
The “Decade of Centenaries”: Commemoration, Controversies, Gender and “Trending”

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The Irish State officially commemorated the Easter Rising of 1916 in 2016 as part of a “decade of centenaries”, a period in history (1913-23) marked by significant episodes of violence and conflict. Despite this, the concepts of pluralism and reconciliation were chosen and embraced as the basis to successfully remember and recall these landmark events in the present. The 1916 commemorations in Northern Ireland were likewise designed to appeal to both the nationalist and unionist communities by focusing on the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, which largely succeeded in getting cross-party support. Contemporary political concerns also loomed in the south. The rise of Sinn Féin as a formidable electoral force has become the political context in which government decisions concerning *how* to officially commemorate nationalist, republican and imperial legacies are being made.

As Ireland entered the second, more contentious phase of the “decade” in 2019, further evaluation of some of the more unpalatable aspects of the War of Independence, the establishment of Northern Ireland and an internecine Irish Civil War was anticipated and even feared. Rightly so. Different State parties (British and Irish) and prominent historical figures, on all sides, were undeniably implicated in instances of horrific, transgressive violence in the period 1919-23 that remain uncomfortable. A broad spectrum of physical and psychological injuries perpetrated against combatants and civilians that are well documented, as well as fatalities that occurred during the revolution, are impossible to ignore or elide a century later. Past tragedies and traumas were not seamlessly forgotten within the intergenerational families and local communities directly impacted either despite political silence on some of these questions.

Public opinion and social media activism increasingly became strong on all these issues as the “decade” progressed. The insertion of British imperialism into the State process of remembrance in 2020 proved incendiary. A proposal by the government to commemorate the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) caused consternation and was cancelled. Full-on opposition to the very idea rapidly surfaced on social media, in particular, including amongst online history influencers. The hashtag #BlackandTans trended for several days. The mainstream print and broadcast media likewise provided extensive coverage. Scholars and experts, who actually had a demonstrable research record in this field, also expressed views as to whether such a commemoration was desirable never mind advisable (see Gannon 2020). The public reaction

meant that, on this occasion, Irish-born (including Catholic) members of the RIC, the all-male imperial force that policed the island of Ireland for a hundred years, were not permitted to “fit” the received definition of the militants being remembered and honoured in the Irish revolution. Lines were being drawn and pressure was exerted. In contrast, and in a different political moment, prior commemoration of the many thousands of Irish who fought in the British army during World War I had passed with far less controversy. In 2020, however, decisions about the terms and limits of the decade of centenaries were now clearly not just being shaped by the government, its expert historical group and consultation process; they were also being played out and framed on viral social media. The relationship between the decade of centenaries and online activism/agenda setting will undoubtedly generate analysis when the commemoration programme that ultimately transpired is assessed in years to come, including by memory and media studies scholars alike. In some of these domains, historians did become heavily invested in commenting on these issues. The definition of public experts also became more loosely defined, often extending beyond the scholarly expectation of having achieved peer-reviewed publication on the subject under discussion. A robust public debate further ensued when the President of Ireland declined an invitation to attend an ecumenical religious ceremony in Armagh on 21st October 2021. The President faced particular criticism from unionists for his decision not to go to an event that was expected to be attended by the Queen (though this ultimately did not transpire). Broad public support for this decision in other political quarters was likewise evident. A public monument at Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin, naming *all* of those who died in the Irish revolution (including British crown forces), was also discontinued and decommissioned in 2022 due to ongoing vandalism. Again, a necro political debate about whether to remember “all of the dead” or just “some of the dead” of the revolutionary era fervently ensued on the public airwaves and on social media. Even if you are dead, it seems, commemoration in civil society is still contentious, hierarchical, politicised and sometimes forceful.

The position of women in the decade of centenaries likewise produced some interesting outcomes as it evolved (Frawley 2021). Initially, the programme to commemorate the 1916 Rising was criticised by feminist scholars willing to publicly speak out about the lack of women experts on prestigious national panels, including in State-supported academic events. An Irish commemoration programme with women (half the population) as a minority presence could never be considered pluralist or reconciliatory despite this stated aim. Dynamics of power and gender as a blind spot became quickly apparent. Some remedial action was subsequently taken but the occlusion of prolific female scholars and potential for gatekeeping was noted. New analytic questions about inclusion consequently arose: who was commemorating and who was being commemorated? The centenary of votes for women, led by the Dáil’s women’s caucus, was subsequently commemorated in a dedicated State programme of events in 2018. However, additional questions about women’s role and hidden experience in the revolution, that were long-documented by feminist scholars, also started to attract greater attention amongst the engaged public and historical commentariat. Real, academic labour in Irish women’s studies enabled this focus. Early interventions in the field, by notable scholars of feminism and revolution in Ireland, had already (long before the decade of centenaries) *empirically* challenged and impressively *disproved* with evidence any assumption in twentieth century modern Irish history, politics and culture that the revolution was primarily experienced by men. It was well known, since the 1980s, that women had not received appropriate credit for their crucial role as activists after the Irish revolution (see Connolly 2003 for a discussion of key sources). The important contribution of women became further evident in the content of more recently released Irish military archive sources (namely the Bureau of Military History witness statements and Irish military pension applications made available online). But this was not first *discovered* during the decade of centenaries.

The question of violence perpetrated against women in the revolution likewise was also largely elided and even denied as a feature of the conflict prior to the decade of commemorations despite evidence to the contrary. A ground-breaking publication by Louise Ryan in 2000, drawing on sources to document gender-based and sexual violence in the War of Independence, had already underlined how transgressive violence was perpetrated against women in Ireland (for a longer discussion see Connolly 2019, 2020a, 2020b). Yet, these issues disappeared from canonical history and public discourse after the Irish Civil War ended. After independence, the Irish State adopted a series of policies that confined women to the private sphere. Women revolutionaries and activists were effectively expunged from the official narrative of State formation. Conservative social and religious attitudes embedded in the infrastructure of the new State, including in relation to women's bodies, societal roles, motherhood, family life and sexuality, combined with a general desire to forget and elide the worst atrocities of the Irish Civil War. The absence of a truth and reconciliation process also ensured any hidden violence or aggression that was perpetrated against women during the revolution remained concealed and thus officially forgotten. Conflict and violence north of the border both before and after 1922, that also significantly impacted women, likewise became unseen. The lack of a gender perspective in mainstream historiography and elision of feminist scholarship for much of the twentieth century also ensured that scholarship that addressed the particular kinds of violence targeted at women in other wars was not adequately integrated or further developed in Irish revolutionary studies either until recently (Connolly 2021).

Clearly, there was enough surviving evidence of gender-based and sexual violence, both in documentary sources (such as, newspapers and military archives, British and Irish) and in subaltern family and community memories, to suggest this occurred. Nonetheless, it was not *seen* as particularly significant until new detailed publications, outlining numerous cases, and public projects emerged in the decade of centenaries (Connolly 2020b). Additional forensic, peer reviewed work has further built on this scholarship and deepened the analysis (for instance, O'Neill 2021). More theoretical and cross disciplinary analysis of how gender, sexuality and power framed the violence of the revolution has also enhanced the scope and content of this field, inclusively understood (Redmond 2021, for instance provides an indepth appraisal of revolutionary masculinities). The ongoing production of very carefully researched, peer reviewed scholarship, revealing original and new findings, is absolutely crucial in ensuring evidence and integrity informs public discussion about gender, especially in a decade of commemorations that is now so heavily influenced by social media takes and attention.

One of the most important outcomes of the commemoration process, in general, is that such new, innovative scholarship of this standard, on the revolution and its aftermath, has been stimulated in tandem both on gender (Cooper 2022) and other issues. New studies of trauma are, for instance, producing important findings and insights on the longer term ripple effect and inter-generational impact of this phase of the revolution (Terrazas Gallego 2020; Aiken 2022; Keane 2021). Very detailed, evidence-based analyses of single events and episodes of violence in particular localities and/or counties – histories from below – have likewise been very instructive in challenging top down historical frameworks. Parity between the local, national and transnational dynamics of revolution and intersectionality have emerged as important methodological principles in the field. Conflict migration has also been significantly advanced as a compelling question in Irish revolutionary studies (see Bielenberg 2013). People were ostracised, displaced and expelled as well as killed. Some of the more “hidden injuries” of the revolution have been revealed.

The initial pluralistic and reconciliatory aims and objectives of the State's programme certainly became more controversial and unpredictable as the decade of centenaries progressed. Social media accounts and history influencers mobilised and got increasingly involved in public controversies. At the same time, some very brilliant new and inspiring scholarship in Irish

revolutionary studies, inclusively understood, has emerged – which has widened and deepened the analysis of this period socially, culturally, historically and theoretically. Full consideration of all this scholarly work and source of information, as well as due respect for the authors of it, is essential in a moment of commemoration and public contestation.

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