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## Dublin, 1916 ... Phoenix, 2016

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It's a long, long way to Dublin from Phoenix, Arizona, USA. Billing itself as "A Small Slice of Ireland in the Desert," the Arizona Irish Cultural Center (AZICC) attempts to bridge that distance by providing residents of Phoenix and the surrounding area access to range of resources related to Ireland and the Irish diaspora. Located on Central Avenue near downtown, the AZICC complex is a striking architectural anomaly surrounded by bleak mid-century modern office buildings, luxury high-rise condominiums, the Buckminster Fuller-inspired Phoenix Central Library, and the equally unexpected Japanese Friendship Garden of Phoenix. If these environs are decidedly un-Irish, the complex itself has attempted to recreate the look and feel of the Emerald Isle with a replica of a Famine-era Irish cottage, a Great Hall containing a fireplace constructed of stones from County Clare, and, towering over all this, the McClelland Irish Library, modeled on a twelfth-century Norman Castle. These simulacral structures, with their evocative forms and quaint touches, promise to transport visitors to a different world, far from the heat and hustle of downtown Phoenix, where they might connect or reconnect with another way of life, another set of values. Like many other Irish cultural centers around the United States, the AZICC promotes the heritage of Celtic peoples by giving place to a full calendar of cultural programming: language courses, book discussions, genealogy tutorials, film screenings, dance performances, music showcases, traveling exhibitions, and even a Bloomsday Beerfest.

There is no doubt that Irish cultural centers provide a valuable service to Irish immigrants, Irish Americans, and their local communities with such programming. And yet these activities and their settings also raise a number of questions for Irish Americans about the preservation and transmission of their cultural heritage: what events in, images of, and ideas about Ireland should be sanctioned? How should the past be reconstructed or reimagined in relation to the present? What objects, narratives, and identities should be recognized as "Irish"? How should these images of and narratives about Ireland be integrated into the cultural life of the United States? To these we might add the more pointed question of how Irish cultural centers in the United States should negotiate the longstanding divides between Catholic and Protestant, Republic and United Kingdom, cultural nationalism and historical revisionism that have shaped and continue to shape any understanding of what Irish culture is. A significant hazard, of course, is that in their efforts to protect and promote Irish cultural heritage these centers become little more than theme parks of uncritical nostalgia, remote outposts of the heritage industry, where a sanitized and simplified version of Irish culture is presented to their membership and the general public.

The centenary commemorations of the Easter Rising, which took place not just across Ireland, but across the United States and the rest of the globe last year, have brought a new

urgency to these questions about the preservation and transmission of Irish cultural heritage. In Ireland more than 1,800 official events were scheduled to mark the occasion, events ranging from poetry readings at local libraries and art installations in regional museums to the reopening of the renovated Kilmainham Courthouse and a massive military parade through the streets of Dublin on Easter Sunday. In the century since 1916, the Rising has become central to Irish national memory. Many conceive it to be among the most important, if not indeed the most important, event in the history of the island, marking the beginning of the end of British occupation and spiritual birth of an independent nation. But many in Ireland also expressed concern that official commemorations would offer a one-dimensional heroic narrative of 1916 and still others announced worries that such commemorations of the Rising might reawaken old tensions and animosities. It was within this broader context of commemoration that the AZICC took up the project of producing its own 1916 exhibition, “Remembering the Easter Rising: Historical Context and Cultural Legacy.” If putting on such an exhibition in Phoenix meant operating at a remove from some of the tensions and animosities of Irish history, and from many of the myths and prejudices surrounding the Rising, it also meant addressing an American or Irish American audience far less steeped in national memory, far less familiar with the details of the event and the circumstances surrounding it. The organizers carried out this task not simply by reviewing the familiar features of the heroic narrative that has grown up around 1916, but by attempting, with great thoughtfulness and resourcefulness, to add new dimensions to that story: highlighting the role of women in the Rising, the social circumstances in Dublin during the period, the part played by the Irish in the First World War, and the various connections between events in Ireland and activities in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

This approach, with its inclusive scope, offered audiences visiting the AZICC an opportunity to develop a pluralistic understanding of the Rising, by placing the event in a variety of social, political, and cultural contexts. Housed in a large upper chamber of the McClelland Irish Library, “Remembering the Easter Rising” was laid out chronologically in a clockwise sweep around the four walls of the room, with a horseshoe-shaped display in the middle, which was dedicated to various narratives and artifacts that relate directly to the occurrences of 1916. Following the exhibition along this course, the visitor would begin in the distant past, with a panel on the Viking and Norman invasions of Ireland, and proceed past a series of panels recounting such landmarks of Irish history as the Penal Laws, the Act of Union, Catholic Emancipation, and the rise of various nationalist movements, especially the revivalism of the late nineteenth century. Collectively, the panels provided a rapid summary of the deep history of the Rising, which allowed the uninitiated visitor to discern a number of lines of historical force as they converged on the second decade of the twentieth century. The exhibition did not really take on its own force, however, until the visitor arrived at a panel detailing the various forms of organized resistance that emerged in years leading up to the Rising: not just Sinn Féin, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and the Irish Volunteers, but also the Ulster Volunteers, *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Erin), and *Cumann na mBan* (Women’s Council). Too often left out of the story of the rebellion in previous commemorations, *Cumann na mBan* had grown to 60 branches across Ireland, including one in Belfast, by late 1914; and the group played a significant role in arming and equipping Irish Volunteers in advance of the event. The many display cases dedicated to the Rising, its immediate precursors, and its direct aftermath included rare books and first editions such as *James Connolly: Portrait of A Rebel Father* by Nora Connolly O’Brien and *Prison Letters of Countess Markievicz* (with a Preface by Eamon de Valera); and newspapers such as an issue of the *Clan-na-Gael Journal* featuring a cartoon of Pádraig Pearse shaking hands with George Washington, captioned “Fighting the Same Foe for the Same Reasons.” Detailed timelines traced events during the build up to the Rising from April 1914 to April 1916, the activities of

the rebels during the conflict, and (with appropriate symmetry) the activities of the British Forces during the same period. Additional panels and display cases addressed the War of Independence, the Emergency, and the Peace Process in the late nineties, together bringing the story of the Rising toward the twenty-first century and its centenary year. The treatment of the Partition and the Irish Civil War, still sources of strong emotions for Irish denizens and Irish Americans alike, was particularly deft: the panel dedicated to these events rendered the ideals of the various participants in their own words, so that visitors could weigh the claims without prompting and develop their own understanding of the conflict. In this way, the exhibition and the full year of programming that accompanied it – book discussions, multimedia presentations, and scholarly lectures, including a talk on the material cultures of 1916 by Professor Nicholas Allen – offered ample provocations for dialogue about the causes and consequences of the rebellion in Ireland.

One of the most powerful ways that the exhibition encouraged this kind of conversation was by evincing what might be called, in distinction from official commemoration or national heritage, a form of diasporic memory. A longing for homeland and national community is commonly associated with diasporas, and with the Irish diaspora as much as any other, but this sense of detachment does not harmonize with notions of national memory. According to Andreas Huyssen, whereas “national memory presents itself as natural, authentic, coherent and homogeneous,” “diasporic memory in its traditional sense is by definition cut off, hybrid, displaced, split.”<sup>2</sup> This form of memory was evident in the attention that the exhibition offered to the role of Irish Americans in modern Irish history: for instance, a case near the exit displayed a picture of Bill Clinton receiving Gerry Adams at the White House on St. Patrick’s Day 1995, as the US became involved in the Northern Ireland peace process. But it was more poignantly, if more subtly, on display in the many of the objects arrayed throughout the exhibition: the blouse and tailor’s implements, which were period correct but of uncertain provenance; the pocket-sized New Testament, carried in the trenches of the Western Front by the ancestor of an AZICC member; the replica Irish Volunteers uniform, with authentic buttons purchased on eBay; the front page of *The Bisbee Daily Review*, a small-town Arizona paper that ran the headline, “Fires Rage in Dublin as Troops and Rebels Battle for the City” on Saturday April 29, 1916, hours after Pádraig Pearse and his forces had surrendered. For visitors to the exhibition, these artifacts provided the opportunity for close physical contact with objects connected to a distant history, but they also gave tangible form to hybrid, variegated, and sundry stories that span the divide between then and now, between the personal and the political, between Ireland and America. Perhaps the most remarkable piece in the entire exhibition was a “Safe Passage Permit” from the Dublin Metropolitan Police allowing its bearer, Rosalie Byrne, to ride her bike through the city center in order to attend college during the week of the Rising. The permit was provided to the exhibition by Rosalie’s granddaughter, Dr. Adrienne Leavy, a native of Dundalk who immigrated to the United States after being called to Irish Bar and who eventually completed a Ph.D. in English on Thomas Kinsella at Arizona State University.

It would be wrong, then, to dismiss the exhibition for dealing in the unnatural, inauthentic, incoherent, and heterogeneous. In myriad ways, “Remembering the Easter Rising,” worked to revise established narratives in the context of diaspora and globalization, migration and transnationalism, which generate unexpected processes of identity production and new understandings of national history. One final example from the exhibition will serve to demonstrate the persistence of these processes: a period copy of the sheet music for “It’s a Long, Long Way to Tipperary,” the cover of which features the image of a kilt-wearing “Tommy Atkins” (slang for a common soldier in the British Army during the First World War) and the headline “The Song They Sing As They March Along.” So closely associated

with the First World War, the song has almost nothing to do with national chauvinism or armed aggression and everything to do with diasporic unease:

Up to mighty London  
 Came an Irishman one day.  
 As the streets are paved with gold  
 Sure, everyone was gay,  
 Singing songs of Piccadilly,  
 Strand and Leicester Square,  
 Till Paddy got excited,  
 Then he shouted to them there:  
 It's a long way to Tipperary,  
 It's a long way to go.  
 It's a long way to Tipperary  
 To the sweetest girl I know!

The lyrics express the predicament of many Irishmen who had come to England in the early years of the twentieth century in search of economic opportunity and perhaps a bit of metropolitan excitement, but who came to experience their displacement in terms of loss and longing. To be sure, despite the fun it pokes at this poor “Paddy,” the song has been sung often enough in the spirit of Irish homesickness. But its author, Jack Judge, was in fact a British music hall entertainer who had never visited Ireland (though he was born to Irish parents) and who claimed that the name Tipperary came to him “out of the blue,” when (so at least one version of the stories goes) he wrote the song to win a five-shilling bet in 1912. The tune only became famous, however, after a war correspondent for the *Daily Mail* overheard the Connaught Rangers Regiment singing it as they marched through northern France in 1914. Later that year it was recorded by the legendary Irish tenor John McCormack and it soon became one of the most popular tunes of the war, sung as a marching song by not just Irish soldiers, but American, British, French, Russian, and even German infantrymen, as well. In 1916, another English newspaper, the *Daily Mirror*, published the lyrics in the languages of the British Empire as a means of promoting loyalty to the Allied war effort. In the century since then, the song has been belted out by all manner of unlikely singers, including 67 British volunteers who were released from a Nationalist prison in Hendaye near the end of the Spanish Civil War and who marched across the International Bridge in their Spanish Republican uniforms as they chanted the chorus. Later, the song would be played as Snoopy’s theme music in *It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown* and sung by a German U-boat crew in the groundbreaking 1981 film *Das Boot*.

None of this, of course, lessens the historical significance of the song nor precludes its status as an unofficial anthem of the Irish diaspora. Rather, it suggests something about how cultural materials enter into collective memory through a variety of means, as they are generated, transferred, and recycled in a variety of contexts for a variety of purposes. “It’s a Long, Long Way to Tipperary,” then, has an important place in a commemoration of 1916, especially one that takes place a long, long way from Ireland, precisely because consideration of it can tell us much about how history is made and remade, how authenticity and inauthenticity mingle, how traditions are recovered and reinvented, how heritage is constructed and circulated. In this age of transnational networks and global communications, national memory is an increasingly diffuse form of knowing about the past and establishing a sense of identity – perhaps especially in the case of Ireland, which maintains a total population of a little over six million between the Republic and Northern Ireland, while some 80 million people around the world, including about 36 million in the United States, claim

some Irish ancestry. Many Irish Americans are deeply invested in their national heritage, making sense of their lives in the United States through ideas about the past and present of Ireland, and for many of them this means not just keeping alive memories of certain customs, landscapes, or relationships, but also recalling a history of triumph and failure, conflict and resentment. Huyssen claims that there is a basic structural affinity between diasporic memory and memory itself, “which is always based on temporal displacement between the act of remembrance and the content of what which is remembered.”<sup>3</sup> Both are a matter of searching and reconstructing more than finding or recovering. In the year of the 1916 centenary, Ireland was faced with the challenge of how to come to terms with its past in a way that was, in the words of Heather Humphreys, Fine Gael TD and Irish Minister for the Arts, “respectful, inclusive and appropriate.”<sup>4</sup> Certain commentators took the occasion to denounce the Rising as a treasonous act, which was without democratic sanction and which resulted in unjustified destruction of life and property. Sinn Féin leaders, meanwhile, took the opportunity to develop their own series of commemorative events as an alternative to the national government’s official program. Still others called for shared reflection on how 1916 should be remembered one hundred years later, why it has taken on certain meanings in the past, and what all this indicates for the people of contemporary Ireland. As these reflections continue, we might also consider how the national memory of Ireland, with its often-strained sense of authenticity and coherence, with its lingering mythologies and animosities, might be amended by the diasporic memory of Irish America.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the exhibition organizers, especially Dr. Joyce East and Caroline Woodiel, for speaking with me about their approach to curating “Remembering the Easter Rising.” In the interest of full disclosure, I should also note that I played a small consulting role in the organization of the exhibition, though I can take no credit for the skillful work that went into completing it.

<sup>2</sup> Andreas Huyssen. 2007. “Diaspora and Nation.” *Diaspora and Memory: Figures of Displacement in Contemporary Literature*. Ed. Marie-Aude Baronian et al. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 85.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Henry McDonald. 2016. “Ireland prepares to mark Easter Rising centenary amid fears old tension may resurface.” *The Guardian*. 2 January. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/03/easter-rising-1916-centenary-peace-process> [retrieved: 01/09/2016]

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