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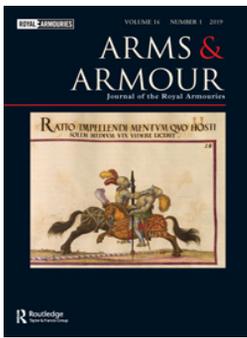
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The Bullet in the Brick: The Materiality of Conflict in Museum Objects

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Tangible traces of conflict in visual artefacts can take viewers uncomfortably close to the realities of war—violence, destruction and fatalities. This article questions the evidential force of objects associated with conflict and their eventual display in exhibitions. Through a study of the display of a brick in which is embedded a bullet that is said to have passed through the body of Francis Sheehy Skeffington when he was executed by firing squad during the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, this article explores the historical configuration of the brick and analyses its public display in the National Museum of Ireland (NMI). By examining the actions carried out by the NMI in collecting and archiving the object and analysing the narrative strategies of its display, this article considers how the visual aspects of exhibition displays can perpetuate a particular version of historic events and accredits objects with assumed authenticity.

KEYWORDS 1916 Rising, authenticity, bullet in the brick, Francis Sheehy Skeffington, exhibition display, material culture, museum narratives, National Museum of Ireland

Introduction

Objects derive their historical weight from where they originate, the places where they are subsequently displayed and the authenticity surrounding them. The historical significance of artefacts associated with conflict is attributed through a range of actions carried out firstly by those with first-hand experience of the conflict and collectors; followed by the institutional practices of museums such as acquisition, conservation, research and ultimately exhibition. This article centres on a portion of a

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.



FIGURE 1. The bullet in the brick (HE: EW.683). Source: National Museum of Ireland.

brick in which is embedded a bullet, which is said to have passed through the body of Francis Sheehy Skeffington when he was executed by firing squad during the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 (Figure 1). The 2016 exhibition ‘Proclaiming a Republic: The 1916 Rising’ at the National Museum of Ireland (NMI) to commemorate the centenary of the pivotal event in the struggle for Ireland’s independence, was the first public display of the brick since its donation to the national collection in 1937.

Due to its display in the exhibition and the media attention that it has received, the brick has become a visual representation of the death of a principal activist in Ireland’s modern political history. In order to explore the significance of this representation, such an artefact requires an examination of the actions carried out by the cultural institution in collecting the object; an analysis of how the visible traces of conflict gives the brick an assumed authenticity; and an analysis of the narrative strategies of its display.

Visible traces of use on artefacts associated with conflict can take viewers uncomfortably close to its realities—violence, destruction and fatalities. On the other hand, the recognition of the visible traces as authentic evidence of conflict, can often go unquestioned by both makers of the exhibitions and its viewers. This article questions the evidential force of objects associated with conflict and their eventual display in exhibitions and suggests that it is necessary to carefully examine, analyse and legitimise a broad series of events surrounding the historical configuration of objects before placing them on public display. In developing this argument, I have carried

out extensive archival research into the aftermath of Francis Sheehy Skeffington's execution, which led to the brick being identified as material evidence of his death during the 1916 Rising and eventually donated to the NMI. Through a visual analysis of the display of the brick, this research examines how the visual aspects of exhibition displays can perpetuate a particular version of historic events and accredit objects with assumed authenticity.

The article also considers the brick in relation other displayed objects that are associated with execution and demonstrates their commemorative role within the exhibition. The final section of the article focuses on the narrative structures of the exhibition and questions the implication of the NMI presenting a mundane, uncertain object as heroic, authentic materiality of a significant event in modern Irish history. Overall, this article will examine the institutional processes of commemorative exhibitions and provide a means of grounding the discussion of authenticity and the materiality of conflict.

Francis Sheehy Skeffington and the 1916 Rising

On Easter Monday 1916, Republicans occupied buildings across Dublin (and at several outposts across the country) in rebellion against British Rule. The six-day battle for Dublin resulted in almost 500 fatalities, destroying much of the city centre. Although the rebels were defeated after a swift British military response, the Rising transformed Ireland by paving the way for the War of Independence (1919–21) and also contributing to the Civil War (1922–3) that followed. Despite almost a century of controversy regarding the morality and legacy of its violence, the Rising continues to symbolise both the struggle for Irish independence and the achievement of national sovereignty.

Francis Sheehy Skeffington (1878–1916) was a well-known political activist in Dublin at the time of the 1916 Rising. He worked mainly as a journalist, becoming editor of the *Irish Citizen* of which he was co-founder in 1912, and contributing to a number of Irish, English, French and American papers and magazines. As an ardent feminist and committed pacifist whose views were opposed to the use of physical force, Sheehy Skeffington was firmly against the violent conflict that was the 1916 Rising. After becoming concerned at the scale of looting that was taking place, he went into the city centre to appeal for calm the day after the outbreak of the rebellion. British soldiers arrested Sheehy Skeffington on his way home and brought him to Portobello Barracks. Although a search revealed nothing more than a draft form of membership of a proposed civic guard (to prevent looting in the city), and no charge was made against him, Sheehy Skeffington was detained for further enquiries. Two other individuals—Thomas Dickson and Patrick McIntyre—were also indiscriminately arrested and detained in the barracks that night.

The following morning, the three men were brought out into the yard and by order of Captain Bowen Colthurst, they were put up against a wall and executed by

firing squad. The bodies were rolled up in sheets and buried in the unconsecrated ground of the barracks yard later that night in the presence of a Catholic chaplain. All the while, Francis' wife Hanna was without definite information as to what had happened to her husband. As a result of alarming rumours about him which reached her from various sources, her two sisters went to Portobello Barracks to make enquires. After being dismissed by the officer responsible for the executions—Captain Bowen-Colthurst—that he had no knowledge of her husband whatsoever, Hanna got in contact with the Chaplain of the barracks and besought him for information about her husband. She was told he was dead and already buried.

The denial of information to Sheehy Skeffington's wife was one of several actions that were taken by British military personnel in an effort to hide evidence that the executions had taken place. As the firing squad of seven soldiers carried out their orders in a small yard, the surrounding walls were covered in residue of blood from Dickson, McIntyre and Sheehy Skeffington. In witness statements given at the inquiry into the deaths of the three men, prisoners in the barracks described how efforts were made to clean the bloodstains from the wall in the immediate aftermath of the executions. Christopher Kearney stated that he “heard scrubbing and washing going on afterwards for nearly two hours” in the yard. Another prisoner, William Boland recalled hearing “the sound of buckets of water and bass brooms”.

The surrounding walls also suffered damage from impending bullets that became embedded in the bricks. Taking further steps to conceal this visible evidence of the executions the following week, an officer at the barracks had several bricklayers who were working nearby brought to the yard at bayonet-point and instructed them to repair the sections of the wall with tell-tale indented bullets.

They were then instructed to remove all the bricks with bullets in them and replace them with new ones which Colthurst had already a supply awaiting. While this was being done the soldiers told them where each of the victims had stood.

One of the bricklayers ‘accidentally’ removed one of the indented bricks from the barracks as it fell into his bag whilst working on the wall. Out of fear, he gave it to a bystander—Francis MacLoughlin Scannell—for safe keeping. After some years, MacLoughlin Scannell wrote to Hanna Sheehy Skeffington explaining the circumstances of how he acquired the brick which he claims contains the bullet which passed through the body of her husband when he was shot by firing squad. He wrote how he had kept the brick for several years but wished it to be in her possession. Hanna donated the brick to the National Museum of Ireland in 1937 where it has remained in the national collection and went on public display in the ‘Proclaiming a Republic: The 1916 Rising’ exhibition for the first time in 2016.

The Bullet in the Brick on Display

‘Proclaiming a Republic: The 1916 Rising’ opened in March 2016 and was the NMI's principal contribution to the centenary programme to commemorate the

1916 Rising. Located in the Riding School in the Department of Decorative Arts in Collins Barracks, the exhibition tells the story of the rebellion through the display of three hundred objects, documents, graphic panels, short film, soundscapes, audio recordings and interactive touchscreen panels. The exhibition is laid out semi-chronologically beginning with an overview of the political climate in Ireland before the Rising, explaining the six days of the conflict itself by garrison location and exploring the executions, aftermath and legacy of the 1916 Rising.

The central part of the exhibition and the area with the largest amount of floor space is Zone Three, ‘Establishing the Rebel Garrisons and the British Countermoves’, which focuses on different Dublin garrisons that were set up during the week of fighting, as well as some areas outside Dublin. Black steel work frames provide a structure to house graphic panels, display cases, AV screens and large scale images in this zone. Flags denoting each garrison and section of the zone are mounted above head height within a ‘striking’ bespoke display framework, which abstractly echoes the silhouette of the ruins of Dublin after the Rising. At each garrison exhibit, visitors are drawn to consider the main relevant themes through the use of impactful graphics which incorporate written interpretation (including quoted first-hand accounts), digital photographic printing of photographs and ephemeral documents. Zone Three is the most heavily populated area of the exhibition in terms of material, text and images on display.

The bullet in the brick is displayed in the ‘Portobello Barracks’ section of Zone Three, which documents the activities in the garrison during Easter Week (Figure 2). It is exhibited in a relatively isolated manner on a white plinth within a stand-alone glass case alongside the ‘Vote for Women’ badge, which was pinned to Sheehy Skeffington’s jacket when he was executed and removed by the medical officer. While the other display cases within in this zone explore the activities of each garrison through a broad exploration of objects and documents relating to several individuals, the Portobello Barracks section focuses primarily on the life and death of Francis Sheehy Skeffington. The surrounding graphic panels and photographs centre around Sheehy Skeffington and his wife, and photographically ignore Dickson and McIntyre who were executed alongside him in the barracks yard. In fact, the only mention of Dickson and McIntyre in the display is in a short paragraph titled ‘Arrest’ and ‘execution’ which details their arrest and orders to be shot by Captain Bowen-Colthurst. By elevating Sheehy Skeffington’s story through the display of objects and graphic panels documenting his political influence, the exclusionary display is an example of Joanna Szczepanski’s (2012) notion of romantic martyrdom in museums as the narrative ‘only has space for one victim’ and ‘pushes out the stories of other victims’.

The NMI Curatorial team have emphasised how the exhibition foregrounds the experiences of ‘not only ... the leaders, the people that usually get the attention, but the everyday participants in the Rising’. While there are several examples throughout the exhibition where ‘history from below’ is developed, when the objects displayed



FIGURE 2. The bullet in the brick on display in ‘Proclaiming a Republic: The 1916 Rising’, National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks. Photograph taken by the author.

in the exhibition are associated with familiar figures in Irish history, that association is made explicit and elaborated on—such as that with Francis Sheehy Skeffington. However, this hierarchical approach and biographical focus upon one prominent individual can compromise the authenticity of objects, which will now be demonstrated by examining the historical configuration of the bullet in the brick.

Questions of Authenticity

On 8th May, Colonel McCammond ordered the bricks which were marked with bullets to be removed from the barracks wall and replaced ‘so that military prisoners exercising in the yard might not see them’. As this replacement work was carried out eleven days after the executions, prisoners had already noticed the damage that the bullets had caused. In his witness statement at the enquiry, William Boland recalled:

I did not count them, but on the right of the wall there were about six bricks—battered—that was at the height of Sheehy Skeffington and about the same number

of marks about the height of Dickson, and six or eight bricks battered at the height of McIntyre.

This statement identified that there were approximately eighteen bricks that were marked with bullets from the firing squad. Although McLoughlin Scannell's letter to Hanna Sheehy Skeffington states that the bricklayers were told 'where each of the victims had stood' and that the brick in question was removed from the spot where Sheehy Skeffington stood awaiting the shots from the firing squad, the likelihood that the bullet shot him before becoming lodged in the wall is questionable.

The exhibition display label reads that 'This brick contains a .303 bullet said to have shot Francis Sheehy Skeffington', while the NMI's online catalogue states that the embedded bullet 'passed through the body of the late Francis Sheehy Skeffington'. The online information on the object is more sensationalist in its alignment with the death of Sheehy Skeffington, while the exhibition display favours technical specifications in place of a definitive implication that the bullet on display penetrated through his body. According to ammunition experts at the Royal Armouries who carefully examined the bullet in the brick using digital images and photographs of the exhibition display, the formation of the bullet within the brick is a pattern correct for the year 1916 and certainly fired at very close range, as was the case in Portobello Barracks. However, without conclusive technical analysis on the brick, it is difficult to attest if the bullet passed through a body, let alone that of Sheehy Skeffington as alluded to in this display. There are also inconsistencies in the physical description of the brick since it was presented to Hanna Sheehy Skeffington in 1935. The letter from McLoughlin Scannell to Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, when he gifted the brick to her describes it as 'a half brick'. The NMI online catalogue describes it as 'a portion of a brick', while the 2016 exhibition display presents it as a 'brick', meaning that its description has been compromised and simplified for the purpose of its public exhibition.

The alignment of the brick with the shooting of Sheehy Skeffington in the exhibition display and eliminating the possibility that the bullet could have been shot at either Dickson or McIntyre, further compromises the authenticity of the brick. The display label reads that the bullet is 'said to have shot Francis Sheehy Skeffington' and does not definitively claim to have been fired at him, opening up the possibility that the claims may not be accurate. Despite the space given for historical ambiguity, the presented narrative still ignores the fact that there were two other people positioned in close proximity to Sheehy Skeffington when the shots were fired. Instead of associating the object with the simultaneous execution of three journalists in Portobello Barracks—the garrison which the section of the exhibition is designed to narrate—the display prioritises the death of one individual who happens to be a celebrated political figure. This elevation of the narrative of the death of a celebrated political figure is further demonstrated by placing the brick alongside a personal possession of Sheehy Skeffington—the 'Vote for Women' badge that he wore when he was executed. The medical officer on duty stripped the dead body and Sheehy

Skeffington's ring and this suffragette badge were shipped from Dublin Castle to his widow after weeks of 'persistent application'.

The authenticating evidence of the brick as presented in the exhibition is from a single document in the NMI archives—the letter written by Francis McLoughlin Scannell when he was gifting the brick to Hanna in 1935. McLoughlin Scannell waited almost twenty years after the execution to send it to Sheehy Skeffington's widow as he considered it 'too gruesome a souvenir' and a 'ghastly memento to offer'. It was a further two years until Hanna donated the brick to the NMI Easter Week collection and almost eighty years until it was put on public display. This decision to exclude the brick from previous commemorative exhibitions may be representative of the reluctance to fully engage with the harsh realities of the rebellion. The 2016 exhibition confronts the experience of execution in an empathic manner—a narrative strategy which will now be discussed in more detail.

Exhibiting Executions in 'Proclaiming a Republic: The 1916 Rising'

The subject of death, and execution in particular, is difficult to disseminate in exhibitions which must accommodate visitors of varying ages, nationalities and political sympathies. Linke (2010) has discussed how the 'Body Worlds' exhibition uses representational strategies that divert the spectators' attention from the domains of terror and death, creating a sanitised narrative that erases critical perception. In creating exhibitions on the subject of conflict, the subject of death is inevitable. With close to 500 casualties during the 1916 Rising including the execution of 16 of the leading figures, it is unavoidable to incorporate death when commemorating this historical conflict.

'Proclaiming a Republic: The 1916 Rising' confronts death throughout the exhibition by displaying items such as memorial cards, last letters and photographs of widows and orphans in mourning dress. On a large wall in Zone Six is the 'Dead of Easter Week' exhibit which lists the names of some 500 people who died as a result of their injuries during the conflict. Their names are listed alphabetically by surname and includes their age at the time of death (if available). Although this exhibit aims to memorialise each of the deceased by naming them individually, the vast amount of names and the limited information available ensures that it exists as a remembrance device rather than a visually engaging interpretive display.

The execution of the 16 leaders of the Rising is narrated in a stand-alone section of the exhibition. The 'Zone 5: Execution' is positioned in the latter stages of the exhibition—after the exhibits on the surrender and scenes of destruction; and preceding displays pertaining to mourning and imprisonment after the Rising. The immersive soundscapes that are prevalent throughout the main areas of the exhibition, which are designed to summon feelings of the chaos and turbulence of conflict, become gradually subsumed by cold silence as visitors approach Zone 5. The stillness of this area of the exhibition and the minimal display of objects marks a transition of

focus from the dramatic episodes of the 1916 Rising to its tragic human consequences. A graphic wall panel presents information on the court martial and sentencing of those suspected to have played a prominent part in the conflict, the subsequent executions of the 1916 Rising leaders and their burials. A long bespoke glass display case is the dominant feature of this zone, in which each of the 16 executions is treated separately. This zone recounts the last moments of the executed leaders by describing their final meetings with families, displaying individual images of each leader and also their families. Each individual is represented in the display by a material object in the glass case alongside an accompanying display text briefly describing the object. These objects are all personal items—many of which were in their possession before they met their death. The material legacies of the executed leaders in the display reinforce what Jane Tynan (2015) describes as the ‘casual heroism’ of the 1916 Rising. Instead of displaying medals or heroic imagery, the display consists largely of everyday objects and civilian clothes rather than military uniforms. Presenting biographical material evidence of these deaths is demonstrative of a display strategy which aims to encourage visitors to ‘empathise with the executed leaders and their loved ones’. Further empathy is encouraged through the display of a document relating to the death of each of the leaders contained within pull-out drawers underneath the display case. A bank of individual listening pods featuring dramatized readings of each of the last letters gives visitors the option to engage with the auditory interpretation of the last moments of the leaders.

The order of the display is chronological according to the approximate time of each execution—the same order in which 15 of the leaders are buried in Arbour Hill military cemetery. However, the ordering of the display does not correspond with the chronology of the executions nor their burial placements. The display places James Connolly after Seán MacDiarmada, when according to documents in the military archives, MacDiarmada was executed after Connolly and is buried in the last of the 15 plots at Arbour Hill. Despite this curatorial oversight, choosing to order the display chronologically rather than by military rank, allows the leaders to be presented as biographical subjects, rather than as esteemed political figures. The display starts with Thomas Clarke who was executed by firing squad in Kilmainham Gaol 4.15 am on 3rd May 1916, and finishes with Roger Casement who was hanged in Pentonville Prison, London at 9 am on 3rd August 1916. The inclusion of Casement in this display disorients the introductory panel of the zone which details how ‘those suspected of taking a prominent part in the Rising were tried by Court Martial at Richmond Barracks’. Casement took no part in the combat during Easter Week as he was captured and arrested by British troops a week before the Rising and was taken to England where he was imprisoned as he awaited his trial for high treason. The introductory text further ignores the presence of Casement in the display as it states how ‘the bodies of those executed, denied a burial by their families, were buried together in a communal grave in Arbour Hill Prison’. Casement was buried in the grounds of Pentonville Prison in London following his hanging. This oversight

collectively positions the other 15 executed men as the foremost casualties of the conflict by presenting their deaths with a generous graphic area and using their personal belongings as well as images of their loved ones to shape sympathetic narratives of the 1916 Rising.

The inclusion of Casement in this zone makes it difficult to decipher the criteria as to who is included in the 'Execution' display. The criteria for inclusion in this zone is not that each represented individual took part in the conflict, as Casement did not. Nor is the criteria that each individual was executed by firing squad in Kilmainham Gaol, as Thomas Kent was shot in Cork and Casement was hanged in London. It appears that the criteria connecting the 16 individuals is that they were all sentenced to death—arguably indiscriminately—and without a fair trial. Taking this criteria as the benchmark for being represented in 'Zone 5: Execution' of the exhibition, the three men executed in Portobello Barracks should also have a presence within this section and be materially represented within the display. Instead of their deaths being given individual displays and reverentially commemorated in the 'Execution' zone, their deaths have been relegated to the most heavily populated area of the exhibition which confronts the actions of Easter Week. The deaths of the three men at Portobello Barracks are predominantly referred to within the display text as murders rather than executions, distinguishing their deaths from the other prominent figures represented in the display.

Perhaps the decision to omit their biographies from the 'Execution' zone is a concern over the lack of material artefacts or documents relating to their deaths. Neither Dickson, McIntyre nor Sheehy Skeffington had the opportunity to lament the impact of their deaths by writing last letters or bequeathing material objects like the other 16 executed men. However, five of the displays in this zone contain death certificates instead of letters and statements reflecting on their imminent deaths. While personal possessions of Sheehy Skeffington are part of the national collection, it is unclear if material representations of Dickson or McIntyre exist—it is unlikely that they exist within the NMI collection. It is clear that Dickson and McIntyre would not have fit in with the neat narratives of the display of distinguished martyrs of modern Irish history that are perpetuated throughout this exhibition. It is of course a possibility that placing the Portobello Barracks executions in this zone was never considered by the curatorial team. Nevertheless, their deaths should at least be given equal prominence as Sheehy Skeffington within the exhibition, as Dickson and McIntyre are the only individuals in the 1916 Rising who were indiscriminately arrested and executed without fair trial, who are not represented by a document, photograph or material object in the exhibition.

Conclusion

This article has uncovered how exhibition displays can perpetuate particular narratives through the inclusion of objects and the presented narratives that accompany

them. Although it is often difficult to authenticate objects from one hundred years ago, this article demonstrates the importance of utilising numerous primary and secondary sources in order to acknowledge multiple narratives. In the case of the bullet in the brick, a single archive document is referred to in the exhibition display and presented as unrivalled evidence, which narrows the representational capacity of the brick. That said, the archival information presented in this article is equally ambiguous until definitive testing is carried out on the brick to prove or disprove if the bullet passed through the body of Francis Sheehy Skeffington. In a commemorative climate where national cultural institutions are dedicated to broadening historical narratives and vocalising previous overlooked individuals, an analysis of this particular exhibition display has revealed how the lamentation of well-known figures in Irish political history at the expense of lesser-known individuals still dominates commemorative practices.

This article has also demonstrated how the development of access to historical records and primary sources can bring a transformation in approaches to the materiality of conflict and allows for deeper, more informed interpretations of historical events. It is imperative that museums and institutions make full use of these sources in order to transform understandings of the past through their collections and exhibition programmes. The bullet in the brick is an example of a hierarchical approach to exhibition display as it is displayed as an object that is representative of the death of one prominent individual, rather than three men who were shot in the same manner, at the same time and in very close physical proximity to each other. Explicitly associating the brick and its embedded bullet with Francis Sheehy Skeffington compromises the authenticity of the object and demonstrates how the interpretive lens of romantic martyrdom operates within the NMI.

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