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REVIEW ARTICLE

Unbiddable Pasts

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Guy Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance: Social Forgetting and Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 707. ISBN 978-0198749356.

Jonathan Evershed, *Ghosts of the Somme: Commemoration and Culture War in Northern Ireland* (Notre Dame, IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), pp. 294. ISBN 978-0268103859.

Richard S. Grayson and Fearghal McGarry, eds., *Remembering 1916: The Easter Rising, the Somme and the Politics of Memory in Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 274. ISBN 978-1316509272.

Joseph S. Robinson, *Transitional Justice and the Politics of Inscription: Memory, Space and Narrative in Northern Ireland* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 244. ISBN 978-0367191740.

Elisabetta Viggiani, *Talking Stones: The Politics of Memorialization in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2016), pp. 265. ISBN 978-1785333415.

1916

At the Ulster Museum in Belfast two artefacts connect the momentous events of 1916 with the thirty years of conflict in Northern Ireland brought to an end by the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. One piece is the work of republican prisoners interned aboard HMS Maidstone in the Belfast docks in the early 1970s: a plaque, signed by its creators, bearing a portrait of the only socialist among the leaders of the Easter Rising in Dublin, James Connolly. The other is a painting by Gusty Spence, the founder of the modern loyalist paramilitary group, the Ulster Volunteer Force. It commemorates the Battle of the Somme: two soldiers in silhouette, bugles to their lips, on either side of a standard bearing the words 'In Immortal Memory', a reference to the 5,000 troops from the 36th Ulster Division who were killed or injured going over the top on 1 July 1916. These two objects not only bring home the importance of history and memory to the paramilitaries who fought each other during the Troubles but also point to how the story of the modern conflict is already being crafted for current political debates and future generations. As William Blair writes, the greatest challenge for the Ulster Museum in the near future will not be remembrance of the battles of a century ago but 'dealing with the difficult and divisive legacy of "the Troubles"'.[1] This is also an issue which historians have already begun to confront, often through their contributions to the debates surrounding the so-called 'Decade of Centenaries', stretching from the Home Rule crisis of 1912 to the end of the Irish revolution in 1923. These five books deal with the politics of memory in Ireland generally, and Northern Ireland in particular, and how memorialisation of traumatic events – official, unofficial and private – has shaped both the public sphere and the hidden recesses of everyday life. Two almost simultaneous events from

[1] William Blair, 'Myth, Memory and Material Culture: Remembering 1916 at the Ulster Museum', in Richard Grayson and Fearghal McGarry, eds., *Remembering 1916: The Easter Rising, the Somme and the Politics of Memory in Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 181–2.

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1916 – the Easter Rising in Dublin and the Battle of the Somme – have acquired extraordinary resonance in the contemporary politics of memory in Northern Ireland.

The Easter Rising was a shock for the British government. The rebels seized the General Post Office and other buildings in Dublin, and proclaimed an Irish Republic. After six days they were pounded into submission by British forces; 450 people were killed, 2,500 wounded and thousands imprisoned. Over ten days in May 1916, fifteen were executed for treason and within a few weeks Irish public opinion had swung from largely puzzled indifference to sympathy. The beneficiaries of this shift were the revolutionaries who regrouped under the banner of Sinn Féin. After winning a series of by-elections, it led the campaign against conscription in 1918 and in that year's British general election, all but wiped out the constitutional nationalists who had spent the previous forty years trying to win Home Rule for Ireland. None of the seventy-three Sinn Féin MPs elected took their seats; instead they inaugurated their own parliament in Dublin and set out to secure recognition for Ireland as an independent republic. In tandem, a guerrilla campaign by the IRA began, culminating in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 and the partition of Ireland into the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland. In retrospect, the 1916 Rising has been anointed as the birthplace of the modern Irish state, its importance, as Roisin Higgins points out, owing as much to 'how it was commemorated as to the original event'.[2] It also became a lodestar for those on both sides of the border campaigning to re-unite Ireland.

Preparations for the Battle of the Somme were underway when the republican tricolour was raised over the post office in Dublin. When the offensive finally began on 1 July, the 36th Ulster Division – largely drawn from the Ulster Volunteers, a unionist militia founded in 1913 with the sole objective of resisting Home Rule – played a leading role. They were singularly successful before being forced to retreat after suffering devastating casualties: more than 5,000 of the 9,000 men who had flung themselves into German fire were killed, missing, wounded or taken prisoner. This blood sacrifice in the cause of loyalty to Britain was contrasted by unionists with the treachery of the rebels in Dublin; partition was payment for the debt owed, six northern Irish counties remaining in the renamed United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with their own devolved parliament dominated by a Protestant majority. In 1921, the year Northern Ireland was inaugurated, a memorial tower was erected at the village of Thiepval where the first battle of the Somme offensive was fought. As Jonathan Evershed notes, this was 'the first permanent memorial to be constructed on the former battlefields of the Western Front'.[3]

Guy Beiner has highlighted the symmetry between the two events in which military disaster created martyrs of the fallen soldiers for a cause which would eventually carry the day. Thus, for both republicans and loyalists the narrative of 1916 in history and memory amounts to 'the triumph of failure'.[4] Throughout the Northern Ireland conflict from 1968 to 1998 both the IRA and the Protestant paramilitaries regularly evoked connections to the events of 1916 to give their campaigns historical justification. IRA leaders gave speeches at Easter Sunday commemorations of the Rising and the glorious defeat on the Somme battlefield was featured in murals in Loyalist strongholds of Belfast. If anything, the importance of this remembrance has grown even stronger since the Good Friday Agreement which ended the conflict in 1998. The new consociational governance arrangements oblige the strongest parties on either side of the sectarian divide, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party, to share executive power. Similarly, parallel republican and loyalist versions of history enjoy parity of recognition within the new dispensation. As Ian McBride, one of the pioneering historians of memory in

[2] Roisin Higgins, '"The Irish Republic Was Proclaimed by Poster": The Politics of Commemorating the Easter Rising', in Grayson and McGarry, eds., *Remembering 1916*, 43.

[3] Jonathan Evershed, *Ghosts of the Somme: Commemoration and Culture War in Northern Ireland* (Notre Dame IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 10.

[4] Guy Beiner, 'Between Trauma and Triumphalism: The Easter Rising, the Somme, and the Crux of Deep Memory in Modern Ireland', *Journal of British Studies*, 46, 2 (2007), 382.

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Ireland has written, 'cultural validation – and perhaps even the past itself – becomes a resource to be sliced up and allocated like social services, schools, broadcasting funds, or housing'.[5]

Memory Boom

Tethering the modern struggle to past victories and defeats is a common theme in this culture of remembrance. In her study of 150 public memorials erected in Belfast, Elizabeth Viggiani discovered that half of them reference historic landmarks that long precede the Troubles.[6] In the case of the modern UVF for instance, establishing a link to the original volunteers of the First World War is an essential sinew of legitimisation. An article in the UVF journal *Combat* about one of their leaders killed by the IRA just before the ceasefire in 1994 figured him as one of the fallen of the Somme: 'if Trevor King had lived in July 1916, he would have been among those heroic Volunteers who, with rifle and pack, trudged down that long lonely road to the Somme … to glory … to oblivion'.[7] The murals, shrines and monuments all over Northern Ireland serve as markers of territory where the authority of the paramilitaries still holds strong more than two decades after the end of the conflict. This means that the conflict is continued 'through symbolic means'.[8] Both the Republican narrative of an anti-imperialist war and the Loyalist account of a defensive battle against sectarian massacre are projected through the memorials of the troubles. The version of history they present is instrumental in the battle 'to win the higher moral ground in the ideological and political contest for the status of victimhood'.[9]

The past also has a more protean function and this is the contemporary focus of Viggiani's study and the other anthropological explorations of the uses of history and memory in the present by Joseph S. Robinson and by Jonathan Evershed. In an era that demanded profound tactical and strategic shifts to bring peace, it allowed the leadership of the IRA to claim an historic lineage for accommodation to modern times. Viggiani quotes a speech by Gerry Adams at the commemoration of the ninetieth anniversary of the Easter Rising in Milltown cemetery in 2006 in which he lists the martyred leaders of the Rising and asks whether there could be 'any real doubts' about their stand on the political issues of the day, specifically how they would endorse Sinn Féin's reversal of its boycott of the parliament in Dublin.[10]

The mutability of political memory is an essential characteristic of its deployment in memorial culture. Viggiani found that individual deaths during the Troubles were subtly folded into a larger collective narrative while still retaining their singular importance. The work of commissioning and erecting monuments has been carried out by groups with clear links to paramilitaries, ex-prisoners being especially prominent in memorial committees; in Viggiani's phrase, these are the 'memory makers'. By contrast, 'memory receivers' are the residents of neighbourhoods who are expected to watch without demurral as memorials are built in their streets or murals painted on the gable ends of their houses. Consultation was more common in Republican than Loyalist areas but it did not pay to be critical: as one Protestant resident put it, 'you have to go with the flow whether you like it or not because it doesn't matter if you say "no" these memorials will go up anyway'.[11] However, the line between memory makers and receivers is not so clear cut. Paramilitaries are embedded in the community, not an external influence; ex-prisoners are often a source of leadership and guidance to their neighbours. Viggiani found that the creation of a collective narrative is 'concurrently genuine and politically strategic'.[12]

[5] Ian McBride, 'The Truth About the Troubles', in Jim Smyth, ed., *Remembering the Troubles: Contesting the Recent Past in Northern Ireland* (Notre Dame IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 13.
[6] Elizabeth Viggiani, *Talking Stones: The Politics of Memorialization in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016), 75.
[7] Ibid., 145.
[8] Ibid., 6.
[9] Ibid., 195.
[10] Ibid., 83.
[11] Ibid., 181.
[12] Ibid., 94.

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She is convinced that these community-based, partisan chronicles are preferable to those sponsored by governments and conflict-resolution schemes which are composed to appeal to both communities and artificially imposed from the outside. Factional histories of the troubles, as long as they are 'bottom-up', will be more effective in finding common ground – a proposition that needs further evidence to make it compelling. At the end of her book she speculates that 'non-state manifestations of memory may perhaps serve a greater function for bringing about a future political dispensation in Northern Ireland as opposing groups use memorialization to wave in new viewpoints that, true, serve their own political goals, but are also moving people towards mutual compromise and a more common ground'.[13] Perhaps this may naturally occur because the energy of memorialisation is exhausted, but there is little evidence in her account of memorialisation to suggest that the guardians of memory are about to welcome new viewpoints.

Like Viggiani, Joseph Robinson's ethnographic investigation of how Northern Ireland has dealt with the past also concludes that attempting to achieve a consensual 'national catharsis' is misguided.[14] Besides being unlikely, he argues that to aim for such an outcome would mute difficult conversations about the meaning of the Troubles. 'Memorial agnosticism' on the part of the state has ceded the field to paramilitaries and their 'oppressive aesthetic', turning places of memory into platitudinous sites justifying past violence which are unwelcoming to alternative interpretations.[15] Northern Ireland is thus 'spatially dominated by two dialectics: one that justifies and legitimises past violence, and one that suborns the past to a shared future and the reconciliatory imperative'.[16]

Robinson's innovative contribution is to identify how these contestations of memory reproduce the state of exception that legitimised paramilitary violence. In the crisis that developed in Northern Ireland in the 1970s 'previously objectionable political acts and decisions' were accepted as normal and opponents no longer regarded as complex humans.[17] Now, although the war is over, paramilitary memorials reproduce 'the internal logic of the respective states of exception' rather than allowing its continued pertinence to be questioned so as to open up a more complex engagement with dead bodies, which would move beyond their usefulness as political symbols, or discussions as to whether they can be judged innocent. This, to Robinson, would mean the recovery of their humanity.[18] In interviews with fifty-two 'memory curators' he seeks out the voices of those who are silenced by the dominant discourses. Subalterns in Northern Ireland, according to Robinson, are people deprived of space to remember their friends or family. He interviews ex-members of the Ulster Defence Regiment in the border counties of Tyrone, Fermanagh and Armagh, where roadside memorials to UDR members killed by the IRA have been desecrated while similar shrines to IRA figures proliferate. As such, UDR memories along the border feel 'underground'.[19]

Although he asserts that the control of public memory space by paramilitary groups is 'splintering and diversifying', his case, like that of Viggiani, is promising rather than compelling.[20] True, in some loyalist communities images of masked gunmen have been replaced by images of King William or even the footballer George Best but these alterations, barely tolerated by paramilitaries, still convey a sectarian message.[21] On the one hand he identifies 'a growing chorus of morally charged voices seeking new ways to remember and new ways to honour and house the ghosts of the past'.[22] But on the other he acknowledges that both communities are 'severely constrained in the types of narrative, ideational

[13] Ibid., 201.
[14] Joseph S. Robinson, *Transitional Justice and the Politics of Inscription: Memory, Space and Narrative in Northern Ireland* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 199.
[15] Ibid., 23.
[16] Ibid., 25.
[17] Ibid., 63.
[18] Ibid., 88.
[19] Ibid., 127.
[20] Ibid., 89.
[21] Ibid., 169.
[22] Ibid., 204.

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and territorial challenges they can make to public displays of sectarianism'.[23] Those attempting to challenge the type of remembrance generated by the sectarian division of power endorsed by the governance arrangements introduced by the Good Friday Agreement find themselves pushed to the margins, a state of isolation which precludes the possibility of transforming the rigidity of post-conflict politics. Robinson favours memorialisation which rehumanises the dead, those who inflicted violence as well as those who suffered it, so that their ghosts are not forced 'to repeat, over and over again, the same ritualised narrative until the narrative takes over the body completely'.[24]

To many, as Jonathan Evershed points out in his ethnographic study of the memory of the Battle of the Somme, invocation of the First World War dead by working-class loyalists represents this same obsessive manipulation of ghosts. But for loyalists who experienced the Good Friday Agreement as a defeat which brought their former enemies to power, remembrance of the Somme connects them to the golden age of ascendant unionism allied to the cause of the British Empire; such memories are also a source of comfort in an era of traumatic change as their former strongholds are hollowed out by deindustrialisation. Evershed discovers that, in uncertain times, 'the ghosts of Ulster's Volunteers are called on to help steer the ship'.[25]

The centrality of the Somme for contextualising the violence of the modern UVF only emerged during the Troubles when it became part of the curriculum of study devised by loyalist prisoners serving time in the infamous Long Kesh detention centre. Demobilising UVF prisoners formed Somme associations in the 1990s and cheap air fares to France allowed interest in the battlefield and its memorials to flourish.[26] In a public sphere where Republicans have been successful at connecting their cause to international liberation, the story of the Somme allowed Loyalists to attach themselves to the biggest national commemoration effort in Britain this century, proclaiming a version of Britishness which they charge has been renounced in the rest of the United Kingdom. Perceiving themselves as curators of a scorned identity typifies the oscillation between triumphalism and defeatism which has often been remarked as a defining feature of Loyalist political culture; Evershed found that his interviewees sometimes switched from one mode to the other in the same conversation. 'The idea that their identity is embattled – beset by the belligerence of Irish Republicanism on the one hand and the ambivalence of middle-class Unionists, the British state, and the wider British national community on the other – is central to Loyalists' self-identification.'[27] Since the peace agreement this sense of embattlement had been heightened and a common complaint is that loyalism is subject to a 'culture war' in which its traditions are belittled.[28] Evershed agrees that they have been deliberately disregarded by the stewards of the peace process in the hope that their recalcitrant, disruptive presence might disappear. Such disdain, he argues, merely stokes Loyalist grievance.[29] Instead he seeks to understand those who heed the ghosts of the Somme. Rather than being solely a vehicle for chauvinism and a demonstration of the strength of paramilitaries, Evershed argues that Loyalist commemoration is equally provoked by fear, insecurity and concern for the future.[30] This identity crisis is compounded by economic deterioration and a sense among working-class Loyalists that they never enjoyed the benefits that supposedly accrued to Protestants during fifty years of Stormont rule.[31] For Evershed, attending to the experience of life and death in these communities during the Troubles should be the starting point for consolidating peace.[32] He also argues that it is necessary to acknowledge that 'there are deep, significant, and irreconcilable differences between the Loyalist

[23] Ibid., 170.
[24] Ibid., 188.
[25] Evershed, *Ghosts of the Somme*, 11.
[26] Ibid., 139–43.
[27] Ibid., 96.
[28] Ibid., 89.
[29] Ibid., 55.
[30] Ibid., 212–4.
[31] Ibid., 108.
[32] Ibid., 205.

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and Republican projects' which extend to Irish involvement in the First World War.[33] Academic historians, he charges, have been complicit in trying to elide these profound political differences through their participation in the programme for the Decade of Centenaries: they are mistaken in their belief that conflict is merely perpetuated by memory and that historical facts can be the antidote.[34] Commemoration, according to Evershed, 'has everything to do with politics, perhaps less to do with memory and (almost) nothing to do with history'.[35] But by focussing on the activists who are the memory makers in both loyalist and republican communities, Evershed begs the question of what a less politicised and functional sense of memory would look like. Fundamental to the three anthropological approaches to created memory is a clear sense of how the paramilitary curators have instrumentalised the practice for their own ends, but the sense of how memories of the Troubles are possessed and circulated in the wider, more apolitical community remains shadowy.

History to Unite?

Until recently, the British and Irish governments overseeing the Northern Ireland peace agreement have largely vacated the role of nurturing a consensus about the past. Drawn together by the pursuit of the peace, they have worked hard to cement bilateral relations. The Queen made the first visit by a British monarch to the Republic of Ireland in 2011 and President Michael D. Higgins made a reciprocal state visit to Britain in 2014. The centenary of the First World War provided further opportunities for both governments to signal that old wounds were healed. While Remembrance Day was a major feature of Northern Ireland's political culture, the participation of Irish recruits in the First World War (some 210,000 Irishmen volunteered for the British Army and at least 35,000 were killed) was officially forgotten in the republic during the late twentieth century, symbolised by the neglect and decay of a memorial garden for the Irish war dead in Dublin. During her visit in 2011 the Queen laid wreaths at both the Garden of Remembrance in the centre of Dublin, which commemorates the republican dead, and at the now restored National War Memorial Gardens in Islandbridge in memory of Irish soldiers who died in the First World War. But both governments also alighted on remembrance of the First World War as fertile terrain for developing a narrative of shared sacrifice, emphasising that Irishmen from both nationalist and loyalist traditions fought together in a bigger cause. On Remembrance Day in 1998 the then Irish President, Mary McAleese, and the Queen unveiled a memorial to commemorate the Battle of Messines in Belgium in 1917 where nationalists from the 16th (Irish) division and loyalists from the 36th (Ulster) Division fought together to defeat the Germans. At the ceremony, Mary McAleese suggested that First World War commemoration could be 'a mutually respectful space for differing traditions, differing loyalties … which would help … to change the landscape of memory. … None of us has the power to change what is past but we do have the power to use today well to shape a better future'.[36] As Richard Grayson remarked, McAleese's speech signified 'that a tradition was actively being invented for an explicit purpose … beyond simply remembering the dead'.[37] By the time the 'Decade of Centenaries' had begun this rhetoric had become institutionalised. In 2014 the Irish Foreign Minister Dermot Ahern declared that competing memories of the past would impede the path to a peaceful future since 'we can no longer have two histories, separate and in conflict' but must see that to be Irish was to celebrate all experiences of the past.[38]

[33] Ibid., 214.
[34] Ibid., 83.
[35] Ibid., 24.
[36] Quoted in Kevin Bean, 'New Roads to the Rising: the Irish Politics of Commemoration Since 1994', in Grayson and McGarry, eds., *Remembering 1916*, 234.
[37] Richard Grayson, 'The Place of the First World War in Contemporary Irish Republicanism in Northern Ireland', *Irish Political Studies*, 25, 3 (2010), 342.
[38] Ibid., 234.

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A more pragmatic reason for the value of a consensus that would quietly bury the past had been advanced a year earlier by the then British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Theresa Villiers, who pointed out that Northern Ireland was engaged in a global competition for investment and thus needed 'to be projecting the reality of a forward-looking, modern Northern Ireland, not one . . . tied up in the kind of conflict . . . associated with its past rather than its present'.[39] Ironically, she anointed historians with the task of entombing the past. They would create a novel tone for the centenary commemorations, based on 'new facts' and 'fresh interpretations' so that history would bring people together. 'Our ambitious goal throughout this decade is [to] seek to use history to unite'.[40] She contrasted the instrumental work of officially approved historians with those who might use the commemorations for partisan ends. There was potential, she acknowledged, 'for sensitive events like . . . the Easter Rising or the Somme to be hijacked by those seeking to use them to re-open old wounds and promote discord and division'.[41] The implications of her use of the word 'hijack', which often appeared in news reports of the Troubles when paramilitaries commandeered buses and cars, clearly indicated who she had in mind.

This fear of the power of commemorations to destabilise Northern Ireland itself was not new; it had a history which long predated the Secretary of State's fear that remembrance of the Somme or the Easter Rising could unravel the peace process. In 1966 the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising was marked by lavish state ceremonials in Dublin with a military parade attended by veterans of the Rising. Eamon de Valera, the leader who famously escaped execution, now the aging President of Ireland, laid a wreath to inaugurate the Garden of Remembrance watched by large crowds. The events were broadcast on the national television service, inaugurated a mere five years previously, which also screened, over eight consecutive nights, a dramatic reconstruction of the Rising as if it were a live news event. A few months later the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Terence O'Neill, went to the Ulster Tower in Thiepval on what *The Irish Times* described as 'a pilgrimage' and watched a bugler sounding the last post in memory of the Ulstermen who fell at the Somme.[42]

Although there were increasing signs of a rapprochement between Northern Ireland and the Republic at the time, O'Neill's decision to allow republican commemorations of the Easter Rising provided unionist extremists with an issue to attack his mild reformism. Ian Paisley (then an obscure preacher, later a world-renowned Protestant firebrand) celebrated the 'defeat of the 1916 rebels' at a rally in Belfast. A Catholic barman, mistaken for one of the organisers of republican commemorations, was shot dead by Gusty Spence.[43] Once full scale conflict ignited in Northern Ireland in 1968 it seemed to O'Neill in retrospect that the season of commemorations had lit the fuse. 'It was 1966 which made 1968 inevitable', he wrote in his autobiography, 'and was bound to put the whole future of Northern Ireland in the melting pot'.[44] O'Neill was not the only one to advance this thesis: it was given real popular currency by Conor Cruise O'Brien, diplomat, politician, historian and prominent polemicist. In his highly influential book, *States of Ireland* published in 1972 – the same year as O'Neill's autobiography – O'Brien argued that the celebrations of the men of 1916 in 1966 had drawn attention to the fact that their objective of a united Ireland remained unfulfilled and thus invited young men and women, particularly in the north, to use the methods of the Rising – 'violence, applied by a determined minority' – to re-unite Ireland by joining the IRA. Similarly, O'Brien argued that commemorations of the Somme 'favoured the recrudescence of armed Protestant extremism' directed at the Catholic minority.[45]

[39] Evershed, *Ghosts of the Somme*, 79.
[40] Ibid., 13.
[41] Ibid., 12.
[42] *The Irish Times*, 28 June and 2 July 1966.
[43] Margaret O'Callaghan, 'The Past Never Stands Still: Commemorating the Easter Rising ibn 1966 and 1976', in Smyth, ed., *Remembering the Troubles*, 124–7.
[44] Roisin Higgins, '"The Irish Republic was Proclaimed by Poster": the Politics of Commemorating the Easter Rising', in Grayson and McGarry, eds., *Remembering 1916*, 57.
[45] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), 150–1.

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Historians and Commemoration

Although his proposition has been subsequently challenged, O'Brien's was only the most influential public voice in a series of warnings that the wrong interpretation of 1916 by historians could be used to justify violence in Northern Ireland. In his presidential address to the Dublin University History Society in 1977, T.W. Moody drew a sharp distinction between the work of academic historians and everyday notions about the past he defined as 'myth' which included popular perceptions of 1916. History writing was 'a matter of facing the facts about the Irish past, however painful some of them may be; mythology is a way of refusing to face the historical facts'.[46] By the time Moody spoke, the influence of these arguments on Irish government policy was already evident. In 1976 – one of the bloodiest years of the Troubles – the sixtieth anniversary of the Rising was ignored by the state and a republican parade in Dublin was banned. Thus, public controversy and academic debate over commemoration in Ireland preceded the 'memory boom' of the 1980s and 1990s when politics in several European states were convulsed by the intrusion of 'unmastered pasts' and the investigation of memory became a thriving historical sub-field.[47] Even so, it would be right, as Guy Beiner suggests, that Irish scholarship only engaged intellectually with this field in the past twenty years with the publication of collections by Ian McBride and Oona Frawley.[48] Beiner's own book on folkloric accounts of the failed French invasion of Ireland in 1798, *Remembering the Year of the French*, published in 2007, laid claim to be one of the most sophisticated investigations of social memory. And with *Forgetful Remembrance*, he has established himself as the leading exponent of memory work in Irish historiography.

Beiner returns to the 1798 rebellion by the United Irishmen who, inspired by the French Revolution and with French support, sought to end British rule and unite Catholics and Protestants in a secular republican state. This time he investigates the consequences of the participation of Protestants in the north of Ireland in a rebellion regarded by most of their coreligionists as a papist-inspired murderous act of treason. After the rebellion was brutally suppressed, the radical Presbyterians who had taken part in it disavowed their participation to conform with the dominant tone of disapproval in the unionist public sphere. The first half of the nineteenth century was, according to Beiner, 'the generation of forgetting'.[49] By the end of the century veterans of the 'Turn-Out', as it was euphemistically known, began to open up about their participation, prompted by 'the desire . . . that their life of muted remembrance had not been spent in vain'.[50] It even became possible to publicly commemorate rebellion in 1898, part of a transnational vogue for marking centenaries, although the legacy of the United Irishmen was now claimed by nationalists who were subject to violent attacks by loyalists, a practice Beiner labels 'decommemorating'.[51] By the 1920s, in the newly partitioned state of Northern Ireland, any references to it were removed from Northern Ireland's official tourist guidebook.[52] Beiner traces to the present day the cycle of remembering and forgetting in which recollection and disregard wax and wane and irony attends the reinterpretation of the rebellion in succeeding generations. The endorsement by the IRA of the heroes of 1798 alienated Ulster Protestants whose ancestors had been rebels.[53] And presaging the later enlistment of the First World War as a vehicle for reconciliation, on the bicentenary of the rebellion, which fell the same year as the Good Friday Agreement

[46] T.W. Moody 'Irish History and Irish Mythology', in Ciaran Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism 1938–1994* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), 86.

[47] Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, 'A Looming Crash or a Soft Landing? Forecasting the Future of the Memory "Industry"', *The Journal of Modern History*, 81 (2009), 122–58.

[48] Guy Beiner, 'Making Sense of Memory: Coming to Terms with Conceptualisations of Historical Remembrance', in Grayson and McGarry, eds., *Remembering 1916*, 13.

[49] Guy Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance: Social Forgetting and Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 145.

[50] Ibid., 247.

[51] Ibid., 357.

[52] Ibid., 452.

[53] Ibid., 503.

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was signed, the Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, suggested that consolidating the agreement was the way to fulfil the ideals of the 1798 rebels.[54]

Public remembrance is not Beiner's main interest. His concern is to excavate the ways in which inconvenient memories were kept alive in inclement conditions or 'what happens behind the scenes when communities try, or profess to try, to forget discomfiting historical episodes but actually retain muted recollections'.[55] His quarry is the chamber of private memory, the subtle and discreet rituals of concealment and revelation which are sometimes domestic and sometimes public; he defines his job as 'penetrating reticence' and recovering 'muffled voices'.[56] These voices trade in ambivalence, ambiguity and misdirection in which silence is a strategy for survival. In a hostile political climate recollections of the rebellion were often cloaked in disapproval so that 'memory was both evoked and covered-up' and 'social forgetting was reinforced even as the past was being recalled'.[57] The term 'Turn-Out' itself was used by people who could not bring themselves to describe the events of 1798 as an insurrection and was therefore laden with ambivalence.[58] This creative use of euphemism, most famously exemplified by references to 'the Troubles', has a long pedigree in the north of Ireland.[59]

On the face of it, Beiner's project presents itself as a difficult if not impossible methodological challenge but suggests it can be completed by interrogating alternative sources to create a bespoke archive, a practice he describes as 'vernacular historiography'.[60] He makes use of an astonishing range of sources beyond conventional records: private heirlooms, travelogues, Ordinance Survey Field reports, novels and plays. He is particularly interested in the recycling of relics and human remains such as the axe used to behead one of the leaders of the United Irishmen, Henry Munro, discovered forty-five years after the rebellion.[61] Not only has he examined private collections but he has done some collecting himself, receiving from the son of a Presbyterian farmer a poem the farmer's father wrote in the mid-1960s about 1798 which included verses critical of the notorious police reserve force known as the B Specials (and was later amended to conceal its seditious message).[62] Beiner reserves a special admiration for the work of antiquarians, who could be Protestant or Catholic and who cultivated local knowledge at odds with official culture. The conservative loyalist Samuel McSkimin, a Presbyterian shopkeeper from Carrickfergus, who as a twenty-three-year-old took an active part in suppressing the rebellion, later collected a huge trawl of oral testimonies; 'he used to go walking about the county of Antrim, gossiping with the people' as an obituary put it in 1843, collecting ballads and stories.[63] A Church of Ireland church architect, Colin Johnston Robb, who was 'attuned to the intrinsic complexities and ambiguities of the memory of the Turn-Out', wrote thousands of articles for local papers from the 1920s until his death in 1976.[64]

As Beiner notes, these works were overlooked by academic historians in the twentieth century who were to make Irish history professional and scientific. Beiner describes his own method as 'a sophisticated neo-antiquarianism' stripped of tedium and the burden of excessive minutiae.[65] He is aware how much his method shares with subaltern history and history from below while being 'weary of subscribing blindly to their predilections and being saddled with unwarranted baggage'.[66] An example is his refusal to 'fetishize the wordsmithery of hyphens and brackets', preferring instead the verb to

[54] Ibid., 544–5.
[55] Ibid., 27.
[56] Ibid., 28–9.
[57] Ibid., 291.
[58] Ibid., 238.
[59] Ibid., 496.
[60] Ibid., 14.
[61] Ibid., 282.
[62] Ibid., 512–4.
[63] Ibid., 226–38.
[64] Ibid., 494.
[65] Ibid., 16.
[66] Ibid., 13.

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'disremember' because it was a word in use in late nineteenth- century Belfast, which signified, in the words of a contemporary scholar, 'a disinclination to remember' and could thus signify 'pretend to forget'.[67]

Beyond an eclectic methodology, Beiner offers a wider critique of professional history. Although he understands how Moody in 1977 could dismiss myths as only worthy of dismantling, he is critical of the narrow scope of the historiography that flowed from this approach and particularly of the notion that facts in themselves would dissolve popular distortions. Moody himself was puzzled by the failure of rigidly objective academic history to clear away the cobwebs of popular mythologising. 'Irish history has made great and unprecedented advances during the past forty years', he reflected in 1977, 'but the effect on the public mind appears to be disappointingly slow'.[68] His error, according to Beiner, stemmed from a simplistic notion of collective memory which assumed that just because memory was invented and constructed 'popular myths and the political structures which they sustain could be dismissed with the stroke of a pen'.[69] Much of the ethnographic work on contemporary remembrance has been influenced by Beiner and shares a similar scepticism that the right kind of objective history can banish the dissensions of the troubles. Jonathan Evershed argues that the designers of the events that have marked the Decade of Centenaries are mistakenly enthralled by the ability of historical facts to resolve the conflict in Northern Ireland. He points out the irony that the 'shared sacrifice' narrative of the First World War lends that conflict a 'reconciliatory potential' denied to remembrance of the Troubles.[70] To privilege some facts – the participation of Irish nationalists in the First World War – is, for Evershed, a selective reading of that conflict, omitting how the republican repudiation of the war represented a rejection of the imperialism which caused it. This discourse he dismisses as 'the propaganda of peace'.[71]

Implicit in this critique is a perception that historians should stand aside from a project defined by contemporary political objectives, even ones as apparently laudable as reinforcing the peace agreement. For Dominic Bryan history has little value in explaining commemorative rituals in which versions of the past are manipulated to serve current ends and yet, in his view, historians have allowed themselves to become 'the high priests of the commemorative rituals' largely because history, like pop psychology, is esteemed by Irish popular culture.[72] Attempting to use moments of commemoration to undermine myths and engage in consciousness raising about the nature of the past' is a futile pursuit because the historian is ultimately absorbed by the commemoration itself.[73]

One consequence of historians being drawn into tacit endorsement of the current political arrangements in Northern Ireland is the acceptance of the model of two traditions. Elsewhere, Beiner has acknowledged that while nationalist and unionist traditions 'have continued to function as landmarks of communal memory' even for those who attempt to reject them, there is a profusion of hybrid identities who reject this bipolarity.[74] Attention to the commemorative rituals of paramilitaries on both sides of the sectarian divide risks ignoring this dimension of the Northern Ireland conflict. We are now very familiar with the iconography of statues and murals, the imagery of gunmen depicted before an historic backdrop, and the scale of resources the paramilitaries pour into the creation of memory. Both Robinson and Viggiani favour 'the splintering of memory' among the grassroots in Northern Ireland.[75] Both agree it may be more fruitful in the end in finding common

[67] Ibid., 30.
[68] Moody, 'Irish History and Irish Mythology', 86.
[69] Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance*, 24–5.
[70] Evershed, *Ghosts of the Somme*, 77–83.
[71] Ibid., 72.
[72] Dominic Bryan, 'Ritual, Identity and Nation: When the Historian Becomes the High Priest of Commemoration', in Grayson and McGarry, eds., *Remembering 1916*, 39.
[73] Ibid., 40.
[74] Beiner, 'Between Trauma and Triumphalism', 377.
[75] Robinson, *Transitional Justice*, 204.

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ground than 'top-down cross-community, inclusive narratives of the past lowered onto society by governments and conflict-resolution bodies'.[76] But if Beiner's exhaustive engagement with the perseverance of hidden narratives and underground memories across two centuries is suggestive of a research agenda for memory of the Troubles, it should lead historians to accounts glossed over by the memorials. 'There is more to public forgetting than meets the eye'.[77] Much work has been done to recover voices marginalised by official commemoration and to explain the persistence of adversarial popular remembrance but there is still a rich vein of muffled voices and muted stories to explore.

[76] Viggiani, *Talking Stones*, 10.
[77] Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance*, 605.

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