

## REFLECTIONS ON RECONCILIATION

17/03/2018 IRISH ASSOCIATION

*Deirdre Mac Bride*

Good afternoon and Happy St Patrick's Day. When did we start to commemorate St Patrick's Day? It can be a feast day, a partisan day or national holiday, marked by formal and popular activities. The Irish Government's visit to Washington and the carnival parades in Belfast, Downpatrick and Dublin and further afield are the current incarnations. Any tradition can "degenerative into a mere object of idolatry" (Crozier:1989:128) and to use in Richard Kearney's phrase "excluding dialogue with all that is other than (itself)"(ibid).

A pause for thought. Following a standoff at College Green in 1823, the observance of St Patrick's Day was promoted "as a means of expressing a separate Irish identity within the union" (McBride, 2001:21). This was in place of the celebration of the July Williamite anniversaries associated with the Protestant ascendancy and in which the vice regal court participated.

Ladies and gentlemen I diverge

I am honoured to speak to the Irish Association today and I thank you, Bob for the invitation to do so in this the Association's 80<sup>th</sup> year of building bridges north and south on the island of Ireland.

My title is Reflections on Reconciliation. Over the last 8 years I have been privileged to work with the NI Community Relations Council (CRC) as Director Cultural Diversity, a role pioneered by Dr Maurna Crozier. I have already quoted from the proceedings of the Cultural Traditions Conference which she edited and which was held a few months before the CRC came into being as an organisation established by and independently of government. A major part of my role has been to develop the decade of anniversaries programme in which I know some of you present today have played a considerable part as members of the Irish Association or in other positions.

So as I prepare to leave CRC at the end of March 2018, leafing through notes and files of various initiatives, meetings, research and evaluations connected

to the decade of anniversaries the invitation is auspicious. I am speaking today in a personal capacity.

I want first to spend a little time locating myself. I grew up in west Tyrone, a relatively poor place, 8 miles from the border, with a strong attachment to Newtownstewart where we lived on the main street above the family business which was a lounge bar. I didn't know the word sectarianism but I knew you were not to be a bigot or support bigotry. My best friend and I went to different but neighbouring primary schools and played together in the holidays. We did so unquestioningly and in adulthood we have both remembered walking up the same street, starrng across into the other playground, looking for but never finding each other. Our two families had extended family and affinities to Donegal; we called it the Free State and talked of Derry. Within the separation common in such small towns, different schools, different churches, sports and clubs and networks, there were moments beyond funerals when the communities came together and spent time with each other.

Four such occasions from the late 1960 s, early 1970s come to mind: the PRONI lecture series on Irish history chaired by Canon Gebbie held in the Model School; the inter community civic weeks in the early 1970s; the cross community guest tea to honour Church of Ireland Canon Gebbie on his retirement took place on the newly purchased GAA field; and in the 1980's the Town Committee organised Christmas parties for senior citizens rotating annually through the various church halls.

I grew up knowing about and having great respect for the Neolithic landscape and the castles of the O'Neill's roundabout. Newtownstewart was a plantation town and the catholic chapel a penal church situated one mile outside the town. The St Patrick's Day celebration was mass, a couple of bands which seemed to me meagre compared to the 12<sup>th</sup> July demonstrations held in the town.

At Easter 1966, I sheltered in a small group behind the high graveyard wall while the tricolour was unfurled illegally and the Proclamation of the Republic was read out. I was one of those many children I now realise throughout Northern Ireland who participated thus. For our summer holiday we went to

Dublin, to the newly re-opened Kilmainham Gaol, the GPO, Arbour Hill and the National Museum, the Book of Kells and the delights of different sweets chocolate elairs and the beach. I knew I was Irish.

So if reconciliation is a journey what was I becoming reconciled to? As an northern Catholic I was of that place but not of that state – neither of Northern Ireland or the Republic. This contributed to the importance in my family placed on taking the great opportunities of free education, on the need to get qualifications because without them there would be no job.

As the civil right marches took place, living with the “B” men stopping the car outside the house and asking my mother where she was going, became reality. So too was a fear the riots (the aftermath of which we had seen from Derry’s walls and in the streets off the Falls Road on a Sunday outing) would come nearer to my home.

When the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was set up, the town watched with bated breath it seemed, to see if the new estate would be allocated fairly and it was, almost door by door to Catholics and Protestants. The strongest impression from that day, however, is of a grown man in tears who had come upstairs to use the phone in private. He hadn’t got a house. I heard him explain that the rural cottage had water running down one side and he and his grown up family lived in one side of the house, his daughters worked from early morn. He couldn’t face them; they would say he hadn’t lobbied enough councillors.

Yet it is an extraordinary place. Little did we know until the archaeological dig of the 2000s that located on and within in the site of the plantation castle burnt down by James II on his way back from the Siege of Derry, were the remains a medieval round tower and moreover an early bronze age cist burial.

4000 years of continuous occupation on the same site!

So there in one town are the issues of diversity, equity, and interdependence and the challenge and potential of community relations in Northern Ireland.

So, to return to the present and to reflections on reconciliation.

The Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund had began in 2010/2011 to consider how to address the historical memory of the potentially divisive period from 1912 to 1923. This was the period from the Home Rule crisis to partition, civil war, the Boundary Commission and all in between. Critically, it includes the foundational narratives of the Republic and Northern Ireland the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme. The construction of social memories related to these two events has formed part of the sectarian divisions between Catholic and Protestant communities. Therefore, how these centenaries would be marked was problematic for the state, civil society and the grassroots. Northern Ireland is a society in which the past and the present are intertwined. There is a deeply rooted identification within the community with exclusive narratives and parallel identities. At the same time the demands of society post 1998 Good Friday Agreement requires more emphasis than hitherto on building a shared society.

In this regard we were cognisant of the speech by An Taoiseach, Mr Brian Cowen TD “A Decade of Commemorations Commemorating Our Shared History” at the Institute for British Irish Studies UCD on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2010 which was highly influential in both parts of Ireland. It is worth revisiting what the Taoiseach emphasised and today I am going to quote selectively from that speech.

“2010-2022 would mark the first centenary of the founding acts of this republic, of the division of this island, and all that has flowed from that.” (A period) “momentous and defining... for all of the people of this island, and indeed for these islands...This was the decade of the covenant and the gun, of blood sacrifice and bloody politics, a time of division and war, not only on this island but across the world...that defined relationships on these islands for most of the last century ...”

(It will be marked with) “Immense pride that it was a period that saw the achievement of Irish independence and the foundation of this State”

(Marked with) “deep sadness that it saw the partition of this island and its people, and the two parts of the island losing touch with each other and with our shared heritage.”

“We created separate histories - British and Irish, orange and green, republican, nationalist, unionist, loyalist – deep wells from which we thought we could draw succour.

In homes and in schools across this island, we grew up knowing and hearing only one set of stories, singing only one set of songs.

Gradually, in recent years, a recognition has emerged that regardless of whether we consider ourselves to be Irish, or British, or both, our history is - inescapably – a shared one.”

“This coming decade of commemorations, if well prepared and carefully considered, should enable all of us on this island to complete the journey we have started towards lasting peace and reconciliation.”

“Government has considered these issues in recent weeks and has decided that its approach will be guided by several principles.”

(These include) “We want to see full acknowledgment of the totality of the island’s history and the legitimacy of all the traditions on the island—that draw their identity and collective memory from our shared history.

We want the process of commemoration to recognise the totality of the history of the period, and all of the diversity that this encompasses,

We believe that mutual respect should be central to all commemorative events and that historical accuracy should be paramount.”

The speech was careful to specifically reference the 1966 commemorations, and a number of distinct groups, those families and veterans who had served in the British Army in the First World War, northern nationalists for whom independence became a very different experience.

It referenced the growing recognition of the Irish contribution “to honour the heroism of those who fought and died there, Protestant and Catholic, side by side...” to the First World War - the Peace Park at Messines, state involvement in commemoration from 2006, all of this prefigured a commitment that the Battle of the Somme would be commemorated by the state in 2016.

An Taoiseach went on and I quote in full “I expect, too, that the events of Easter 1916 will be commemorated with respect and dignity in every part of this island. That, I respectfully submit, is a challenge that must be considered by the leaders of unionism.”

The speech was important in informing and lending some confidence to our deliberations here in Northern Ireland. It also built on the relationships that had been developing between Unionism and the Irish Government through the Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade and in particular through the Mary McAleese Presidency. The warmth of the relationships that continued to grow particularly among representatives of working class loyalists was particularly striking and encouraging. This builds on long established links with the Somme Centre in which political figures such as Ian Adamson of the Somme Association have been central and constant.

In the development of those relationships John Greene and George McCullough of the Glasnevin Trust have welcomed northern unionism and have made tremendous space for formal commemoration of the First World War in Ireland. I will draw attention to two specific examples of how the Trust has promoted reconciliation operating as it is, as an independent body.

#### The Victoria Cross Stones

These are individual stones dedicated to each man who won a Victoria Cross for bravery. In Great Britain and Northern Ireland these are made available by the state and erected with some formal commemoration in the birth place of each soldier. The Glasnevin Trust received the 27 Irish Victoria Cross stones in July 2016 at a formal commemorative event and now holds these in posterity.

At the centenary of the outbreak of war in 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014, a Cross of Sacrifice provided by the Commonwealth Graves Commission was dedicated in Glasnevin in a state ceremony. This was one of a number of such events.

I will watch with interest as the Easter Rising Remembrance Wall develops to include the names of all those whose lives were ended in the violent turmoil throughout Ireland including those who died in the war of independence and civil war on all sides and those killed in sectarian violence in 1920/21 in Belfast.

## **The Irish Government programme**

The Irish Government in addition to the extensive Ireland 1916 programme developed a separate programme for 2016 which marked the British Army casualties in the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme. The Irish Defence Forces and the British Army Regiment (which encompassed the Sherwood Foresters which had suffered the most fatalities of British army units in Dublin Easter 1916) honoured those men who died at a ceremony in the Grangegorman military cemetery in May 2016 to an audience of northerners, military and diplomatic personnel. There was a republican protest at the ceremony in opposition to the commemoration.

In all of this the Irish government walked a fairly difficult line. It was I think aware of unionist sensibilities about how the commemoration (and indeed in the Republic the celebration) of how The Easter Rising would play in Northern Ireland. Would a green wave flow over the border across the north and unsettle unionist communities? In the event the Ireland 1916 programme largely stopped at the border. Those who wanted to participate in the Irish national commemoration went south to Dublin for Easter 2016 and throughout the year. In what I think was a different version of 1966 quiet gatherings in graveyards.

So I will leave that for now and talk about Northern Ireland.

## **Northern Ireland and the Decade of Anniversaries**

We had a complicated task, each year seemed to contain its own risks and potential pitfalls. When we started out on this process in Northern Ireland, I would give talks about what we were trying to achieve and why people should get involved. I used the phrase “everyone has to be able to see their face in this”, calling for a broadening of context and the inclusion of multiple perspectives. Content should be able to travel physically and metaphorically from one community to another.

How did we try to manage that? In addition to the obvious broadening of the content to include women and labour, we developed what became a widely adopted set of principles. These were called the Principles for remembering in

public space otherwise they became known as the CRC/HLF principles. They were

- 1) Start from the historical **facts**;
- 2) Recognise the **implications** and **consequences** of what happened;
- 3) Understand that different **perceptions** and **interpretations** exist; and
- 4) Show how events and activities can deepen **understanding** of the period.

And

All to be seen in the context of an **'inclusive and accepting society'**

In practice the principles proved to be helpful to organisers of centenary programmes by contributing to an overall policy and practice framework. In this respect the principles and the Decade of Anniversaries Toolkit proved to be enabling, permissive, address questions of what was politically feasible and helped to engender safe spaces for intercultural dialogue.

The situation that developed around the commemorative space in Northern Ireland is unique on these islands. It is the absence of the state level. An absence which in my view limits the space in which civil society can explore narratives that one or other community finds difficult. I would suggest that it also hampers north south contact and understanding. The emphasis then shifts to the next layer of government arms length bodies and district councils and to civil society in particular.

While the NI Executive Committee made good progress in March 2012 thereafter that faltered. Thus just before the centenary of the Covenant and on the eve of the Community Relations Council (CRC)/ Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) lecture series to which ministers were invited, the Executive Committee issued a statement recognising the social, political and economic significance of the decade of anniversaries, its desire to set the tone for the forthcoming period and principles that would guide it. Those principles were derived from the work of the commemoration project steering committee established in Department for Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL). The statement tasked the Ministers for DCAL and Department for Enterprise Trade and industry (DETI) to develop a programme.

However, over time Ministers adopted the CRC/HLF principles. The work was progressed by CRC/HLF and DCAL's arms length bodies, District Councils and council funded local museums and key NGOs at regional and local level. The Decade Roundtable established in 2011 by CRC and HLF grew to reflect this growing body of work.

In so far as there was a co-ordinated Northern Ireland programme, the NI National Museum, PRONI, Arts Council, Libraries NI, NI Screen, the 26 and now 11 District Councils and NGOs such as The Junction and the Nerve Centre were particularly active. Programmes were funded through tweaking existing sources from DCAL and NI Executive Committee Departments – Office of the First Minister Deputy First Minister / The Executive Office (OFMdfM / TEO) whose funding included the Community Relations Council. Civil society work was supported through charitable sources, district councils, TEO, CRC, Heritage Lottery Fund and the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) Reconciliation Fund and the Peace III EU special programme. Perhaps this was a pragmatic and sensible deployment to the arms length bodies, councils and civic society?

The range of activity to support groups to engage with the decade of anniversaries organised by CRC and HLF with input from the Decade Roundtable under the banner of Remembering the Future (RTF) included:

### **Remembering the Future Lecture series**

Over eleven evenings chaired by Dr Eamon Phoenix from March to June 2012, we were regaled by over 20 historians. We aimed to increase knowledge and understanding offering a range of perspectives and covering the decade from 1912-19234. The recordings of the sessions were edited and are available online.

### **Conferences**

- *Remembering The Future* (keynote by Fintan O'Toole) 2011
- *Remembering 1916* (including how remembered) (2013) and two subsequent publications.

- *Conflict, Polarisation and Partition* (lectures, and case studies on skill development, sensitive and controversial history) November 2017.

## **Resource Fairs**

*Creative Centenaries* 2015 at Titanic Belfast and *1916 what's it all about?* in 2016 at Ulster Museum – approximately 250 people attended each event, with decade programme organisers hosting stalls and workshops. I was struck by one comment from the evaluation - the importance of being openminded in approaching the different centenaries.

## **Decade of Anniversaries Toolkit**

Guidance lessons and tips for ethical commemoration and 25 case studies (2013) and with an addition 45 case studies (2018) available in hard copy and online.

## **Decade of Centenaries Survey**

This was undertaken in 2013 and repeated in 2017. The latter explored with organisers of programmes the impacts for society, impacts for participants, and impacts for organisations. The responses drawn from across all sectors and geographies are encouraging.

## **Development of north south relationships**

Under the presidency of Professor Mary Daly with input from Maurice Manning Chair of the Expert Advisory Group on commemoration the Royal Irish Academy held a north south seminar with CRC and HLF in December 2015 on the question of joint commemoration and the respective challenges of the decade.

In February 2018 CRC/HLF on behalf of the Decade Roundtable presented to the Dept of the Taoiseach's Expert Advisory Group on Commemoration in Dublin on the approach that has developed in Northern Ireland and the challenges ahead.

## **Commemorative activity in Northern Ireland**

The range of Northern Ireland commemorative and exploratory activity was considerable. It was significant that the Ulster Museum's *Remembering 1916:*

*Your Stories* and Belfast City Council's (BCC) *Reflections on 2016 – The Belfast Story* interpretations of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme was contained in a single exhibition. The public records office PRONI *1914-1918 blog*, monthly drew on letters in its archives to give with first person accounts of the war and its impact and the Easter Rising.

District Council Good Relations Units and Officers organised programmes using lectures, music, drama, discussions and courses aimed at the general public. In Belfast the council funded two significant community engagement programmes - *Belfast 1916* and *Somme 100*. Mid Ulster Council's Programme continued features in common with other local authorities using a mix of small grants to local groups, lectures and drama.

Northern Ireland has eight council funded local museums. Some of these were particularly active utilising peace funding in working with local communities, such as Causeway Coast and Glens and Mid and East Antrim Museum Services *Over the Hawthorne Hedge* and *On The Brink –The Politics of Conflict*. Lisburn Museum's exhibition *Lisburn Catholics and The Great War* and its community outreach programmes was also invitational in terms of exploring differing narratives.

District councils worked fairly systematically utilising the Nerve Centre's app *1916 The Year that Changed Ireland*, animations, graphic novels and other resources to engage younger people and the general public. They also invited The Junction's *Ethical and Shared Remembering Project* to run workshops to promote discussion and dialogue utilising the ethic of hospitality, flexibility and plurality. The Nerve Centre's *Creative Centenaries programme* developed three separate exhibitions and programmes for the North West with the Tower Museum in Derry Londonderry *1916 –Untold Stories*, with Ulster Museum in Belfast *#Making History 1916 Exhibition* and adapted content for the National Library in Dublin. Co-operation Ireland's *Entwined Histories*, the Church's Trust *Journey Together – North West Schools Jointly Remembering the Centenary of 2016* and the creative Centenaries workshops are fine examples of engaging in schools outreach.

At a community level, groups accessed the programmes outlined above as well as organising their own. A common feature across these programmes was site

visits particularly to WW1 and Easter Rising sites in Dublin. The Rural Community Network developed accredited courses *One History, Many Stories* with unionist communities where there is a reluctance to engage more broadly. It has found that the engagement around the decade has become a spring board for future community relations work.

In the absence of the formal state role in commemorating the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme as such, the actual dates were marked in Belfast by community led programmes. These occasions were well supported public events. The Easter Rising was marked by parades as part of *Celebrating 1916 - the Belfast Story*. This was a programme of parades, drama, debates and intimate discussions developed by a group drawn from individuals, community activists, groups from the world of culture arts and tourism, historians such as Tom Hartley and communities. The Unionist Centenary Committee was established to take forward a “Decade of Unionist Centenaries” and was made up of a cross section of the Unionist family, including politicians, loyal orders, the marching bands and a range of community based organisations such as the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division Memorial Association. The group staged parades, re-enactments, drama, exhibitions and concerts and intends to continue to work to “promote our culture in a positive manner and educate, thereby removing myths and easing tensions”. The members of both groups coalesced around the respective nationalist and unionist identities. Both groups highlighted the critical importance of using a set of principles that they had each developed as guidelines.

Of particular note was a joint exhibition between the 6<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers Research Group and the Unionist Centenary Committee. The panels were based on the experience of the Falls Road Catholic men from the National Volunteers who joined the 6<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers and the Protestant men from the Ulster Volunteer Force who joined the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division. This was funded by DFAT and hosted by the Glasnevin Trust and it was, in my view, a highpoint of collaboration and reflection on the outbreak of WW1. The Fellowship of Messines founded in 2002 by a diverse range of individuals from Loyalist, Republican and Trade Union backgrounds continued to develop opportunities to engage in joint study, training programmes and dialogues around the questions of *History, Identity and Politics*.

Finally drama was particularly effective in making the “large forces of history at once human, personal and intimate” and where these are accurate, authentic and using participants own stories “such work is a beginning of reflection and discussion rather than in any sense a closure” (Smyth, D. 2018). Some of the best known are Philip Orr’s plays *One hundred Years (2012)* and *Half Way House (2016)*; the site specific work by Kabosh on the Somme *July 1<sup>st</sup> 1916* and *No News is Good News* and on the Easter Rising *Elizabeth Corr. Partisan Productions From the Shipyard to the Somme (2013)* played to a capacity audience of local people in Dee Street Recreation Centre for 5 nights. Londonderry Bands Forum/Blue Eagle Productions *Divided By History, United By Music (2016)* illuminated two local stories while the collaborative effort behind the community based production *Meeke and the Major (2016)* of valour and respect touched people in the Ballymena Ballymoney areas.

So, to return to the present and to reflections on reconciliation.

Returning to that early Cultural Traditions conference one of the conclusions drawn from those sessions was that “learning to handle our cultural traditions so that they serve as creative symbol is vital for the future well being of our entire community” (Crozier.1989:129). I think we have made some head way in doing that.

I want to return to the point and indeed pointed remark in Cowen’s speech “I expect, too, that the events of Easter 1916 will be commemorated with respect and dignity in every part of this island. That, I respectfully submit, is a challenge that must be considered by the leaders of unionism.”

At the commencement of this period that was perhaps a more realistic hope.

Peter Robinson gave the address at the inaugural Edward Carson lecture in Iveagh House in Dublin on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2012. It was appropriate that as first Minister Arlene Foster attended an event organised by the Church of Ireland Historical Centenaries about the Easter Rising in February 2016 but the precursor to this and the delay undermined grassroots unionists planning their own visits to Dublin that year.

President Higgins’ decision to turn down the invitation to attend the Belfast City Council funded Easter 2016 Ceremonial Dinner (for which incidentally

cross party/ community agreement was required to finance it) lessened that event. He subsequently gave the intended speech to a small gathering in the Linenhall Library some months later. However, the symbolic significance of the President of Ireland acknowledging the very different experience of northern nationalists alluded to in Cowen's speech was lost. Indeed so also was the opportunity to note the progress made in terms of parity of esteem.

To conclude, I am reminded of an article written by Brian Walker of the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University Belfast. The subject was the commemoration of St Patrick's Day over time. It seems to me that he was saying these commemorations rise and fall with the politics. The decade of centenaries is not insulated from this.

This underlines the importance of building relationships and trust so that the politics can withstand narrower party interests. In the absence of such maturity north south relationships most find other ways to grow.

Thank you

### ***References***

An Taoiseach, Mr Brian Cowen TD "A Decade of Commemorations Commemorating Our Shared History" at the Institute for British Irish Studies UCD on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2010.

Crozier, M (1989) ed., Cultural traditions in Northern Ireland, Institute of Irish Studies, Belfast: The Queen's University of Belfast.

Mac Bride, D. (2018) ed., Decade of Anniversaries Toolkit Update 2018, Belfast: NI Community Relations Council.

McBride, I. (2001) ed., History and Memory in Modern Ireland, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Smyth, D. (2018) in Mac Bride, D. ed., A review of Marking Anniversaries and Assessment of the Challenges of the Years Ahead with Practice Implications, Belfast: NI Community Relations Council.

Walker, B. (1996) History, Myth and Politics in Ireland, Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University Belfast.