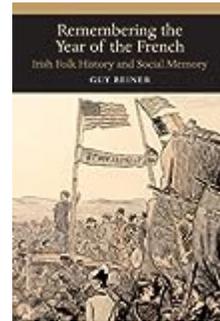




Guy Beiner. *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007. xix + 466 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-21820-1; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-21824-9.



Reviewed by Ruan O'Donnell

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Rebellion and Remembrance

The considerable achievement of *Remembering the Year of the French* is immediately evident from a first cursory glance at the volume. The wealth of information produced, thematic originality, and level of analysis separates this book from all but a few of those forming part of the avalanche stimulated by the 1998 bicentennial. Guy Beiner's long-term investment in the intricacies of his chosen subject have equipped him with the insight of a true expert in a specialist field. The comprehensive endnotes and listings of consulted sources testify to a major organizational endeavor by the author, which, commendably, he has brought to a highly successful fruition.

In Ireland the term "Year of the French" has long evoked the 1798 rebellion when the United Irishmen rose in arms in a failed attempt to bring a democratic republic into being against the wishes of the British Empire. For many, the belated and comparatively small French expedition to the western coast in August 1798 marked the most dramatic phase of a much wider rebellion that was then either contained or waning in most of Ireland. The campaign included numerous features that ensured the

longevity of its folk memory: military aid from the Continent, mobilization of local rebels to assist the French veterans, joint victory over the garrison forces, a long march to the interior, and a brutal counterattack in which massacre and martyrdom scarred the population.

The fact that the Irish Rebellion failed where pro-democratic revolutions in America and France succeeded ensured that the events of 1798 were viewed through the dismal prism of defeat. A corollary was that formal discussions of one of the most concerted and violent uprisings in Western Europe occurred against the backdrop of threatened and actual revisionism. While no serious armed attempt was mounted after 1803 and before 1848, the latent and occasionally visible threat of severe unrest was near constant. Military containment in 1798 ensured that those who had fallen in the cause of republicanism were officially unvindicated in the royalist United Kingdom, which Ireland joined by controversial means in 1801. The country remained a heavily garrisoned society throughout the nineteenth century, and many traditional modes of homage, not least the erection of stat-

ues and memorials to rebel heroes, were impossible. If, as Beiner argues, the hiatus in the production of celebratory written accounts was not as long as some have averred, the literary heritage of the 1810s and 1820s was heavily skewed toward the minority yet victorious pro-government community. Under the surface, however, a vigorous oral and folk culture positively thrived.

In a structurally complex but entirely logical manner, Beiner interweaves the disparate strands of historical occurrences and reactions in 1798, alongside analysis of the emergent legacies and viewpoints over time. Account is taken of both ephemeral and lasting manifestations of popular interest: songs, folk beliefs, and monuments. Mercifully free of pretentious jargon, the vast purview of the author is truly impressive. Beiner has seemingly taken account of virtually every plaque, memorial, marked grave, and identified location of public note connected to the rebellion period in the West of Ireland. Crucially, he has unearthed a great deal of information pertaining to the gestation and execution of particular commemorative projects, giving him a firm grounding that serves him well in teasing out the later utilization and recorded attitudes toward the same sites.

His acumen has enabled him to demonstrate how memorials dedicated in 1898-99 and venerated with varying degrees of enthusiasm and dedication ever since passed from the custody of radical republicans to those who held power in the southern jurisdiction in the mid-1920s. The process of isolating potentially subversive elements from the platforms of extant memorials had a secondary effect of pushing such persons toward secondary and unmarked locations of local historical significance. While judging the real significance of such dislocation is very difficult to assess, Beiner skillfully interprets the complicated interplay of memory, formal history, folklore, opportunism, and evolving contexts.

The book also comprises the most complete account to date of the nature and development of the oral history of the 1798 rebellion. The author has surveyed near contemporaneous accounts, official attempts to record folk stories, proto-histories, and reflective texts. Writers and subjects are assessed and every stage of the progression of such information is charted through the generations and the printed media. In this respect, Beiner's wider reading and theoretical grasp are effectively applied to the Irish experience.

Inevitably for any such ambitious and wide ranging narrative, there are omissions and debatable conclusions. It is not a criticism to observe that more is warranted on the not-so-hidden hand of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in the "Mediations of Remembrance" section. The IRB readily merged a presumably genuine interest in commemorating the "Fenian dead" along with more pragmatic agendas of grouping cadres, talent spotting for recruits, generating propaganda, and raising large sums of money in the international networks. The harvesting, stimulation, and manipulation of folk memory took many forms for the influential IRB elite. This sub-theme deserves a discrete in-depth analysis, and there is no doubt but that the rich milieu fleshed out by Beiner in *Remembering the Year of the French* will greatly inform any such project.

A major study of the political, social, and military history of the rebellion of 1798 in Connaught is also badly needed and perfectly viable given the voluminous archives in Ireland, France, and Britain. In fact, the historiographical neglect of the origins, course, and consequences of the Western campaign is all the more glaring in the light of Beiner's pioneering work. This excellent book will endure and comprises a very rare instance when the close examination of folkloric and commemorative dimensions of a subject precedes a standard account of the actual events in focus.

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