SELECTIVE MEMORIES.

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*Towards Commemoration: Ireland in war and revolution 1912-1923*, John Horne and Edward Madigan (eds), Royal Irish Academy, 182 pp, €15.00. ISBN 978-1908996176

This book arises from a conference led by the Centre for War Studies, TCD, in association with the Princess Grace Library Monaco, in which historians, civil society activists and commentators met in October 2011 and debated the forthcoming centenary decade of World War 1 and the Irish revolutionary era. The objective was to contribute to the process of re-evaluation, re-imagination and remembrance of the past that this centenary of commemoration of a nation in war and revolution will inspire and also to point to where the pitfalls and potentials of this process of commemoration lie. The hope is to arrive at a richer understanding of the decade and of the whole of the twentieth century through an open and creative engagement with the past of war and revolution. The book is organised in three sections; histories, memories and commemorations; the plural, as explained by Edward Madigan in the introduction, signals the diversity of views contained in each of these interpretations of the past.

The Histories section is bracketed by the essays of William Mulligan on the European background of war and violence to the pre-war period 1911-14 and by John Horne’s essay on the continuing wars of 1917-23 that did not end with the armistice. Both set the events of the Irish revolution in a wider “European Wars” context, thus negating any view of Irish exceptionalism. Mulligan convincingly situates the militarisation of first the Ulster Unionists, then Irish nationalism and Irish labour, in a European-wide logic of violence at the level of the greater and lesser powers that leached down into civil society. This European-wide militarisation of politics ended the state monopoly of violence. John Horne enlarges the time frame of the Great War, showing that the violence started in 1912, before August 1914, did not end until 1924, which is to demonstrate that Ireland was particular but not unique in the experience or duration of violence. The time period of his essay covers the transition from a Europe of empires to a Europe of nations in which the forces of nationality, democracy and class came to the fore in shaping events. For these two essays alone this book is worth buying.

Stuart Ward addresses the Gallipoli campaign and its commemorations in Australia and Ireland. In a judicious argument, he contrasts the Australian experience, in which the campaign became the foundation “war-making” event of Australian nationhood with the Irish experience, in which it became a prime exemplar in delegitimising the British state and empire. This was despite the striking similarities in the experience and initial responses to Gallipoli of Australians and Irish: for both communities this was the first time that a “national” army had been in the field. Ward then examines the commemorative legacy of Gallipoli and the several iterations that have remoulded the memory for both communities, culminating in an Irish State commemoration at Suvla Bay in 2010 that appropriated the Irish dead of Gallipoli in a theatrical ceremony of recovered memory.

Catriona Pennell, using the Irish volunteer recruits to the British army as her exemplar, addresses the “Anglo-centric” view of the Great War and its resistance to academic findings of the international makeup of British forces. She illustrates the persistence of this parochialism through a fascinating analysis of the way the war is presented and studied in the British educational curriculum and also through British media presentation of Queen Elizabeth II’s visit to Ireland. The fact that, as Dr Pennell says, it takes a lot of people other than the English to make a “world war” needs to be addressed, though with Michael Gove setting the agenda for British education it seems unlikely that her subtle arguments will get a hearing.

Fearghal McGarry, using the Bureau of Military History witness statements that he has mined so fruitfully, examines the ideology of the 1916 revolutionaries and finds little or no republicanism in the classic sense. Even within the IRB membership he finds little republican ideology. Instead he finds a general militarism, cultural nationalism and Catholic mysticism to be the dominant ideologies. In his view therefore this will present a challenge to the way in which 1916 will be commemorated, as it clearly cannot be presented as a “republican” birth of the nation. While accepting the point that Ireland had a republican revolution without a republican mass movement, with all the connotations of secularism and democracy of such a movement, the force of the separatist ideal was also a powerful motivator. The revolutionaries’ quarrel was not with British misgovernment in Ireland, the argument of the home rulers, but with British government in Ireland per se. The popularity of the Great War among the Irish simply added urgency to their vision of the republic as a future project that would follow rather than precede the separatist struggle.

An oddity in the histories section of the book is the essay by Paul Bew on William Lavelle Monypenny, the imperialist and journalist, and his 1913 publication on the ‘Two Nations” in Ireland. The two nations theory has had a long life, from Carlyle to the British and Irish Communist Organisation. The particular significance of Monypenny’s version seems to be that it supports Bew’s view that the genesis of the Ulster crisis was Asquith’s “fundamentally illiberal and coercive policy towards Ireland” rather than the threat of violence of Carson, Craig and their followers. It also adds to Bew’s own rehabilitation of John Redmond’s reputation as the last Irish Liberal. However, that Carson’s speech at Craigavon on September 23rd, 1911, which is the moment the arming of Ulster was launched, predates the April 1912 introduction of home rule would suggest that it was the violence of the Ulster Unionists that counted, not their claim to an ethnicity that started as Irish Protestant, then became Ulster Protestant and finally “Ulster without three counties” Protestant. Could Asquith have responded to that threat by offering, as Bew suggests he should, concessions in the home rule bill, and remain a Liberal?

The 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic by referring to the “dead generations” and to the two hundred years of asserting the right of Ireland to self-government, attempted to fix the Rising in a uniquely Irish context. Yet the proclamation also referred to the “right moment to strike” and the assistance of the Germans, the gallant allies in Europe, and of the American-Irish, thus situating 1916 in the contemporary crisis. The histories section of this book succeeds in widening the debate for the entire revolutionary period in Ireland and in embedding it in the context of the contemporary world wars. In this historians of today have arrived back at the view of the historians of the period. W Alison Phillips, the then Lecky professor of History at TCD, begins his contemporary history of his times, *The Revolution in Ireland 1906-23*, with the election of the Liberal government and the arrival of James Larkin in Ireland. In what would seem a daringly revisionist view for today, Larkin is seen by this strongly Unionist historian as the most potent and dangerous revolutionary in Ireland. Richard Dawson, writing in 1920, in the first sentences of his *Red Terror and Green*, situates the Irish revolution in the context of the Great War and within a Bolshevik assault on the British empire. It seems we are today rediscovering perspectives that came naturally to contemporaries of these events.

The contributors to the “Memories” section explore the experiences of those for whom the period of war and revolution is embedded in their own consciousness as an historical memory, not of events but of family narratives and community folktales. Paul Clarke, journalist and documentary-maker, a Belfast native with a complex background shaped by a Catholic-Nationalist and Protestant-Unionist inheritance, remembers the fiftieth anniversary commemorations of his childhood being shaped by those who had actually experienced World War 1. Straddling the “two traditions”, his memories have the coolness of the detached observer occupying the place between. Bridging the parallel worlds of Protestant and Catholic Belfast he raises the question as to whether identity is “who we say we are” or “who we are told we are”? Heather Jones, the historian of violence against prisoners of war in World War 1, draws on her memories of a Church of Ireland childhood in suburban Dublin of the 1980s and the celebration of Remembrance Sunday, gently, affectionately, persistently teasing out the meaning of the poppy for Protestants in the Republic of Ireland. Her conclusion is that it was an act of communal subversion directed against both the new Catholic powers of the Republic and the Unionist Protestantism of the North. For southern Protestants, commemoration on Remembrance Sunday had no connection with either the State or with Unionism. It was, she suggests, primarily an act of communal intimacy becoming, by the 1980s, another ritual in the Church of Ireland calendar confirming and renewing for that group a sense of local identity and pride in its status as a minority culture and a distinct community.

Tom Hartley, former lord mayor of Belfast, Sinn Féin activist and historian of Belfast’s city cemetery, remembers the experience of another minority, Northern Ireland Catholics. His memory narrates a personal discovery of forms of Irish patriotism that were Protestant, Orange and Unionist through his researches into the history of Belfast City Cemetery. It is a convincing self-analysis of his own and presumably other Sinn Féin activists’ response to the challenge of moving from loyalty to one’s own political view of history to engaging with the totality of history. Ian Adamson, the Ulster-Scots cultural advocate, recounts his own work on the restoration of the Thiepval Ulster Memorial tower and the founding of the highly successful Somme Association. Much of this largely self-congratulatory essay was published earlier as “The Ulster-Scots Movement a personal account” in Wesley Hutchinson & Clíona Ní Riordáin (eds) *Language Issues: Ireland, France, Spain* (2010). Nevertheless it is a valuable memoir of a very significant innovation in inter-communal activism and “grassroots” history.

Tom Burke, military historian and founder of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association, recounts the history of the association and its work in rescuing the RDF from forgetfulness. It asks an interesting question as to why people would join the RDF Association and why people came to lectures and exhibitions on the RDF. Based on carefully kept records of attendance and of comments he suggests that for individuals it was mainly for family research; for the State it was seen as part of the post-Agreement landscape of the “two traditions”.

Brian Hanley, the historian of the IRA, weaves an elegant narrative drawing together family stories of relatives who died as British and as Irish Free State soldiers or as IRA volunteers, his own memory of British war comics and the Irish state’s low-key commemorations of the 70th and 75th anniversaries of the 1916 Rising in 1986 and 1991. As a student of history at Trinity College Dublin it seemed to him that there was a rewriting of history in which the revolutionary foundation of the state was being apologised for, forgetting that it was the British, and not an Irish government, that determined Ireland’s role in the Great War. Hanley’s essay asks difficult questions of the whole cult of commemoration, challenging not only the poppy as a fashion accessory to contemporary British jingoism, but also the narrowly militaristic form of the revived Easter Rising commemorations in the Irish state of the 1990s, excluding precisely those social aspects that made it a revolutionary era.

The third and final section of the book discusses the highly political and state-dominated activities of “commemoration”. This section reads as the most heated and most interesting of the discussions. Keith Jeffrey, historian of Ireland and the Great War, reviews the ebb and flow of commemoration of World War 1 in Ireland, finding an extraordinary range and intensity of commemoration in the period between 1918 and the outbreak of World War II. This goes against the now accepted view of an Irish amnesia on the war dead. The suppression of commemoration during World War II began a decline in ceremonies until the 1980s, when the peace process prompted a remarkable revival. Jeffrey’s essay is a judicious analysis of the way the state (north and south) has used, and continues to use, the dead of the war to bolster political agendas. Craig’s linking of the dead of the Somme to the establishment of Northern Ireland is matched by Ahern’s linking of the same dead to the peace process. Jeffrey’s analysis is optimistic however on the potential of the now distant past to serve as a common ground for divided communities to find creative forms of interaction and sharing. David Fitzpatrick, also an historian of Ireland and World War 1, in his densely argued and provocative essay on historians and commemoration calls for a “good history” of awkwardness and contrariness to combat the “bad history” that is morally evasive, blandly sentimental and clearly designed to serve a current political agenda. I wonder who are the “bad historians” he has in mind. Jay Winter, the doyen of cultural historians of Great War commemoration, explores the use of the words “glory” and “glorious” (the noun and the adjective) in French, British and Irish Great War commemoration cases. He suggests that, in finding glory in death and suffering the Irish are closer to the French than to the British experience. Both French and Irish cultures are Catholic and both situate violence in a revolutionary context, whereas the British tradition is Protestant and focuses commemoration on the sacrifice made by the dead rather than on the killing. The Irish dimension to his argument is heavily reliant on Yeats and O’Casey. Following his argument that language frames memory, the Irish ballad tradition would be perhaps a better source for popular memory; though that the old woman down by the glenside sings “Glory O, Glory O to the bold Fenian men” may confirm his tentative findings.

Anne Dolan, who has written on the history of Civil War commemorations, writes as a militant non-believer among the sects of history and commemoration, doubting whether historians should have any role in the strictly political shows of commemoration. The *Irish Times* journalist Fintan O’Toole, in a serendipitous riposte to Dolan, insists that historians are also citizens and are therefore part of the processes of commemoration with no more or no less ownership of the past that any other. He suggests six principles that should guide historians in the decade of commemoration, with none of which any historian would quarrel.

Pierre Joannon, the Franco-Irish historian and diplomat, offers the French experience of commemoration as a warning to the Irish, no less obsessed with history. The French experience has not led to any sense of a shared past or to reconciliation, but to demands for compensation, resentment and self-contempt. The French state has got itself embroiled in litigation on historical questions because of the “Memory Laws” and it seems the French are becoming heartily sick of commemoration. He advises that history, like drink, is good in moderation but dangerous if taken to excess. His best suggestion for an Irish decade of commemoration would be to bring it into civil society and away from the state and the academy and also to broaden it into a European dimension.

In his conclusion John Horne re-emphasises the centrality of what he terms the “Greater War” of 1912-23 to the contemporary geopolitical and cultural landscape of not only Ireland or Europe but of the world. At the same time he confirms the importance of the national framework so long as it looks beyond the obvious and seeks to encompass the women’s and workers’ movements and the artistic and cultural responses to global war. History and commemoration, he argues, should not be separate and historians must engage in the forthcoming centenaries, not as collaborators in the commemorations by the state but as critical commentators “marking” the centenary events. The objective he sets is that in the triangle of interests, the state, the academy and civil society, the professional historians should work to establish robust connections with the latter independent of the state. Historians should set out to create overlapping and multiple audiences for public history and enrich the public sphere, subverting the already apparent tendency for the “two traditions” to go about commemorating separate histories, or alternatively, for the state to sponsor homogenised and bland sentimentality.

The tensions that lie behind the threefold sections of the book are enriching. Historians are most interested in the “pastness” of the past and its interpretation. They welcome ambiguities and complexities. The denser the history the messier it gets. Commemoration is a political act: it is very much present-minded and it is primarily concerned with using the past to validate the present. It is a key interest of the state and seeks grand and simple gestures. Memory is a subjective moment in which the self becomes also another that both remembers and is remembered. Tensions are therefore to be expected between the practices of the academy, the demands of the state and the expectations of individuals and groups on how each and every significant date is marked, or not marked. By way of illustration; two recent commemorative events are referred to in the essays. One is the 1798 bicentenary, which was overwhelmed by the state and its need for a gesture that would validate the peace process and neutralise the developing standoff at Drumcree. There is an uncomfortable feeling among historians that they were seduced by the state into collaborating in the construction of an unhistorical narrative for the commemorative events in order to bolster its agenda. For the academic contributors to this book the pitfalls of a repeat collaboration are feared. The other event is the visit of Queen Elizabeth II in May 2011, a sequence of grand gestures closely choreographed by the state. That visit and the ceremonies at Croke Park, the Garden of Remembrance and at the War Memorial Park at Islandbridge are positively cited in this book as examples of good commemoration.

The agenda set out in this collection of essays is to conflate the histories, memories and commemorations of both war and revolution in Ireland and so enrich both. At this point in the decade of commemoration it would seem that we are still tending to see these as parallel rather than interlocking texts. An agenda that would widen the context for the history of the Irish revolution, preserving its particular national aspects whilst locating it in the wider world war context, is that of the state and its legitimacy. The British state in Ireland basked in an unprecedented level of legitimacy in August 1914 as Nationalist and Unionist joined in support for war, a fact that propelled the IRB into action. It is the same story across Europe as the war that began with near universal approval eroded the legitimacy of the state and eventually destroyed it in revolution. To what extent may we find that the British state in Ireland was destroyed by its own failure to retain legitimacy rather than by the action of revolutionaries? If this is the case then the centenary of the meeting of the first Dáil Éireann will be as significant as that of the Easter Rising. The agenda for the ceremonies of commemoration are posing most difficulty for the Protestant Ulster Unionist and loyalist tradition and it is likely that the specifically local will be sidelined in favour of generic British military ceremonies marking key battles. Already the centenary of the launch of the Carson trail in 1911 has been ignored and the centenary of the formation of the UVF in April 2013 was marked by loyalist displays from which Unionist politicians were conspicuous by their absence. Future absences from the commemorations, though not from the histories, will be the Irish Convention of 1917-18 that was almost the last “agreed Ireland” before partition.

It is the case that nationalist Ireland is having relatively little difficulty in including the Great War in the calendar of commemoration. This is not surprising as, despite the repeated accusations of hostility to the Great War dead, the Irish State has been sympathetic and supportive of the efforts of commemoration. The difficulty that O’Higgins had with the proposal to build a cenotaph in Merrion Square was not that it was in the heart of the city, as Madigan suggests, but that it would imply a connection with the foundation of the state, based in government buildings just across the road. In any case the Imperial War Graves Commission had already rejected the site as inadequate, despite the enthusiasm of the British Legion’s Irish branch. The culture of commemoration was itself already becoming contentious. In Britain, and in Ireland, it began as an annual bacchanalia celebration of victory, marked in Dublin by assemblies around the statue of William of Orange on College Green and heavy drinking in the Union-flag-bedecked Protestant Conservative Club off St Stephen’s Green. In Britain it was not until 1925 that the government succeeded in turning Armistice Day from a focus for disgruntled war veterans to a day of remembrance for the families of the war dead. The British Legion, often treated with an uncritical sentimentality, was, in Britain, aggressive in pursuing the expulsion of women and non-veterans from the civil service to create jobs for returned soldiers. In Ireland the Legion delighted in making the work of the Imperial War Graves Commission difficult, as detailed in the richly researched and definitive*Remembering the War Dead: British Commonwealth and International War Graves in Ireland since 1945*, by Fergus A D’Arcy (2007). Notice must be taken of the fact that Irish state forces never attacked ex-British army soldiers commemorating their comrades. When they were attacked it was by the IRA, but they made a point of attacking any and every other political group that dared assemble for public meetings. Also, it is worth contrasting the generous treatment by the Irish state of the war dead of the British army with, firstly its own shameful neglect of the ten executed IRA volunteers in Mountjoy whose exhumation did not happen until 2001 and, secondly, the British government’s refusal to return the body of Roger Casement to Ireland until 1965. This would suggest that the main difficulty in the decade of commemoration will be with the tradition that gives primacy to the war acknowledging the validity of the tradition that gives primacy to the revolution: will the poppy give equal respect to the Easter lily? Further complications to the decade of commemoration that we can anticipate will occur in 2018, the centenary of the armistice. This centenary will be commemorated, but the at the end of a summer of remembering the fiftieth anniversaries of 1968 and the civil rights march in Derry that mark the beginning of the Northern troubles. How will commemoration and memory be negotiated? Perhaps the most useful thing historians could contribute to the decade of commemoration would to start right now with assembling an archive of the commemoration process; its planning, the events, online content, books, articles, television and radio programmes; so that future generations will have the material with which to judge how the generation of 2012-23 remembered.