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Widdis, B., & Reisz, E. (2024). *Collecting ambiguity: material objects and the afterlives of empire on the island of Ireland*. Paper presented at Transnational Island Museologies International Conference and the 47th ICOFOM Annual Assembly, St Andrews, United Kingdom.

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

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Transnational Island Museologies International Conference and the 47th ICOFOM Annual Assembly

5-7 June 2024

Collecting Ambiguity: Material Objects and the Afterlives of Empire on the Island of Ireland

Contact details and affiliation:

Dr Briony Widdis, briony.widdis@qub.ac.uk & Dr Emma Reisz, emma.reisz@qub.ac.uk

[School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics](#)

Queen's University Belfast

Northern Ireland, UK

In this paper, we propose that exploring connections to significant objects, both within and beyond museums, offers insight into how empire is perceived and personalised in the unique context of Ireland, especially in Northern Ireland. We examine privately owned items and the public representation of empire in institutions like the Ulster Museum and the National Museum of Ireland. By integrating public history and anthropology, we argue that the legacies of empire in material collections across Ireland and Northern Ireland not only reflect the island's divisions, but also reveal unexpected and shared narratives.

While Northern Ireland is often seen as a divided society shaped by imperial fault lines, simplistic binary identities fail to capture the complexity of Ireland's increasingly diverse societies and their relationships with the past. Northern Ireland's complex ties to British imperialism, as the part of Ireland remaining in the UK after 1922, encompass narratives of colonialism, migration, participation in empire, and resistance to imperialism.

Encounters with Empire are part of daily life in Northern Ireland, mirrored by numerous memorials and statues honouring local figures' roles in imperial endeavours. For instance, the statue of Frederick Temple Blackwood, the first marquess of Dufferin and Ava, outside Belfast City Hall commemorates his tenure as Governor General of Canada and Viceroy of India. Dufferin's commissioning of Helen's Tower during the Irish Famine not only symbolises the Dufferin family's connections with empire, but also embodies Ireland's literary history, with verses from renowned poets like Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning inscribed on its walls.

An exact replica of Helen's Tower stands in the French countryside opposite Thiepval Wood, where the 36th Ulster Division, composed mainly of men from Ulster who trained on Clondeboye estate, made their historic charge on 1 July 1916. This underscores Helen's

Tower's iconic role in local identity, symbolising both British imperial expansion and Ulster's memories of World War I.

The Dufferin memorials in and near Belfast, prominently situated in Northern Ireland's capital and visible for miles around, intertwine ideas of civic identity with sacrifice and victorious success, resonating not only in Europe but also globally. These memorials perpetuate imperialistic sentiments, but are only distantly connected with the identities of many people in the region today.

Discussion of these issues on the island of Ireland risks reopening old wounds and disrupting established heritage discourse from the peace process. Flags, emblems, murals, and rituals have instrumentalised imperial and anti-imperial symbols, reflecting how, as highlighted by scholars like Dominic Bryan have highlighted, historical narratives legitimise political positions within both localised and broader contexts.

Marches linking historical events to current identities remain common, especially around 12th July, when Orange fraternities commemorate the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. This battle, marking a turning point in James II's efforts to regain the English and Scottish monarchy, is celebrated by the Orange Order, which rejects (Roman) Catholic members. The presence of Orange marches has been contentious throughout the Northern Ireland conflict (1968–1998), reflecting differing interpretations of identity and history. In Banbridge for example, an annual arch goes up in July, but in 2023 it was erected early, in May, for King Charles's coronation. This illustrates a symbolic connection between past monarchic conflicts, modern sectarianism, and current royal celebrations.

Vernacular symbols also reflect these tensions. For example, some people express their affiliations with the Orange order by growing Orange lilies. This is highlighted by how in Larne, Co. Antrim, a mural commemorates Northern Ireland's centenary shows the lily, and also associated Orangeism with Scotland, England, and the wider UK.

On the other hand, Irish Republicans adopt the white lily, worn at Easter to honour those who died in the 1916 Rising. The symbol is also linked, in Ireland, to international anticolonialism and is supported by Derry City Council, as seen in a Belfast Telegraph article. Republican murals in Belfast express solidarity with Palestinian freedom, highlighting perceived parallels between British colonialism in Palestine and Ireland. The movement supports various anticolonial causes, evident in murals advocating for Leonard Peltier. Language rights also intersect with anti-colonial discourse, embraced by the Irish language community. Queen's University Belfast organised a conference with Glór na Móna in 2023, exploring decolonisation's connection to community voices, policing, and British history in Ireland.

Previous research on the symbolic value of imperial/colonial objects in Northern/Irish identities has been limited. Our research combines a cultural biography of objects approach with participant autoethnography, to analyse how empire-related objects are perceived by institutions, communities, and individuals. We aim to unpack complexities and ambiguities surrounding private and public collections in Ireland and Northern Ireland associated with empire, moving beyond simplistic narratives of identity and imperial meanings.

Our research contributes to the ongoing work of museum decolonisation in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, drawing insights from practices across the UK and beyond.

Decolonising principles, such as valuing all forms of knowledge equally, guide this process, although it is particularly complex given the political resonances associated with empire and colonialism in the Irish context.

The Inclusive Global Histories exhibition at the Ulster Museum, which opened in March 2022, navigates these complexities by collaborating closely with local communities and explicitly aiming for a "decolonial" approach. The exhibition conveys how many objects within it lack clear provenance, reflecting historical practices of typological display and the colonial collecting of items perceived as curios.

Adopting an object-biographical approach, recommended by scholars like Kopytoff, is crucial to understanding how objects were removed from their places of origin and the stories they carry. This approach also highlights the dynamic interactions between objects, institutions, communities, and individuals throughout their lifecycle, revealing layers of meaning beyond museum interpretations. For example, a Solomon Islands canoe, displayed in Belfast's early museums, now prompts reflection on the determinants of its historical and cultural significance. What museums value may differ from what originating communities and visitors value, underscoring the importance of considering diverse perspectives in museum practices.

Our project delves into how people in Northern Ireland experience objects linked to empire and colonialism, departing from the traditional museum perspective to focus on public history. This perspective considers how people engage with and interpret their own histories, including within counter-publics, offering crucial insights into the use of history in Northern Ireland. Exploring both public and non-public dimensions of history, we investigate personal, familial, and emotional connections to the past, seeking to understand whether these reflections align with or challenge traditional discourses around empire and colonialism.

Since 2021, we have emphasised museum decolonisation efforts that involve originating communities and contribute to peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. Our research involved contacting 43 Accredited museums to enquire about their collections related to Ireland's involvement in the British Empire, revealing significant holdings across regions including Africa, Oceania, Asia, and North America.

Additionally, since 2021, we've pioneered participant autoethnography as a collaborative research method to examine heritage associated with Irish imperial and colonial pasts. Through one-to-one interviews with 33 adults in Northern Ireland, we explored their connections to objects from National Museums NI's World Cultures collection. Participants from diverse backgrounds shared their perspectives, enriching our understanding of how empire and colonialism are remembered and their implications for peacebuilding on the island of Ireland.

Participants in our research often gravitated towards a Buddha figure, demonstrating familiarity with Buddhist iconography. Conversely, they showed less affinity for rarer items such as a cloak that had belonged to King Kamehameha III in Hawai'i, and the *tomako* (canoe), suggesting that global importance does not always align with local connections.

Transparency about the limits of knowledge, and concern for the items' first owners, emerged as key themes among contributors. Some found the topic of the British Empire troubling or traumatic, while others held positive feelings. Most participants easily discussed Ireland's

colonial status and were interested in how the country's role in the Empire is reflected in these collections.

Since 2023, our research has expanded through a public engagement element, partnering with organisations including ArtsEkta and the Irish Museums Association. Our approach considers both socio-cultural and historical perspectives on Irish memories of colonialism and empire.

Photographs play a significant role in colonial visualities, with examples like a 1960s photo taken near Cairo reflecting white perspectives through framing and historical contexts. Such images recall European dominance in archaeological explorations and the European Grand Tour, shaping Western perceptions of the Orient. Mid-twentieth-century touristic photographs like this one, viewed in the private, domestic settings, can perpetuate inherited prejudices and supremacist attitudes, potentially reinforcing them in the outside world.

However, this is only one perspective, and comes from white academics. In our research, we aim to collaboratively explore how people remember colonialism and empire, considering objects and visual materials that trigger memories. By prioritising community voices and acknowledging our own engagement with the subject, we seek to amplify diverse memories and expertise beyond academia.

While our research has revealed discomfort in discussing the British Empire Northern Ireland, many people possess family items linked to personal colonial experiences. Public engagement on empire can be divisive, but focusing on individual experiences promotes ethical reflection, revealing shared experiences across identities and political views, particularly regarding migration and travel narratives.

In our view, academic methodologies should acknowledge historical divisions, but also work across them. We approach our research with an anti-racist lens, valuing emotions and meaningful collaborations, while recognising the importance of re-examining overlooked narratives.

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