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‘1916 and the Challenges of Commemorative Exhibitions in Ireland’

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Abstract

This paper examines how National Cultural Institutions in Ireland have demonstrated significant responses in facilitating collective, reflection, celebration and engagement with the 100th year anniversary of the 1916 Rising by discussing some of the broad tensions and issues facing three exhibition case studies at the National Museum of Ireland and National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin and at the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork City.

Introduction

The events of Easter 1916 are of seminal importance in Irish history. What began as a small uprising in the centre of Dublin on Easter Monday set in motion a series of developments which ultimately led to Ireland’s independence from Britain. Even though the rebellion itself lasted just six days and inevitably failed, it is synonymous as a moment in the past which represents Irish history, characterizes Irish culture and amplifies national identity. Numerous groups such as nationalists and socialists as well as many political parties in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland identify with and draw inspiration from the events and individuals associated with the 1916 Rising.¹ Those charged with organising commemorative events have an unenviable task of acceding to the demands of the relatives of the rebels of 1916 as well as the numerous groups and political parties who all want to have a stake in the celebration.²

Furthermore, the commemorations of the 1916 Rising have tended to flip flop. The disillusionment caused by civil war, partition and economic hardship ensured that early commemorations of 1916 were rather low-key. By the 50th anniversary in 1966, the revolutionary generation was aware of its own mortality and felt the need to ensure that future generations understood its legacy. The commemorations that year were momentous and large in scale. However, the 75th anniversary in 1991 was a considerably more subdued occasion. The beginning of the Troubles in Northern Ireland silenced state commemorative practices with remembrance events organised by independent committees instead of the state. With a record of fluctuating commemorative activities and the presence of master narratives which continually reinforced the white Irish Catholic majority position, national cultural institutions have been anticipating the importance of the centenary year for some time. One hundred years marks a transition from a lived memory into a realisation of a new legacy and a new interpretation of the event. The harrowing history of the 1916 Rising and its legacy of struggles and divisiveness has required national cultural institutions to design and create exhibitions and events which allow discounted narratives of the roles, accounts and legacies of civilians, women

¹ White, Timothy J and Mernane, Denis (2016) ‘The Politics of Remembrance: Commemorating 1916’ in *Irish Political Studies*, 31 (1), 31.

² White, Timothy J and Mernane, Denis (2016) ‘The Politics of Remembrance: Commemorating 1916’ in *Irish Political Studies*, 31 (1), 32.

and children emerge in an effort to compensate for their invisibility in previous commemorative programmes.

Drawing on primary and secondary sources from my research which includes discussions with museum staff, descriptions of exhibitions, museum documents, guided and self-guided tours and academic publications, I have identified six key dynamics in preparing for significant commemorations.

The first is the **conservation** of key objects- a fundamental responsibility of museums and galleries as it focuses on the protection and care of tangible traces of the past. For example at the National Museum of Ireland (NMI), all flags that relate to 1916 were sent to textile specialists to preserve and restore them in preparation for centenary exhibitions. Secondly **collaboration** is an important factor so that loans, exchanges and copyrights can be arranged with a number of key stakeholders such as other institutions (including institutions outside of Ireland such as Imperial War Museum) and private collectors. During this centenary year, with an unprecedented amount of commemorative exhibitions being created, national cultural institutions and other cultural sites have been in competition with each other in obtaining materials and objects for display. **Commissioning** artworks, designs and publications requires a lengthy lead in time and extensive foresight is essential. **Establishing advisory groups** which consist of historians, public intellectuals and curatorial experts is necessary so that they can give national cultural institutions honest, forensic feedback relating to their proposed plans. Co-ordinating conversations with public stakeholders and key audiences such as schools, 1916 relatives, local communities, international students and tourists whose first language is not English; through **focus groups** should be undertaken in order to gain an insight into their expectations. Engaging with current **academic research** can be tricky as it is a live process but is crucial in order to be aware of any new breakthroughs in research. With these dynamics in mind, I will examine centenary exhibitions as case studies in order to analyse how museum displays are bound up with how we continue to remember and (re)interpret the past.

Case Study One: 'Proclaiming a Republic' exhibition, National Museum of Ireland (NMI), Collins Barracks.

The NMI has a long history of hosting 1916 commemorative exhibitions. The first exhibition was in 1932 which was curated by Nelly Gifford Donnelly- a participant in the Rising who collected artefacts through personal connections and the 1916 collection was built around this. The NMI stands apart as the pioneer in hosting 1916 exhibitions. Not only did it set the stage for the solidification of the need to preserve and present the material culture of Ireland, it also ushered in a new form of museum-society relations centred on public engagement and collection building. The NMI's 1916 collection now contains 15,000 individual items, 8,500 paper based documents and over 20,000 scanned images. The current exhibition 'Proclaiming a Republic' is the NMI's eighth exhibition on the subject and is its largest and in terms of visitor numbers, it's most successful to date.

In previous exhibitions at the NMI, curators had less freedom and were subject to pressures from government funders to project a homogenous white Celticised racial image.³ Exhibitions had a strong political agenda and were created to encourage a call to action. A key aspect of the mission of

³ Kirwan, Alan (2012) 'Construction of Irish Identity and its Representation at the Nation's Museums' in *Enquire*, 5 (1), 65.

the NMI is to “hold its collections in trust for the nation, with a unique responsibility for the rich material culture of Ireland and its peoples and the natural history of our island...” (Strategic Plan, 2014-2017). Traditionally, the history of politically significant events has been inspired by the stories told by notable artists, writers and historians. As national stories are increasingly told through visual culture, national cultural institutions play an integral part in how nations produce a shared image of itself and its past. The NMI reiterates its importance to the public as it makes ‘a valuable contribution to the social and cultural development of Ireland and acts as a source of inspiration for the creative, cultural and education sectors’.⁴ History at a national level is constantly being redefined and as Doupona and Coakley (2010) have stated, it exists ‘to the extent that these images and stories are acknowledged and reaffirmed by others as legitimate representations of the nation-state or ethnic population’.⁵

The suppression and elevation of narratives is almost inevitable in museum exhibitions and can generate dissatisfaction and condemnation from visitors; thus leading to an institutional re-examination of hierarchies of value. This was the case for the NMI who through their centenary exhibition, offer a more nuanced reflection on the condition of Ireland in the 1910s, focusing on broader social and economic issues such as the conditions of tenement dwellers, the struggle of the urban working classes and the status of women. ‘Proclaiming a Republic’ also broadens the spectrum of the experience of 1916 beyond the leaders and concentrates on the lesser known figures.

The wide use of everyday objects in ‘Proclaiming a Republic’ represents the desire to go beyond the over familiar accounts of the leaders as political heroes who gave the ultimate sacrifice for their country and portray them as biographical subjects- creating an intimacy with the leaders as ordinary individuals. The ‘Courts Martial and Execution’ section of the exhibition details the last moments of the executed leaders of the 1916 Rising individually by describing their last meetings with families, exhibiting their final letters and displaying artefacts which were in their possession before they met their death by firing squad in Kilmainham Jail. Both Joseph Plunkett and Sean Heuston’s last moments are materially represented by a set of rosary bead. The objects themselves are not heroic, they are mundane until they become associated with significant events- similar to the stories of the participants in the Rising themselves. Also drawn upon within this exhibition are the histories of other nations and past societies who also participated in rebellion so that Ireland’s struggle for independence is shared with others.

Case Study Two: ‘James Stephens, the National Gallery of Ireland and the 1916 Rising’ at the National Gallery of Ireland.

The National Gallery of Ireland (NGI) opened in Dublin City Centre in 1864 and houses the Irish national collection of Irish and European art. It holds a small number of objects pertaining to the 1916 Rising so it is limited in how it can engage with the subject directly. For its 50th anniversary commemorative exhibition, the Director of the NGI, James White, wrote an explicit apology for the

⁴ National Museum of Ireland (2014) *Telling the Story of Ireland: Strategic Plan 2014-2017*, 11. <http://www.museum.ie/Corporate-Media/Corporate-Information/Statement-of-Strategy>. Accessed 01/09/2016.

⁵ Doupona Topič, Mojca and Coakley, Jay (2010) ‘Complicating the Relationship between Sport and National Identity: The Case of Post-Socialist Slovenia’ in *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 27 (4), 373.

absence of representations 'of the most distinguished figures in the Rising' in their landmark 1916 exhibition- reiterating the traditional desire for national cultural institutions to illustrate the stories of prominent individuals rather than ordinary citizens.⁶ In his foreword of the *Cuimhneachán* exhibition catalogue, White states how 'This exhibition does not by any stretch of the imagination do justice to the great occasion it endeavours to commemorate, due to the lack of material'.⁷ The obstacle of the NGI's limiting collection must still be endured to this day and narratives are restricted to events leading up to the Rising and its aftermath (rather than the dramatic rebellion itself); images of noble, cultural and political figures of the era (rather than participants in the conflict); and conventional published accounts of the era (rather than original, primary research).

For the 100th anniversary exhibition, the NGI presented an exploration of the atmosphere of a city in upheaval in the context of personal account by gallery employee James Stephens. The exhibition is based on one of the best-known published eyewitness accounts and a first edition of the book is the focal point of the display. The exhibition also features portraits of some of the individuals mentioned in the book, portraits of the author himself and depictions of the city immediately after the conflict.

While this particular exhibition attempts to balance the intimacy of a personal account within a national frame and provide a backdrop to a historic rebellion, the inconsistencies of the national collection and its deficiencies in representing the pivotal event in the creation of the modern Irish state, reveals that the NGI must still contend with a cluster of institutional factors that determine their capacity (or incapacity) to represent the past.⁸

Case Study Three: '1916 in Contemporary Art', Crawford Art gallery, Cork.

Crawford Art Gallery is a national cultural institution and regional art museum for the province Munster, dedicated to the visual arts, both historic and contemporary. '1916 In Contemporary Art' is an exhibition of personal artistic interpretations by contemporary artists, commissioned by collector Larry Lambe. Varying in scale and media, from painting to poetry, the only instruction the commissioned artists received was that the work should be linked with any event of 1916 that affected Ireland.⁹ This was a relatively broad instruction and provided a compelling multiplicity of responses and a measured reflection on turbulent times.

The poets and artists represented in the exhibition variously recover, celebrate, mourn and decry in a range of media and formal approaches. One of the strengths of the exhibition is how it spotlights forgotten vignettes among well known narratives, remembering those elided from familiar histories and uncovering arresting parallels over time.¹⁰ Each artwork is accompanied by a statement from each artist in order to provide a background into the artists' motivation and context in how the pieces fit the broad brief.

⁶ National Gallery of Ireland (1966) *Cuimhneachán 1916: A Commemorative Exhibition of the Irish Rebellion 1916*. Dolmen Press, Dublin. 3.

⁷ National Gallery of Ireland (1966) *Cuimhneachán 1916: A Commemorative Exhibition of the Irish Rebellion 1916*. Dolmen Press, Dublin. 6.

⁸ Autry, Robyn (2012) 'The Political Economy of Memory: The Challenges of Representing National Conflict at 'Identity Driven' Museums' in *Theory and Society*, 42 (1),. 70.

⁹ Ireland 2016 (2016): 'Crawford Art Gallery'. <http://www.ireland.ie/partners/crawford-art-gallery>. Accessed 01/09/2016.

¹⁰ Kelleher, Sarah (2016) 'Not Fade Away' in *Irish Arts Review*, Vol. 33 (2). 256..

With most of the conflicts of 1916 and indeed its subsequent commemorative events occurring in Dublin city centre, hundreds of kilometres away from the location of the exhibition; it is often difficult for events outside of the capital to gain attention and contribute to the commemorative conversation. However, this exhibition uses its geographical detachment to its advantage and takes the opportunity to grasp the difficult issues of 1916 (such as death, the enemy, failure, Ireland's current economic state) instead of the more comfortable issues; which have already been discussed extensively in the primary sites of commemoration in Dublin. '1916 in Contemporary Art' is the only one of the exhibitions examined here that is a travelling exhibition and it employs a wider context to the Easter Rising's centennial at the Crawford Gallery with a considerable focus on contemporary creative arts.

Conclusion.

Nuanced narratives that were ignored in previous commemorations have emerged in the 2016 commemorations (women, civilians, children). The themes emphasised in the exhibitions are universal (women and violence for example) and places the events in 1916 Ireland within an international context. 2016 has been a huge opportunity for the cultural industry and the centenary has stretched far beyond national cultural institutions. Despite this paper being confined to large national institutions, the contribution of regional and local museums in facilitating engagement must not be overlooked. How to approach and commemorate a contested past is far from a uniquely Irish problem and many countries face up to it. It is an intellectual and philosophical problem fraught with difficulties and anomalies which requires vigilant self examination as well as confronting evasions and prejudices that have been rooted 100 years ago and more.

The approach of national cultural institutions has been a determined one, emphasising aspects that are inclusive and celebratory while also commendably taking note of past discrepancies and countering traditions in contemporary Ireland. These institutions have a huge weight of expectation as they are often viewed as portraying the definitive version of history due to the scale of their collections, resources, staff and financial investments. This research into the three case study exhibitions emphasises how decision making over commemorative activities is heavily influenced by more than a collective will to remember or forget.¹¹ While these institutions present one of the most painful episodes in Irish history, they still selectively mine the past and approach histories of violence with caution.¹²

¹¹ Autry, Robyn (2012) 'The Political Economy of Memory: The Challenges of Representing National Conflict at 'Identity Driven' Museums' in *Theory and Society*, 42 (1),. 60.

¹² Autry, Robyn (2012) 'The Political Economy of Memory: The Challenges of Representing National Conflict at 'Identity Driven' Museums' in *Theory and Society*, 42 (1),. 69.

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