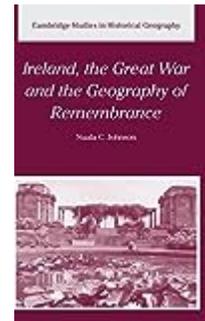




Nuala C. Johnson. *Ireland, the Great War and the Geography of Remembrance.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. viii + 192 pp. £45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-82616-7.



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Ireland and the Great War

Nuala Johnson's book unites two of the hottest current topics in Irish studies and cultural studies: Ireland's involvement in the 1914-18 war, and the wider topics of memory and commemoration. Ireland and the Great War has been the subject of popular and scholarly books, and numerous television and radio programs. The national memorial on the outskirts of Dublin has been repaired, and in 1998 the Irish President, Mary McAleese, and Queen Elizabeth II unveiled a memorial in Messines (Belgium) to Irish troops who died in the war. The memorial was constructed by young people drawn from both parts of Ireland. This renewed interest is partly a reflection of the 1998 Belfast Agreement and the search for common ground between different traditions.

Johnson approaches the topic from the perspective of a historical geographer and the methodologies drawn from cultural studies, especially the work of Roland Barthes. After a theoretical chapter titled, "Geography, Landscape and Memory," she discusses recruitment. The major strength of this chapter lies in her analysis of the images in recruitment posters, which are reproduced in the chapter; however her discussion of recruitment is his-

torically weak. Readers who are not well versed in Irish history will not realize that war-time recruitment became a very contentious matter, or that the threat of conscription in 1918 brought mass protests throughout nationalist Ireland and the withdrawal of all nationalist MPs from Westminster. Conscription was a key event in radicalizing Irish nationalism and ensuring the triumph of Sinn Fein, but she shows no awareness of this.

Her discussion of the peace day celebrations in the summer of 1919 and of the memorials to those who died in the 1914-18 war suffers from a similar lack of awareness of the wider historical context. For example, Merrion Square, the site originally proposed for the national memorial, was within yards of the Leinster Lawn cenotaph erected to the memory of Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins, two leaders of the Irish war of independence. Her claim that "in Cork, then, the vocabulary of the Great War existed comfortably alongside the independence movement" (p. 99) is extremely difficult to reconcile with well-documented accounts of street fights in Cork between veterans of the 1914-18 war and Sinn Fein during that time, or the fact that veterans of the 1914-18

war were often the targets of attacks and even assassination attempts. Given the highly charged nature of Irish political life in the aftermath of the 1914-18, it is actually surprising to read of the number of memorials to the Great War erected in these years. If nothing else they indicate the strong commitment of Irish veterans and their families to remembering the event at a time when this would have been an unpopular, even dangerous position to adopt.

Johnson has uncovered some interesting material and she should be congratulated for this; but, unfortunately, her exposition of its significance is fundamentally weak-

ened by her limited knowledge of Irish history. Johnson appears to have confined her reading to works that deal directly with the Great War, as if that event could be understood without taking account of the wider of Irish history. The wider historiography of Ireland 1914-21 is too voluminous to list here, but she would have avoided major pitfalls if she had at least read David Fitzpatrick's classic, *Politics and Irish Life, 1913-21* (1977) and Peter Hart's *The I.R.A and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork 1916-1923* (1998). The complex and contested issues associated with the Great War are only intelligible when we take account of how the war interacted with Irish nationalism and Irish unionism.

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