

A lasting monument to partition: negotiating Ireland's 'decade of centenaries' in the new age of Brexit.

In March 2012, in the week before St Patrick's Day, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, and his Irish counterpart, Taoiseach Enda Kenny, issued a joint statement following a successful meeting at Downing Street in London, 'British Irish relations, the next decade.'¹ By and large, it was a fond and forward-looking text and in the press conference that followed both men spoke warmly of the Anglo-Irish relationship. Long dominated by the Northern Ireland conflict, it was now time to put that all behind. Friendship, cultural connections, and familial ties would from here on form the basis of a strong political, trading, and European partnership. But there was one striking difference in their statements. For the Irish leader the decade anticipated in the document held an inescapable significance to which the British man made no reference whatsoever.²

Ireland is currently waist deep in a 'decade of centenaries' commemorating the series of events – encompassing war, civil strife, and revolution – that culminated in partition and the founding of two separate polities on the island. It was the formative moment of both the Irish state and the United Kingdom in its current form. Beginning in 2012, a generous 'long decade' of eleven years will take us through to the end of the Civil War that racked and scarred the nascent Irish Free State, and the erection of a customs barrier on the border on April Fools' Day 1923. It has been well noted that commemoration is never wholly (or even largely) about remembering the past. What is publicly recalled, brushed over, or forgotten is inevitably a choice and, in Ireland as elsewhere, to memorialise the past is to act politically in

¹ Joint statement by the Prime Minister David Cameron and the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, 'British Irish relations, the next decade,' Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, 12 March 2012, www.gov.uk/government/news/british-irish-relations-the-next-decade

² Transcript: Prime Minister David Cameron and Taoiseach Enda Kenny, 'Press conference followed talks and the issuing of a 10 year Irish-British Joint Statement,' Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, 12 March 2012, www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transcript-prime-minister-david-cameron-and-taoiseach-enda-kenny

the present.³ But with bloody memories still to wade through before we reach the other side, the ground on the distant bank may be shifting once again.

2012 marked one hundred years since the passing of the third Home Rule Bill by the British House of Commons – a scheme long promoted by Liberal and Irish Nationalist MPs to devolve limited powers to a parliament in Dublin. The reformist cause had defined Irish politics since the 1870s, and had at last achieved an apparent victory. The Bill's two nineteenth-century predecessors had foundered on the rocks of parliamentary opposition, first in the Commons and later in the House of Lords. The latter had lost its veto via the Parliament Act 1911, retaining power only to delay a piece of law it did not like. As such, the Irish Bill was put on hold – initially intended for two years – by the chastened but still Tory-dominated second chamber. Although it did formally reach the statute book in 1914, it had by then been overtaken by the rush to war. In securing its passage, the Home Rulers looked finally to have their goal within their grasp, but this was to prove to be a victory from which they would never recover.⁴

Had the Tories and their allies accepted parliamentary defeat in 1912, then Ireland's subsequent history might have been different and the centennials of its present constitutional arrangements mercifully short. As it was, while excitement gripped nationalist Ireland in the interregnum created by delay, it invited and attracted fearsome opposition from amongst the mostly anti-devolution Protestant minority. Concentrated in parts of the province of Ulster to the north, Unionism had already emerged as a powerful regional force. More than two hundred thousand men responded to the introduction of the Bill by putting their names to a 'Solemn League and Covenant' pledging to resist the plan by 'all means'. A similar number

³ Dominic Bryon, 'Ritual, identity and nation: when the historian becomes the high priest of commemoration' in Richard S. Grayson and Fearghal McGarry (eds.), *Remembering 1916: the Easter Rising, the Somme and the politics of memory in Ireland*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp 24-42.

⁴ To paraphrase the famous account of the eclipse of the Liberal Party in this period in which the Home Rule Crisis featured prominently. George Dangerfield, *The strange death of Liberal England*, London: Constable, 1936, p. 6.

of women signed a more passive but no less determined 'Declaration.'⁵ Styling themselves the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), many thousands took up arms to display their preparedness to fight, and the path towards partition started to come clear.

Ten years of anniversaries are long enough to offer something to satisfy almost every taste and, despite their capacity to overwhelm the complexities of the Irish past, Ulster and communal confrontation were not the only source of crisis or militancy in these years. A vibrant fight for women's suffrage cut across and, to some extent, unsettled established party loyalties. In July 1912, crowds of male Home Rulers attacked and 'hunted' pro-suffrage activists in Dublin, seeking vengeance for a thrown hatchet that narrowly missed Prime Minister Herbert Asquith during a visit, striking instead (albeit only grazing) John Redmond, the pro-imperial and avowedly anti-suffrage leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party.⁶ The same year, the Titanic trundled out of Belfast's mighty shipyard, Harland and Wolff, and sank on its first voyage.

In 1913, the great Dublin lockout saw the Irish Transport and Workers Union defeated after a year-long battle with the city's Employers Federation. The outbreak of the First World War the following year came as a further blow to the internationalists among the workers' leaders and postponed again – forever as it transpired – the implementation of an island-wide Home Rule. A century later, the anniversaries of some of these events (the ship and strike, if not the axe) helped to launch what one anonymous online wag referred to as the 'Decade of BIG Dates.'⁷

⁵ In total 237,368 men signed the Covenant and 234,046 women signed the corresponding women's Declaration. 'About the Ulster Covenant,' Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/about-ulster-covenant

⁶ Those responsible were members of the British Women's Social and Political Union who had travelled over for the occasion, but that did not prevent attacks on members of the Irish Women's Franchise League. Rosemary Cullen Owens, *Smashing times: a history of the Irish women's suffrage movement, 1889-1922*, Dublin: Attic Press, 1984, pp 57-61.

⁷ Drumlins Rock, 'The Decade of BIG Dates (and little ones too), *Sluggie O'Toole*, 14 Dec. 2011, <https://sluggerotoole.com/2011/12/14/the-decade-of-big-dates/>

The opening of the commemorative floodgates was the subject of some trepidation, not least as the seminal year of 2016 approached. 1916 witnessed both the Easter Rising in Dublin and the Battle of the Somme in early July – defining events respectively in subsequent nationalist and unionist collective consciousness. The former entailed an attempt by a militant minority of republicans, socialists, and linguistic and cultural separatists, to seize the opportunity of European conflict to strike against British rule in Ireland. Famously, the rebel figurehead, Pádraig Pearse, had earlier declared the British government to be ‘fools’ for forgetting the importance to the Irish of their dead. Defeated militarily, over the next two years a combination of public revulsion at the execution of the Rising’s leaders, admiration for their heroism, and growing disquiet about the World War profoundly altered the political situation.

At the Somme, Ulster’s Unionists acquired martyrs of their own. When War had erupted in the summer of 1914, the British government suspended the implementation of Home Rule. Redmond and his Unionist counterpart Edward Carson called on their supporters to join the Empire’s effort. While more than 200,000 Irishmen eventually enlisted and encompassed diverse strains of thinking on the ‘national question,’ their sacrifice would pass primarily into pro-Union mythology. Despite its earlier stated intention to resist in arms the forces of the Crown, much of the Ulster Volunteer Force was incorporated into the British army as the 36th (Ulster) Division. Ordered to advance on 1 July, in the first two days of fighting at the Somme some 5,500 Ulstermen were lost.⁸

Both the dangers and potential political capital entailed in making a fuss about ‘big dates’ have long been evident in Ireland. The centennial of the great United Irish rebellion of 1798 had, in 1898, served as a moment of political awakening for some of those who would help

⁸ Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 56.

to organise the revolutionary generation.⁹ Unionism lost no time immediately after the First World War in appropriating the memory of the fallen – Ulster’s sacrifice could not go unrewarded.¹⁰ And after a century, commemoration too has acquired its own history.

In 1966, while still outwardly lamenting partition, the Dublin government sought to use the Rising golden jubilee to project a modernising image. Anglo-Irish relations were, relatively speaking, opening up as both countries prepared to enter the European Economic Community. The IRA, on the other hand, found its own way to mark the occasion and pre-empted the official agenda by blowing up and bringing down the statue of Admiral Nelson that had until then stood in central Dublin.¹¹ Predictions of additional (possibly more serious) armed actions never materialised. But in the years that followed a view took hold in certain quarters that public flag waving that year had helped to rekindle militant sentiments, thereby adding fuel to the Troubles that flared in Northern Ireland at the end of the decade. The 1966 events were often more nuanced than their detractors remembered, but there is no doubt that commemoration is politically fraught.¹²

Both the historical profession and those charged with responsibility for public celebrations were troubled by the long years of conflict in the North and, after 1966 official anniversary events in Dublin were largely muted. Buoyed by the Peace Process, a military parade was resurrected for the ninetieth in 2006, with Minister for Defence, Willie O’Dea, explaining that troops no longer needed on the border were now free for ceremonial functions. To others it

⁹ Roy Foster, ‘Remembering 1798’ in Ian McBride (ed), *History and memory in modern Ireland*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp 81-3.

¹⁰ Jonathan Evershed, ‘Ghosts of the Somme: the state of Ulster Loyalism, memory work and the ‘other’ 1916’ in Richard S. Grayson and Fearghal McGarry (eds.), *Remembering 1916: the Easter Rising, the Somme and the politics of memory in Ireland*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp 247-8. James Loughlin, ‘Mobilizing the sacred dead: Ulster unionism, the Great War and the politics of remembrance’ in Adrian Gregory and Senia Pašeta (eds.), *Ireland and the Great War: a war to unite us all?*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 133-54.

¹¹ Roisín Higgins, *Transforming 1916: meaning, memory and the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising*, Cork: Cork University Press, 2012, pp 61-2.

smacked of an attempt to ritually reclaim the Rising from Sinn Féin, whose post-conflict growth was spreading South and has continued unabated.¹³ But 2006 was also a moment of renewed national confidence at the height of the Celtic Tiger economic boom.¹⁴

Things have looked more complicated since the crash of 2007-8. Amongst the public faces and cheering crowds that greeted the Irish Defence Forces in Dublin, and the quantities of T-shirts, mugs, and fridge magnets made and sold for the occasion, a desire to 'complicate the narrative' was a signature theme for much of the vast scholarly, creative, and commemorative output that surrounded Easter 2016. Alongside the flood of books about the history of events, a smaller but steady flow of titles has reflected on commemoration and memory itself. Others have emphasised the human cost of the insurrection and its violent suppression by the British state, such as Joe Duffy's successful account of the forty children killed during Easter week.¹⁵

Beyond the border, things have proved more complicated still. There commemoration has a bloody and layered history. At one time public memory of the Easter Rising was scarcely tolerated in Northern Ireland, while that of the First World War was unassailable. In the jubilee year of 1966 a paramilitary group adopting the title UVF claimed arguably the first lives lost in the modern Troubles – an elderly Protestant widow caught in a fire following a petrol bomb attack and two unarmed Catholic men randomly chosen and shot dead.¹⁶ Twenty-one years later an IRA bomb at a Remembrance ceremony at the cenotaph in Enniskillen killed eleven and injured many more.

¹³ *Guardian*, 10 April 2006.

¹⁴ Richard S. Grayson and Fearghal McGarry, 'Introduction' in Richard S. Grayson and Fearghal McGarry (eds.), *Remembering 1916: the Easter Rising, the Somme and the politics of memory in Ireland*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 3.

¹⁵ Joe Duffy, *Children of the Rising: the untold story of the young lives lost during Easter 1916*, Dublin: Hachette Books Ireland, 2015.

¹⁶ David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, and Chris Thornton, *Lost lives: the stories of the men, women, and children who died as a result of the Northern Ireland troubles*, Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2001, pp 25-9.

Unsurprisingly, memory is one of many problems to have beset the on-off Northern Ireland power-sharing executive. The annual Somme memorial at Drumcree near Portadown has been site and scene of repeated violent standoffs between the ultra-Protestant Loyal Orange Order and police. And, despite the achievements of the peace process, in 2016 Unionist leaders remained unwilling to participate in commemorations of the Rising, even boycotting a dinner at Belfast City Hall jointly marking both 1916 anniversaries.¹⁷

Notwithstanding these difficulties, at the dawn of the 'decade,' when Kenny and Cameron issued their joint statement, there was justification for their optimism. 'The relationship between our two countries,' began the two premiers, 'has never been stronger or more settled, as complex or as important, as it is today.'¹⁸ Since the 1998 accord Catholic and Protestant participation in the European slaughter of the First World War has been consciously repackaged as a 'site' of shared memory to serve as ballast to the peace. The wisdom of sanitizing the memory of global war to salve the sores of local conflict has not been fully tested but those who once believed that fighting it might serve a similar function were proven wrong (many returned to Ireland and fought each other).¹⁹ Nevertheless when, in 2011, Queen Elizabeth II became the first British monarch to visit Dublin in a hundred years, the itinerary for her trip embraced both the republican Garden of Remembrance and the National War Memorial Gardens – affording equal status to remembering those who fought for empire and those who fought against it.²⁰

¹⁷ *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 March 2016

¹⁸ Joint statement by the Prime Minister David Cameron and the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, 'British Irish relations, the next decade,' Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, 12 March 2012, www.gov.uk/government/news/british-irish-relations-the-next-decade

¹⁹ For the belief that war service could reconcile Irish Catholics and Protestants see, Colin Reid, *The lost Ireland of Stephen Gwynn: Irish constitutional nationalism and cultural politics, 1864-1950*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011, p. 162.

²⁰ Edward Madigan, 'Introduction' in John Horne and Edward Madigan (eds), *Towards commemoration: Ireland in war and revolution, 1912-1923*, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2013, p. 1. In March 2016 Irish President Michael D. Higgins did question whether the 'supremacist and militarist imperialism' mobilised to promote Irish participation in the Great War had been subjected to the 'the same fault-finding edge' as has the republicanism of the Rising. Speech by President Michael D. Higgins at a Symposium entitled "Remembering

Were this period of remembrance over, this might be a moment for relaxation and perhaps for some self-congratulation. But even if nothing had changed since 2012 the second act of the 'decade of centenaries' would have always been more gruesome than the first. Except for a few bright spots – votes for (some) women won in 1918 – the end of Ireland's revolutionary experience cannot match the undiluted romance that once attached to the heroes of Easter Week or the message of simple sacrifice that still tends to characterise Poppy Day events. In March 1922, the killing in Belfast of Owen McMahon, his four sons, and lodger by a 'police death squad' was part of a series of assassinations of Catholic civilians in newly formed Northern Ireland.²¹ A month later ten Protestant men were slain by IRA members over several days in Dunmanway, County Cork.²² And in neighbouring County Kerry the following year, Republican prisoners who rejected the Treaty with Britain were tied to landmines and blown to pieces by erstwhile comrades now serving in the freshly minted National Army.²³ These incidents and others like them will be remembered and contested when the time comes to commemorate the founding of the two states.

And half-way through this ten-year glut of anniversaries, a nationalistic upsurge – partly civic minded, but powered also by atavistic impulses and ethnic fears and animosity – has resurrected questions that to many eyes had seemed dormant at its outset. Twenty years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, partition, and Ireland's long-contested relationship with Britain, have entered into a new period of uncertainty. This fresh volatility

1916", Mansion House, Dublin, 28th March, 2016, www.rte.ie/documents/news/address-by-michael-d-higgins.pdf

²¹ Tim Wilson, "'The most terrible assassination that has yet stained the name of Belfast': the McMahon murders in context" in *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxvii, no. 145, May 2010, pp 84-106.

²² Whether the Dunmanway men were shot because they were or were believed to be informers or whether the motive was sectarian has already been the subject of a two-decade public and scholarly row. For a recent article on the dispute see, Ian McBride, 'The Peter Hart affair in perspective: history, ideology, and the Irish Revolution' in *Historical Journal*, Published online: 23 August 2017, pp 1-23.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X17000139>

²³ Charles Townshend, *The republic: the fight for Irish independence, 1918-1923*, London: Allen Lane, 2013, p. 443.

arises less from Irish acts of politicized remembrance, than from British politicians' (and public) capacities to forget.²⁴

On 23 June 2016 a majority of people in England and Wales voted to Leave the European Union. A majority of Scottish voters opted to Remain and, so too, did a clear majority of voters in Northern Ireland. These results have produced doubt about the future of relationships across these islands, and the 'Irish Question' has returned to Westminster party politics. 'We may try to forget our history,' wrote Irish historian A. T. Q. Stewart at the turn of the millennium, 'but it will not forget us.'²⁵ One hundred years ago Britain and Ireland (and Ireland's two political communities) were moving apart and now, in different, and to date, less dramatic ways, they are again. As we get ready for the centenaries of deadly sectarian strife, civil war, and partition, it looks as if these anniversaries might be marked by the return of border controls and customs posts. It is not yet known whether they will arrive again on April Fools' Day.

Abstract

Ireland is half-way through a 'decade of centenaries' commemorating the series of events that culminated in partition. Contested memories may be further aggravated by Brexit.

Bio

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²⁴ See, Mo Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish in interwar England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp 1-3.

²⁵ A. T. Q. Stewart, *The shape of Irish history*, Belfast: Blackstaff, 2001, p. 186.