



Ireland in the Decade of the Great War, 1912 – 1923: Towards Commemoration. Monaco: Centre for War Studies, Trinity College Dublin; Princess Grace Irish Library, Monaco, 20.10.2011-22.10.2011.

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Ireland in the Decade of the Great War, 1912 – 1923: Towards Commemoration

This two-day conference was staged under the auspices of the Centre for War Studies at Trinity College Dublin and the Princess Grace Irish Library in Monaco. It was funded by a generous benefaction received through the Trinity Foundation and organised and co-convened by John Horne and Edward Madigan.

Although many of those who attended the event are academic historians, it departed from the traditional conventions of an academic conference in a number of key ways. To begin with, the Monegasque setting provided a neutral forum, relatively remote from Ireland, in which views could be exchanged in an open, uninhibited fashion. In addition, the very diverse disciplinary, methodological and national backgrounds of the scholars in attendance meant that the history and legacy of the period were discussed in a genuinely fresh and insightful manner. Yet perhaps the most novel feature of the conference was the participation of twelve non-academic delegates who have a personal or professional interest in the Irish experience and memory of the Great War and who will be actively involved in the forthcoming centenary commemorations. Each of these commentators regularly communicate with the public via journalism, popular history, civic commemoration, museum exhibitions, and the broadcast media. Their contributions consistently informed and enhanced the historiographical debate on the relationship between history, memory and commemoration, and also forced some of the historians present to consider the real relevance and impact of their research.

The format of each session was designed to maximise debate, and each of the speakers was asked in advance to link their specific area of expertise to the process of commemoration. Much of the discussion during the various sessions thus focused on the tense, occasionally antagonistic relationship between academic history and popular commemoration. There seemed to be a general consensus from the outset that while the two are intimately linked, they are emphatically not the same thing. The objectives of the historian are usually quite different to those of the commemorator and, in both cases, the motives of those doing the remembering can sometimes be quite murky. Remembrance of the past in the public sphere tends to be highly politicised. This is very evidently the case with Ireland in the decade of the Great War, but it also pertains to a whole range of different national contexts and communities. Understandably, moreover, the sort of history that informs commemoration tends to be simplified, if not simplistic. And while, in Ireland and elsewhere, there is often a stated desire for a pluralistic, inclusive version of the history of the Great War, in reality, historical actors tend to be pushed into categories that deny their individual complexity. The frequent overlap between various communities and interest groups is thus often overlooked and the men and women of the period are assumed to be Unionist, Nationalist or Republican, Moderate or Extreme, British Army or IRA, and so forth.

The manifestly positive political desire to promote a unified, inclusive historical narrative can also lead to the

promotion of a version of history in which there are no villains and our ancestors are portrayed as far less antagonistic than they were in reality. Commemorators, especially politicians and those who work for government agencies, are often concerned with the need to avoid offending particular political, ethnic and social sensitivities. There is thus a tendency to avoid judging historical actors and to gloss over their motives. From an academic perspective, the danger inherent in such an approach is that value-free history is just not history.

All of these issues mean that scholarly historians, either consciously or unconsciously, often set themselves against public history and commemoration. A number of delegates spoke eloquently about the fundamental differences between the roles of the historian and the commemorator. While the historian should be primarily concerned with detachment, nuance, complexity and accuracy, the commemorator almost necessarily has to compromise on these things. One delegate warned the historians present that unless they had a very clear idea of what they hoped to bring to the process of commemoration, they risked hindering and confusing public knowledge of the past rather than enhancing it. In a particularly insightful contribution to the debate, another scholar admitted that he did not know if historians had anything to add to commemoration, particularly in the case of violent and traumatic historical episodes. Commemoration, he argued, tends to be at its most powerful when analysis – the business of the historian – is kept to a minimum and the emphasis is placed on gestures. This approach to remembrance has a long tradition in continental Europe, but the peace process has brought about a climate in Ireland in which the grand gesture has allowed political representatives to circumvent some of the messiness of history in the name of progress and conciliation. The wreath-laying ceremonies at the Garden of Remembrance and the national war memorial during Queen Elizabeth II's visit to Ireland in May 2011 provide recent examples of commemorative occasions at which nuanced historical commentary would arguably have been inappropriate.

Given the apparent gulf between history as an academic discipline on the one hand, and public history and commemoration on the other, can the scholarly historian play a constructive role in the forthcoming centenary commemorations? The two round-table sessions that concluded the conference provided some interesting responses to this conundrum. Some of the academic participants shared quite personal experiences and insights, and, in the process, reminded us that historians are mem-

bers of the public themselves. They are thus just as entitled as political and civic representatives to contribute to the public discourse on history over the course of the decade of centenaries. Several of the round table participants suggested, however, that if historians want to engage with the public in a meaningful fashion, they should bear a number of things in mind.

To begin with, there is already a great deal of interest in Ireland in the decade of the Great War, and a whole host of individuals and groups claim some sort of social, political or cultural stake in the commemoration of this transformative period. Academic historians should therefore accept that the forthcoming series of centenary commemorations will proceed with or without them. If they wish to inform people about the past, moreover, they should try to do so in a constructive, non-didactic fashion. The public, as at least one delegate reminded us, can handle a certain amount of messiness and ambiguity, and will respond well to historical complexity and nuance as long as they are couched in the right terms. The choice of language, tone and expression when communicating with the general public is therefore highly important. Finally – and perhaps understandably, given the diverse range of nationalities present – several commentators emphasised the need for both historians and members of the general public to understand events in Ireland during the decade of the Great War as part of a wider European and global experience. Such a transnationalist view should not either trivialise or detract from distinctive Irish dynamics and phenomena; on the contrary it should help us to understand just how significant they were. From the public perspective, references to violence and conflict in other parts of Europe can provide a potentially healthy reminder that Ireland was not the only country in which terrible things happened between 1912 and 1923.

The challenges of centenary commemoration was the title of the second round-table debate, but this theme was actually broached in the opening session and re-emerged repeatedly over the course of the two days. Given the violent, internecine and highly ideological nature of events in Ireland a century ago, the forthcoming decade of centenaries is indeed fraught with challenges, for both academic historians and more popular commentators. No easy answers were arrived at in Monaco, but the unusual combination of scholar and commemorator allowed for a remarkably open and constructive exchange of ideas and laid the ground for continued communication over the course of the coming decade.

Conference Overview:

Opening Remarks: John Horne / Edward Madigan
(both Trinity College Dublin)

Session 1: Arming Ireland, Arming Europe

Chair: David Fitzpatrick (Trinity College Dublin)

William Mulligan (University College Dublin): Varieties of violence in Europe 1911-1914

Timothy Bowman (University of Kent): Guns and gunrunning: arming the UVF and Irish Volunteers 1910-1914

Session 2: Volunteering

Chair: Richard Grayson (Goldsmiths College, University of London)

Catriona Pennell (University of Exeter): More than a curious footnote: Irish Responses to Britain's Call for Volunteers, 1914-1916

Stuart Ward (University of Copenhagen): The threshold of nationhood: Irish and Australian recruitment narratives at the outbreak of war

Session 3: Battlefronts

Chair: Adrian Gregory (Pembroke College, Oxford)

Philip Orr (Independent Scholar): Sacred Grounds: Great War Battlefields and Irish Memory

Eunan O'Halpin (Trinity College Dublin): The Missing Dead of Ireland, 1919-1921

Session 4: Claiming Sovereignty

Chair: Eunan O'Halpin (Trinity College Dublin)

David Fitzpatrick (Trinity College Dublin): Nationalism and Unionism 1912-22

Fearghal McGarry (Queen's University, Belfast) The Easter Rising and Irish Republicanism

Session 5: Divisions

Chair: Edward Madigan (Trinity College Dublin)

Anne Dolan (Trinity College Dublin): Divisions and Divisions and Divisions

John Horne (Trinity College Dublin): The War after the War, 1917 - 1923

Session 6: Memories

Chair: Nicholas Allen (National University of Ireland, Galway)

Jay Winter (Yale University): Language and Remembrance in the period of the Great War: Britain, France, Ireland

Keith Jeffery (QUB): The Great War, Memory and Commemoration in Ireland

Round Table (i): History versus Commemoration

Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau (École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales)

Annette Becker (Paris X, Nanterre)

Pauric Dempsey (Royal Irish Academy)

Fintan O'Toole (Irish Times)

Heather Jones (London School of Economics)

Chair: Pierre Joannon (Consul Général d'Irlande)

Round Table (ii): The Challenges of Centenary Commemoration

Ian Adamson (Somme Heritage Centre, Ulster Unionist Party)

Tom Burke (Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association)

Paul Clark (Ulster Television)

Tom Hartley (Sinn Féin)

Lar Joye (National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks)

Chair: Edward Madigan (Trinity College Dublin)

Closing Remarks: John Horne

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