present actions are not determined

[12] F. S. L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890–1939* (Oxford, 1979), p. 177.

by the past, but rather the reverse: that what we choose to remember is
dictated by our contemporary concerns.

For a theoretical formulation of this view, we might turn to the French
sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who first drew attention to what he
called 'the social frameworks of memory' in the 1920s.[13] Where Freud
believed that an archive of memories was housed within the unconscious
of the individual psyche, Halbwachs proposed that recollections cannot
endure outside social networks of communication. In isolation, our indi-
vidual images of the past are fragmented and transitory; to be properly
stabilised they require repeated confirmation by other members of our
community. When we recall the past, then, we do so as members of
groups – a family, a local community, a workforce, a political movement,
a church or a trade union. What we remember or forget therefore has as
much to do with external constraints, imposed by our social and cultural
surroundings, as with what happens in the frontal lobes of our brains.[14]
And as those external forces evolve over time, so too our memories must
evolve with them, reflecting the shifting power relations that have taken
place within our communities. This is true not only of autobiographi-
cal recollections, but also of historical memories – those transmitted to
us from previous generations by oral tradition, literature or anniversary
rituals. Approached in this way, it becomes easier to explain why piv-
otal events and personalities which possess self-evident and spontaneous
meanings for us have been understood in very different ways by previous
generations. Memory, in other words, has a history of its own, and like
the best forms of history it teaches us to think again about what we have
taken for granted.

There are some similarities between this approach and the work of the
Cambridge psychologist, Frederick Bartlett, who explored the contextual
structures that order individual recollections in the 1930s. Shortly after,
the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard developed the concept of 'structural

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[13] See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, IL,
1992); Mary Douglas, 'Maurice Halbwachs, 1877–1945', in Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective
Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York, 1980), pp. 1–21, reprinted
in Mary Douglas, *In the Active Voice* (London, 1982), pp. 255–71; Patrick H. Hutton, *History as
an Art of Memory* (London, 1993), ch. 4. The best survey of the literature is Jeffrey K. Olick and
Joyce Robbins, 'Social memory studies: from "collective memory" to the historical sociology
of mnemonic practices', *American Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998), 105–40. Other introductions to
the subject include Peter Burke, 'History as social memory', in Thomas Butler (ed.), *Memory:
History, Culture and the Mind* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 97–113; John R. Gillis, 'Memory and identity:
the history of a relationship', in John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*
(Princeton, 1994), pp. 3–24.
[14] For the psychology of memory and its epistemological background see James Fentress and Chris
Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford, 1992), ch. 1.

amnesia' in his classic study of the Nuer people of the Sudan.[15] Yet it
is only in the last twenty years that sociologists such as Barry Schwartz
and Yael Zerubavel, psychologists such as David Middleton and Derek
Edwards and historians such as Pierre Nora and Raphael Samuel have
put social memory at the top of an interdisciplinary agenda.[16] One
common link is a growing interest in the social and political dimensions
of remembrance, prompted partly by the rise of multiculturalism, with its
political vocabulary of victimhood, restitution and, in the Irish context,
'parity of esteem'.[17] The creation of ethnic minorities in western Europe
and the United States as a result of immigration, the fragmentation
of the Soviet bloc along ethnic lines, and the demands of 'aboriginal'
populations for territorial entitlements in Canada, Australia and New
Zealand – all have encouraged greater sensitivity among scholars to the
ways in which the past has been used to underpin social privilege and
political power. A corresponding shift has taken place within the social
sciences, away from the social dynamics of nationalism towards a focus
on language and symbolism as the keys to understanding how collective
identities are forged. Scholarly inquiry now focuses on the means by
which communities have been 'imagined' or 'narrated' with the aid of
newspapers, novels and other texts during the modern era.[18]

The rediscovery of Halbwachs, whilst long overdue, has not been un-
critical. Most contemporary readers would agree that Halbwachs, as a
pupil of Emile Durkheim, placed excessive emphasis on the collective
nature of social consciousness, to the extent that the individual was re-
duced to the sum total of his or her collective parts. For this reason, James
Fentress and Chris Wickham prefer to speak of 'social memory', a term
which avoids the organic and consensual connotations attached to no-
tions of collective identity.[19] Subsequent scholars have distinguished

[15] Olick and Robbins, 'Social memory studies', 106.
[16] Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago, IL, 1995); David Middleton and Derek Edwards (eds.), *Collective Remembering* (London, 1990); Barry Schwartz, 'The reconstruction of Abraham Lincoln', in ibid., pp. 81–107; Barry Schwartz, Yael Zerubavel and Bernice M. Barnett, 'The recovery of Masada: a study in collective memory', *Sociological Quarterly*, 27/2 (1986), 147–64; Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London, 1994); Nora's work is discussed below.
[17] For Northern Ireland see Tom Hennessy and Robin Wilson, *With all Due Respect: Pluralism and Parity of Esteem* (Belfast, 1997); Neil Jarman and Dominic Bryan, *Parade and Protest: A Discussion of Parading Disputes in Northern Ireland* (Coleraine, 1996); more widely, see Charles Taylor *et al.*, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ, 1994).
[18] For the 'cultural turn' in studies of nationalism see Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, 'Intro-duction: from the moment of social history to the work of cultural representation', in Eley and Suny (eds.), *Becoming National: A Reader* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 3–37.
[19] Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, p. ix.

between varieties of memory – official/vernacular, public/private, elite/popular – reminding us that behind the blotting out of painful episodes, the sudden recollection of long-forgotten events, or the preparation of commemorative rituals, there are often fierce clashes between rival versions of a common past. Others have highlighted the dangers of the 'presentist' tendency shared by many followers of Halbwachs. As Barry Schwartz has warned, an undue emphasis on the malleability of the past destroys any sense of historical continuity, leaving us unable to account for the extraordinary durability and recurrence of some historical images and myths over time.[20] It can be argued, indeed, that the arrangement of experience through narrative frames is such a basic part of cognition that events are encoded with meaning as they actually occur.[21] Some of these difficulties can be elucidated further by briefly examining two of the most prominent models adopted by historians of collective memory, the 'invention of tradition' and the '*lieux de mémoire*'.

Among British historians the dominant paradigm for the study of commemorative rituals and symbols was established by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *Invention of Tradition* (1983). Although Hobsbawm, the guiding spirit behind the collection, deconstructed a diverse range of traditions, from the royal Christmas broadcast to the Wimbledon tennis tournament, his chief preoccupation was with the emergence of the western nation-state during the years between 1870 and 1914. This period saw the introduction of national systems of education, the institution of public ceremonies such as Bastille Day (1880), and the mass production of commemorative statues and monuments. The sudden proliferation of national celebrations was a response, so the Hobsbawm thesis ran, to a crisis of legitimacy experienced by established ruling élites. Just as social patterns were disrupted by accelerated industrialisation and the extension of the franchise to the working classes, western states were forced to mobilise their populations on an unprecedented scale as economic and military competition between the European powers intensified. 'Invented traditions' therefore encompassed the whole panoply of national festivals, symbols and rituals employed to assert a 'largely factitious' continuity with the past.[22]

Following Hobsbawm's lead, many historians have taken delight in exposing the recentness of traditions which lay claim to an ancient pedigree.

[20] See note 16 above.
[21] David Carr, 'Narrative and the real world: an argument for continuity', *History and Theory*, 25 (1986), 117–31.
[22] Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: inventing traditions', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 2.

In practice, however, the distinction between pre-industrial 'custom' and the artificial ceremonies of the nation-state is difficult to maintain. In Ireland, as elsewhere, the years between 1870 and 1914 were central to the formation of national identities. Many 'traditions' were consolidated, as incipient party organisations utilised commemorative occasions as a means of accessing a mass constituency. The marching season, with its distinctive parades, bands and regalia, was co-opted by Conservative leaders following the legalisation of 'party processions' in 1872. With the production of standardised banners and street-arches, the Twelfth of July assumed something like its modern form, and the practice was established of using 'the Field' as a political platform for party politicians.[23] At the same time, the Irish Parliamentary Party harnessed an elaborate historical symbolism, incorporating Grattan's Parliament, the United Irishmen, Daniel O'Connell, the Young Irelanders and the early Fenian movement, to secure the loyalties of a mass following.[24] These rival iconographies and rituals are sometimes regarded as inventions designed to serve the interests of political élites who forged electoral blocs out of communities split by social differences. Yet the reality is much more complicated. The extension of parading represented the formalisation of festive practices which had been maintained by the rural lower classes since the 1790s, while nationalist iconography can be dated back to the same period.

Repeated reference to the 'manufactured' or 'artificial' aspects of nineteenth-century remembrance results in a restricted view of the role played by commemorative practices in shaping group identities. As a historian trained in a broadly Marxist tradition, Hobsbawm emphasised the manipulation of symbols and memories by official élites which sought to indoctrinate the masses with accepted values and behaviour through the repetition of collective rituals. Such an approach fails to explain why some versions of the past carried a popular resonance that others lacked. An antidote can be found in Anthony Smith's work on ethnic groups, which highlights the constraints imposed on nationalist intellectuals by the customs and institutions of the communities to which they belong. While nationalist mobilisation sometimes involves outright fabrication, it more often requires the imaginative reworking of pre-existing materials.[25] In a study of the Gaelic revival, John Hutchinson has applied Smith's approach to Irish nationalism, arguing that the success of Gaelic

[23] Neil Jarman, *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 1997), p. 62.
[24] Peter Alter, 'Symbols of Irish nationalism', *Studia Hibernica*, 14 (1974), 104–23.
[25] See the essays reprinted in Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford, 1999).

revivalists depended on their 'ability to evoke and appropriate genuine communal memories linked to specific homelands, cultural practices and forms of socio-political organisation'.[26]

Although it bears some similarities to Hobsbawm and Ranger's collection, Pierre Nora's *Les lieux de mémoire* (1992) differs in scope, method and ambition. This multi-volume work brought together 120 contributors from a variety of disciplines – literary criticism, political science, and sociology as well as history.[27] Most French traditions, as Nora observed, were either created or refashioned during the nineteenth century. Consequently much space is devoted to the monuments, symbols and anniversaries established during the nation-building ventures of the Third Republic – the same timespan which had interested Hobsbawm. Yet the definition of a *lieu de mémoire* extends far beyond the invented traditions of Bastille Day and the Tour de France to include 'any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community'.[28] In addition to physical sites (the prehistoric caves of Lascaux), rituals (the ceremonial annointment of kings at Rheims), historical figures (Joan of Arc) and institutions (the role of the *Acadamie Française* as guardian of the French language), Nora explored the fundamental spatial and temporal categories which have structured representations of the French past, such as right/left, *ancien régime*/revolution, and Paris/provinces.

A full understanding of Nora's objectives must begin with his analysis of the shattered relationship between history, memory and national identity in France. Nora traced the development of historiography through four stages, each characterised by the exploration of new sources and methods, but ultimately propelled by upheavals in the wider social world. The first phase, the romantic, achieved its apotheosis with Michelet's poetic understanding of the French Revolution as a triumphal manifestation of the national soul. The second dates from the Franco-Prussian war when, in an apparent effort to emulate German efficiency, French scholars reconstructed their discipline around the scientific exploration of archival sources. Beginning with the manifesto of the *Revue historique* (1876), this positivist historiography culminated in Ernest Lavisse's twenty-seven volume, *Histoire de France*, a historiographical counterpart

[26] John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London, 1987), p. 20.

[27] Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory*, English language edn, ed. with a foreword by Lawrence D. Kritzman (3 vols., New York, 1996). This is a revised and abridged translation of the original work in French.

[28] Nora, 'From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Realms of Memory*', in *Realms of Memory*, vol. i, p. xvii.