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1916 Easter Rising and the Reconceptualization of Memory

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'The 1916 Easter Rising and the Reconceptualization of Memory'

By Siobhán Doyle (Dublin Institute of Technology)

Presented at The Politics of Memory: Victimization, Violence and Contested Narratives of the Past International Conference at Columbia University, New York. 3rd December 2015

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 Irish independence.

The Government of Ireland is organising a national and international program of events to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising and to remember those who fought and those who died for Irish independence. Ireland 2016- the state's centenary committee- is (quote) 'a call to action for the people of Ireland and its Diaspora to remember 1916 and the pivotal period in Ireland's history, to reflect on the past 100 years, and to re-imagine our future'.

Commemorative History of the 1916 Rising

Different generations have commemorated 1916 in different ways. Academics and commentators have disagreed in their interpretation of its significance with their opinions sometimes influenced as much by their own political leanings as by knowledge of the subject. The disillusionment caused by civil war, partition and economic hardship ensured that early commemorations of 1916 were rather low-key.

In 1923, a committee was formed to commemorate those who had died in 1916 and the War of Independence. Public subscriptions funded the project and it was decided to commission an illuminated vellum book- *Leabhar na hAiséirghe* (Book of the Rising)- by Art O'Murnaghan- who was a self-taught artist and he excelled as an illuminator, calligrapher and stage designer (See Figure 1). He worked on the project initially from 1924 to 1928, taking up to a year to complete each page. By 1952, O'Murnaghan had completed 26 exquisite pages, inspired by ancient Irish manuscripts, oriental art and the artist's own mysticism.

The 25th anniversary in 1941 included an exhibition in the National Museum of Ireland and the issuing of medals for both 1916 and War of Independence veterans but the most dramatic commemoration was for the 50th anniversary in 1966. By 1966, the revolutionary generation was aware of its own mortality and felt the need to ensure that future generations understood its legacy.¹ The centrepiece of the official commemoration was a military parade down O'Connell Street (See Figure 2). Art exhibitions were held, and RTE (Ireland's national broadcaster) dedicated much of its schedule during the week to programmes related to the Rising. Throughout the country many local commemorations were held, and these largely adhered to the format of a religious service, parade, speeches and the reading of the Proclamation, followed by a cultural event such as a pageant or concert.

¹ [http://www.museum.ie/Decorative-Arts-History/Exhibitions/Previous-Exhibitions/The-Easter-Rising-Understanding-1916-\(1\)/Commemoration](http://www.museum.ie/Decorative-Arts-History/Exhibitions/Previous-Exhibitions/The-Easter-Rising-Understanding-1916-(1)/Commemoration)

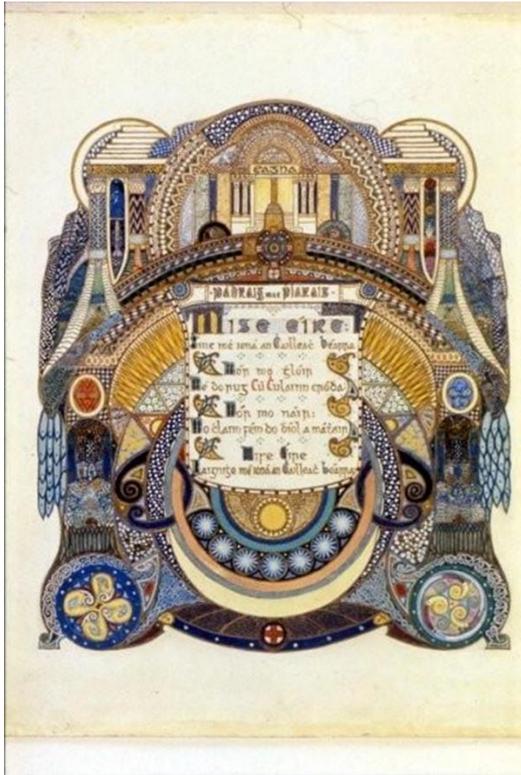


Figure 1: *Leabhar na hAiséirgh*(1924-1951) by Art O' Murnaghan



Figure 2: 50th Anniversary Military Parade, O'Connell St, Dublin (1966)

In the decades that followed, events in Northern Ireland overshadowed the annual commemoration and the Easter military parade was discontinued in the 1970s. The 75th anniversary was a considerably more subdued occasion. The beginning of the Troubles in Northern Ireland silenced state commemorative practices with remembrance events were organised by independent committees instead of the state.

Commemoration is a form of public performance of citizenship and the state is central in orchestrating this synchronised remembrance. State commemorations may give official closure to a period of contestation and the nation is the most important framework for commemoration. Historian Marie Coleman asserts that we are in danger of attributing too much power to states and governments but if governments do not orchestrate these commemorations which tradition demands should be ritualised, others with less benign agendas will seize the baton and produce much more discordant and ultimately disruptive tunes. There has been a surge in dissatisfaction with what was being offered by the state. An overdose of re-enactments and repetitive wreath laying ceremonies has led to criticism of the government commemorative committees as exercising too much caution and equivocation by those who are in favour of a straightforward celebration and triumphalism. The traditional approach to state commemorations is prevalent for a number of reasons: it is familiar and accessible to a broad audience and it offers a safe means of addressing the political and emotional sensitivities particular to remembrance events. Such commemorative activities seek to appeal and soothe rather than challenge. However the tendency towards this can result in commemorations that lack any emotional or poetic impact.

There are many pressures of commemorating the Easter Rising; one of which is the challenge of commemorating a moment of political violence during a peace process in Northern Ireland and in a global climate of terrorist attacks. What it is important to remember is that Ireland is commemorating events from one hundred years ago, not trying to replicate them. One hundred years marks a transition from a lived memory into a realisation of a new legacy and an opportunity to create a new interpretation of the event. Those tasked with organising commemorative events must eliminate the threat of reducing historical remembrance to a costume drama. The commemorative events undertaken by the State to date in remembering events such as the 1913 Lock-Out and '1915 Road to the Rising' event have in general offered a better 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. The State's elaborate plans for 2016 would suggest that this wider context will be central to the Easter Rising's centennial, with plans to develop a tenement museum and considerable focus on the creative arts in addition to the inevitable predominance of the rebellion.

New Technologies of Commemoration

Familiar social technologies such as observing one minute of silence produce novel experiences and modalities for performing the psychological. New technologies- although some currently still in their infancy- are bound to have an increasingly profound influence on commemoration and the formation and transfer of collective memory. For example, the BBC Voices 16 project will use Twitter as a storytelling tool by telling the composite story of the year 1916 through personal stories in the first person narrative. This twitter feed will chart the days that changed Ireland focusing on a first person testimony.



Figure 3: Locketts containing images of the 1916 leaders cut from newspapers

The circulation of mass-produced images is critical in making historic events and the people surrounding them recognisable figures. This can be traced back as far as the immediate aftermath of the Easter Rising when images of the rebels were circulated on postcards, in newspapers, and in souvenir publications. These mass-produced images made the leaders recognisable figures to those who had initially responded with hostility to the Rising. A set of locketts which contained images of the executed leaders cut from pages of newspapers can be situated alongside other examples of mass-produced ephemera that were adapted by their owners to reflect a more nuanced and personal interpretation of the events of Easter Week and its aftermath (See Figure 3). These material objects were integral to the changes in public opinion towards the rebels during the period of internment. Furthermore, by considering the ways in which mass-produced ephemera was modified, we can see the emotional and physical labour invested in the creation and the display of more personalised mementoes of the Rising and how it illustrates the reflexive discourses that shaped the narrative interpretations of the event.



Figure 4: The Choclamation

However, a media revolution, a surge in mass communications and in the age of social media and digital archives, means that commemorations are even less amenable to control than in the past. Ephemera associated with the Rising is already prevalent including a chocolate bar which is being sold at retail outlets for €2.99 (See Figure 4). Not exactly what the rebellion leaders had in mind, the wrapper displays their faces as well as the Proclamation (surely a chocolate egg would be more appropriate to celebrate the Easter Rising).

Conclusion

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 government approach appears to be determined to emphasise aspects that are inclusive and celebratory while also commendably to take note of countering traditions in contemporary Irish politics. The outcome may be somewhat bland and unexciting, but revolutionary consciousness is necessarily about extremism and about hostility repudiation and hatred, terror and death. Regardless of how one interprets its impact, there can be no doubt that knowledge of 1916 and the events that followed was and is still crucial to our understanding of the history and political development of modern Ireland.