How should we commemorate the post-1916 period during the Decade of Centenaries on a North/South basis?

ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY
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Background

The post-1916 period in Ireland includes many divisive and contentious events, involving war, sectarianism, population movements and the partition of the island. From 2016 onwards, during the remainder of the Decade of Centenaries, the focus on these issues will intensify, and there are challenges regarding how we collectively approach and commemorate the anniversaries on a North/South basis.

This one-day event on 14 December 2015 asked how we should do so in a manner that brings greater understanding of the historical events and the consequences that followed.

The event was organised by the Royal Irish Academy, Community Relations Council and Heritage Lottery Fund, and brought together academics, civil society, policymakers, cultural institutions and civil servants currently involved in the Decade of Commemorations to discuss the challenges of commemoration and to suggest how to proceed on these contentious issues in the coming years.

The panel of speakers discussed the challenges of commemoration in Ireland and the lessons learned from Ireland 2016, the Irish state commemorations in 1966 and the implications for commemoration in Northern Ireland. In addition there were roundtables on ‘Commemoration of war and conflict’ and ‘Commemoration on a North/South basis’.

Introduction

Professor Mary E. Daly, President of the Royal Irish Academy and Professor of History at the School of History and Archives in University College Dublin, welcomed the attendees and speakers to Academy House. The Royal Irish Academy/Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann is Ireland’s leading body of experts in the sciences, humanities and social sciences. She explained that the aim of the initiative was to bring together a very carefully chosen group of people from both parts of the island to consider how to deal with the post-1916 commemorations during the Decade of Centenaries, particularly the issues that arise in terms of North/South relations. It was an initiative that came out of meetings between the Academy, the Community Relations Council and Heritage Lottery Fund in Northern Ireland. These organisations wanted to start the conversation among people who had deep knowledge on this topic and to expand it thereafter to a
more public domain. The workshop offered an excellent opportunity to begin work on these complicated issues and she encouraged the attendees to speak frankly and openly.

Ms Jacqueline Irwin, CEO of the Community Relations Council, welcomed everyone and thanked the Academy for hosting the event. She noted that the expertise and experience of the people in the room meant it was possible to open the conversation on the post-1916 period in the Decade of Centenaries in a very meaningful sense. She said the audience in the room made her aware of the commitment of those who had worked on these issues over many years. The Community Relations Council and Heritage Lottery Fund have been working together on the issues of commemoration for over a decade and have developed principles for remembering in public spaces. In the context of an ‘inclusive and accepting society’ these are:

— Start from the historical facts;
— Recognise the implications and consequences of what happened;
— Understand that the different perceptions and interpretations exist; and
— Show how events and activities can deepen understanding of the period.

The post-1916 commemorations will be a compelling but complex period, and she asked attendees and speakers to think about some of the issues that will be coming up over the coming years because the past is very much present when we discuss these issues.

The Challenges of Commemoration in Ireland for the post-1916 period

Mr Paul Mullan. Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund, Northern Ireland chaired the panel and introduced the four speakers.
Dr Éamon Phoenix, Principal Lecturer in History and Head of Lifelong Learning at Stranmillis University College, Queen’s University, Belfast, spoke about the implications of post-1916 Rising commemorations and gave an overview of the events that occurred in Northern Ireland 1916–1922.

Dr Phoenix said it will be important to ensure that any treatment of this contested period is based on the historical facts. At the beginning of the conversations on the Decade of Centenaries the focus was on 1916 (Rising and Somme) but now the focus has started to shift to post-1916. People have been thinking ahead on these matters but it is not always easy for everyone to accept a fact-based approach given the contestation of events, motives and interpretations, and a lack of common memory about what happened. Indeed, memory in Northern Ireland can at times seem mutually exclusive, operating along parallel lines. Yet, in order to grow understanding, it is important to engage in cross-community dialogue.

A central element of the Decade of Centenaries will be the politics of partition and the establishment of two Irish states by 1922, which must be critically examined. In addition, the intense political and sectarian violence of 1920–22 and its enduring legacy in specific localities (e.g. Lisburn, Banbridge, East Belfast) and communities means it still reverberates, posing a challenge to us all.

At the scholarly level there is now more information than ever before with the release of official papers and new research, while local history groups are getting more involved and looking to commemorate specific people and events. But current community relations need to be considered in marking events in terms of the peace process and historical accuracy.

Dr Maurice Manning, Chair of the Expert Advisory Group on Commissions, spoke about the role of the Expert Advisory Group thus far in the Decade of Centenaries.

The Expert Advisory Group was set up because of awareness of the dangers of politicisation due to the role that 1916 and the Civil War can play in the contemporary debate. There was a desire for a group that could consult and advise the government, and act as arbiter on issues of historical accuracy. However, although its advice has been sought, it has not needed to act as arbiter. It was very important for the group to ensure it retained its independence, because there are always dangers that such a group may be used as a mudguard
in such situations. However, this did not preclude the advice of the committee being sought both formally and informally on individual issues as they arose.

In the very beginning the Expert Group set out a series of principles that should make up the central elements, and design, of the Decade of Centenaries programme. The Expert Group was conscious to stress that commemoration was not just a lead-up to 2016 but was part of the entire Decade of Centenaries. It also wanted to stress inclusivity and commemorating accurately, proportionately and appropriately. These principles should also apply to the post-1916 period.

It needs to be stressed that the advice given by the committee was accepted in full and publicly acknowledged by government and public service as the template for the 2016 Programme.

The Expert Group carried out extensive public engagement in advance of the programme being designed. The issues involved were not without challenge and contention, but a programme was drawn up. The central importance of scholarship and learning emerged as a theme during the process, and hopefully it has laid strong foundations for examining this period. The role of the cultural institutions has also been very important and will leave a legacy. There will also be community and youth involvement, a focus on the Irish language, capital projects, state ceremonies and engagement with the Diaspora.

Commemorating 1916 will turn out to have been the least troublesome aspect, but the post-1916 period is very difficult and sensitive. The principles drawn up initially can assist and provide a framework of certainty and clarity regarding how to proceed.

**Professor Mary E. Daly**, President of the Royal Irish Academy and Professor of History at the School of History and Archives in University College Dublin, spoke about the commemoration of the Rising in 1916 and the lessons we might learn from that.

Professor Daly noted that commemoration tells us more about the period in which it happened than about the event being commemorated. In many ways examining Ireland 100 years ago tells us more about 2016. Commemoration must always be seen as history refracted through contemporary society and events. But any commemoration event can be destabilised or transformed by the present circumstances, and we must be aware of that. We also live in an age of social media and it can capture things in unexpected ways: we do not know what might happen despite all our well-intended plans.
Those who planned the programme in 1966 were not to know what would happen from 1967 to 1972, but with hindsight they might have chosen to do things differently. In the current context there is more awareness and self-reflection about commemoration, and an extensive literature on commemoration that can now be drawn on.

Regarding the 1966 commemorations it must be noted that there were other international commemorations going on. But the commemorations in Ireland were statist and partitionist in nature. It was very much a statement of the achievements of the country, such as stemming emigration and growing employment. The commemorations were focused on Ireland being a modern country with aspirations, and they were future facing. There was a clear separation from the past, and the commemorations were a celebration of where the country was by 1966 compared with 1916. But the 1966 commemorations excluded Northern nationalists, and left them feeling isolated and beleaguered. It also came at a time of emerging sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland. But the Dublin authorities were unaware of the impact of not being inclusive, because they believed the issues were very much in the past and were historical issues. Now we are much more aware of how history can rear its head and how sectarian issues do not stop at the border, but contentious issues remain and these need to be thought through, especially in light of the North/South dimensions.

Mr John Concannon, Director of Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme, gave an overview of the process of designing the programme and the final product.

The process was guided by the Expert Advisory Group and a desire to be inclusive of the multitude of perspectives, narratives and experiences. It was decided that the Proclamation would be central to the design of the programme given the values it espouses, and that the programme would reflect that. But it was not an easy task to put the programme together given the sensitivities, and extensive public engagement was crucially important to get that right. The Irish flag was another element that that public wanted emphasised given the symbolism of reconciliation and peace. In addition, people expressed the view that they wanted the signatories to be central to the programme. There were consultations in every county. Following the consultations the final strands of the programme were chosen: State Ceremonial, Historical Reflection, Cultural Expression, Community Participation, Global and Diaspora, A Living Language, and Youth and Imagination. The number of programme events is growing on a daily basis, and there is a real sense of ambition and cooperation right across government departments, cultural institutions, higher education institutions and communities, which augurs well for 2016 and beyond.
Audience Discussion
Following the Panel

A note of caution was sounded regarding anniversaries from ‘the Troubles’: the 50th anniversaries are likely to be marked in the coming years and it was stressed that these timelines and events in the Decade of Centenaries need to be thought through.

A big challenge is to depoliticise partition on the island of Ireland and its impact, and to see partition in a global sense and in the context of a growing maturity.

Deeply traumatic personal events will be marked during the Decade of Centenaries, and we need to be aware of the hurt, pain and divisions that will emerge and that it will be an uncomfortable experience. But we need to give that history a voice also, as has been done so far through the Community Strand in the Irish Government’s Ireland 2016 Centenary programme and through local authorities. But this may be more difficult in Northern Ireland. However, the work of cultural institutions, libraries, museums, universities, schools and civil society has proved to be a very effective mechanism for engagement, and encouraging discussion and understanding, thus far.

Community twinning North and South could be desirable to show that the traumas and tragedies of the centenary period were not unique to specific communities or areas, but were shared experiences.

The arts and culture have a very important role to play in sharing stories and experiences in a very constructive and productive way whereby people can choose how to engage and interpret, rather than talking at people in a very directional way.

The evaluative element of commemoration is crucial to ensure understanding, and we need to make sure this happens. There is a deep void North and South regarding how we understand each other’s experiences of what has happened in the past, but the upcoming commemorations can be very helpful in starting to address those misunderstandings and gaps in knowledge.
Roundtable Discussions:
Commemoration of War and Conflict

— Are there issues regarding how commemoration reverberates in the present in Northern Ireland and Ireland?
— Are we too focused on militaristic events and should we seek to broaden the context? How should we do this ethically?
— What are the challenges you see emerging in the coming years? What are the implications North and South?

What has been notable about the commemorations relating to 1916 is the sheer volume of material being generated and discussed, in both jurisdictions. All the groundwork carried out at civil society level has been hugely helpful to ensure the issues relating to 1916 are being discussed openly now. But this was not the case in 2013, and there was much worry and anxiety about it at that time among policymakers. However, the concerns now at official level are operational issues as civil servants try to keep up with the sheer volume of work.

The reverberations of commemoration very much mirror the fault lines in Northern Ireland. What remains to be seen during the Decade of Centenaries is to what degree there will be an attempt to bridge these narratives or let them run in parallel lines. There is a sense that the middle classes in Northern Ireland have not engaged. There is no government programme in Northern Ireland equivalent to the level of state action in Ireland's programme. The responsibility for making sense of the decade within the context of a set of principles has been met by the heritage and cultural agencies (with government funding) and by civil society (again with some government funding). The politics of identity also has a class dimension, but we over-invest in its potential for destabilisation. Contemporary social, economic and political issues are more of a concern for policymakers.

The roundtable discussions suggested there should be more of a focus on the impact on civilians and families, socially, emotionally and economically, during the time period being commemorated. It was noted that women-centred narratives were largely untold stories, but are gaining prominence. There are also social, political and intergenerational impacts that can be drawn from World War I in
particular. The reverberations of the Somme as a three-month battle can also be linked to how a sense of identity, and indeed of loss, is expressed in Northern Ireland. It has to be approached sensitively in the light of these reverberations so that it is not seen as being appropriated or ‘greened’. Although the theme of inclusiveness for 2016 has had a positive impact, and neutral spaces where different traditions can explore and discuss the issues have been very important, it must also be noted that not everyone wants to share their history or memory, e.g. the Somme.

There can be an overemphasis on militaristic and statist events in the context of commemorations, but military events can also be seen in a wider context of social and political change in Ireland. An example given was the National Museum of Ireland’s 1916 exhibition, which provides a social history, giving the age (six months to 84 years) and location (Western Front, Egypt, etc.) of all those who died in the period between the Rising and the executions.

But an ethic of non-violence is also important to examine, because alternatives to violence were being explored during the time period being commemorated but are largely underemphasised. Nationalist and unionist perspectives on partition and the founding of both Stormont and Dáil Éireann also need to be examined. The sheer quantity of social forces propelling Ireland and Europe, irrespective of World War I, are relevant components of the decade. These include issues such as universal suffrage and the implications of young soldiers dying at the front who did not enjoy full political rights. These sorts of concerns may broaden the focus from the purely military. Similarly an international perspective (such as Finland’s civil war) may put Ireland’s issues in context.

Given their own recent experience of commemoration, the discussants reflected in depth on the challenges of commemoration in a general sense and made suggestions on how best to commemorate in Ireland. It was noted that commemoration should be conducted as acknowledgment rather than celebration, and there is a major opportunity for educationalists and historians to counter any oversimplification of history. But with all commemorations it is important to get the balance right between the past and the future, while ensuring historical accuracy. The main responsibility is to ensure that you do not further deepen divides and you take responsibility to identify opportunities to reduce divides. While you need to make sure you are not too prescriptive, a structured approach to commemoration has the potential to recognise the implications, the possibilities and the opportunities.

Specific to Ireland and Northern Ireland, there is a need to create and increase safe space in which people can engage with a range of perspectives and engage in
mature discussion. In Northern Ireland that needs to include actually hearing what people are saying, and conducting the discussions in a way that leaves people with their dignity intact. Recent experiences also suggest that we need to disengage from what was called ‘a scenic route around the dead’ or through ‘the politics of dead bodies’. A local focus can be traumatic and painful, but it resonates and so there are more opportunities to consider shared experiences such as the survivors of World War I and revolution in Ireland.

In terms of the challenges emerging in the coming years, the coincidence of the 50th anniversaries of ‘the Troubles’ could be dangerous if we are not aware of that context. There is a risk of inherited validation of the use of violence: if it was valid in the early 20th century then, it can be argued, it was equally so in ‘the Troubles’. The anniversary time period covers the start of ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland and the high levels of violence, death and injuries in the early 1970s and the political and administrative changes. These overlapping commemorations require analysis to include what happened in unionist and nationalist communities’ mentalities after partition.

The North/South challenge is creating a greater awareness in both places about what these issues mean for each other. This requires a change in the level of interest about the other place. But thankfully we are in a very different place to the 1966 commemorations: Ministers now engage on a North/South and East/West basis, civil servants have good working relationships, and cultural institutions have developed relationships whereby they regularly phone one another regarding collections and loans etc. Those structures and relationships are now solid and can withstand shocks and difficulties.

The forthcoming 1918–1923 commemoration period presents challenges, but these are primarily to ensure that opportunities are not missed. At present there are no major plans for the post-2016 period and it was recommended that the framework that was used to commemorate 1916 be used, and that it guide policymakers in the next phases.

Some suggested principles for commemoration in Ireland and Northern Ireland agreed by the attendees were:

—Firstly do no harm;
—Accept diversity of experiences;
—Allow opting in, rather than diluting initiatives or shoehorning people into situations;
— Recognise that steps can be small but significant; they do not need to be big, expensive, high-octane events;
— Actively use commemoration to identify opportunities to increase understanding and engagement; and
— Give voice to those who do not traditionally have it and look at social issues, e.g. suffrage, class issues, labour and women’s rights.

Roundtable Discussions: Commemoration on a North/South basis

— Is it possible to commemorate on a North/South basis? Has it happened so far? Is it desirable?
— Under what circumstances do joint commemorations work? What recommendations do you have regarding North/South commemoration?
— Specifically how should we commemorate: the War of Independence, Civil War, partition and violence in Northern Ireland?

The approach thus far has been for the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland to work on separate Decade of Centenaries programmes, but including one another where it was deemed symbolically appropriate. It was felt that going beyond that level of co-ordination was, and is, difficult because there is insufficient knowledge and information about each jurisdiction in the other. In addition it can be inappropriate to hold ‘joint’ commemorations of some specific events where these are held deeply in one or other community, with which the other would not be comfortable. However, this does not apply to talks/lectures about events when one is trying to broaden understanding by inviting a different perspective to be provided.

A number of carefully chosen North/South events could continue to be used to symbolically mark occasions in the post-1916 period. But joint commemoration should not be the aim, it would be better to start now with building awareness through a series of concentric circles. Great leadership by the President and the
Queen has been a feature of successful joint commemorations. Otherwise it is important to operate at the level at which people are comfortable, and that is generally the local level. However, when an event cannot be commemorated together it is important that it happens with respect.

Commemoration of World War I ran smoothly, but it was not always an easy subject matter and it took a couple of decades to transform the situation. A way to deal with all difficult issues post-1916 could be to organise conferences and civil society initiatives to prepare the ground. Keeping conversations going will be important, on the island in particular. There is such a wealth of information at the local level with history groups, and to provide a structure for the rest of the Decade of Centenaries the local authority and local council structures for 2016 could be left in place to continue to deliver locally.

Partition crystallises the difficulties of the various relationships. There is a North/South and East/West dimension in acknowledging partition and its impact over the past 100 years leading to complete separation of experience on the island. But partition should also be seen in the wider international context of partition in this period.

Commemoration of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and partition generally should be academic and cultural in focus, rather than state ceremonial. Devolved commemoration will happen anyway. A framework will be required and a specific tone will need to be adopted. It will be crucial to acknowledge how far we have come, rather than get bogged down in the past. The experience of Ireland 2016 should be applied to the post-1916 period, especially the role of promoting inclusivity. Also, the principles and tools – both from Ireland 2016 and developed by civil society in Northern Ireland – that have been most effective should be adopted. There is no one-size-fits-all for commemoration, however.

Partition could be commemorated by both states. We need to acknowledge that civil society did not collapse during partition. We should also look to focus on human stories and the damage done psychologically. The most sensitive and difficult issue is obviously the relationship of partition to violence. It will be worth thinking about the events that occurred before and after partition in the context of the human toll and consequences of violence, and in terms of how they are connected to each other.

The need to create comfortable and neutral spaces in which unionist, nationalist and other perspectives can be discussed, and where there can be an acceptance of the validity of the other person’s point of view, was underlined. One practical example was a series of events at which people were invited to walk through
history in each other’s shoes using an open discussion format with dim lighting. This approach has engaged and increased participants’ confidence by creating a local and comfortable space.

There needs to be a conscious effort to broaden the audience and the perspectives, to use multifaceted elements of cultural, locality and academia, and to explore the contexts (generously and broadly) so that people can understand more deeply the position of the other as individuals and jurisdictions. There was an illuminating discussion about how this becomes difficult when we look at these matters as collective political processes rather than individual narratives. We can feel an emotional attachment or loyalty to ‘our own’ history, which can operate as an anchor in the way we see ourselves. Conversely, it may be possible or desirable to loosen the anchors so that we can float to our chosen destination. In order to do so, we have to be confident in our identity. This again underlines the importance of generosity in articulating contexts, being sensitive and creating more neutral and comfortable spaces for discussion. There has to be confidence in one’s own identity.

How we mark and/or commemorate the post-1916 events of the War of Independence, Civil War, partition and violence in Northern Ireland will be complicated and difficult. Some specifically contentious issues were highlighted:

— The British Government has a role in explaining partition;
— Exploring alternative accounts of the War of Independence requires that some of the Northern Ireland files be made available in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland; and
— Each atrocity and event could end up being commemorated regarding the War of Independence. This would be very divisive in the South in particular and would be difficult internally.

In terms of North/South co-operation, aspects that could be examined include the level of separation and indeed hostility that existed before partition (i.e. sport, attitudes of clergy to Northern ministries, etc.) and the degree to which the British Government viewed partition as a unionist project. The international dimension of ‘nationalism’ and state formation would also be revealing if explored in the context of the whole island.
There was a general view that in considering the North/South dimension, we are really at the stage of ‘scratching the surface’ in terms of information and how we make such divisive events meaningful. In tracing a framework, it may be appropriate to think of the future and how this endeavour could be influenced by the future we want, and in a sense to work back from there. But in many ways it is hard to see how it will be planned so far in advance, given there are so many other pressing political issues that may impact, regarding constitutional matters and borders in Europe, the UK and Ireland. In addition certain events are commemorated every year in Northern Ireland and the implications of this will need to be explored. They are of particular difficulty for the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and the yearly occurrences will need to be mapped onto an overall calendar of any final programme to avoid clashes.

Some general suggestions for commemoration of the post-1916 period of the Decade of Centenaries were:

—Keep dialogue open;
—Consult a wide range of people;
—Frame the Decade of Centenaries as a whole, and include the wider context;
—Keep the 2016 networks; and
—Ensure that East/West relationships continue to create space for meaningful engagement regarding our history.
Concluding Remarks

Ms Jacqueline Irwin, CEO of the Community Relations Council, thanked the speakers and attendees and said it was a privilege to hear the conversations, and quality of the discussions, at the tables.

In summing up she identified some common positions that had emerged throughout the day:

— There is a common history, but not a common memory;
— Commemoration is refracted through our contemporary circumstances, a lens that can be helpful and/or unhelpful;
— Commemoration can enrich the historic record; and
— Commemoration does not just examine history; it can also make history.

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