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The Politics of Pluralism: Historians and Easter 2016

What historian of revolutionary Ireland can claim to have remained utterly impervious to seduction during the current orgy of centennial commemoration? The study of how distant events have been remembered is suddenly both popular and profitable, offering almost irresistible attractions . . . The hard questions of history (what actually happened and who thought what, why, and with what consequences) are neatly avoided. Released from tiresome delving into the distant past, historians easily mutate into columnists and pundits, accorded spurious authority because of their past credentials as scholars.

David Fitzpatrick¹

Historians should not be cultural critics or advisors. Their job is to write history and to critique the work of fellow historians.

Nicholas Canny²

In Ireland, and far beyond, the centenary of the Easter Rising in 2016 was hailed as “an extraordinary success.”³ Remembering the Rising may have meant little more than a good day out for many but broad participation from the arts and heritage sectors, academics, and local communities ensured a vibrant program of commemorative events that explored the rebellion from every conceivable angle. This success was due in part to the Irish government’s imaginative commemorative program but it was driven by popular enthusiasm. Some 250,000 people observed the formal ceremony outside the General Post Office (GPO) on Easter Sunday, while a remarkable 750,000 individuals took part in Reflecting the Rising, Ireland’s largest ever public history festival, the following day.

Beyond its popularity, the most striking aspect of the centenary was its pluralism which saw the foregrounding of previously overlooked perspectives such as the role of women.⁴ The *Irish Times* praised the government’s program for transcending the narrow nationalism that it associated with previous anniversaries:

Those men and women in the uniform of our Army marching yesterday were much more than a romantic gesture to the past or nod to the dead generations – they are an assertion of sovereignty, of maturity and success as a State despite the difficult times. Independent. Democratic. Tolerant. European. Of many faiths and none. Most importantly a State in which our multiple identities are interwoven . . . One stream, the physical force tradition, is inextricably associated with 1916. But it is, and was, only an element, and very much a minority

¹ David Fitzpatrick, “Instant history: 1912, 1916, 1918,” in *Remembering 1916. The Easter Rising, the Somme and the Politics of Memory in Ireland*, ed. Richard Grayson and Fearghal McGarry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 65.

² Quoted in Charles C. Ludington, “Visions and Revisions,” *History Ireland* 4/1 (Spring 1996): 5.

³ Eunan O’Halpin, quoted in *Irish Times* (hereafter *IT*), 29 Dec. 2016. For a lively overview of the centenary, see Catriona Crowe, “How have we remembered 1916?,” John Hewitt Summer School, July 2016 (<https://crossborder.ie/site2015/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/1916-reflection-for-website-Crowe-text.pdf>).

⁴ *Women and the Decade of Commemorations*, ed. Oona Frawley (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021).

element, whose importance is not in this commemoration of one week in a decade of revolution being privileged.⁵

There was broad media consensus that the Irish State had successfully reframed the legacy of Easter 1916. The *Irish Times* columnist Miriam Lord noted the government's success not merely in engaging the public but in navigating the treacherous minefield that is commemoration of republican violence: "It was truly a great day for Ireland; a great day to be Irish . . . yesterday's dignified and uplifting commemoration confounded the cynics. In its tone and execution, it hit all the right notes."⁶ Coverage of the Reflecting the Rising festival similarly emphasized both its popularity and pluralism:

The Rising was recalled by way of readings, lectures, debates, theatre, film, dance, exhibitions, concerts and re-enactments . . . perhaps most significant of all were the spoken words which underlined our new-found ability to challenge views of history and yet accept there is more than one definition of Irish freedom. . . . The contrast with the inevitably narrower focus of 1966 is marked . . . It was clear on this anniversary the approach to the Rising was one of inclusivity with the application of what the President [Michael D. Higgins] cited as "ethical sensitivity."⁷

In a feature headlined "Peaceful Path to Marking 1916 Easter Rising," the *New York Times* identified the Necrology Wall – a new memorial at Glasnevin cemetery inscribed with the names of 488 of the rebellion's fatalities regardless of their status as rebels, Crown forces, or civilians – as epitomizing the government's sensitive engagement with Ireland's contested past.⁸ The Irish State, it seemed, had finally cracked the problem of how to remember its violent origins without alienating those (including among its own elite) who did not identify with the "physical-force" republican tradition. A new commemorative mode, identified with such emollient terms as "shared past," "narrative hospitality," and "ethical remembrance," had brought to an end a century-long "chronicle of embarrassment."⁹ Gently mocking the national mood of self-congratulation, *Waterford Whispers News* reported that the "sombre and harmonising scenes witnessed on the streets of Dublin especially moved the Nation, prompting calls to commemorate this past weekend's commemorations with a commemoration of its own."¹⁰

Almost four years later, in January 2020, the wheels abruptly came off the commemorative bandwagon when Fine Gael Minister for Justice Charlie Flanagan proposed a ceremony to remember policemen killed during the Irish Revolution. Declining his invite, the Fianna Fáil mayor of Clare spoke for many when he described the Dublin Castle ceremony as "revisionism gone a step too far."¹¹ Denouncing it as an obscene attempt to "question the very legitimacy of our battle for independence and sovereignty," Dublin City Council

⁵ *IT*, 27 March 2016.

⁶ *IT*, 28 March 2016.

⁷ *IT*, 28 March 1916.

⁸ *New York Times*, 24 April 1916.

⁹ David Fitzpatrick, "Commemoration in the Irish Free State: a chronicle of embarrassment," in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 184-203.

¹⁰ *Waterford Whispers News*, 29 March 1916 (<https://waterfordwhispersnews.com/2016/03/29/new-1916-commemoration-events-planned-to-honour-the-1916-commemorations/>)

¹¹ *IT*, 5 Jan. 2020.

voted to boycott the ceremony: “Only a subservient Government suffering from a postcolonial state of mind and ashamed of our revolutionary history would encourage this disgraceful event.”¹² Sinn Féin president Mary Lou McDonald weighed in on Twitter: “Govt commemoration of RIC [Royal Irish Constabulary], Black&Tans, DMP [Dublin Metropolitan Police] a calculated insult to all who stood for Irish freedom. Nowhere else would those who brutally suppressed national freedom be afforded a state commemoration. Crass Fine Gael revisionism gone too far. Cancel this event @LeoVaradkar.”¹³

Although the minister of state responsible for Dublin Castle declared that he too would not be attending, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar continued to support the ceremony, arguing that it was about remembering – rather than condoning – the past: “We should respect all traditions on our island and be mature enough as a State to acknowledge all aspects of our past.”¹⁴ Adroitly comparing the initiative to the recovery of the memory of Irish servicemen, Varadkar observed: “We now all accept, or almost everyone accepts, that it is right and proper to remember Irish people, soldiers who died in the First World War. And I think the same thing really applies to police officers . . . who were killed, Catholic and Protestant alike, who were members of the RIC and the DMP.”¹⁵ Fatally undermining this argument in the court of public opinion was the awkward fact that the “Black and Tans” and “Auxiliaries,” British-raised paramilitary forces responsible for many egregious atrocities in 1920-21, had also served within the RIC. Other complicating factors such as the complicity of regular policemen in reprisals, the Irish nationality of some Black and Tans, and the sectarian excesses of the Ulster Special Constabulary were ignored in an emotive debate framed around commemoration of the Tans.

Although he conceded that the RIC had “found itself on the wrong side of history,” Flanagan expressed his disappointment at seeing “public representatives abandon the principles of mutual understanding and reconciliation in an effort to gain headlines.” Noting the importance of remembering “all the threads” of Ireland’s “complex history,” Flanagan dexterously concluded that he was “happy to endorse the recommendation of the Expert Advisory Group that we commemorate the place of the Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police in Irish history.”¹⁶ His subsequent clarification that Black and Tans would not be commemorated at the ceremony failed to stem the tide of politicians publicizing their non-attendance. Fianna Fáil justice spokesman Jim O’Callaghan, for example, asserted that there could no “moral equivalence between the struggle for Irish independence . . . and the effort made to suppress that struggle by the military forces of the colonial power.”¹⁷ Flanagan bowed to the inevitable, “postponing” the ceremony.

Tolerance, inclusivity, sensitivity: the buzzwords of pluralist commemoration were largely absent from the ensuing controversy. Rather than signalling Irish “maturity,” the debacle propelled the Wolfe Tones’ “Come Out Ye Black and Tans” to the top of the British and Irish charts.¹⁸ Over two hundred messages sent to Taoiseach Leo Varadkar illustrated the vitriol unleashed by Flanagan’s proposal: “When do you plan to hold the Oliver Cromwell commemoration?” demanded one correspondent. Others posited analogies with Jewish commemoration of the Nazis, and Indian commemoration of the British Indian troops responsible for the

¹² *IT*, 7 Jan. 2020.

¹³ Mary Lou McDonald, Tweet, 6 Jan. 2020 (<https://twitter.com/MaryLouMcDonald/status/1214222257775685632>).

¹⁴ *IT*, 7 Jan. 2020.

¹⁵ *IT*, 6 Jan. 2020.

¹⁶ *IT*, 7 Jan. 2020.

¹⁷ *IT*, 7 Jan. 2020.

¹⁸ *IT*, 9 Jan. 2020.

Amritsar massacre. Varadkar was abused as “a fascist, a muppet, a moron, an idiot and ‘a dirty traitor’,” whilst other correspondents dwelled on his Indian heritage.¹⁹ Taoiseach Enda Kenny, denounced by hecklers as a “traitor” and “c**t” when he launched the Ireland 1916 program at the General Post Office in 2014, would have sympathized with his successor’s predicament.²⁰ Enabling politicians to throw a party where the behaviour of those who show up cannot be predicted, such are the perils of political commemoration in Ireland.

The furore had damaging consequences if hardly, as Varadkar claimed, setting back the cause of unification.²¹ Indeed, discomfited by the pluralist tone that had hitherto characterized the Decade of Centenaries, many Northern Irish unionist politicians appeared to welcome evidence of what they saw as the popular nationalist intolerance that had been obscured by the reconciliatory rhetoric of Southern politicians. The description of the RIC as “colonialists” and “oppressors,” declared Ulster Unionist Party leader Steve Aiken, was “an insult to their memory and their descendants.” For the TUV’s Jim Allister, the government’s climb-down in the face of republican bigotry was a “telling signal to unionists as to how they and their history would be treated in an all-Ireland.”²²

The controversy served to call into question the government’s commemorative approach, with the *Irish Times* endorsing Varadkar’s view that “we have lost our way.”²³ Describing the episode as “a warning shot which must be heeded,” the chairman of the Expert Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations (EAG), Dr Maurice Manning, appealed for political leadership rather than extreme language and opportunistic posturing, declaring it “a shame, and shameful, if the spirit of openness and tolerance” that had characterized the State’s largely bipartisan approach since 2012 was damaged.²⁴

This shifting commemorative mood was symbolized by the fate of the most prominent exemplar of “shared history.” When it was visited by Prince Charles in May 2017, the Glasnevin memorial continued to symbolize the “new era of reconciliation” – notwithstanding a recent paint attack and sporadic criticism of plans to inscribe the names of Black and Tans.²⁵ Subsequently, however, Dublin Cemeteries Trust announced that it would cease inscribing names on the memorial pending a security review. By 2020, following a more destructive assault that saw sledgehammers used to remove the names of Crown forces, the memorial – covered by “tarpaulin, held in place by duct tape” – presented “a forlorn sight.”²⁶

The RIC controversy raises questions about the earlier success of pluralist modes of remembrance. Why did commemoration of Crown forces prove comparatively uncontentious in 2016? And to what extent were the limitations of pluralist commemoration identified by historians in their engagement with the centenary? Drawing in part on personal involvement in several commemorative projects, this essay considers how historians navigated the challenges of “commemorationist history” in 2016.²⁷

¹⁹ *IT*, 12 Feb. 2020.

²⁰ *The Journal.ie*, 13 Nov. 2014 (<https://www.thejournal.ie/enda-kenny-heckled-1777328-Nov2014/>)

²¹ *IT*, 8 Jan. 2020.

²² *IT*, 8 Jan. 2020.

²³ *IT*, 16 December 2020, 4 Jan. 2021.

²⁴ *IT*, 22 Jan. 2020.

²⁵ *IT*, 24 April 2021, 12 May 2017.

²⁶ *IT*, 6 Feb. 2020, 24 Apr. 2021.

²⁷ On this term, see Tom Dunne, “Commemoration and ‘shared history’: a different role for historians?,” *History Ireland* 21:1 (Jan/Feb. 2013): 10-13.

That commemoration reflects contemporary needs more than the complexity of the past is widely acknowledged. An extensive historiography has analysed how the Easter Rising, one of the most revolutionary events in Irish history, was commemorated in ways that reinforced conservative values throughout much of the past century.²⁸ But this literature also emphasizes how the Irish State often struggled to control commemorative narratives. Contested from below by myriad interest groups, the legacy of Easter 1916 was invariably characterized by division. Ultimately, its protean meaning was determined by those doing the remembering.

The liberalization of the Irish Republic had witnessed new interpretations of the old story over preceding decades. As official Ireland embraced modernity, ideologies of ‘nationalism, traditionalism and Catholicism’ were displaced by secular and consumerist values.²⁹ The more immediate context shaping the centenary though was provided by the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement which saw the Easter Rising, previously commemorated in isolation, remembered within a broader “Decade of Centenaries” that encompassed the Ulster Covenant, Lockout, First World War, partition and (after initial uncertainty) Civil War. Embracing diversity, this ingenious construct sought to facilitate a more inclusive remembrance of independence that would support reconciliation in Ireland and Britain.

The extensive bipartisan planning by the Irish State, and the UK government’s support for Dublin’s reconciliatory approach, were also novel. An All-Party Dáil Consultation Group on Commemorations was formed in 2012, while the British prime minister David Cameron and Taoiseach Enda Kenny met at Downing Street to announce an “intensive programme” characterized by “mutual respect, inclusiveness and reconciliation” to mark the “events that helped shape our political destinies.” Similar rhetoric was echoed, if less convincingly, by the Northern Irish Executive which affirmed the commemorative principles of “inclusivity, tolerance, respect ... and interdependence.” These developments built on earlier initiatives that had addressed the legacy of revolutionary violence. In 2011 Queen Elizabeth II’s successful State visit took in both the Garden of Remembrance, where Irish Volunteers are honored, and Croke Park, site of an infamous reprisal by Crown forces. President Higgins reciprocated in 2014, laying a wreath at the grave of the Unknown Warrior at Westminster Abbey.

How did historians respond to this instrumentalization of history? Initially with trepidation. Leading scholars such as Roy Foster expressed concern about the ease with which the Rising’s ambiguous legacy could be appropriated, and the danger of simplistic interpretations gaining ground: “When we get into the public endorsement of memory, when the politicians take over and decide to direct and choreograph how we remember something, and this has happened not only with 1916 but with the Famine and 1798, when the politicians get in on the act, I think, we have to be very careful indeed.”³⁰

Foster’s sentiments accord with my own recollections of participation in an initiative by academic historians to coordinate a program of public engagement under the auspices of Universities Ireland.³¹ Although

²⁸ *Remembering 1916*; Roisin Higgins, *Transforming 1916: Meaning, memory and the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012); Fearghal McGarry, *The Abbey Rebels of 1916: A Lost Revolution* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2015).

²⁹ John Waters, *Was it for this? Why Ireland Lost the Plot* (Dublin: Transworld Ireland, 2012).

³⁰ Interview with Roy Foster, 2 Nov. 2015 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKT19_EHQwQ).

³¹ For the Universities Ireland historians’ committee, see <https://universitiesireland.ie/category/conferences/>.

there was no consensus about how we should engage with the Decade of Centenaries at its first meeting in 2011, committee members were agreed on the importance of not being seen to endorse the State's commemorative narrative. There was agreement that the profession had not responded well to the challenges of the 1798 bicentenary when, against the backdrop of the peace process, the government had directed that attention "should shift from the military aspects of 1798 and be directed towards the principles of democracy and pluralism which the United Irishmen advocated."³² The charge that historians who had identified themselves with this agenda by participating in official events had compromised their scholarly integrity had led to considerable acrimony (bound up with longer-standing tensions between "revisionist" historians and scholars and commentators who were more sympathetic to nationalist interpretations).³³

Despite this apparent consensus on the need for critical distance from the State, several Universities Ireland committee members, in what might be seen as an early example of the tensions associated with public history, joined the Expert Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations established by Taoiseach Enda Kenny around the same time. Although the EAG claimed to advise the government "completely independently of any political views, agendas or influence," it remained unclear how its role could be reconciled with independence from the State's commemorationist agenda. Describing the EAG's establishment, its chair, Dr Maurice Manning, recalled that the Taoiseach had instructed it "to safeguard the integrity of the entire commemorative process" by ensuring "that there would be no manipulation for political or other purposes – whether it came from Government or other vested interests."³⁴ The EAG, it should be acknowledged, did assert its independence from the government. Manning, for example, noted that his committee resisted pressure to adopt the peace process as a commemorative frame of reference: "We were into commemoration. We were into history. We were not into politics. We said no."³⁵ These differences were occasionally aired publicly: in the wake of the RIC controversy, Diarmaid Ferriter (professor of modern Irish history at UCD), complained that the EAG "should not be used by the Government as a mudguard to provide cover for itself when it receives negative reaction."³⁶

A more critical view of the EAG, however, would see its primary purpose – at least from the perspective of the government – as that of legitimizing the State's commemorative program. The committee's political complexion was suggested by the appointment as chair and vice-chair of Manning and Dr Martin Mansergh who, in addition to their scholarly credentials, represented the governing Fine Gael party and Fianna Fáil opposition. More fundamentally, scholars of commemoration regard the idea that State remembrance can be divorced from considerations of power and politics as naïve. Indeed, the prominence of historians throughout the Decade of Centenaries has attracted criticism for this reason. Anthropologist Dominic Bryan, for example, has argued that the effective monopolization of the State's commemorative practices and discourses by historians reflects the "legitimising role" of history rather than the disciplinary expertise of historians (who, he argues, are less well placed than social scientists to analyse how identity and power are represented through

³² Roy Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), 82-4.

³³ Tom Dunne, *Rebellions. Memoir, Memory and 1798* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2004).

³⁴ Decade of Centenaries 2012-2023. 2021 Programme (Dublin, 2021), p. 4.

³⁵ *IT*, 11 Jan. 2020.

³⁶ *IT*, 7 Jan. 2020.

contemporary rituals).³⁷ The presence of historians at commemorative events, Bryan asserts, validates as “history” contemporary rituals that are primarily “acts of political identity” with only tangential links to past events.³⁸

The role of the historian as, in Bryan’s words, “the high priest of commemoration,” brings benefits, not least an amplified voice in public discourse. Although motivated by “a spirit of public service,”³⁹ the EAG (and historians generally) are no more immune to self-interest than other social groups. The centenary enabled historians to reach a mass audience, and to advocate on behalf of their discipline.⁴⁰ The high profile accorded to history and historians by commemoration probably contributed to the success of the campaign to retain History as a core compulsory Junior Certificate subject. The EAG advised the State on its lavish €50 million commemorative program which saw the funding of under-resourced heritage institutions such as the Military Archives. Acknowledging the ambivalence arising from their participation in commemoration, Anne Dolan has noted: “Historians are almost always at odds with this agenda, making the past more complex, bringing more aspects to light, challenging the assumptions that make the past easy for any cause to bluntly wield. Yet historians still benefit from the crumbs at the commemorative table.”⁴¹ Increasingly, more than crumbs are on offer. Overseen by an expanding staff of “impact” officers and managers, public engagement has become integral to research funding and career progression in UK and other universities.

Although historians had advised the State on previous anniversaries, such as that of the Famine, the EAG represented the most sustained initiative of this kind. To what extent was it responsible for the State’s pluralist approach? The EAG’s “Initial Statement” advocated a commemorative model “informed by a full acknowledgement of the complexity of historical events and their legacy, of the multiple readings of history, and of the multiple identities and traditions which are part of the Irish historical experience.”⁴² The same rhetoric was echoed by the government’s subsequent mission statement heralding a “broad and inclusive” program intended to foster “deeper mutual understanding among people from different traditions on the island of Ireland.”⁴³ But it is evident from earlier State initiatives that the pluralist direction of travel had already been established, rather than resulting from the advice of historians. Emphasizing that it was neither “an executive nor policy-making group,” Diarmaid Ferriter noted that “the EAG experienced a long wait for a 1916 centenary programme from the government that it could offer advice on.”⁴⁴ Prior to the launch of that program, another EAG member recalled, “there was no overarching design and even then, some entertained grave doubts about how it would all work.”⁴⁵

³⁷ Dominic Bryan, “Ritual, identity and nation: when the historian becomes the high priest of commemoration,” in *Remembering 1916*, ed. Grayson and McGarry, 24-42. For the composition of the EAG, see <https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/expert-advisory-group/>. President Michael D. Higgins’ Machnamh seminars have also been dominated by the discipline of history: see <https://president.ie/en/news/article/machnamh-100-president-of-irelands-centenary-reflections>.

³⁸ Bryan, “Ritual,” 24.

³⁹ Initial Statement by Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations (available at <https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/publications/>).

⁴⁰ See, for example, Eunan O’Halpin in *IT*, 29 Dec. 2016.

⁴¹ Anne Dolan, “Commemorating 1916,” *IT*, 2 Jan. 2015.

⁴² Initial Statement.

⁴³ Decade of Centenaries Programme (2012).

⁴⁴ Diarmaid Ferriter, “1916 in 2016: personal reflections of an Irish historian,” *Irish Historical Studies* 42: 161 (May 2018): 162.

⁴⁵ Eunan O’Halpin, quoted in *IT*, 29 Dec. 2016.

Two further points might be made in light of the later RIC debacle. First, the government and EAG advocated pluralist approaches for different reasons. Although it was considered contentious during the “history wars” during the Troubles – when critics of “revisionism” alleged that an ostensibly objective plurality of narratives was advocated by “anti-nationalist” historians in order to undermine the emotional and ideological force of a nationalist understanding of the past centered on British oppression of Ireland,⁴⁶ the acknowledgement of what Roy Foster described as “varieties of Irishness” had become post-revisionist historiographical orthodoxy by 2016. The principal attraction of pluralism for the State, however, lay in its potential for reconciliation rather than its methodological merits as sound history. Second, many politicians understood the term to mean something different from historians who did not equate pluralism with a “neutral” interpretation of the past, requiring an agreed narrative, or egalitarian remembrance of all who died as tragic victims of a “shared history.” Historians, rather, see pluralism as the recognition of diverse interpretations and memories of the past based on a “respectful recognition and acknowledgement of historical difference.”⁴⁷

This is not to suggest that historians reject the idea that greater public understanding of history can have beneficial outcomes such as a more cohesive or tolerant society, or fewer opportunities for the mobilisation of divisive myths. As Stephen O’Neill notes elsewhere in this issue, the EAG has evaluated its own efforts in terms of minimizing contentious remembrance.⁴⁸ In judging the 1916 centenary an “extraordinary success,” EAG member Eunan O’Halpin noted (in a distinctly partitionist take) that it had “occasioned no significant disruptions, no contests over commemorative spaces, no riots, no arrests,” no “triumphalism” or “revanchism.”⁴⁹ Many academics, however, are sceptical of the idea that memorialisation can be used as a tool to reconcile contemporary social divisions.⁵⁰ The belief, shared by most historians, that a critical interrogation of the past should not be subordinated to contemporary aims represents an important distinction from the necessarily more instrumentalist approach of the State. As the EAG cautioned: ‘There should be no attempt to contrive an ahistorical or retrospective consensus about the contemporary impact and legacy of divisive events.’⁵¹

Indeed, historians repeatedly highlighted this danger throughout the Decade of Centenaries. In a perceptive early critique, Tom Dunne counseled against the deployment of a “superficial ‘shared history’” characterized by a “vacuous ‘parity of esteem’” in place of efforts to achieve genuine mutual historical understanding between different communities. He noted also the difficulties for academics confronted by such an agenda: “when the event commemorated has clear implications for ongoing conflict and attempts at reconciliation, historians can come under intense pressure to prioritize contemporary political concerns over

⁴⁶ Seamus Deane, “Wherever Green is Read,” in *Revising the Rising*, ed. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha and Theo Dorgan (Derry: Field Day, 1991), 91-105.

⁴⁷ Siobhan Kattago, “Memory, Pluralism and the Agony of Politics,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41/3 (Sept. 2010): 383; idem, “Agreeing to Disagree on the Legacies of Recent History: Memory, Pluralism and Europe after 1989,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 12/3 (Aug. 2009): 375.

⁴⁸ *Reference required to “the recurrence of specifically defined” quote in O’Neill article.*

⁴⁹ *IT*, 29 Dec. 2016.

⁵⁰ For an example of efforts to use history to improve community relations, see <https://www.community-relations.org.uk/decade-centenaries>. For a critique of assumptions underlying moral remembrance, see Lea David, *The Past Can’t Heal Us. The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁵¹ 1916/2016: Clár comórtha ceád bliain: centenary programme (Dublin, 2015), 62–3, cited in Ferriter, “1916 in 2016”: 165.

their primary duty to engage critically with the sources.”⁵² Whilst lauding the “admirable impulses” behind pluralist commemoration, David Fitzpatrick also cautioned against a spurious “inclusivity.” Criticizing the “tempting but dubious” notion of “equality of suffering,” he argued that rather than suspending their moral judgment

historians should try to add moral intensity to the ways in which we commemorate the past. Morally neutral commemoration is a dangerous deception, inviting abuse by partisans seeking to exonerate those responsible for past atrocities Commemoration, like good history, should help us to understand what forces impelled people to commit terrible as well as courageous acts. Though the outcome of such investigations is often contentious and morally unsettling, it is preferable to a bland recitation of general blamelessness.⁵³

The EAG similarly warned against the chimera of value-free interpretation: “Official events must within reason be inclusive and non-partisan, but the State should not be expected to be neutral about its own existence. The aim should be to broaden sympathies, without having to abandon loyalties.”⁵⁴

As we will see, the RIC controversy crystallized tensions between these contrasting understandings of pluralism. Several earlier interventions by historians had signalled these divergent approaches. In 2013, when the Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore (without consulting the EAG) advocated that British royals be invited to the centenary of the Rising, Manning clarified the EAG’s view that commemoration should not be subordinated to politics: “Our job is not the job of the peace process.”⁵⁵ The same year saw the release of “Ireland Inspires 2016,” a promotional video marketing the centenary that featured Queen Elizabeth II, Ian Paisley and Bono but not the Proclamation or the Rising’s leaders.⁵⁶ Diarmaid Ferriter’s pithy description of this apparent effort to dilute the ideological significance of the rebellion as “embarrassing unhistorical shit” formed part of a broader critique by historians (among others) that saw the government recalibrate its program to ensure greater historical integrity.⁵⁷

In one respect, these responses inverted previous scholarly interventions. Rather than berating the State for disseminating crude nationalistic narratives, historians criticized the government for minimizing the rebellion’s political significance. But the underlying critique in both scenarios remained that of historical distortion for contemporary purposes. Interestingly historians, although inherently fractious, did not fall out either amongst themselves or with the State in 2016. This may have reflected how, in contrast to the Troubles, the stakes were now so low,⁵⁸ but it also resulted from the common ground enabled by pluralism. Few

⁵² Dunne, “Commemoration and ‘shared history’”: 10-13.

⁵³ David Fitzpatrick, “Historians and the Commemoration of Irish Conflicts, 1912-23,” in *Towards Commemoration: Ireland in War and Revolution, 1912-23*, ed. John Horne and Edward Madigan (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2013), 127.

⁵⁴ Initial Statement By Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations (available at <https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/wp-content/uploads/publications/Initial/Initial/index.html>).

⁵⁵ *IT*, 9 May 2014, quoted in Ferriter, “1916 in 2016”: 165.

⁵⁶ *IT*, 13 Nov. 2014.

⁵⁷ *IT*, 2 Jan. 2015.

⁵⁸ As Kevin Whelan has observed. On commemorative difficulties arising from the Troubles, see *Remembering the Troubles: Contesting the Recent Past in Northern Ireland*, ed. Jim Smyth (Indiana, ND: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

historians, for instance, were likely to have supported the call by their colleague Ronan Fanning for a “shameless” and “unabashed celebration” of Easter 1916 as “the seminal moment in the birth of the Irish Republic,”⁵⁹ but all could agree that it was a complex event deserving of remembrance in all its diversity.

II

What challenges did scholars engaged in public history face during the centenary? In addressing this question, I draw on my own experiences as a historical consultant working with An Post (the Irish postal service) on two commemorative projects. The reflections that follow do not represent the views of other individuals and organisations involved in these projects.

With two other historical experts (Catriona Crowe, former head of special projects at the National Archives of Ireland, and Lar Joye, curator at the National Museum of Ireland), I advised An Post’s Definitive Stamp Sub-Committee on the development of a series of stamps to mark the centenary of the Rising. Unsurprisingly, previous commemorative stamps had reflected the ideological imperatives of their times. Due to wartime shortages, the first two stamps, issued in 1941 to mark the Rising’s 25th anniversary, were overprints of previous designs. Featuring, respectively, a map of an unpartitioned Ireland and a Celtic cross, overlaid with Gaelic text (“1941 I gcuimne Aiséirge 1916”), they illustrated the State’s emphasis on the Rising’s nationalist, Gaelic and Catholic rather than revolutionary dimensions. The first original design marking the Rising was also issued in 1941: Victor Brown’s iconic image of an armed Volunteer looming over the GPO, accompanied by a Gaelic translation of the opening line of the Proclamation (“In ainm Dé agus in ainm na nglún a d’imig rómáinn”), symbolized both the government’s preparedness to defend itself during the “Emergency,” and the Gaelicist ethos of de Valera’s regime.

Although the fiftieth anniversary is sometimes seen as having reflected Seán Lemass’s modernizing efforts, the attractive golden jubilee stamps – featuring Seán O’Sullivan’s portraits of the Proclamation’s signatories – typified the conservative gendered commemoration of the Rising in 1966.⁶⁰ In 1991, reflecting the Irish State’s desire to downplay commemoration due to the violence of the Troubles, only one stamp was produced to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary: it was issued only after lobbying by “Reclaim the Spirit of Easter,” an organisation set up in response to fears that the government would snub the anniversary.⁶¹ The design of this stamp, and the sole stamp issued to mark the ninetieth anniversary in 2006, have been described as “muted and almost apologetic.”⁶² In contrast, An Post issued sixteen stamps to commemorate the centenary of the Rising; they were designated, moreover, as definitive stamps (intended for everyday use rather than the more limited circulation stamps that normally mark anniversaries), resulting in the global circulation of an estimated ninety million stamps throughout 2016.

Their themes highlighted reflected several considerations, most importantly that the stamps should reflect the government’s pluralist ethos. The need for historical accuracy was also emphasized: the disputed

⁵⁹ *IT*, 28 Feb. 2015.

⁶⁰ Higgins, *Transforming 1916*.

⁶¹ Robert Ballagh, ‘1916 and all that – A personal Memoir’, 21 April 2006 (<http://www.theirelandinstitute.com/wp/1916-and-all-that-a-personal-memoir/>.)

⁶² John Mooney, ‘The Politics of Irish Stamps’ (<https://keepinganeyeonthe czarofrussia.com/2014/12/12/the-politics-of-irish-stamps/>).

identity of a member of the Irish Citizen Army had led to the withdrawal of an earlier stamp in 2014. The potential for controversy was a further concern for An Post. In the course of my work on various commemorative projects, tensions between pluralist impulses and the desire to avoid the potential for controversy were often evident. Following a process of public consultation, our committee proposed sixteen stamps to An Post, which consulted the EAG, before forwarding a revised set of designs that the Cabinet approved in full.

The centenary stamps differed markedly from their predecessors. As in 1966, they included all of the Proclamation's signatories (a modification of our original proposals recommended by the EAG), but they encompassed more diverse subjects, including rank-and-file and female rebels, a pacifist radical, working-class Dublin civilians, and a chorus girl (Louisa Nolan) who had risked her life to tend wounded soldiers.⁶³ Other previously unrepresented subjects included Crown forces and civilian fatalities. Making the case for the inclusion of potentially controversial figures, our committee cited the government's advocacy of an inclusive approach that acknowledged the Rising's complexity. In representing their contentious subjects, the stamps' designs emphasized a pluralist motif. For example, DMP Constable James O'Brien shared a stamp with Irish Citizen Army rebel Seán Connolly. British army officer Sir Francis Fletcher-Vane was commemorated alongside radical feminist Francis Sheehy Skeffington: the former had been dismissed from his command for exposing the murder of the latter. Illustrating the intimacy of the era's divisions, Royal Dublin Fusilier Sergeant William Malone featured on a stamp with his brother, IRA lieutenant Michael Malone, who had commanded the highly effective Mount Street Bridge rebel outpost.

Despite their ubiquity, the public response to the stamps was muted. Several press reports praised their emphasis on reconciliation.⁶⁴ Describing the stamps as "magnificent," "subtle," and "mature," Ruth Dudley Edwards – a columnist known for her trenchant criticism of Sinn Féin – welcomed what she described as "a genuine attempt to show something of the complexity of Irish identity."⁶⁵ Conversely, Republican Sinn Féin, a militant organisation opposed to the peace process, criticized the "Free State postal service" for "yet another act of Free State historical revisionism." Identifying as particularly egregious the inclusion of Crown forces "and a women decorated for bravery by King George V," it condemned the commemoration of "collaborators with British rule" alongside "martyrs who died for Irish Freedom" as an effort by an "inherently imperialist, collaborative and corrupt state-let . . . to hijack the legacy of 1916."⁶⁶

Although such criticisms gained little traction, our pluralist approach was not universally welcomed. For example, descendants of two brothers who fought on opposing sides in 1916 regarded the proposal that they share a stamp as inappropriate. Relatives of a different set of brothers, who did approve of the idea, were subsequently identified. One lesson learned here was the importance of consultation, particularly on potentially controversial themes. The influence on commemorative initiatives exercised by relatives' groups resulting from the claim to ownership over aspects of the past, evident on various occasions throughout 2016, contrasts markedly with academic scholarship where historians face few constraints in how they interpret or narrativize

⁶³ See An Post, Irish Stamps Report 2016 (http://www.anpostmedia.com/Media/M10241-An_Post_Philatelic_Report_2016.pdf).

⁶⁴ *The Sunday Times*, 9 Feb. 2016; *IT*, 8 Feb. 2016.

⁶⁵ *Belfast Telegraph*, 22 Feb. 2016; Ruth Dudley Edwards, speaking on BBC Radio Ulster, 25 March 2016.

⁶⁶ Press release, Sinn Féin Poblachtach National PRO, Seán Ó Dubhláin, 8 Dec. 2015 (<https://republicansinnfein.org/2015/12/08/the-revolution-of-1916-remains-unfinished-business/>).

history. Nor is the ownership asserted by descendants merely moral, or dependent on the importance placed on consensus by the State and large organisations, it can extend to copyright ownership of specific images. The public, in short, have a real say in public history.

The stamp depicting Constable James O'Brien and Seán Connolly was criticized for similar reasons, with the accomplished public historian Donal Fallon tweeting: "Cringed when I saw this. ICA fighter goes on a stamp, so we better put a DMP man on it too." But, rather than representing a banal or ethically problematic neutrality, this stamp sought to communicate a more complex, interrelated, narrative (outlined in augmented reality resources accessible via the stamp's QR code). O'Brien, one of the rebellion's first fatalities, had been killed by Connolly at the gates of Dublin Castle. Shortly after, Connolly became one of the first rebels to die when he was shot on the roof of City Hall. But O'Brien's place in history, in contrast to that of his killer, had been forgotten, a fate exemplified by W.B. Yeats' telling description of Connolly as "the first man shot that day."⁶⁷

While problematic for some, pluralist approaches were embraced by others. Descendants of both men came together in an impromptu gesture when Freya Connolly, a great granddaughter of Seán Connolly, lay a wreath of flowers outside Dublin Castle during a brief ceremony to commemorate O'Brien.⁶⁸ But the critique articulated by Fallon centered on the same issue identified by opponents of the Glasnevin memorial, and the organisation responsible for the commemoration of O'Brien was the Harp [Historical and Reconciliatory Police] Society which initiated the controversial RIC ceremony in 2020. Through such rituals at sites of memory such as Dublin Castle or Glasnevin cemetery, or arising from the protests and commentary they generated, the meaning of 1916 was renegotiated in 2016; and, for the most part, pluralist modes of commemoration evoked more public support than criticism.

Although Ruth Dudley Edwards has suggested that republicans were "furious at the even-handedness" of the stamps, the relative lack of controversy seems the most significant aspect of their reception.⁶⁹ Prior to their release, it had been anticipated that the commemoration of British soldiers (but not, interestingly, of Irish policemen) on stamps "would be a step too far."⁷⁰ Indicating its concerns about the potential for controversy, An Post did not initially issue a press statement to mark the release of the stamps. The muted public response may, in part, have resulted from the careful framing of this difficult history, but it also reflected a striking shift in attitudes.⁷¹ For example, one potentially sensitive stamp featured two-year-old Seán Foster, the youngest victim of the Rising. Prior to 2016, civilian fatalities – although accounting for the largest proportion of deaths during Easter week – had never been publicly commemorated. Moreover, the charge – levelled by critics of republicanism such as Kevin Myers – that the rebels had acted immorally by sacrificing civilian lives to the cause of Irish freedom featured regularly in polemical debate on the Rising during the Troubles. By Easter 2016, however, the memory of child fatalities was no longer seen as politicized. This was due, in large part, to the

⁶⁷ McGarry, *Abbey Rebels*, 346.

⁶⁸ *IT*, 25 Apr. 2016.

⁶⁹ Ruth Dudley Edwards, "The fading myths of Easter 1916," *Prospect*, 21 Apr. 1916.

⁷⁰ John Mooney, 'Robert Ballagh Question and Answer Session' (<https://keepinganeyeonthezarofrussia.com/2015/09/03/robert-ballagh-question-answer-session/>)

⁷¹ It may also, as Guy Beiner has noted, reflect the diminished contemporary status of stamps.

remarkable impact of RTÉ broadcaster Joe Duffy's bestseller, *Children of the Rising*, but the success of this publication reflected a broader willingness to remember publicly what had once been suppressed.⁷²

A separate consultancy role during the same period, as one of a team of academics developing content for the GPO Witness History museum established by An Post, raised similar issues.⁷³ The factors shaping the collaborative development of exhibitions tend to remain opaque. Exhibition text, for example, is rarely attributed to an author. There is seldom any acknowledgment of the rationale or pressures that determine the overall interpretive approach which is often shaped more by the aims of the museum or its funders than those of the curators and academics who generate the content. The guiding concept of the GPO as a witness to history, for example, was devised by An Post, as was the exhibition's central theme of communication. Other influential stakeholders included the Irish government whose €10 million investment reflected the museum's status as one of the Ireland 2016 program's nine "Permanent Reminders." The exhibition's narrative frameworks and storylines were largely generated by the museum design company, Martello Media, which worked with the historical consultants to produce the exhibition text. In striving to create an exhibition that would be grounded in scholarship yet sufficiently entertaining to attract the numbers required for commercial viability, whilst also adhering to An Post's brief, Martello necessarily balanced competing pressures.

As with their involvement in other forms of commemoration, the professional historian provides not merely their expertise but their scholarly authority, reinforcing through their participation the legitimacy of the endeavour. In practical terms, much of my work on this project focused on ensuring accurate and credible content. Much effort was devoted to ensuring that the interpretation was even-handed. For example, the centerpiece of the exhibition – an immersive animated movie depicting the battle for Dublin – required careful framing to avoid a caricatured portrayal of valiant rebels and villainous officers. Efforts were made to ensure that the themes prioritized by the exhibition's funders – such as the emphasis on communication demanded by An Post, or the depiction of contemporary Irish society as inclusive sought by the Department of Foreign Affairs (which was consulted on the exhibition text) – did not result in distorted or teleological narratives.

The adoption of a pluralist approach addressed some of the resulting tensions. In developing an exhibition exploring one of Ireland's most contentious events, An Post understandably sought to avoid controversies that might damage its brand or conflict with the government's reconciliatory agenda. Consequently, an approach characterized by minimal interpretation was initially suggested by An Post. Martello and the historical consultants instead advocated a critical approach that would make explicit rather than conceal conflicting interpretations, prompting visitors to form their own conclusions about contentious questions such as the morality or effectiveness of republican violence. For example, video interviews with prominent media commentators identified with contrasting views of the Rising were included in the exhibition.

Raising – rather than answering – questions, this approach enabled a critical engagement in line with contemporary museological practice. It also meant that An Post was unlikely to be seen as responsible for contentious aspects of the exhibition. Working across a range of commemorative projects, I found that the desire to avoid controversy presented a greater interpretive challenge than pressure to represent any particular

⁷² Joe Duffy, *Children of the Rising: The untold story of the young lives lost during Easter 1916* (Dublin: Hachette Ireland, 2015); McGarry; *Abbey Rebels*, 327.

⁷³ GPO Witness History's academic consultants included Diarmaid Ferriter (UCD); Georg Grote (UCD) and Roisín Higgins (Teesside University). A steering committee of historical experts included Catriona Crowe (NAI), Lar Joye (National Museum), and Stephen Ferguson (An Post).

ideological perspective. As I also experienced working with the Ulster Museum in redeveloping its Troubles gallery, the initial iteration of which had been constrained by “the absence of artefacts, critical analysis or multiple perspectives,” the authority provided by academics as historical consultants can support curators in addressing difficult history more explicitly, particularly in environments where political pressures and sensitivities can result in a spurious neutrality characterized by the kind of banal descriptive approach initially proposed by *An Post*.⁷⁴

This is not to suggest that pluralist approaches are apolitical. For one, the decision to represent multiple interpretations or identities displaces the previously dominant perspective. Frequently implicit also in pluralist approaches is a critique of violence, or rather certain forms of violence: in narrativizing the “shared sacrifice” of nationalists and unionists, for example, State commemoration of the First World War rarely critiques imperialist violence. Given that museum-building processes reflect dominant value systems, the re-evaluation of the State’s violent origins effected by the Troubles unavoidably impacted on museological interpretations of the revolutionary era which shifted from triumphalist to more inclusive narratives.⁷⁵ In 1974, as conflict raged in the North, President Erskine Childers complained to Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave that an exhibition dedicated to IRA officer Seán Treacy “contained nothing but guns.”⁷⁶ Visitors to GPO Witness History will, by design, encounter few guns. In terms of the themes emphasised (such as social and gender history), as well as downplayed, *An Post*’s exhibition reflects the commemorative pressures and sensibilities of the Decade of Centenaries.

Any nostalgia for traditional interpretations of Easter 1916, however, could be sated by a visit to the “mawkishly sinister” Revolution 1916 exhibition at the Ambassador Theatre several hundred metres further along O’Connell Street.⁷⁷ Bristling with militaria, this “original and authentic” exhibition boasted “the largest private collection of 1916 artefacts and weapons” including “Howth Mausers and Michael Collins’s gun.” Other highlights included a reconstruction of the stonebreakers’ yard where the rebel leaders were executed, and a mock-up of the H-Block cell where Bobby Sands starved to death. Sinn Féin publicly denied any involvement in the exhibition which was run by Ireland 1916 Commemorations, a company headed by Sinn Féin’s 1916/2016 National Programme Co-ordinator with a registered address at Sinn Féin’s headquarters.⁷⁸

Contrasting markedly with themes emphasized by Revolution 1916, the reconciliatory dimension of GPO Witness History’s interpretive approach was recognized by the European Museum Academy whose judges awarded the exhibition a prestigious Micheletti prize. Describing it as “an extraordinary achievement, an historical challenge which has been transformed into a reconciliation centre which also poses questions for the future,” the judges commended the exhibition for “dealing in an even-handed way with a very emotive subject that would have been impossible even a decade ago.”⁷⁹ Although such an approach may seem preferable to many, it is no less political in its implications than an exhibition emphasizing the role of patriotism, violence

⁷⁴ Karen Logan, “Collecting the Troubles and Beyond”: The role of the Ulster Museum in interpreting contested history,” in *Difficult Issues: Proceedings of the ICOM international conference*, ed. ICOM Germany (Heidelberg: Art Historicum), 177. On the redevelopment of the Troubles gallery, see idem, *Curating Conflict. The Troubles and Beyond* (Belfast: AV Browne, 2021).

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Crooke, *Politics, Archaeology and the Creation of a National Museum of Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2001); Darragh Gannon, *Proclaiming a Republic: Ireland, 1916, and the National Collection* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2016).

⁷⁶ Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and not a Rabble. The Irish Revolution 1913-1923* (London: Profile, 2015), 368.

⁷⁷ Fitzpatrick, “Easter Rising,” 291.

⁷⁸ *IT*, 3 April 2016; *Irish Independent*, 2 Apr. 2016.

⁷⁹ *Irish Examiner*, 3 Oct. 2017.

and martyrdom in securing independence. As the controversy over the “Ireland Inspires” video demonstrated, depictions of the revolutionary era that elide its violence and ideological intent raise legitimate questions about historical integrity. Unsurprisingly, critics of present-day Sinn Féin welcome the Decade of Centenaries’ emphasis on reconciliation. Reviewing both exhibitions, Ruth Dudley Edwards interpreted their contrasting approaches as “a vivid illustration of the widening gulf between the way republicans and mainstream Irish nationalists view the past.” Criticizing Revolution 1916 as a “dangerous” effort to “reinforce the Pearsean version of Irish history . . . with politically-correct revisions” (such as its anachronistic depiction of women as combatants), Dudley Edwards welcomed how – as she saw it – the “brilliantly-designed” GPO Witness History represented the outlook of a “government reflecting the present mood of a mature society sick of violence.”⁸⁰

Given that “historical scholarship and commemoration differ so much in their rationale,”⁸¹ can the participation of historians in such projects be reconciled with scholarly integrity? Although historians aim to challenge their new audiences by emphasizing the constructed and contested nature of the past, engaging in commemoration necessitates some accommodation with the largely ahistorical aims and assumptions of its sponsors. The line between complicating and distorting the narrative arising from this trade-off is a fine one that historians must tread carefully. For example, when asked to speak at an event to “mark” (speakers were asked not to use the term commemorate) the centenary of the Easter Rising at Christchurch Cathedral attended by Taoiseach Enda Kenny, Northern Irish First Minister Arlene Foster, and the British ambassador, I chose to discuss the experiences of Protestant rebels, and their disillusionment arising from the Catholic ethos of independent Ireland, rather than the role of sectarian divisions in accentuating revolutionary violence.⁸² Reflecting on such narrative strategies, David Fitzpatrick has suggested that it may “be possible in the Irish case, without unduly twisting the record, to highlight events and alliances pointing towards compromise rather than confrontation,” thereby reconciling “the moral imperative of the commentator and the heuristic imperative of the scholar.”⁸³

III

Recent studies of commemoration have emphasized the agency of individuals, organizations, and the public in determining the success of the State’s efforts to control commemorative narratives. Why, in contrast to 2020, did critiques of the government’s “shared history” approach meet with public indifference in 2016?

From the 2014 launch of its centenary program – which was boycotted by relatives’ groups and disrupted by protestors – opposition to the State’s approach was confined to the margins of commemorative discourse. The unveiling of the Glasnevin memorial by acting Taoiseach Enda Kenny, for instance, was picketed by the 32 County Sovereignty Movement. Protestors used a megaphone to amplify rebel songs, throwing smoke bombs and fireworks in scenes that led to scuffles and arrests.⁸⁴ Some relatives’ groups

⁸⁰ Dudley Edwards, “fading myths.”

⁸¹ Fitzpatrick, “Historians,” 132.

⁸² Press coverage focused on whether First Minister Arlene Foster’s attendance contradicted her much-criticized refusal to commemorate the Rising. Distinguishing between (political) commemoration and (apolitical) historical reflection, the Church of Ireland maintained that the event was “not commemorative” as it was “designed to mark the centenary of the Easter Rising by exploring it historically” (*Irish News*, 17 Feb. 2016).

⁸³ Fitzpatrick, “Historians,” 132.

⁸⁴ *IT*, 3 Apr. 2016; *Irish Examiner*, 3 Apr. 2016.

criticized the pluralist turn: James Connolly Heron described the Glasnevin memorial as “an aberration” intended to sanitize the Rising’s legacy.⁸⁵ Robert Ballagh, whose Reclaim the Spirit of 1916 initiative had opposed the government’s minimalist commemoration of 1916 in 1991, formed Reclaim the Vision of 1916 to criticize the State’s more expansive approach in 2016. Commemorating the rebellion as one event in a decade of centenaries, Ballagh argued, was a “distortion of history” intended “to distance citizens from the aims and ideals” of “a heroic generation”:

certain influential voices continue to insist that, at this point in our history, we, the Irish people, should be “mature” and “commemorate” all who died in a “shared history.” This concept is entirely fraudulent. The African slaves brought to North America to work the cotton plantations would hardly have described their experiences at the hands of their masters as a “shared history” . . . There can be no equivalence between those who died in the struggle to create an Irish Republic and those who perished in crushing that very Republic. Can you imagine the British authorities erecting a plaque at the cenotaph in London to honour those “brave” members of the Luftwaffe who died in bombing raids over London during the Second World War?⁸⁶

Although some callers took to the airwaves to denounce the Glasnevin memorial on RTÉ’s popular *Liveline* program, most appeared to consider that the “shouts of ‘Traitor’ from outside the gates of Glasnevin on the morning the wall was unveiled sounded mean-spirited and way out of date.”⁸⁷ As in 1991, such criticisms of official commemoration were broadly aligned with those of Sinn Féin; by 2016, however, that party had become a far more significant electoral force in the Republic where it was only major party opposed to the State’s commemorative program. Dublin TD Aengus Ó Snodaigh, for example, declared it ‘totally inappropriate for a memorial wall to list indiscriminately together Irish freedom fighters and members of the British crown forces’.⁸⁸ Launching its own National Programme of Events, Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams reminded supporters that “Fine Gael, Labour and Fianna Fáil governments didn’t just abandon commemorating Easter 1916, they also banned others from marking it too.”⁸⁹ Explicitly linking the centenary to the Troubles, Adams called for a rededication to the achievements of Pearse, Connolly, and Bobby Sands: “let us complete their work.”

Although well-funded, Sinn Féin’s efforts to position itself beyond the commemorative consensus fell flat.⁹⁰ Drawing parallels with the party’s opposition to what had proven a remarkably popular royal visit, the party’s critics saw the centenary’s success as evidence of how out of touch Sinn Féin was with more tolerant Southern sentiment. When Sinn Féin criticized a State ceremony in May 2016 at Grangegorman military cemetery – described on the official centenary website as an event organized “in honour of the British soldiers who met their demise during the rebellion” – Fianna Fáil politicians (in striking contrast to 2020) continued to support it, criticizing Sinn Féin’s unwillingness “to commemorate all who died.” As one TD explained: “If the

⁸⁵ *The Journal.ie*, 2 Apr. 2016 (<https://www.thejournal.ie/1916-wall-aberration-2692975-Apr2016/>).

⁸⁶ Robert Ballagh, “What Anniversaries Tell Us,” *History Ireland* 24/2 (Mar./Apr. 2016): 10.

⁸⁷ Catriona Crowe, “How have we remembered.”

⁸⁸ *Irish Examiner*, 3 Apr. 2016.

⁸⁹ “Sinn Féin launches National Programme of Events” (<https://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/33261>).

⁹⁰ *IT*, 10 Aug. 2016.

British Queen can go to the Garden of Remembrance and bow her head to those who died in 1916, then I don't think it's inappropriate to attend an event to commemorate the British who died."⁹¹

The well-publicized arrest of a lone protestor at that ceremony (who, somewhat bizarrely, was accosted by the Canadian ambassador to Ireland) underlined the impression that such protests were confined to the fringes, as did positive coverage of the ceremony by nationalist media outlets.⁹² Sinn Féin was also accused of hypocrisy given its opposition to the idea of a hierarchy of Troubles victims north of the border.⁹³ The party's rejection of the State program was no doubt influenced in part by partisan calculations (the party, for instance, quickly resiled from its unpopular stance on meeting royals) but it was also based on ideology. In contrast to Southern parties, Sinn Féin did not see the legacy of Easter 1916 as legitimizing the Irish State. As Adams bluntly observed at the party's rival Arbour Hill ceremony: "This state is not the Republic proclaimed in 1916."⁹⁴

But this stance held less appeal south of the border. Symbolizing the lacklustre public response to republican protests against the State's pluralist approach, a Union Jack set alight in Glasnevin cemetery proved too wet to burn. However, republican criticism of the State program may also have failed to resonate with the public because of the extent to which the centenary was accompanied by patriotic rhetoric. For instance, at the ceremony to mark the opening of GPO Witness History, acting Taoiseach Enda Kenny eulogized the rebels in terms seldom heard during the Troubles: "It was on this site, 100 years ago, that Pádraig Pearse read aloud the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in an act of brave defiance that lit the touchpaper leading to the culmination of centuries of struggle for Irish freedom."⁹⁵ The State, moreover, retained traditional patriotic rituals such as the laying of wreaths at Kilmainham Gaol, and the military parade on O'Connell Street (reinstated in 2006 when the success of the peace process paradoxically enabled the revival of militaristic remembrance). Minor changes of register, such as the dropping of martial tunes by the army band, the laying of wreaths at the GPO by children rather than soldiers, and the replacing of gunshots by a drum roll were unlikely to have been much noticed. Nor did the Taoiseach's observation that the State ceremony commemorated "all those who died in 1916" attract attention.⁹⁶

Indeed, somewhat at odds with the Decade of Centenaries' reconciliatory impulses, the lavish scale of remembrance in 2016 placed the rebellion center stage in a manner that had not occurred since 1966. On "Proclamation Day," Irish schoolchildren drafted their own versions of the declaration and practiced how to salute the tricolour. A Flags for Schools initiative saw army officers visit 3,200 schools to teach children about the "vibrant symbol of our nation."⁹⁷ Whether regarded as cultivating practical citizenship, inappropriate militarism, or an assertion of the real Óglaigh na hÉireann's claim to the legacy of 1916, it is difficult to

⁹¹ "'Not Appropriate': Sinn Féin rejects invitation to commemorate British 1916 deaths," *The Journal.ie*, 26 May 2016 (<https://www.thejournal.ie/sinn-fein-british-rising-2788788-May2016/>).

⁹² Joseph Mulraney, "The 1916 Commemoration for British Soldiers remembered my own relative" (<https://www.irishcentral.com/roots/history/limited-protests-at-1916-commemoration-for-british-soldiers>).

⁹³ Sinn Féin's support for pluralist initiatives in Northern Ireland went largely unnoticed in the South. A Lower Ormeau Road mural depicted Corr family members who fought with republican and British forces. Picketed and firebombed by dissident republicans, a Falls Road mural featuring Edward Carson proved more contentious.

⁹⁴ "Adams addresses Lost Leaders commemoration in Arbour Hill" (<https://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/39134>).

⁹⁵ *IT*, 26 Mar. 2016.

⁹⁶ John Dorney, "The 2016 Rising Centenary" (<https://www.theirishstory.com/2016/12/29/the-2016-rising-centenary-what-did-it-all-mean/#.YMjU5qhKhPY>).

⁹⁷ *IT*, 14 Sept. 2015.

envisage such initiatives during the Troubles. Many commemorative activities offered a happy combination of pluralism and patriotism. Belying the firmly gendered nature of revolutionary women's roles in 1916, the prominently displayed images of a gun-toting Countess Markievicz that appeared on the side of Irish buses on International Women's Day resulted from a "Women of the Rising" campaign sponsored by the Royal Irish Academy, Bus Éireann and a car insurance firm.⁹⁸

Although largely successful, this potentially discordant combination of pluralism and patriotism dissatisfied both purist republicans and their critics. Whereas the former charged that the Rising's ideological significance was diluted by its subsumption within the Decade of Centenaries, the scale of the centenary appalled critics of republican violence. Criticising how the State depicted the Rising "as the foundation event of our democracy – as we did this year," former Taoiseach John Bruton argued that "instead of using the official ritual of 1916 commemoration to rekindle our national ideology around something that was inherently unrealisable, we should instead commemorate the entire process that led to our present statehood, with special emphasis on the landmarks that did not involve the use of force."⁹⁹

Amidst the mania for remembrance, characterized not only by imaginative public history interventions but a welter of commemorative kitsch, many of these arguments, as well as the State's nuanced recalibrations of the rebellion's legacy, went unnoticed by most. The extent to which nationalistic perspectives continued to elicit approval, particularly in local communities, was also overlooked by much press coverage that emphasized, as the State desired, an interesting new narrative centered on "maturity" and reconciliation. Indeed David Fitzpatrick, in characteristically astrigent terms, has plausibly suggested that

it would be naïve to suppose that the recent orgy of centennial commemoration has transformed public perceptions of 1916 from narrowly nationalist celebration to modishly pluralist self-questioning. Instead, the predominant outcome of both official and private commemoration in the Republic of Ireland has been to reinforce the belief that the rebellion was a noble, patriotic, and justified act of collective sacrifice, tainted only by the failure of subsequent generations to act on the prescriptions of the "proclamation" issued on Easter Monday.¹⁰⁰

Although social media, constrained within its twin settings of outrage and enthusiasm, provides an unreliable indication of public opinion, it does offer evidence of popular responses that would previously have been mediated by media pundits and other cultural gatekeepers. An outsized banner celebrating constitutional nationalist leaders, placed by Dublin City Council at Parliament House on the suggestion of the Department of Taoiseach, was ridiculed on Twitter.¹⁰¹ Purportedly "revisionist" (but broadly accurate) scenes in RTÉ's €6 million costume drama, *Rebellion*, such as the depiction of the rebels' Catholic piety and Pearse's disturbing zealotry, also provoked derision.¹⁰² In contrast, both the American-made *1916 The Irish Rebellion* documentary

⁹⁸ See: <https://www.its4women.ie/news/Bus-eireanns-1916-commemorative-campaign.aspx>

⁹⁹ *Centenary Conversations*, supplement to *IT*, 29 Sept. 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Fitzpatrick, "Easter Rising," 283.

¹⁰¹ *IT*, 14 Mar. 2016. 58% of over 16,000 readers of *The Journal.ie* (14 Mar. 2016) who expressed an online opinion regarded the banner as inappropriate whilst 29% approved (<https://www.thejournal.ie/dublin-city-council-banner-2659407-Mar2016/>).

¹⁰² *Irish Independent*, 15 Jan. 2016.

series and the RTÉ musical extravaganza, *Centenary*, were lauded on social media, not merely because they were better programs, but because they articulated celebratory narratives of Easter 1916.

IV

Perhaps, as Roisín Higgins has suggested, the celebratory tone and scale of the centenary contributed to the generous public response to critical perspectives on the Rising in 2016. A more obvious explanation for the backlash against pluralist commemoration in 2020 was provided by the transformed political context. As Diarmaid Ferriter observed, “the winds of current affairs – in particular the sentiments and emotions generated by Brexit and the corresponding frostiness in Anglo-Irish relations – can deeply impinge on how an interpretive framework for the past is employed.”¹⁰³ The ascent to power of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, a shameless and mendacious opportunist indifferent to the threat posed to Northern Irish stability by Brexit, further diminished Irish enthusiasm for shared history.

But notwithstanding the presence of British officials at Irish commemorative rituals throughout the Decade of Centenaries, Dublin’s enthusiasm for ‘narrative hospitality’ was never fully reciprocated by London. Whereas the Irish government, supported by its historians, resolved to commemorate the State’s origins with greater complexity, the British government blocked proposals by the historians on its First World War advisory board to mark post-war violence in India and Ireland. More recently, advocates of decolonization have been removed from British museum boards as part of a broader “government-sanctioned culture war.”¹⁰⁴

Ethical remembrance, as President Higgins noted in a tactful speech alluding to “atrocities too great to recall,” requires a willingness by both sides to recall what happened.¹⁰⁵ In a more pointed critique of “a feigned amnesia around the uncomfortable aspects of our shared history,” Higgins noted “a reluctance in former imperial powers to engage now with their imperialist past and to examine that past with descendants of those previously colonised.”¹⁰⁶ Contrasting with recent Irish enthusiasm for “complicating the narrative,”¹⁰⁷ the lack of interest on the other side of the Irish Sea in re-evaluating a no less mythologized island story reflects an intensification of the nostalgia, racism and ignorance that always characterized English attitudes to Ireland and Empire.¹⁰⁸ These differing official approaches to remembrance of a genuinely shared history that saw violence in Ireland radically reconfigure the United Kingdom help to explain why the Irish government provoked a furore to commemorate individuals who died in the service of another State that had little interest in remembering them.

The controversy over the commemoration of the RIC also owed something to political clumsiness as senior civil servants from the Department of Justice intruded on a commemorative pitch previously regulated by officials from the departments of the Taoiseach and Arts and Heritage. A religious service organized by the

¹⁰³ Diarmaid Ferriter, “Commemorations need political leadership,” *IT*, 18 Jan. 2020.

¹⁰⁴ *The Guardian*, 1 Apr. 2019, 1 May 2021.

¹⁰⁵ “Statement by President Michael D. Higgins on the Anniversary of the Sack of Balbriggan,” 20 Sep. 2020 (<https://president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/statement-by-president-michael-d-higgins-on-the-centenary-anniversary-of-the-sack-of-balbriggan>).

¹⁰⁶ Michael D. Higgins, “Empire shaped Ireland’s past,” *IT*, 11 Feb. 2021

¹⁰⁷ Catriona Crowe, “How have we remembered.”

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Richard J. Evans, “Rewritten History,” *London Review of Books* 43/23 (2 December 2021) (<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n23/richard-j.-evans/short-cuts>).

Harp Society was unwisely elevated to a State ceremony by justice minister Charlie Flanagan who failed to place his proposal before either the Cabinet or EAG.¹⁰⁹ In light of the sensitivities involved, the EAG reportedly had academic rather than State ceremonial events in mind when it recommended “specific initiatives to commemorate the RIC and the DMP.”¹¹⁰ But Flanagan’s proposal was consistent with the government’s pluralist ethos. Nor was it his first such initiative. In 2019 he had become the first minister to attend a service (at which the Taoiseach was also represented) to commemorate policemen killed by Irish Volunteers. Referring to them as having been “murdered in the line of duty,” Flanagan explained that “as they saw it they were protecting communities from harm” and “maintaining the rule of law.” Describing himself as a “pluralist who believes in the co-existence of peoples of different traditions on the island coming together,” Flanagan noted the presence at the ceremony of “RUC widows from the North” who “were pleased to see a representative of the Irish Government.” His presence there, he explained, “was in the same spirit” as his attendance at Grangegorman to commemorate British soldiers.¹¹¹ Although these remarks provoked little controversy at the time, the potent folk memory of the Black and Tans ensured a very different response the following year when Flanagan’s proposal triggered what one journalist described as “an ancestral fury beyond the usual opportunists who opposed any reconciliation gesture as a sell-out.”¹¹²

Conflicting with the EAG’s stricture that the State should not be neutral about its own existence, Flanagan’s misjudged efforts to instrumentalize a “shared history” of the War of Independence – which was likely influenced by his disapproval of more recent IRA violence – jarred with his position as a minister of a State that owed its existence to republican violence. The RIC controversy thus brought into focus some of the wider tensions that had characterized official commemoration over the Decade of Centenaries, shaping a memory discourse that largely evaded considerations of motivation, agency and ideology in favor of a reconciliatory remembrance that positioned all the revolutionary dead as tragic victims of a shared history.

As with Boris Johnson’s much criticized position on cake, pluralism enabled the Irish government to celebrate Easter 1916 while signalling its sensitivity to other perspectives. Paradoxically, as anthropologist Johnathon Evershed has observed, the lavish – if decentralized – scale of State patronage helped to defuse the Rising’s contentious legacy:

the encouragement of a “creative” islandwide commemorative cacophony, seems to have allowed for greater narrative control than would have been possible under similar conditions of tighter state management as had prevailed . . . in 1966, 1976, or 1991 . . . wandering around RTÉ’s busy, sprawling (and undoubtedly quite enjoyable) “Reflecting the Rising” jamboree in Dublin on Easter Monday, 2016, it was often difficult to discern what, precisely, the many pageants, performances, and (in one particularly perplexing exhibit) horticultural displays had to say about 1916 . . . If the peace propagandists’ relative success in their attempts to regain control of the commemorative agenda from other expressly political interests can largely (and counterintuitively) be

¹⁰⁹ *IT*, 8 Jan. 2020; Ferriter, “Commemorations.”

¹¹⁰ Diarmaid Ferriter, quoted in *IT*, 7 Jan. 2020.

¹¹¹ *IT*, 15 Sept. 2019. See also Brian Hanley, “The RIC was never a normal police force,” *IT*, 13 Jan. 2020.

¹¹² *IT*, 10 Jan. 2020.

attributed to the “democratization” of the centenary, then it should be noted that this *did* also rely, in part, on processes of circumscription, prohibition and cooptation.¹¹³

Were the historians among the co-opted? Their role in critiquing “commemorationist history” calls into question the claim that historians provided “ideological cover for politics and power,” thereby “giving legitimacy to contemporary political actors.”¹¹⁴ The related charge that historians are poorly placed to analyze and critique how the past is deployed in the present is not borne out by an increasingly sophisticated historiography of memory and public history expertise that contrasts with the reluctance of earlier generations of historians to engage seriously with commemoration. Characterizing the relationship between history and commemoration as contested and uneasy rather than incompatible, David Fitzpatrick has suggested that historians are well-placed to advise commemorative planners on the perils of bad history: “Though many may reject the very concept of ‘good history’, few would deny that historical research is capable of identifying elements of falsification, distortion and undue political influence in the way that past events are narrated. Academic historians are not privileged arbiters of historical truth, but they should be better equipped than most people to detect appealing but flawed narratives.”¹¹⁵

The sophistication and agency with which a historically-literate public engaged with the centenary, moreover, challenges the idea that commemoration must remain subservient to the needs of collective myth-making. Benefiting from the democratization of access to sources resulting from State-sponsored projects such as the digitization of the Military Service Pensions collection, the centenary witnessed “a truly impressive explosion of public engagement with matters once the preserve of teachers and historians.”¹¹⁶ Working with local authorities, libraries, museums and schools, historians contributed to this remarkable “democratization of history-making.”¹¹⁷ The contrast here with post-Brexit Britain is striking. The ability of the public to think for themselves, Richard Evans noted in a scathing critique of the UK government’s efforts to impose a simplistic patriotic narrative on British cultural institutions such as the National Trust and British Museum, should form ‘the basis for teaching, writing and researching history in a way that helps citizens to distinguish fact from fiction, propaganda from truth, myth from history.’¹¹⁸ By communicating new narratives, interpretations and perspectives, historians in Ireland helped to convey how history, as a constructed body of knowledge, is open to interpretation and contestation. By making clear, moreover, how “commemoration is itself a part of the historical process – and is therefore open to radical change,” they supported the emergence of “new forms of collective remembrance” more adequate to contemporary circumstances.¹¹⁹ As the *Sunday Independent* journalist Brendan O’Connor noted in his column reflecting on the centenary: “It is fitting, isn’t it, that we can’t

¹¹³ Jonathan Evershed, *Ghosts of the Somme: Commemoration and Culture War in Northern Ireland* (Indiana, ND: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 222-23.

¹¹⁴ Bryan, “Ritual,” 29, 42.

¹¹⁵ Fitzpatrick, “Historians,” 126. See also Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, “Public History and the Professional Historian: An Irish Perspective,” *Estudios Irlandeses* 9: 137-45.

¹¹⁶ David Fitzpatrick, “The ‘Easter Rising’. Four Fallacies and Some Reflections” in *Parnell and his Times*, ed. Joep Leerssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 286.

¹¹⁷ Fitzpatrick, “Easter Rising,” 286.

¹¹⁸ Evans, “Rewritten History.”

¹¹⁹ Fintan O’Toole, “Beyond Amnesia and Piety,” in *Towards Commemoration*, 156-7.

agree what it was about, or what it achieved, or what its legacy is or how best to commemorate it. Easter, a moveable feast, a date that shifts. Nothing is immutable in Ireland. Everything is up for change.”¹²⁰

The fate of the Glasnevin memorial – and the State’s commitment to pluralist remembrance – also remain uncertain. Scarred by the RIC controversy, Charlie Flanagan declared that he would not blame the Glasnevin Trust for abandoning the project: “The objective to commemorate ‘without judgment or hierarchy,’ while laudable, cannot be achieved.”¹²¹ But perhaps commemoration without judgement or hierarchy is neither possible nor desirable? Launching the 2021 Programme for the Decade of Centenaries, the Fine Gael Tánaiste, Leo Varadkar, and Fianna Fáil Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, expressed their continued support for the memorial. “The fact that we could be the first country in the world to embrace our history in such a way is a real statement about the future that we could have on a shared island,” Varadkar declared. Criticizing the “condemnatory approach that certain people have” (a reference to Sinn Féin which is currently leading the opinion polls), Martin asserted that his government would not be deflected from commemorating “the loss of human life on all sides.”¹²²

Whether this admirable sentiment can be reconciled with a genuine historical engagement with the past remains to be seen. The recent controversy sparked by President Higgins’ decision not to attend a ceremony commemorating partition and the formation of Northern Ireland has focused public attention on the limitations of a “shared history” that fails to address ideological difference. Perhaps lessons can be drawn from others states that have grappled with considerably more difficult histories of occupation and oppression, and where the question of how to reconcile conflicting memories of the past remains a greater threat to democratic values. Observing that the goal of achieving consensus about the past is not merely idealistic but unrealistic, given the centrality of ethnic or national memories to group identity, Siobhan Kattago, an Estonian-based scholar, has argued for more – not less – public and political discussion of historical divisions:

Pluralism entails respect for different memories of the past and recognition of difference. If the legacy of the past is merely used as a tool for short-term political gain, the possibility of learning about the past for the sake of [the] future is lost . . . Agreeing to disagree is neither a whitewashing of the past nor a grand narrative, but an acknowledgement of different conflicting memories of historical events.

Such an approach, Kattago argues, necessitates “respect for multiple memories, recognition of cultural difference and empathy with others” but – crucially – the abandonment of efforts to fashion a shared history: ‘If we are to take pluralism seriously, then total consensus about the past is impossible and perhaps even undesirable.’¹²³

¹²⁰ Brendan O’Connor, *Sunday Independent*, 27 March 2016.

¹²¹ *IT*, 24 Apr. 2021.

¹²² *IT*, 24 April 2021

¹²³ Kattago, “Agreeing to Disagree”: 390, 376; idem, “Memory, Pluralism”: 384.

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