

1916 in 2006

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What was meant to be a direct and serious threat to British rule in Ireland in 1916 became a small-scale skirmish on the streets of Dublin that had little impact beyond the capital city. But the actions of the men and women who were behind the Easter Rising have an important claim on Irish collective memory. That the nationalist rhetoric of the now famous 1916 martyrs was wrapped in a religious idiom, and appealed to this-worldly as well as otherworldly sentiment, helped to ensure its place in posterity. For all the importance of this event in our collective memory though, it has not always been remembered as it was on Easter Sunday 2006, when the Irish state organised an elaborate official commemoration of the tragic and ill-fated rising, the first such event since 1966.¹

¹ For an interesting historical account of early state (in)activity with respect to 1916 commemorations, see D. Fitzpatrick, 'Commemoration in the Irish Free State: A chronicle of embarrassment', in I. McBride (ed.), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 184–203. For more detail on the fiftieth and seventy-fifth anniversary commemorations, see D. Kiberd, 'The elephant of revolutionary forgetfulness', in D. Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 191–207. A brief account of a research project on the fiftieth anniversary commemoration carried out by the Humanities Institute of Ireland, University College Dublin, is available at www.ucd.ie/ucdtoday/jun06/jun06/rememering_easter.pdf (accessed November 2007).

This chapter attempts to examine the state's commemoration of the ninetieth anniversary of this event and the issues it raises for our understanding of collective memory. In doing this I draw on the insights of the founder of this subfield of sociology Maurice Halbwachs, as well as the more recent influential work of anthropologist Paul Connerton. The approach I adopt is broadly Durkheimian, emphasising the importance of shared rituals in certain times and places, and focusing on symbols that help to evoke common emotions and sentiments of community, belonging and inclusion.² I hope to show how remembrance of the past brings concerns about the present to the surface of social life, that official state commemorations are carefully choreographed occasions for announcing national collective identity, and that the 2006 parade through the streets of Dublin – a movement of people's bodies through space as well as time – relied on ongoing textual representations to organise and structure its meaning. I also seek to highlight the role of oblivion in remembering and how the past is claimed in different ways by different social groups depending on their interests and concerns.

Easter week was an apt time to initiate a push for political independence. Quite apart from symbolically linking the rising to the resurrection of Christ and its powerful resonances of rebirth and redemption, Easter Monday was also, in pragmatic terms, a good time to take control of strategic buildings on the main street of Dublin city, catching an unsuspecting imperial government in Dublin Castle by surprise. Confusion marked the rebels' organisation and this led to the postponement of the planned rising from the Sunday to the Monday. With the help of a small amount of explosives and ammunition and a considerable amount of courage and confidence, they put their plans into action. But the might of the rebellion

² For a good account of Émile Durkheim's theorising about memory, see B. Misztal, 'Durkheim on collective memory', *Journal of Classical Sociology*, vol. 3, 2003, pp. 123–143.

leaders was met with even greater might from the British Army. Heavily armed and with superior military capability, it was a fairly straightforward matter for the colonial power to extinguish the rising. It was less able to seize control of the myth – a story people live by – that Easter 1916 would become in the imagination of Irish nationalists.

Central to this narrative is the Proclamation, a foundational document setting out the broad outlines of a national programme. It is also an interesting example of a civil religious³ text in which religion is mobilised to legitimise the rebels' political goals and ideals, clearly set out in the document's opening sentence summoning Irish people to seize the opportunity for autonomy: 'Irishmen and Irishwomen: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom'. Interestingly, the signatories to the Proclamation, though executed, were immortalised in the building of the state's first high-rise public housing project in Ballymun, a symbol of modernising, 1960s Ireland and a good example of the inscribing of time in space.

On collective memory

Commemorating the past plays an important role in identity formation and negotiation and in recent years scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds have paid increasing attention to the memory–identity nexus. One clear message from this literature is that memories of the past are culturally created and shared. Within the discipline of sociology, the theorist who has contributed most to the collective memory literature has been Maurice Halbwachs, a student of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. One of

³ The concept of civil religion comes from the work of Robert Bellah, see R. Bellah, 'Civil religion in America', *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 96, no. 1, 1967, pp. 1–21.

Halbwachs' major contributions is his insistence that memories are social in terms of content and process. Simply put, 'memory needs others' in two important ways.⁴ First, memories are formed within what he calls 'social frameworks' of memory, that is to say, families, classes and religious groups of which we are part. For Halbwachs:

Everyone has a capacity for memory that is unlike that of anyone else ... but individual memory is nevertheless a part or an aspect of group memory ... to the extent that it is connected with the thoughts that come to us from the social milieu (family, church, community organizations, political parties, neighborhoods, ethnic groups etc.).⁵

Once these frameworks of memory (such as the family) die or disappear, the memories hosted by them tend to fade as well. What people remember then is socially determined. But how people remember is also socially shaped.

Memories can be transmitted through material objects located in space or geography, for example museums, memorials or murals; through embodiment such as marches, gestures, bodily posture and pilgrimage; or in oral culture through gossiping and storytelling. These various modes of remembrance, which interact with one another in interesting and important ways,⁶ both remember and remember, that is they recall the past and unite people with others sharing the same collective narrative. Special attention here is given to the role of embodiment in remembering the past and Paul Connerton's foundational work on how societies remember has been influential in this

⁴ M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, edited and translated by Lewis A. Coser, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶ See, for example, L. Spillman and B. Conway, 'Texts, bodies, and the memory of Bloody Sunday', *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007, pp. 79-103.

respect.⁷ For Connerton, bodily social memory is carried through two kinds of practice: formal commemorative ceremonies and more informal bodily practices such as gestures and posture. In his framework, commemorative ceremonies include parades, marches and processions. Central to these is the notion of performative re-enactment, of seeking to do things now as they were really done then, thereby invoking an explicit link between the past and the present.

The parade

The official commemoration of the ninetieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising took place on the streets of Dublin. It was a public event drawing a crowd of an estimated 100,000 people. It was highly militaristic and consisted of different brigades and sections of the Irish Army marching from Dublin Castle to O'Connell Street and past a reviewing stand outside the General Post Office (GPO), the scene of the action so to speak. It was a highly scripted occasion as well – soldiers marched in a carefully choreographed movement and sequence. Leaving nothing to chance, a full military rehearsal took place in the Curragh camp prior to the parade. It was a 'top down' commemoration in the sense that it was organised, funded and promoted by the state rather than by 'bottom up' civil society groups. In addition, it was an embodied event, that is to say, it involved the physical or bodily act of walking through the streets of the city as an exercise in bringing the past into the present.

Such a military procession did not, of course, take place in 1916, but the reading aloud of the Proclamation outside the GPO, a key part of the 2006 commemoration, showed a concern among the organisers, as Connerton would lead one to expect, with explicitly linking the present to the past. In most other respects, there seems to have been little attempt

⁷ P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

in the organisation of the commemoration to repeat history as it really was.

State representatives emphasised the importance of the parade as an opportunity to show the nation's military to itself. In form and content, the event clearly followed convention in state commemorative occasions. By doing this it demonstrated, through public spectacle, the political independence the rising had sought to achieve but which was not realised for another five years. By most accounts, and despite the absence of a strong tradition of commemorating 1916 and of state activity around this, the 2006 event was a successful ritual.

But ritual is as much about the present as it is about the past. Political rhetoric at the commemoration, for example, revealed a strong presentism or emphasis on present-day concerns. The past was seized upon as a resource to make sense of the present. Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, for instance, used the occasion of a wreath-laying ceremony in the Stonebreakers' Yard of Kilmainham Gaol to point to the achievements Irish society had made in realising the goals of the 1916 martyrs and to underwrite the state's legitimacy.⁸

By gathering here today, 90 years on from the Easter Rising, our presence is testimony to the fact that our generation still cherishes the ideals of the courageous men and women who fought for Ireland in Easter week and during the War of Independence ...

He went on to point out that:

The men and women of Easter 1916 gave their lives so that Ireland could gain her freedom ... this generation used that freedom to support peace and reconciliation in our own country when, in an overwhelming and historic

⁸ *The Irish Times*, 17 April 2006, pp. 8–9.

act of self-determination, we voted for the Good Friday agreement in 1998.

Ahern's statement explicitly linked this remembered violent act to recent peacemaking activities in Northern Ireland. Clearly, the rising was a 'usable past'. Significantly, he mobilised the memory of a violent period in 1916 to communicate a political message about the value of peaceful democratic means in bringing about positive social change:

As we look to the future, we must be generous and inclusive so that all of the people of Ireland can live together with each other and with our neighbours in Great Britain on a basis of friendship, respect, equality and partnership ... and every day, in every place, we will continue to work for peace, for justice, for prosperity and for reconciliation between all who share and who love this special island.

Put another way, 1916 was invoked as a model for society, as an event infused with important lessons for contemporary and future living.

Textual representations

Although the military parade was the high point of the commemoration calendar, 1916 was also remembered through various other non-embodied, textual means such as newspaper pull-out supplements, posters, exhibitions, academic conferences, websites, postage stamps, scholarship schemes, documentaries and so forth. These textual representations all arguably helped to shape and organise the meaning of the state parade and the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Mary Coughlan, seemed to hint at this when she made the point in the Dáil that:

A number of events to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the 1916 Rising are planned. One of these is the

restoration of the military parade at the GPO by Óglaigh na hÉireann, the Defence Forces, which has been in abeyance since the early 1970s ... the military parade is just one part of this year's commemorations. A number of other events for Easter week and throughout the year are being planned. On the education side, one of the initiatives will include a special supplement for schools in *The Irish Times*, including a map of the 1916 locations around Dublin sponsored by the Department of Education and Science. The Department also operates an annual Easter week 1916 commemoration scholarship scheme.⁹

The Irish Times, in collaboration with the Department of Education and Science, carried a special sixteen-page, pull-out commemorative supplement two weeks prior to the parade. The supplement set out to map the 'lived reality of the Rising',¹⁰ drawing on accounts of people with direct, first-hand experience of the event, or what Halbwachs refers to as autobiographical memory. The intent was to capture things as they really were. Most of the 100,000 people who attended the official parade and the thousands of others who watched it live on television, however, came to it, not with an autobiographical memory, but with historical memory mediated through various cultural materials including documentaries, school history textbooks and newspaper reports.

In addition to the supplement, *The Irish Times* also produced a poster, presumably for classroom use, chronicling the events of Easter week in a day-by-day account. In a postscript section, the newspaper quoted William Butler Yeats's poem 'Easter 1916', noting that though the rising was not successful, the world was 'changed utterly' because of it. The authenticity of the

⁹ *Dáil Debates*, vol. 617, no. 1, 28 March 2006, available at www.irlgov.ie (accessed February 2007).

¹⁰ *The Irish Times*, 28 March 2006, The 1916 Rising Special Supplement, p. 1.

poster's account was established by the use of contemporaneous photographs of the rising and of major protagonists as well as reproductions of the original 1916 Proclamation, a Sinn Féin rebellion handbook with a map of Dublin, and the surrender note of Pádraig Pearse. Representations like these, with the attention they gave to truth and authenticity, particularly around the time of the commemoration, arguably helped to frame the events of Easter 1916 in the public imagination and to activate people's memories of them. Put another way, these cultural texts sought to keep amnesia, the conceptual cousin of remembering, at bay, especially among a new generation with no lived experience of the event.

Oblivion and contestation

One might imagine that many Irish people, and certainly the Irish state, had good reasons for forgetting about the events of 1916. Consider, for instance, the appropriation of 1916 by followers of physical-force republicanism and its use as a central myth in the republican narrative about the oppressive nature of British colonial rule in Ireland. Time and again, Irish republicans claimed the memory of the 1916 martyrs to legitimise their own armed struggle in Northern Ireland and to assert that they were the true inheritors of the republican ideals that the rebellion leaders represented.

A second reason why the Irish state might have been reluctant to claim the memory of 1916 in 2006 has to do with official indifference at the time of the fiftieth and seventy-fifth anniversary commemorations. By establishing a pattern of dissociation from the event and a non-interventionist approach to commemoration, the Irish state allowed other partisan groups to claim its memory and deploy it to articulate a counter-hegemonic political discourse. By reclaiming this memory in 2006, therefore, after a long period of lapse, the state was forced to offer a convincing story about past official oblivion and the

republican coloration of memory work in previous times. The movement of Irish republicanism into the political mainstream since the mid-1990s provided just such a justification. As the Taoiseach put it in the Dáil, 'At one time circumstances dictated that the parade be discontinued but it is now appropriate, as we move to an end of violence in the North, confirmed by the announcements that have been made this year which make that crystal clear, to celebrate the event'.¹¹

Compared with 2006, the past was indeed a foreign country.¹² Not only had political sensibilities altered, but a radically changed economic context made 1916 a model of Irish society, to which the country had finally lived up. Now that Ireland had successfully made the transition from a poor backwater to a rich Celtic Tiger, the ideals of the 1916 Proclamation, emphasising the principles of liberty and equality, found an echo in people's lived social realities much more so than they would have in say 1966 or even 1991. Indeed, the political rhetoric of the leaders of the rising may well be the most remembered aspect of what happened. Consider, for example, that the 'cherish all the nation's children equally' injunction of the Proclamation subsequently entered and became common currency in Irish public policy debates.

Not everyone agreed with the tone or coloration of the official parade. Ritual, as David Kertzer observes, helps to

¹¹ *Dáil Debates*, vol. 611, no. 5, 7 December 2005, available at <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/DDebates.aspx?Dail=29&Type=DAL> (accessed February 2008).

¹² L. P. Hartley begins his 1953 novel *The Go-Between* with the memorable phrase, 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there', see L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, New York: The New York Review of Books, 1953. Within the collective memory literature, this idea has been taken up by David Lowenthal, as indicated by the title of his influential book, see D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

create 'solidarity without consensus'.¹³ Some civil society organisations demonstrated against it in protest marches organised in the afternoon following the official state procession, revealing how the commemoration became a touchstone for contestation around competing discourses of peace and violence, 'high politics' and pragmatic considerations. One political activist group drew attention to the gap between the ideals of the Proclamation and contemporary Irish political support for the war in Iraq. Others took issue with the military motif of the parade and its articulation of state power. An Afri-organised counter-demonstration highlighted poor conditions within the Irish health service and included a mock event of wheeling a hospital trolley past the GPO. It also pointed to the contrast between the military profile of the parade and class-based issues close to people's everyday social lives and concerns (such as health and education) which were omitted from the official commemoration programme.¹⁴ These rumblings of dissent bring into focus the fact that commemorative occasions are received by multiple audiences with different interests and needs.¹⁵

Conclusion

In this chapter I have drawn upon the insights of Halbwachs, Connerton and others to make sense of the 2006 parade and other modes of commemorating the 1916 Easter Rising. This short case study helps to illuminate some key broader issues of concern to collective memory scholars, including the role of memory in underwriting collective

¹³ D. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988, p. 69.

¹⁴ *The Irish Times*, 17 April 2006, p. 16.

¹⁵ The concept of multiple audiences comes from the work of Gary Fine, see G. A. Fine, *Difficult Reputations: Collective Memories of the Evil, Inept and Controversial*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 160.

identity, memory as a site of contestation and the extent to which remembrance undergoes change over time.¹⁶ In this analysis the memory–identity interface and commemorative change loom the largest.

For anyone who attended the 2006 parade, it was more celebratory than sombre in tone, as much a celebration of the achievements of an economically prosperous new Ireland as of a politically independent old Ireland. Crucially, the ninetieth commemoration of the rising became a touchstone for a debate about Irish nationhood. Speeches at the commemoration emphasised themes of prosperity, pluralism and stability, and how Irish society had made good on the political rhetoric of the rising's leaders, even if this project was somewhat more delayed than they would have predicted. As the Taoiseach put it, 'Ireland is now in full stride and beginning to fulfil the hopes and expectations that all the patriots of the past knew we possessed'.¹⁷ The commemoration was used as a platform for political claim-making, mostly in support of the state-building project but sometimes, especially from 'bottom up' civil society organisations, contesting it. This helped to make a larger point that the past is useful for making important claims to present-day audiences and for shaping and fashioning our collective future.

¹⁶ For a comprehensive review of the collective memory literature from a specifically sociological perspective, see J. K. Olick and J. Robbins, 'Social memory studies: From 'collective memory' to historical sociology of mnemonic practices', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 24, 1998, pp. 105–140.

¹⁷ *The Irish Times*, 17 April 2006, p. 8.