

Parading Memory: The Production of Commemoration in the Irish Republic's 90th Anniversary Celebrations of the Battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising

Holly A. Maples

On the 16th of April 2006, the government of the Irish Republic held a military parade in Dublin City in celebration of the 90th Anniversary of the Easter Rising. In June of 2006 another event occurred that further transformed the context of commemoration, and acted to align the past with the present political moment: the 90th Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. Throughout the twentieth century these two events have symbolized opposing ideologies in Irish commemorative practice. Diverse communities in both Northern and Southern Ireland have used key historical events to express current political and cultural ideologies. The 2006 celebrations of both events in the Republic give witness to the radical economic and cultural transformations of contemporary Ireland and can be viewed together as commemorations of that State's future rather than its past. However, as this essay argues, the power of collective nostalgia in the Irish context also offers the community slippage from present concerns to past triumphs.

The 2006 Easter parade began at Dublin Castle and concluded at the Garden of Remembrance. This was the first official commemoration since the summer of 1969, when the parade was suspended because of its perceived connections with the Provisional Irish Republican Army, and in response to the outbreak of violence during

celebrations of the Rising in the North.¹ While the 1966 commemoration had been an optimistic pageant – much like the 2006 parade – intervening remembrances of the Rising became charged with political controversy. The re-instatement of the parade in 2006 was a celebratory affair which reflects both the continuing peace process in Northern Ireland and the current prosperity found in the Republic of the ‘Celtic Tiger’.

While the re-emergence of the Easter Rising parade in 2006 is an expression of the significant political and economic changes on the island as a whole, the 2006 celebration of the Battle of the Somme emphasizes the Republic’s increasing interests in Continental Europe and the rise of the European Union. For the first time, the Irish Republic joined in to honour the Irish dead in an international commemorative event that included representatives from both sides of the war, commemorating an event that had been excised from Irish history and transformed into a purely British, or Unionist, event. Therefore, this was more than just a celebration of Ireland’s European present and future; the Irish Republic’s presence in the European Memorial Day celebrations of the Somme re-wrote the country’s own commemorative past.

As Fintan O’Toole suggested in the *Irish Times’ Supplement to the Easter Rising*, when we speak of the Rising we are speaking of two things: the myth, and the event.² I would argue, however, that all commemorations have three main components: the myth, the selective event that is being portrayed, and most importantly, the contemporary community who are enacting that commemoration. The 2006 celebrations of the Rising exploited nostalgia for the past to highlight the current prosperity and peace of Celtic Tiger Ireland, while the commemoration of the Battle of the Somme emphasized the Republic’s inclusion in the European Union

¹For a study of the history of commemoration of the Easter Rising in Ireland see Mairin Ni Dhonnchadha and Theo Dorgan, eds., *Revising the Rising* (Derry: Field Day, 1991).

² ‘Easter Rising Supplement’ *The Irish Times*, March 2006.

against the backdrop of the sacrifices and atrocities of World War One. However, by reclaiming the Republic's commemorative celebrations of the Easter Rising, as well as their part in the Battle of the Somme, the Republic of Ireland assisted in the transformation of commemoration events for their own aims. The Irish reclamations of the Easter Rising and Battle of the Somme remembrance celebrations are symbolic constructions of the country's "Road ahead" as well as the one behind.

EASTER RISING AND BATTLE OF THE SOMME: A History of Surrogation

On 1 July 1916, the battle began which had been thought to be the turning point in the First World War, but turned into an engagement which would drag on for months and become one of the biggest disasters of European military history. During the first morning alone over 20,000 British, Scottish, Welsh and Irish soldiers were killed by German firepower with 35,000 wounded and 8,000 German dead; by the end of the Battle of the Somme over a million soldiers from both sides in total were killed or wounded. However, it was not merely the enormity of casualties which gave the Battle of the Somme its notorious reputation, but the fact that the battle, which lasted from July to November, gained only six miles of land for the allied forces. Over the course of five months, the battle line generally remained static with the soldiers burrowing deeper into the trenches. In fact, during World War I, twice as many soldiers died from infection and disease caused by conditions in the trenches themselves than from wounds received in any battle.³ In the numerous memoirs, songs, poems or performances of the time, the Somme only has to be mentioned to evoke mass slaughter, military debacle, and tragedy for both sides of the war. In

³ For detailed research on the history of the Battle of the Somme see: Peter Liddle, *The Battle of the Somme: A Reappraisal* (L.Cooper: London, 1992), and Stewart Ross, *The Battle of the Somme* (Raintree Press, Chicago, 2004). For contemporary accounts of the battle, see: John Buchan & George H. Casamajor, *The Battle of the Somme: The First Phase* (T. Nelson & Sons, New York: 1916).

England, memory of all that went wrong with trench warfare is caught up in the sites of specific battles such as the Somme, Gallipoli, Verdun, Dunkirk, and other such locations of human tragedy. As the *Irish Times* commented in a special report:

For many, the standard, iconic imagery of the Somme, Verdun and Ypres are those of the war itself: the mud-soaked battlefields, the moonscapes of craters, the bare shapeless tree trunks jutting forlornly from the ground, the indistinguishable grey faces trudging in procession to their deaths.⁴

The landscape of battle became a symbolic location of tragic loss for a generation: poignant battlefields of memory and sites of commemoration for years to come.

As the literature of the war has testified – works by the poets Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, David Jones, Isaac Rosenberg and Robert Graves, novels like Erich Maria Remarque's *All's Quiet on the Western Front*, or the memoirs by writers like the nurse Vera Brittan – the cultural memory of World War One in post-war England, France and Germany is one of tragedy. The image of young soldiers destroyed in their thousands in careless campaigns waged by elderly generals is evocative of the more general victimization of the population by the ruling class. David Jones of the Welsh Fusiliers described his foray into Mametz Wood at the Battle of the Somme:

Across upon this undulated board of verdure chequered
Bright
When you look to left and right
Small, drab, bundled pawns severally make effort

⁴ Ruadhán Mac Cormaic, 'Soldiers Songs', *Irish Times*, 4 July 2006.

Battle of the Somme, the Easter Rising has itself been appropriated into a narrative of previous and future struggles for independence and heroic Republican national histories. Joseph Roach describes the appropriation of the past found in both the Easter Rising and Battle of the Somme as a process of surrogation:

...culture reproduces and re-creates itself by a process that can be best described by the word surrogation. In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric. Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure, I hypothesize, survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates.⁶

According to Roach, culture is in a constant process of *surrogation* of memories, events and individuals. The Irish use of surrogates to reflect the networks of culture and identity power structures offers a highly charged playing ground for Roach's understanding of the phenomenon. The symbolic battles over memorial and historical terrain between the Irish Republic, and Northern Irish Orange Order, and Republican parades, gives witness to how the battle of the Somme, the Easter Rising, and other Irish commemorative sites, are surrogated by the Irish and Northern Irish communities.

The Unionist appropriation of the battle of the Somme is just as active a surrogation of collective memory as the Irish Republic's erasure of it. In regards to Joseph Roach's definition of *surrogation*, the Unionist appropriation of the battle of the Somme is in itself an act of violent forgetting. Fintan O'Toole elaborates upon this ironic surrogation of history:

⁶ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996): 2.

In some ways, the Somme posed as many challenges to Unionist as it did to nationalist orthodoxy. In order to remember the battle as a glorious sacrifice (contrasted to the stab-in-the-back of treacherous Catholics in the Easter Rising), it was necessary to forget its essential obscenity. In order to use the memory of the Somme to bolster obedience to authority, it was necessary to forget that the courage and self-sacrifice of the troops was betrayed by the folly of their leaders. In order to use the Somme as a marker of Protestant character, it was necessary to forget, not merely the presence of Catholic nationalist divisions, but also the fact that the Ulster Division had fought in what was seen as a typically “Irish” way. It lost so many men because those men ran with reckless zeal into the German lines, and were then forced to beat a bloody retreat.⁷

No matter how the Ulster Unionists strategically misinterpreted the battle their appropriation of the Somme became an act of surrogation, a claiming of sectarian ownership over a uniform commemoration of suffering which affected both communities.

The Unionist surrogation of the Somme began with the commencement of battle being delayed by a day. Due to an act of fate, the battle, which was supposed to have begun at the end of June, started on the same day as the Battle of the Boyne. As early as 1917, only a year later, the commemoration of the Belfast Twelfth focused on the Somme’s coincidence with traditional Ulster victories. Dominic Bryan describes this fusion of the Somme with the Ulster Unionist cause in his book *Orange Parades: The Politics of Ritual, Tradition and Control*:

⁷ Fintan O’Toole, ‘Why We Remember’, *Irish Times*, 4 July 2006.

On 1 July 1916 it was the 36th (Ulster) Division that spearheaded the attack at the Battle of the Somme. Within two days 5,500 men were killed or wounded (Bardon 1992: 455), and back in Belfast press reports of the glorious push were soon joined by the lists of the casualties. Orangeism had a blood sacrifice and renewed military and political legitimacy... Colonel Wallace spoke of the new 'glorious first of July' since it coincidentally took place on the same date as the Battle of the Boyne using the old calendar. He recounted that men had 'sashes over their shoulders' and drove the enemy before them 'on the banks of the Somme, as their fathers had done 226 years before on the banks of the Boyne'.⁸

From a devastating battle of diverse Allied military companies to a concentrated act of triumphant Protestant might, the surrogation of the Somme was so successfully realized that the Irish Catholic contribution to the entire war was erased, by both Unionist and Republican communities. While the nationalist World War One soldiers were forgotten, the Ulster soldiers' battles turned victims into victors, and transformed the war in a desire to create Protestant heroes for the struggle against Irish independence. Whereas the English recorded mass casualties in the "War to End All Wars," the Irish Unionists commemorated the triumph of Ulster courage and their noble sacrifice for the Motherland. The Somme commemorations in Northern Ireland have been so separated from the historic events that, according to Fran Brearton, "The stereotype of the martial Irishman - valiant, aggressive, heroic, with a daredevil spirit - is seemingly remote from the stereotype of the Ulster Unionist - entrenched, defensive, immovable."⁹ However, Brearton goes on to describe the "inadequacies of those stereotypes" revealed by the actual events of the Battle of the Somme, where on

⁸ Dominic Bryan, *Orange Parades: The Politics of Ritual, Tradition and Control* (London: Pluto Press, 2000): 55-56.

⁹ Fran Brearton, cited in Fintan O'Toole, 'Why We Remember', *Irish Times*, 4 July 2006.

the first of July the Ulster troops charged valiantly ahead of their comrades during the battle and were tragically caught in between the two lines, so that many of their numbers were gunned down by Allied rather than Axis forces.¹⁰

While the Unionists expanded their part in the battle, the Irish nationalist historical narrative erased the Battle of the Somme, as Declan Kiberd states:

For decades after independence, the 150,000 Irish who fought in the Great War (for the rights of small nations and for Home Rule after the cessation of hostilities, as many of them believed) had been officially extirpated from the record. No government representative attended their annual commemoration ceremonies in Christ Church: and none publicly sported a poppy.¹¹

By the 1990s, however, the Irish Republic began to re-examine the part played by Irish soldiers in the battles of the Somme and other campaigns of the Great War. With the development of the European Union and increasing globalization, the search began for collective historic experiences which drew Ireland and the Irish people into the fold of the greater European community. The forgotten history of World War One perhaps began to seem as problematic as its memory had earlier done during the formation of the Republic. The Irish contribution of the Battle of the Somme now offered a possible representation of Ireland's contribution to this collective European tragedy. While Ireland remained neutral during the Second World War and could not take part in the wide-scale international D-Day commemorations of 1994, the Battle of the Somme was a perfect place to insert itself into the embrace of the European

¹⁰ Fran Brearton, cited in Fintan O'Toole, 'Why We Remember', *Irish Times*, 4 July 2006.

¹¹ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage Press, 1996): 239.

Union. During the media attention surrounding the 2006 celebrations, Fintan O'Toole illustrates the danger of this oversight in the *Irish Times*:

Because it had such a huge impact on human self-understanding, the Somme ought to have been a part of Irish official memory, even if not a single Irish soldier had taken part. That in fact Irish involvement in the Somme was at least as prominent in proportional terms as that of any of the other combatant nations ought to have assured it a prominent place in our sense of our collective past. Yet, for at least 70 years, the memory of the Somme gave way to other battles of remembrance, as competing versions of Irish history dug their own trenches.¹²

The Irish erasure of its contribution to the First World War may have been a response to a combination of the Republic's discomfort with its own imperialist past, and the Ulster Unionists' appropriation of the massacre as part of its narrative of loyalty to the Crown. However, no matter what occurred during the past ninety years, as O'Toole and others argued in 2006, the new climate of Irish commemorative history and its contribution to the European community has returned the focus to the Somme and the Irish contribution to a wide scale European tragedy.

COMMEMORATION FOR A NEW ERA

Many cultures offer commemorations of past individuals and events. However, at times, societies develop particular climates for commemoration, moments in history when the need to celebrate the past forms a significant part of the national practice. The climate of commemoration may be due to shifting values in a society, or

¹² Fintan O'Toole, 'Why We Remember', *Irish Times*, 4 July 2006.

moments of radical change, events which create the need to re-affirm a culture's past or future due to the fear of losing that history altogether. Due to the globalization of its economy, the current wave of immigration and the recent increase of wealth into the country, the Republic of Ireland has been witness to multiple transformations of its community and landscape, and to its very identity. These transformations have caused a significant re-evaluation of the Irish nation and, indeed, what it means to be "Irish" in all areas of the country's social, political and economic spheres. During this transitional period, centennial and commemorative celebrations have occurred in every aspect of Irish life. These celebrations have encapsulated political events like that of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, the bicentennial of the 1798 Rebellion, the births and deaths of historical figures, like the Beckett Centenary – for which the Fianna Fáil government paid €800,000 – and, even those of fictional occurrences as with *Bloomsday*, a centennial celebration in honour of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

As the wave of commemorations hit the nation, we must pause to ask, who are these celebrations for? What is the purpose of commemorations and whom does it benefit? In essence, what is being commemorated: macro or micro history, or a nostalgic longing for less complex struggles and a retreat back to a time with more consistent understandings of "Ireland" and "Irishness"? In the following examination of the recent Irish commemorative events of the 90th Anniversary of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, this essay illustrates that no matter how diverse commemorative events may be, they all reveal the anxieties of their own contemporary identities and the desire, through commemorative rites, to manipulate the past into a palatable form for present imaginings of a community's historical

legacy. Commemorative events aim to establish an understanding – or affirmation – of a community’s own identity.

The act of commemoration can be read as an analysis of contemporary social and political aims and mentalities. By focusing on the act of commemoration itself and the current Irish Republic’s commemorative history, I argue that the commemorative parades in the Republic of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme are performances of contemporary economic, political and social power over the country’s own past. The Irish Republic’s memorial history of the Battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising illustrate how commemorations function as performative *acts* of both collective cultural identity and pastness. A national commemoration is not only the celebration of past events and past cultures, but a deliberate construction of the past for present and future communities, cultures, politics and policies.

COMMEMORATION AND NATIONAL MEMORY: Politics of A Chosen Past

Memory is what binds a community together; it is through mnemonic triggers that a group of individuals find a common heritage, a common past. For a community whose identity is under threat, it is “the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories,”¹³ according to Ernest Renan, which helps to form or create a nation. In this way, popular memory is an essential part of the formation of the nation.

Commemorative events –such as centennials, monuments, parades, or festivals – all play active roles in that formation through the building of collective memory.

According to Ian McBride, “[m]emories are constantly being described, narrated, illustrated and commemorated in order to inscribe them upon the public memory.

¹³ Ernest Renan, ‘What is a Nation?’, in *Becoming National: A Reader*, eds. Geoff Eley & Ronald Grigor Suny (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 52-54.

These evocations of popular memory are not simply important, but, rather, necessary for the formation of a society.”¹⁴ Moreover, the commemorations of public memory are platforms for a community to enact that memory and, by doing so, make the public subscribe to the official (or on the other hand, counter-) memory being created. Thus the community can perform not only their position within collective history, but also their place within a society. A commemoration is a complicit *act* of a people towards its community.

However, a commemoration, like any organised event, is constructed. The commemoration is deliberately planned to fulfil a certain agenda for its orchestrators. According to Pierre Nora, such events replace the loss of ritual in society; they are the *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory) which “mark the rituals of a society without ritual”¹⁵, creating simulacra of a forgotten past which manipulate the plastic form of history into palatable forms for the current society:

Lieux de memoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organise celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally.¹⁶

Commemorative celebrations offer a space for such sites of memory to be offered to a public not only lacking such sites of nostalgia, but longing for them. These ‘ritualized’ performances offer an authenticating ritual for the construction of collective memory. The *lieux de memoire* allows historical events to become

¹⁴ Ian McBride, ‘Memory and National Identity in Modern Ireland’, in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed. Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 1-42.

¹⁵ Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire’, *Representations* No. 26, Special Issue: ‘Memory and Counter-Memory’, (1989): 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

mythicized, transformed from a moment of history into a site of collective ontological belonging.

The performance aspect of a commemoration, like a parade or rally, is developed not only by the event organizers but by its audience as well. The audience participates within the event (i.e. through singing and dancing, applause, cheering or other activities) playing an active role in the performative aspect of commemoration. Thus the people are demonstrating their solidarity within the national structure through their very presence and participation in the event.¹⁷ Anthropologist Kelly Askew describes this duologue which occurs between a people and its country in civic celebrations and commemorative displays. In her study of public events and traditional music in Tanzania, Askew writes of how, upon arrival in Tanga, the president of Tanzania reinforced his “political and social superiority” while “the youths and musicians had performed their loyalty to the state” through the presentation of a festive display of allegiance and power by the witnesses and participators of the event.¹⁸ Through the “festive display” all participants and witnesses tacitly present their loyalty (or dissent) to the state by the very nature of the commemoration. Askew’s study of Tanzania is strangely apposite to commemoration in the Irish context. The Irish Republic constructs parades or commemorative events to display the nation to the populace; however, the populace also perform their own place within the nation through civic performances. Commemorative performance practices fuse the public sense of “nation-hood” to the State itself. Even by their very presence, the audience, willing or not, presents a national body for the national event.

¹⁷ In his account of the celebrations surrounding the American Revolution, Waldstreicher spoke of these performative events as: "Celebrations were no afterthoughts to independence, nor were they mere symbolizations of accumulated oedipal anxieties. They were anticipated, deliberate, necessary responses to the Declaration of Independence." David Waldstreicher, 'Rites of Rebellion, Rites of Assent: Celebrations, Print Culture, and the Origins of American Nationalism', *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 1 (1995): 47.

¹⁸ Kelly Askew, *Performing the Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002): 4-5.

Through verbal and physical acts at a commemorative event, the audience becomes integrated into the celebration and performs its own role, or multiple roles, within it. The physical body of the audience becomes transformed into a national formation of identity, a symbol of the nation within these commemorations by its mass form. In *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton describes how memory becomes embodied in these performances through the performative acts of community: “In habitual memory, the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body.”¹⁹ The recurring rituals of commemorative performance do not merely re-instate accepted memory in the audience’s mind, but rather inscribe the memory upon the bodies of the audience. Commemorative performance, through audience applause and consensual participation, creates the embodiment of living memory. Through these commemorative acts, the audience is transformed from passive watcher into active participant in the political struggle towards nationhood.

Commemorative performances keep alive past events while, at the same time, they dictate which events of the past will be continued in the future. Consequently, the past is a malleable creature constantly shifting and being shifted by contemporary society and the individuals that make up that society. Through commemoration and revisionist history, the past becomes a substance to be shaped and formed according to what is needed within it. The past is not only “chosen” but formed and transformed into a substance necessary for contemporary consumption. The past is constructed in order to fit in with the designs of the commemoration organizers and, at the same time, that of the public imagination.

¹⁹ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 24.

THE CLIMATE OF COMMEMORATION

The elaborate Easter Rising parade in 1966 appeared a celebration of the economic expansion seen by the Irish Republic in the mid-sixties. The celebration was framed by the press to honour not only the 1916 martyrs, but also the significant changes to Ireland during the radical decade of the 1960s. However, the increasing tension in Northern Ireland caused the Rev. Ian Paisley and the Ulster Constitution Defence Committee to have a train of parade participants from the South to be barred from entering Northern Ireland.²⁰ By the spring of 1967, the rising violence in the North transformed the 1916 events into a symbol of Northern Irish Republican protest. On 29 March 1970 an Easter parade in Derry culminated in violence with several parade participants injured.²¹ Commemorations of the Easter Rising became so connected to “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland that during the subdued memorial marking its 75th anniversary, Taoiseach, Charles J. Haughey was asked by members of the press why he was holding the ceremony at all.²² Haughey’s commemoration was a small, hushed affair, consisting of speeches from a few veterans and the placement of flowers around the General Post Office in Dublin, a focal point of resistance during the Rising. However, public hostility to the event, as a result of the ongoing violence of the IRA, was such that even these minor commemoration activities appeared a dangerous threat to the Irish Republic and the island as a whole. Due to such a politically-charged history, the reinstatement of the march in 2006 and the surrounding activities in honour of the Easter Rising was cause for celebration by the Republic, according to the Fianna Fáil government, as a powerful statement of the successful peace process in the North. Bertie Ahern, the Irish Taoiseach,

²⁰ Dominic Bryan, *Orange Parades: The Politics of Ritual, Tradition and Control* (London: Pluto Press, 2000): 80.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 87.

²² Declan Kiberd, ‘The Elephant of Revolutionary Forgetfulness’, in *Revising the Rising*, ed. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha & Theo Dorgan (Derry: Field Day Press, 1991).

demonstrated his faith in the development of peace in Northern Ireland by declaring that the commemoration would be an opportunity for “Remembrance, reconciliation and renewal.”²³ However, as Mary McAleese, the Irish president asserted, in the post-Celtic Tiger Republic, the 1916 Rising was an event that goes beyond the conflict in Northern Ireland, or the birth of the Republic: “We rightly look back on our past with pride at the men and women who lived in very different times from ours, and who made sacrifices of their lives so that we would enjoy these good times.”²⁴ In essence, McAleese declared that the parade of the Easter Rising was a demonstration of today’s prosperity as well as yesterday’s sacrifice. Although these statements were criticized in the Irish press as attempts by the Fianna Fáil party to use the commemorations to boost their support in upcoming elections for Dublin in 2006, the commemorations of the 1916 Rising were a celebration of the future’s predestined victory over its past.

With such extreme changes in the population and topography, there are many areas within the abundance of Celtic Tiger Ireland that are not emphasized by the Fianna Fáil government. The disparity between rich and poor, the abuse of drug and alcohol consumption and the rising racism in Ireland show a different side to the newly prosperous country so lauded by Mary McAleese during the Easter Rising commemoration ceremony. The conflicting view of Celtic Tiger Ireland is one of prosperity and poverty, globalization and an increasing racial and cultural tensions developing among its populace. In his criticism of much of the confident rhetoric around its current prosperous and seemingly changing ideologies of the Irish landscape, Luke Gibbons describes this ironic contradiction in the country:

²³ *BBC News*, 16 April 2006, cited on <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4913392.stm>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The dramatic shift from being a country impaired by chronic unemployment and emigration until the 1980s to being a host-culture for immigration in the 1990s is accordingly welcomed as a sign of growing multiculturalism in which Ireland can at last take leave of its troubled past. However, as we have seen, the suffering bound up with historical injustice and sustained cultural loss does not lend itself to overnight cures, and it may well be the process of disavowal, the surface optimism of a culture in self-denial, which poses the greatest problem to a genuine engagement with cultural difference.²⁵

Gibbons posits that the Irish culture should confront its history before it can truly engage in a critical interrogation of its current culture beyond the surface of economic and social prosperity. However, Gibbons's assertions that the Irish are not willing to engage in a study of their past and only look to the future ignores the continuous examinations of the past found in contemporary Irish cinema, literature, theatre and commemorative practice. Moreover, Gibbons' belief that it is through the examination of the Irish colonial past that an understanding of multiculturalism and modernity will occur in contemporary Irish society denies the possibility that the past can also offer a place for escape from the present; a nostalgic journey into a history with events that can both justify existing displays of identity, and help to inculcate that identity into an intractable, adherent force. In essence, the construction of collective memory aids in the formation a barricade against change.

In the current community of an evolving Ireland, where the understanding of "Irishness" is in flux, commemorative celebrations become a way to venerate not only the past, but also to re-affirm traditional understandings of Irishness.

²⁵ Luke Gibbons, 'The Global Cure? History, Therapy and the Celtic Tiger', in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, eds. Michael Cronin, Peadar Kirby & Luke Gibbons (London: Pluto Press, 2002): 105.

Commemorations are more necessary when a community is in transition and its identity is under threat. Ernest Renan describes how the past and representations of the past help to bind a community together through the remembrance of collective sacrifice. The nation is formed and reformed through contemporary representations of the past.

A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life.²⁶

As seen with Fianna Fáil's manipulation of the Easter Rising for its own governmental propaganda, commemoration events and centennials are powerful because, according to Linda Hutcheon, the intangibility of the past makes it an ideal platform on which to raise present issues. The nebulous construction of collective national memory creates an emotional tie to an imagined past that holds a powerful grip over a community. Hutcheon describes this as manufacturing a feeling of nostalgia through contemporary commemorative events. "It is the very pastness of the past," Hutcheon suggests, "its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia's power."²⁷ The malleability of the past to reconstitute itself into the image of present belief systems makes it the ideal source for current tensions to play

²⁶ Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?', in *Becoming National: A Reader*, eds. Geoff Eley & Ronald Grigor Suny (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 52-54.

²⁷ Linda Hutcheon, 'Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern', in University of Toronto English Library (19 January 1998) [UTEL Criticism and Theory Resources] (Toronto, Canada, 1998 [cited on 3 March 2000]); available from www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html. Cited in Peter Glazer, *Radical Nostalgia: Spanish Civil War Commemoration in America* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005): 37.

themselves out. While twenty-first century Ireland encompasses multivalent communities of diverse cultures, races and religions, commemorations and centennial events of the past century help to create a comforting nostalgia for the public by celebrating the Ireland of the early twentieth century with its supposedly homogenous identity and traditional struggles between the colonized and the colonizer. With England as the colonial “other,” turn-of-the-century Ireland is perceived by many in the present to have had a common enemy and a firm commitment to shaping its own sense of “Irishness,” an identity that is now perceived as under threat in a more visibly global Ireland.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Ireland was a period of active cultural and political productivity and major change in the country, a time of admirable achievements to commemorate in any era. However, the study and commemoration of these achievements can not be looked at outside of their current cultural context. It is not the past that changes, but contemporary culture’s relationship to it. In P.J. Matthews’s work on the Celtic Revival, published in 2003, he comments that “At a time when the homogenizing pressures of globalization on local cultures have registered as a major concern with cultural criticism, the achievements, as well as the failures, of the Irish revival may have much to teach us about the cultural dynamics of the Ireland in the twenty-first century.”²⁸ As Matthews argues, a new and vigorous understanding of the past may help Ireland, or any culture, to throw light upon current changes, or current cultural transformations. If Ireland at the turn of the millennium is witnessing vast transformations of its landscapes and communities, it can be no more radical a transformation than that seen at the turn of the previous century. In this way, the celebration of a centenary event remains a

²⁸ P. J. Mathews, *Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Fein, the Gaelic League and the Co-Operative Movement* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003): 148.

powerful victory of past achievement and of established change for a society looking for answers to its current evolution by acknowledging those in its history.

Commemorative practice in the Irish Republic transforms history for contemporary national and communal agendas. Through the fostering of collective nostalgia, the present and the past can be placed in opposition with one another to highlight, or alleviate, anxieties over radical transformations of the community and the nation.

During the 90th Anniversary celebration, the Republic of Ireland's decision to join in the European commemoration of the Battle of the Somme remains a part of its contemporary emphasis on inclusion in the European Union. By reclaiming their own part of this particular battle, and in World War One as a whole, the Republic of Ireland assisted in the transformation of a commemoration event for its own aims. The need to memorialize this tragic event now, ninety years after it happened, is significant in that it goes beyond an individual level (with most, if not all, of the soldiers who witnessed this battle being dead, and therefore unable to be honoured or affected by the commemoration) to a communal, or inter-communal event. As the first Irish minister to participate in a Somme Commemoration, Mary Hanafin the Minister of Education, clarifies: "It's not so much that we are interested in history for the sake of remembering, but in history for what we can learn from it, and how we can move forward from it."²⁹ The Irish participation in the memorial event became symbolic of the contemporary political climate in both Northern and Southern Ireland. "For the Irish people to commemorate that is hugely significant," Hanafin explained, "It shows the improved relations between North and South, and between England and Ireland."³⁰ In the commemoration of an event from the "long past," the tragedies of World War One had lost their grip on the European community; the Irish reclamation

²⁹*Irish Times*, 3 July 2006.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

of the Battle of the Somme is a symbolic construction of the country's place within the European community of the early twenty-first rather than twentieth century.

The 90th Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme was emphasized as an “act of healing” between the former Allies and Axis powers, (Germany was delighted to participate in the commemorative activities alongside Britain and France), between the Irish and British, and Northern and Southern Ireland. Nevertheless, despite the noble rhetoric surrounding the ceremonies, some old conflicts arose. Ian Paisley denied that the commemoration had anything to do with finding similarities between Ulstermen and the IRA, while Britain offended Ireland with Prince Charles's oversight in forgetting to acknowledge Ireland as one of the countries that experienced overwhelming losses during the war.³¹

The commemoration in Ireland of the Battle of the Somme absorbed the event within the greater legacy of Irish commemorations. The Irish contribution to the First World War was swiftly transformed from a British commemorative activity to a distinctly Irish one. Bertie Ahern was quick to liken the Irish acts of heroism in the Somme to that of the Easter Rising, and thus transform Irish fighting for Imperialist “King and Country” into an act of Irish national heroism and sacrifice. As the Taoiseach declared, “More than 5,000 men of the 36th Ulster Division fell in the first two days in July 1916. They fought alongside 200,000 Irish men from every county of Ireland. Their bravery was no less than that shown by the insurgents of Easter Week.”³² By making clear connections between the two battles of 1916, Ahern, among other members of the Fianna Fáil government and the Irish media, attempted

³¹ Charles mentioned Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India but did not mention Ireland at all. Later his press secretary assured the *Irish Times* that Prince Charles did not deliberately leave out Ireland, but the oversight rankled none-the-less. See *Irish Times*, 4 July 2006.

³² *Irish Times*, 29 June 2006.

to justified their shift in Irish commemorative history and transform the public's understanding of the significance of the Battle of the Somme as an *Irish* conflict on par with that of the Easter Rising. While on the first of July 2006, the Irish government became a part of the European Somme commemoration activities in France, in Ireland they continued memorial activities and honoured the event. Bertie Ahern emphasised that the Irish commemoration of the Battle of the Somme and the reinstatement of the Easter Rising parade were both acts of re-appropriation:

[The Easter Rising Commemoration] Televised live, the ceremony had been abandoned with the outbreak of the modern Troubles in the North. However, the ruling Fianna Fail party, which Mr Ahern leads, judged that it was a propitious moment to "reclaim" a part of the state's history, which had been "colonised" by Sinn Fein, the Provisional IRA's political wing. Last week Mr Ahern unveiled a postage stamp commemorating the Battle of the Somme, in a very public acknowledgement of Ireland's British military history.³³

Both of these commemorative events were, as Bertie Ahern argued, the re-appropriation of colonized history (one by the IRA and the other, fittingly, by the Ulster Unionists). The act of resurrecting history became, for the Fianna Fáil government, yet another triumph of Ireland's future over its past. Moreover, the triumph was not only over a terrible battle in history, but over the *rights* of commemoration itself. The Irish Republic's appropriation of what has long been considered a Unionist memorial is also an act of defiance against the Northern Irish conflict's binary of historical events and commemoration practice.

³³ *Irish Times*, 29 June 2006.

COMMEMORATING THE FUTURE

Commemoration acts to bind communities together through the *imagined* past. These *imaginings* are created, not solely through print culture as previously noted in Benedict Anderson's work, but also through rituals of performance. Collective memory is important because it is what reinforces our understanding of ourselves and our community. Individual memory may not be reinforced as it is both unpredictable and constantly shifting. It is through collective imaginings that our world takes on solid, concrete form; as Ian McBride notes, the past becomes "stabilised"³⁴ through this collective process.

The recent commemorations of the Battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising reflect contemporary societal change in the Irish Republic's attitude to its past. While the 2006 Battle of the Somme commemorations act as a celebration of Ireland's participation within the greater European community, the recent anniversary of the Easter Rising represents the triumphant prosperity of the new economy over past struggles and economic deprivation. Moreover, both of these events influence the way the Irish community perceive its future and its past, and instigate, perhaps, other social movements of revisionist history and memorial healing within the community itself.

³⁴ "When we recall the past, then, we do so as members of our groups -a family, a local community, a workforce, a political movement, a church or a trade union." Ian McBride, 'Memory and National Identity in Modern Ireland', in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed. Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 6.

WORK CITED

BBC News, 16 April 2006.

Askew, Kelly, *Performing the Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002).

Bryan, Dominic, *Orange Parades: The Politics of Ritual, Tradition and Control* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

Buchan, John & Casamajor, George H., *The Battle of the Somme: The First Phase* (T. Nelson & Sons, New York: 1916).

Connerton, Paul, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Cronin, Michael, Kirby, Peadar & Gibbons, Luke, eds. *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

Cormaic, Ruadhán Mac, 'Soldiers Songs' *The Irish Times*, 4 July 2006.

Dorgan, Theo & Ni Dhonnchadha, Mairin eds. *Revising the Rising* (Derry: Field Day, 1991).

Dungan, Myles, 'Fighting Amnesia' *The Irish Times*, 4 July 2006.

'Easter Rising Supplement' *The Irish Times*, March 2006.

Glazer, Peter, *Radical Nostalgia: Spanish Civil War Commemoration in America* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005).

Irish Times, 29 June 2006.

Irish Times, 3 July 2006.

Jones, David, *In Parenthesis* (New York: New York Review Press, 1937). Reprinted (New York: New York Review Press: 2003).

Kiberd, Declan, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage Press, 1996).

Liddle, Peter, *The Battle of the Somme: A Reappraisal* (L.Cooper: London, 1992).

Mathews, P.J., *Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Fein, the Gaelic League and the Co-Operative Movement* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003).

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

Nora, Pierre, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire' *Representations* No. 26, Special Issue: *Memory and Counter-Memory* (1989): 7-24.

O'Toole, Fintan, 'Why We Remember' *The Irish Times*, 4 July 2006.

Renan, Ernest, 'What Is a Nation?' *Becoming National: A Reader*, Ely, Geoff & Ronald Grigor Suny, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 41-55.

Roach, Joseph, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

Ross, Stewart, *The Battle of the Somme* (Raintree Press, Chicago, 2004).

Strinati, Dominic, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004).

Waldstreicher, David, 'Rites of Rebellion, Rites of Assent: Celebrations, Print Culture, and the Origins of American Nationalism' *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 1 (1995): 37-61.

Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature, Marxist Introductions* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1977).