

Recruiting the dead

Oration by **Helen O'Carroll**, Curator, Kerry County Museum at Tralee Town Council Commemoration Ceremony in Páirc An Phiarsaigh, Tralee, 20 April 2014

Commemorations make me nervous, which is rather inconvenient given that we have just started a decade of them – a decade that will take us on a journey through key historical moments that have shaped the country. I think I'm nervous because commemorations are not what they seem – they seem to be all about events in the past, but actually they are as much about the present as they are about the past. But that part of the commemorative process, the present, isn't openly talked about, even though current circumstances and contemporary concerns drive that process. That makes me nervous because what purports to be all about the past and engagement with our history is really contemporary politics grafted onto the past. And that isn't history at all.

And what also makes me uneasy is the gap between what we say we're doing and what we're actually doing when we commemorate. We use the conventional wisdom that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it as a justification for commemoration. We tell ourselves that we have a duty to the dead to remember them and that this is what commemoration is all about. But that's what we say we're doing – what we're really doing is recruiting the dead to serve our current concerns and purposes, in the here and now. We're not really remembering them at all because we're too busy marching them up and down to the beat of a drum that is sounded in the present.

Truncating the Famine

Consider the two big commemorative events that took place in the 1990s – the 150th anniversary of the Famine and the 200th anniversary of the 1798

Rebellion. The Irish government decided that the official commemoration of the Famine would last from 1995 to 1997. So as far as the Irish government was concerned the Famine ended in 1847. This was a bizarre echo of the British government's decision in 1847 to declare the Famine over even though it actually lasted for at least another three years as Irish people continued to die from hunger and famine-related diseases. In 1847 the British government decision was motivated by the desire to save money by scaling back relief efforts. In 1997 the Irish government wanted the Famine off the stage to make way for the next commemoration. So the decision to truncate the span of the actual Famine was a political decision taken in the present for contemporary considerations. This is politics, not history, and it is certainly not a remembrance of the dead.

Sanitising 1798

The next commemoration gives us an even more graphic example of this in action. This, the bicentenary of 1798, one of the bloodiest and most divisive episodes of Irish history, coincided with the final stages of the peace process in the mid-1990s, culminating in the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. For the official commemorations the major concern was to find a way of marking the rebellion without emphasising sectarianism and violence, features all still too present in Northern Ireland in 1998. This was done by emphasising the role of the United Irishmen – the union between Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter, all working together to envisage a new united and peaceful Ireland. So the United Irishmen were pressed

into service once more, this time to play their part in the peace process of the 1990s. The fact that a key feature of the 1798 Rebellion was Catholic and Protestant beating, piking and burning each other to death, was downplayed and where possible utterly ignored. This is politics and bad history and it is not a remembrance of the dead.

But history is all about interpretation isn't it? Yes it is but that's only half the story – good history is an interpretation of the past based on all of the available evidence. It doesn't rely on political calculation or

berate the established political class as sell-outs who betrayed the country by their cowardice, inhumanity and rapine. This is all contemporary politics, it is not history and it is not a remembrance of the dead.

What we commemorate, who we commemorate, when, where, why – these are all decisions taken by us in the present. The events chosen by us are dictated by our requirements in the here and now, not by the innate importance of the historical events themselves. Hang on a second, you might say, the Easter Rising is different because it is unquestionably the most

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emotional identification with a particular community, group or tribe. It is a rigorous process that involves close examination and analysis of the sources, all of them, not just the select few that fit a preconceived notion or that can be used to support a specific narrative that has been written by the present. In 1998 unpalatable evidence from the past was ignored in the hope that it could be banished, both from 1998 and from 1798. This is neither good history nor a true remembrance of the dead.

Pressing the dead into service

With this in mind maybe you can understand my nervousness because I don't think it will be any different in the decade of commemorations that lies ahead. Already we can see how the events of that decade are being pressed into service to reflect present political agendas and contemporary viewpoints. From a historical point of view the possibility of the presence of a member of the British royal family at some 1916 commemorative event has an absurdity to it that renders it a meaningless gesture. From the perspective of current Anglo-Irish relations it is highly significant. The dawn of a new Ireland with the Rising will be reflected in the portrayal of Ireland in 2016 rising phoenix-like from the ashes of economic recession and banking collapse, being led into the promised land by today's generation of visionary leaders. On the left you'll have the ideals in the Proclamation being used to

transformative event in Irish history, and had the most profound effect on the Irish people. Therefore it naturally selects itself as the most important event to be commemorated. Yes but actually there were events that were equally as transformative and with effects just as significant, if not even more so. Consider the succession of Land Acts from 1870 onwards that completely revolutionised the nature of land-ownership in Ireland – a huge shift in a country that was overwhelmingly rural. Ireland went from being a country of tenants to a country of landowners in almost a generation, and don't tell me that didn't have an effect that has continued to this day. Or consider the Old Age Pension Act of 1908 and the changes this brought to family life in Ireland. What about the Irish Co-operative Movement – established in the late 19th century and still having a profound effect on Irish life today.

What we are doing when we commemorate

But we don't commemorate these with big public events, even though they directly affected Irish people and had a profound effect on how they lived their daily lives in the early 20th century. The reason why is again fundamentally rooted in the present rather than the past. We commemorate the Easter Rising not just because we see it as the foundation stone of our state, but because our state is still young – so young, in fact, that for many people in Ireland the founding parents of our state were their actual parents. As a young state it

needs regular affirmation and validation in the form of events like this to grow and flourish. An event such as this by a public body like Tralee Town Council is a manifestation of the state in action. And today serves as an opportunity for TTC to demonstrate its existence before it is subsumed into a larger organisation.

On an even deeper level public commemorative events like this are all about creating collective solidarity and unity in the here and now. It is a

we are doing when we commemorate. It is vital that we take the time and trouble to understand how past and present co-exist in any commemorative event and how they relate to each other.

Commemoration isn't history, but at its best it provides the inspiration for people to engage actively with their history and motivates them to find out more, which is perhaps a truer remembrance of the dead. What is really encouraging is the number of people

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communal, tribal activity, an opportunity for the community to come together in a common purpose, creating emotional identification with the group. That in itself is not a bad thing, indeed it can be an extremely positive thing for society. However, the sociologists will tell you that in the creation of collective solidarity there is always an in-group and an out-group, and that is perhaps reflected today by the fact that we are not the only group in this town staging a commemorative event. This is where I start to get nervous again; because inevitably one group asserts that their interpretation of the past is of greater value than the other in the commemorative process. If that interpretation is based on political calculation and emotional identification with a particular group we end up with the dead we claim to be remembering being marched back and forth between both sides in the service of politics and bad history.

The decade ahead

We need to find a way to get to the end of this decade without finishing up with bland, meaningless, bad history, or without ripping each other apart in the attempt to make one interpretation of the past triumph over the other. And that is what will happen over the next decade unless we acknowledge the existence of the present in commemoration and critically examine what

who have embarked on the quest to connect their personal, family story with the events of the period, a research journey made easier by the amount of information that is now available on-line. I am hopeful as well that this ready availability of information will make it harder for vested interests to spin the past into a shape that suits their own purposes.

Stand them down

And if we really want to do our duty to the dead perhaps we could let them rest in peace and stand them down from marching to the drum of our contemporary agendas. On that note I'll leave you with a quote from the poem 'Little Gidding' by T.S. Eliot – this part of the poem was inspired by the dead of the English Civil War and it applies equally well to our own Civil War. Indeed I think it's not such a bad perspective from which to view our decade of commemorations:

*We cannot revive old factions
We cannot restore old policies
Or follow an antique drum.
These men and those who opposed them
And those whom they opposed
Accept the constitution of silence
And are folded in a single party*

T.S. ELIOT, 'LITTLE GIDDING'