



Constitutional Conversations, No. 6 of 6

Ethics and Commemoration

Royal Irish Academy, 24 November 2016

Report by rapporteurs Andrew Godden and Cira Palli

INTRODUCTION

A political decision has made 2012–22 the ‘Decade of Centenaries’ on the island of Ireland. Commemorative events have been, are being and will be held on both parts of the island to mark some of the most important events in that crucial decade of Irish history a hundred years ago. Now that the decade is almost halfway through, it is an opportune moment to reflect upon how commemorations already undertaken might inform coming commemorations. Reflecting on the ethical components of collective commemoration can provide a framework for handling contested and divisive narratives of the past in a manner that is inclusive and tolerant and prompts consideration of the often conflicting senses of identity in contemporary Ireland, north and south.

It was to explore these issues that this event, the sixth and final in the Constitutional Conversations series, was convened. The framework on ethical remembering that underpinned the event is available on the Royal Irish Academy website.¹

PANEL ONE

The first panel provided a cautionary note regarding the pitfalls of commemorative events in divided societies. In the absence of an agreed narrative capable of bridging sectarian divisions, biased accounts of historical events are utilised to further political agendas rather than promoting truth and reconciliation. This suggests a clear need for ethical principles on the part of official agencies to counter self-aggrandising accounts of the past.

Attendees discussed a number of ethical principles, which they regarded as being central to all commemorative projects in the Irish and Northern Irish contexts. These principles were threefold. First, ‘contextualisation’ should ensure historical accuracy in commemorations that are state-backed. Second, ‘revision’ of the past must allow for

¹ Louise Mallinder & Margaret O’Callaghan, ‘The Ethics of Commemorative Practices’ (31 March 2015) <https://www.ria.ie/news/professor-louise-mallinder-and-dr-margaret-ocalaghan-ethics-commemorative-practices>



an inclusive approach in recognition of multiple narratives. And third, the ‘democratic dissemination’ of primary historical sources should facilitate greater access by the public to promote a critical outlook on the empirical record and to foster social dialogue.

The panel contended that the application of these principles could not only facilitate more pluralistic and historically accurate commemoration, but perform a didactic function by promoting greater understanding of important constitutional moments. In furtherance of this argument, attention was drawn to two particular developments in the Republic: the publication of archive material and the recognition of the victims of the revolutionary period. In terms of the former, emphasis was placed on the work of the Irish Bureau of Military History, which, along with the Military Service Pensions Collection, has in recent years released vast amounts of archive material related to the revolution and the Civil War in publicly accessible digital form. These efforts have served to ‘democratise’ the commemorative process by allowing Irish citizens to view their history from their own perspective. Similarly, there has been a recognition of the anti-revolutionary and non-military casualties of the revolution. This is manifest in the controversial Remembrance Wall in Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin, a monument that lists the names of all those who died in the Rising—British soldiers, Irish members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and civilians. Some argued that such initiatives are illustrative of how ethical principles discussed above can operate in practice. A key question remained, however—what precise ethical principles were being drawn upon and whose definition of the ethical was foregrounded.

PANEL TWO

In the second panel a sceptical note was sounded as the very concept of ‘ethical commemoration’ was called into question. The substance of this argument relates to the ‘porous’ nature of the borders between commemoration, history and politics; it was argued that it is often difficult to separate commemorative acts from broader politics and culture, especially when many of the commemorative acts themselves have been sanctioned by the state. As recent literature on Ireland and commemoration demonstrates, state actors cannot control all meanings of commemoration; they are merely one of a series of actors.

It was suggested that the Northern Ireland example demonstrates how ethical commemoration may be difficult to achieve not only in principle, but also in practice. There was agreement at the Northern Ireland Executive on how to approach the ‘Decade of Centenaries’ by setting the tone and providing leadership in putting an official acknowledgement process in place. However, it was not subsequently possible to develop a Northern Ireland Executive Programme led by two government departments as originally envisaged. Essentially, the Northern Irish approach could be characterised as a ‘bottom-up’ endeavour led by culture, heritage, arts and local authorities, civil society organisations and individuals, all of which have played a key role in devising and delivering programmes of talks, exhibitions, drama, site visits, dialogue and discussion on an inclusive basis in the context of a set of principles for remembering in public space. First World War commemorative projects that are UK-wide also had a considerable role in Northern Ireland’s centennial commemorations. There have been notable successes such as nationalist willingness to commemorate the First World War, the Somme commemorations in the Woodvale area of North Belfast, and nationalist efforts to include unionists in their reflections on the Easter Rising. However, other northern commemorations have proved more difficult for organisers. For instance, the significance of the Easter Rising to the broadly nationalist part of Northern Ireland proved more difficult to acknowledge at an official level. This was underlined by the withdrawal of the President of Ireland from a Belfast City Council commemorative dinner amid concerns about insufficient cross community support.

It was argued that Northern Ireland’s political and civic leaders can learn from their southern counterparts in marking historical milestones in a transparent, democratic and participatory manner. Northern speakers emphasised that they could do with greater assistance so that best practice and perspectives on the challenges ahead could be shared across the jurisdictions on how to commemorate the past. Though both the Easter and Somme commemorations were agreed to have ‘gone well’, although it remains unclear to what degree this was on occasion motivated by the desire to entrench existing loyalties, it was recognised that difficult commemorations

lie ahead, including commemorating the Civil War and partition. These events, to varying degrees, had enormous implications for the island as a whole. In addition, speakers agreed that it needed to be borne in mind that future commemorations will be shaped by broader contemporary dynamics such as the Brexit negotiations and their impact on British–Irish relations.

CONCLUSIONS

On the one hand, the conversation underscored the complexity of the potential meanings of ethical commemoration in its conceptual and practical senses, while highlighting the genuine need for broad ethical benchmarks; scepticism was, however, reserved. The first panel provided an overview of the debate on ethical commemoration, with the panellists recommending the three principles discussed above as examples of the way in which ethical precepts can be used in practice. In contrast, the second panel raised fundamental questions as to the viability of the ethical as commemorative talismans. Conceptually, the notion may be contingent upon, and inseparable from, wider political and cultural factors, and in practice in a state such as Northern Ireland in which the legacy of the centenaries is contested, paying attention to ethical commemoration is critical notwithstanding that the outworking of this will underline the difficulty of applying it.

Yet, these issues notwithstanding, some participants agreed that the commemorative projects in the Republic of Ireland are good examples of what is intended to be an ethical commemoration, with a multiplicity of narratives being given public space. It was suggested that the examples cited underscored an emerging spirit of humility, maturity and tolerance in the Republic which, if replicated north of the border, could facilitate a more inclusive and engaging commemorative process across the island. While it was agreed that ethical commemoration remains a contested concept, the discussants favoured greater collaboration between north and south, in the hope of exploiting the cooperative potential of what remains of the ‘Decade of Centenaries’. The issue of how to commemorate partition may prove to be its greatest challenge.

Mary E. Daly and Margaret O’Callaghan (eds.) *1916 in 1966: Commemorating the Easter Rising* (Royal Irish Academy, 2007)

Richard S. Grayson and Fearghal McGarry (eds.) *Remembering 1916: The Easter Rising, the Somme and the politics of memory in Ireland* (Cambridge, 2016)

PROGRAMME

Convenors: Margaret O’Callaghan, Queen’s University Belfast
Louise Mallinder, Ulster University

Panel One Explored what ethics can bring to processes of commemoration, focused in particular on exploring the importance and challenges of commemorating constitutional moments, and considered how commemoration can be inclusive of gender, political opinion and religion.

Panellists: Kristian Brown, Lecturer, School of Criminology, Politics & Social Policy, Ulster University
Catriona Crowe, Member Royal Irish Academy, National Archives of Ireland
Fearghal McGarry, Professor of Modern Irish History, Queen’s University Belfast

Chair: Louise Mallinder, Professor of Human Rights and International Law at the Transitional Justice Institute (TJI), Ulster University

Panel Two Reflected on the recent commemorations of the 1916 Rising and Proclamation and explored how ethical principles of commemoration can be applied to the upcoming commemorations of constitutional events.

Panellists: Deirdre Mac Bride, Cultural Diversity Programme Director, Community Relations Council
Frank Callanan SC, historian and writer
Martin Mansergh, Vice-Chair of the Government-appointed Expert Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations
Mary E. Daly, President Royal Irish Academy

Chair: Margaret O’Callaghan, School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy, and Politics, Queen’s University Belfast

ATTENDEES

Eileen Brennan	Dublin City University
Joan Campbell	Member of the Public
John Coakley MRIA	University College Dublin and Queen's University Belfast
Brendan Comyn	Chief State Solicitor's Office
Patricia Conlon	International Law Association – Irish branch
Michael Cronin	Boston College
Anne Dolan	Trinity College Dublin
Oran Doyle	Trinity College Dublin
Mark Duncan	RTÉ Century Ireland/Boston College
Catherine Ghent	Gallagher Shatter
Paul Gillespie	University College Dublin
Roland Gjoni	University College Dublin
M Godwin	
Alyson Gray	Century Ireland
John Green	Glasnevin Trust
Joel Hanisek	
Mary Harris	NUI Galway
Colin Harvey	Queen's University Belfast
Bridgit Hourican	
Lar Joye	National Museum of Ireland
Walt Kilroy	Dublin City University
Máire-Ide Maguire	Property Services Regulatory Authority
Patrick Maume	Dictionary of Irish Biography, RIA
Patrick McCourt	St Patrick's College, Maynooth
Conor Mulvagh	UCD School of History
Thomas Murray	UCD School of Social Policy
Donal O'Brolchain	Member of the Public
Noreen O'Carroll	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
Ciaran O'Neill	Trinity College Dublin
Mary O'Sullivan Long	Member of the public
Andy Pollak	Dublin City University
Andrew Power	Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology
Ben Shorten	RTÉ Century Ireland/Boston College
Colin Wrafter	Member of the public

