

IBIS ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2010

Chairman's Introduction to Session 1

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I want to take these few minutes of Introduction to offer some reflections on the theme of Commemoration generally.

Those who chose the theme for this year's Conference chose wisely. This decade comes 50 years after the 1960's, which was densely populated with commemorative occasions: the 50th anniversary of the Solemn League and Covenant, the Larne gunrunning and the Easter Rising; the 200th anniversary of Wolfe Tone's birth, and the centenary of the Fenian rising. The tensions to which they gave rise were doubtless at least a contributory factor in the outbreak of the Troubles. The potential for destabilisation if there is a proliferation of Commemoration events in this new decade is obvious.

The role of Commemoration in a national context was persuasively argued by the French philosopher Ernest Renan. National solidarity required 'the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories'. But he recognised that, in the interests of preserving that solidarity, the art of forgetting as well as remembering might be necessary. Out of that process, identity is forged. Communities acquire historical depth. In the words of the Brazilian funeral song, 'Far, far away, I hear the voice that time will not take away'.

That voice, over the centuries, creates a narrative which stresses continuity, linearity, consistence and inevitability. We can see this in the two grand narratives emerging from Irish history. On the nationalist

side, a story of dispossession, oppression and destiny unfulfilled. On the unionist side a story of a community of insecure settlers on the frontier, constantly at risk of siege. Significant events and personalities give the narratives their thread. One historian has graphically instanced how loyalism has been 'constructed upon a grid of talismanic dates – 1641, 1690, 1912'. For nationalists, there is the pantheon of republican martyrs from Wolfe Tone to Patrick Pearse.

However, Renan's formula does not work when memory is so contested that no amount of forgetfulness can produce a unified narrative. It is difficult, therefore, to argue with Professor Longley's forthright statement that in Ireland 'endemic division maintains sites of memory as sites of conflict' and 'one man's iconography, commemoration or ritual is another's coat-trailing'. Or, as another historian has put it, 'public commemoration has turned into a battlefield where selective, discrepant and antagonistic narratives of the past clash and compete'.

Are we doomed to experience down the generations the destructive aftershocks of the bitter conflicts of the past? The playwright Frank McGuinness has called one – dimensional folk memory a lethal cultural weapon and called for the mutual understanding which produces not political unity but 'an imaginative unity, an imaginative understanding of why people were behaving the way they did'. Sebastian Barry has asked if it is possible to walk out of the closed rooms of history and embark on a narrative which has no ends other than those yet to be determined. Taking the Somme and the 1916 Rising as examples, it has been asked whether we might acquire the ability to recognise the emotional equivalence of two parallel narratives within the same historical moment, thereby escaping the traditional binaries of loyalty and treachery. All of these interesting ideas from the literary world

involve each side very consciously offering the other a full effort at understanding.

But scholars are increasingly challenging the view that we are indeed prisoners of our past, with the practice of Commemoration ensuring that we remain firmly shackled. Ian McBride, for instance, explores the possibility that present actions are not determined by the past but rather the reverse – that what we choose to remember is dictated by our contemporary concerns. The idea goes back to Thucydides who said that people make their recollection fit with their present experience. Roy Foster also put it starkly: ‘Commemoration is always present-minded, for the purpose of present politics’.

Memory is certainly not a constant. As Professor Horne has put it, all memory has a history. Others have spoken of memory as being, like history, ‘inherently revisionist’ as memory is reinterpreted. A very clear example is how the 1798 rising of the United Irishmen was commemorated in 1898 and 1998. 1798, viewed from the perspective of 1898, was a phase of the struggle for faith and fatherland. A hundred years later, reflecting the burgeoning peace process, the attention shifted, as the Commemoration Committee put it, from the military aspects of 1798 towards the principles of democracy and pluralism which the United Irishmen advocated and there was acknowledgement of the Ulster dimension and particularly the contribution of the Presbyterian tradition, with its emphasis on justice, equality and civil liberty.

Turning to the Great War itself, one can see the evolution in nationalist perspectives. IRA veteran Ernie O’Malley could refer critically to the way in which Irish Republicans ‘dismissed the agony, gloom and misery of the trenches as we dismiss another man’s sorrow’. As he watched

the Poppy wearers parade on Grafton Street in November 1926, he felt sympathy for them 'for many had relatives killed I am sure'. His brother had served in the British army. The Royal Irish Academy publication Our War has a photograph of the huge numbers who had assembled in College Green two years previously, with the Civil War barely ended, to remember the dead of the Great War. The new Government was represented each year in the 1920s at the wreath-laying at the Cenotaph in London. Mr De Valera's government gave a subsidy in 1932 for the construction of the national memorial at Islandbridge, with the British imperial architect Lutyens as designer. One has to fast forward over two generations to the joint inauguration by the President and the Queen of the Round Tower at Messines in 1998 to identify a similarly iconic moment.

The peace settlement on the island has recognised that the old ideological verities and certainties on all sides cannot accommodate the complex interactions of what are really varieties of Irishness and that a broader narrative framework is required. So how do we ensure that Commemoration, which is such a powerful transmitter of memory, reflects these new realities and does not constrain the shared future which is the aspiration dictated by those realities?

This poses a challenge for the creative imagination. In the volume Our War to which I have already referred there is a fascinating reference to the cantata 'A Terrible Beauty is Born' by the Irish composer Brian Boydell which emerged during the 1966 Anniversary of the 1916 Rising. The libretto drew not only on Yeats' famous poem but on poems by nationalists killed on the Western front, including Tom Kettle's 'Cancel the Past'. Professor Jeffrey, in whose chapter of the volume this is dealt with, comments on how the cantata 'recognised the essentially 'seamless robe' of the Rising and the war', though he admits that the

powerful connections between the two may still not be universally accepted. He also refers in this context to the decision by the government of the Republic in 2006 to commemorate the ninetieth anniversaries of both the Rising and the Battle of the Somme.

The conflicts of the past are fact but the challenge for this and future decades is whether, as it has been put, they can encounter, clash and argue with one another on different terms. Historians can play a powerful role by not just telling what happened but also by showing how the event became memory and how the memory evolved.

The title of the Conference has a nice ambiguity about it: Commemorating Shared History. In Irish terms the Great War is a peculiar instance of an iconic event in which people who were politically poles apart participated in a common cause. What is surprising is not that Commemoration of this event has evolved as it has but that it took so long to do so.

Much more problematic are the tracts of historical space that are contested. Can one say that these, too, are 'shared history? They certainly constitute a common past and peace needs to be made with that past. The coming decade will test our resolve.

At the start of this decade Belfast's (then) Lord Mayor Alex Maskey said that it was his objective 'to seek to identify common ground for all of us in this generation' and indicated his intention to 'contribute in a positive way' to the development of a public debate about the use of (inter alia) commemorations.

That debate is long overdue. Hence the significance of today's proceedings, which will hopefully prompt a serious debate on how we

can commemorate the past in a way which enables us to share the future.