**Identity Formation, Commemoration and History Education**

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Queen Elizabeth’s visit to Dublin in May 2011has been attributed with special significance. Alongside the then Irish President, Mary McAleese, herself born a Northern Irish Catholic, in public Queen Elizabeth jointly commemorated those executed in the Easter Rising 1916 for fighting against British rule, and those Irishmen, north and south who died for Britain in the 1st World war. This was a visual and symbolic representation of mutual respect. The event may prove to be a turning point for commemoration of political events on the island of Ireland. Certainly, it has been an important tone-setter for what followed in the next few years – and its resonance is relevant to this paper.

**Commemoration in Contested Societies**

In conflict affected societies, especially, commemorative acts are potentially dangerous. They are the sparks that can inflame underlying tensions when one protagonist or the other uses them for cultural and political purposes to reinforce dominant narratives. Thereby, they perpetuate division. [[1]](#footnote-1) In Ireland those narratives are, simplistically, on the nationalist side 700 years of British oppression and the unfinished business of ending partition on the island; amongst unionists in Northern Ireland, the connections to British heritage and resistance to the constant, often violent, threat of religious and cultural coercion into a united Ireland. To those holding these positions, identity is perceived as fixed and coming together to remember victory or suffering is used to reinforce solidarity. Any reflection on possible negative consequences of such expression is deemed to be weakness.

In the literature of History Education the influence of master narratives is well recognised although, often, they are too easily attributed only to the dominant political group using its power over systems, curriculum and textbooks to stamp its national ideology on its people. The impact of community is also strong in shaping historical consciousness. Wertsch’s theory of appropriation and resistance to the dominant narrative of the state illustrates this.[[2]](#footnote-2) Depending on whether collective memory within communities and families largely affirms or challenges the official narrative, the strength of community based commemoration can either reinforce or resist state influence. Particularly, where groups are juxtaposed in latent enmity, the dangers of a lack of broader historical context are present, and narrow uncritical interpretations, and the identification of past events, are seen as either ‘theirs’ or ‘ours’.

Thus, for divided societies historical commemorations create trepidation and challenge. For example, in the case of Northern Ireland, historians have argued that the 50th commemoration of the Easter Rising by nationalists in 1966 helped to trigger tensions which contributed to the thirty years of internecine violence which followed.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Commemoration and the Common Good**

Historical commemorations cannot be easily suppressed, and when they are they are driven underground and can become potent tools of resistance. Should the state try to restrict them, or mediate them, to contain their impact? Or can they be opened up to broad public scrutiny where they become negotiated, discursive and potentially transformative, thus positively influencing group relationships and moving society from negative to positive peace?[[4]](#footnote-4)

Research suggests that the process of historical learning is a more absorbent one than the appropriation / resistance model suggests. Rather, it is one whereby young people learn about history from a range of sources, be it family, community, TV, films, literature, heritage sites, as well as in the classroom.[[5]](#footnote-5) Seixas accepts historical consciousness as “*the area in which collective memory, the writing of history and other modes of shaping images of the past in the public mind merge*”. [[6]](#footnote-6) Our historical consciousness is an amalgam of the totality of our formal and informal learning. Crucially, it does not need to be fixed and selective, as dictated by our identity and background. Therefore, in appropriate circumstances, individuals can be engaged in reflexive debate.

Here, I draw on my positive experiences as a history teacher and researcher. Working with Keith Barton in Northern Ireland, where history teaching in response to conflict, has adopted a mediating, critical enquiry role, we observed that young people valued the history they encountered in school because it gave them access to ‘both sides’ of the story, but this was not their sole source of knowledge of the past. We found that they were engaging in Bakhtin’s idea of “internally persuasive discourse”[[7]](#footnote-7); young people were wrestling with different perspectives gathered from the various sources of their learning and this led them to question accepted certainties encountered in their everyday lives. Granted, they were unlikely to move away from their own broad, community orientations but there was evidence that they were reassessing their understanding and reaching individual positions for themselves.[[8]](#footnote-8) Lederach talks of peacebuilding beginning with change in individuals before a critical mass emerges that acts as a catalyst for societal transformation.[[9]](#footnote-9) Might that enquiry mindset, fostered in history classes, be transferred to wider society when engaging in commemorative acts? Before returning to this question, the paper considers wider societal engagement with commemoration.

**Ethical and Shared Remembering**

A decade ago, with peace a fragile concept (as it still is, 21 years after the signing of the Belfast / Good Friday Peace agreement) Ireland, north and south, faced the prospect of a decade of contentious anniversaries. The period 1912-22 contained a series of key events which led to partition and shaped modern Ireland – unionists’ armed resistance to Home Rule for Ireland, the Irish role in World War One, the nationalist 1916 Easter Rising followed by the War of Independence against the British, leading to partition and then the Irish Civil War – all emotive issues which, unmediated, were likely to be commemorated through the partisan lens of the contemporary political divide, with the risk of inter-community confrontation.

In both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland there was recognition that how the Decade was to be remembered and commemorated required careful management to prevent the events being appropriated by those seeking political gain, or even destabilisation of the peace process.

In the Republic of Ireland, a government directed committee was established with broad representation to insure inclusivity, and to steer commemoration forward.[[10]](#footnote-10) In Northern Ireland, the parties sharing government were unable to contemplate such consensus. Instead, civil society, deeply aware of the negative consequences likely if the vacuum was not filled, picked up the challenge. Work was coordinated through a statutory body independent of government, the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council (CRC), and funded from the United Kingdom National Lottery fund.[[11]](#footnote-11)

From the outset CRC sought to identify a set of principles with which to frame how commemorative events were conducted. Only those accepting this framework would be eligible for funding. The concept of Ethical and Shared Remembering has underpinned the process.[[12]](#footnote-12) It is built around five strands:

1. *Remembering in Context* – understanding the circumstances of the time in which the events occurred in order to better understand why people acted in the way they did. Any commemoration must take account of ‘the past as another world’ and be remembered outside of contemporary political posturing and pretence.
2. *Remembering Whole* – recognising the interconnectedness of events and that history cannot be compartmentalised into “ours” and “theirs”. This requires acceptance that the process will, at times, be uncomfortable.
3. *Remembering the Future* – from whatever political perspective commemoration is approached, those participating should share a vision of a society aiming for social justice, equality and reconciled relationships.
4. *Remembering Ethically* – this cannot be a celebration or a condemnation. It should not be a blame game. It requires ‘generosity and sensitivity’ and an open and critical mindset. Whatever the historical outcome, it should acknowledge the role of brutal violence, but also its destructive consequences.
5. *Remembering Together* – the recognition of the plurality of narratives: that historical truth is provisional and provides substance for critical discourse. There must be a readiness to hear the other’s narrative because “*walking through our histories together may be the only liberating option*”.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In helping community groups to adhere to these principles when planning, CRC translated them into the following practical guidance for action:

* Start from the historical facts;
* Recognise the implications and consequences of what happened;
* Understand that different perceptions and interpretations exist;
* Show how events and activities can deepen understanding of the period;
* All to be seen in the context of an ‘inclusive and accepting society’.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Seven years into the Decade of Centenaries the application of ethical remembering can claim some success and provides learning for those engaged in collective commemoration in contested societies.[[15]](#footnote-15) Importantly, despite the potential of anniversaries such as the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Easter Rising to heighten communal tension, no serious violence has resulted from the many acts of historical remembrance that have been held in the Decade so far. Largely, restraint has been shown and, as time has progressed, there has not been the degree of triumphalism displayed around key events which has been usual in the past when commemorations have taken place within segregated areas, dominated by identity politics. Further, external funding and support has encouraged innovative forms of remembering: for example, through the use of drama and the creative arts and supported by multi-media presentations by the BBC and other outlets. Crucially, the CRC can point to significant instances of cross community engagement and dialogue around events that in the past would have been exclusive either to unionists or nationalists.[[16]](#footnote-16)

An important catalyst to this has been the identification of common historical experience, both within communities, across communities and across the Irish border. Those promoting a more open and inclusive approach to remembering have been careful to give attention to movements and events of the Decade in which Irish people of all backgrounds could find some common ground , as well as those anniversaries deemed contentious. The years 1912-19, especially, were ones of struggle for the labour movement on the island and this featured large scale strikes and lock-outs in which Protestant and Catholic workers often found common cause. Similarly, the fight for female suffrage, in Ireland and Great Britain, involved women from all creeds and classes. Above all, a creative re-imagining of how the events of the 1st World War can be commemorated has facilitated collective experiences, thus providing bridges by which groups have crossed into each other’s historical consciousness. Traditionally, remembrance of the world wars has been largely the preserve of unionists, despite the huge contribution made by nationalist, Catholic Ireland to the British war effort between 1914-18 (and, indeed, 1939-45). Collective nationalist discomfort at acknowledging this grew from partition onwards and was exacerbated by the presence of British soldiers on Irish streets after 1969, during the Northern Irish Troubles. The meeting of the respective heads of state, the Queen and the Irish President, in 2011 set a positive tone. Combined with the more peaceful post agreement environment and civil society support, space has been found whereby unionists better recognise the part played by nationalists in the war and nationalists have rediscovered aspects of their family and community past that has been long buried.

Thus, the exploration of common experience has helped a culture of shared remembering to develop. Of course, we must be careful not to overestimate the impact of the ethical remembering concept. Not all commemorative activities have sought, or been granted, the endorsement of the CRC initiative. My own work, in the context of formal education, demonstrates the continuing power of partisan “street” history and its resistance to rational historical argument.[[17]](#footnote-17) Popular myths remain strong but, as a society, there is now a greater awareness of the importance of historical evidence and history’s potential abuse. Indeed, perhaps, the Decade’s greatest challenges are yet to come. The years 1919-21, leading to partition. were a very bloody period in Irish history, characterised by sectarian killings and state suppression: and it is likely that emotions will be further heightened by the added layers of contemporary tension around Brexit, and the historical coincidence that a new cycle of 50 year anniversaries of the more recent Troubles is now upon us.

**The Role of History Education**

So having concentrated on the wider societal trends, what of the role of schools in the remembrance process?

Disappointingly, formal education in Northern Ireland has not taken a high profile in remembering the Decade. This is in contrast to the Republic of Ireland where the official sanction of the Department of Education has ensured that schools have engaged enthusiastically, and critically, with commemorative events, especially those related to the 1916 Rising.[[18]](#footnote-18) In the north, work in the community has overshadowed that in schools. This is partly because of the inability of the power-sharing government to agree any formal programme but, also, it reflects the tendency for schools in a conservative educational system, segregated on religious lines, to avoid controversy for fear of offending belligerent voices in their own communities. Research is required but media reports suggest that some schools have been more comfortable dealing with events within their own community and been less likely to pursue understanding of commemorations associated with the other community.

However, CRC have been keen, where feasible, to extend their work on the Decade into formal education. Here, I feature a project they funded under my direction – the preparation of an on-line resource, *A Decade of Anniversaries*, for use in schools.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In examining the project’s specific aims and objectives it is first important to place it in the wider context of developments in History Education. In common with the rest of the United Kingdom, history teaching in Northern Ireland was considerably influenced by the ‘new history’ that emerged in England from the 1970s. This moved the emphasis from a body of knowledge to be learnt to encouraging young people to engage in rudimentary ways with the disciplinary procedures of the subject, as practised by academic historians. Thus, over time, a broad paradigm has emerged in many countries, where it is advocated, with variations that, centred on a constructivist philosophy, rational historical thinking can be fostered through enquiry, and understanding key historical concepts such as evidence and change through time. In the British context, initial exponents saw its rationale as developing criticality for historical study rather than directly addressing issues in contemporary society. Progressive educators in Northern Ireland, faced with contested identities, and escalating violence, were drawn to the provisional and discursive construct of knowledge explicit in the enquiry approach but, also, argued strongly that the part played in society by the misunderstandings and abuse of history in fuelling conflict had to be challenged. Hence, the NI History Curriculum has evolved to embrace ‘extrinsic’, societal, as well as ’intrinsic’ disciplinary objectives[[20]](#footnote-20); for example, it directs teachers to help students make connections between historical study and their personal sense of identity and to examine how history is used, and abused, in communities and politics; in effect, in Körber’s words, to enable students “to think historically themselves and thereby to be able to reflect upon (clarify) their personal as well as collective historical identity”.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In the field of education, latterly, researchers and theorists working on one or other of these dimensions, students’ historical thinking and their historical consciousness, have acknowledged the importance of studying their relationship and bringing them together into a cohesive model. Körber, in incorporating historical consciousness into the FUER model of historical thinking moves it from “a state of mind” to an attribute aiding understanding – “*a competence – the competence to think historically*” which includes both how historical interpretations influence the present and are also shaped by it.[[22]](#footnote-22) Defined thus, he argues “*history is only history in the full sense [….] If it derives any relevance for the present”.* Consequently, he concludes that the field of commemoration and memory culture must be integrated into school history teaching.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The concept of Remembrance Education, as embodied in the curriculum in Flanders, Belgium, has been critiqued by Van Nieuwenhuyse and Wils.[[24]](#footnote-24) The authors endorse the validity of its study but also explore the tensions between it and history education. They see this as an extension of the intrinsic / extrinsic debate within history teaching itself, and draw attention to the dangers of presentism and judgments which disregard historical context. In concluding that “*the absolute moral standards and the present-centred character of remembrance education is far removed from the more historical and contextual thinking of history education*”, they advocate for the contribution that history makes “*as a subject of critical historical research*” to remembrance when discussion on the latter enters the domain of contemporary citizenship.[[25]](#footnote-25) Harris has referred to the “uncomfortable bedfellows” relationship between history teaching and citizenship.[[26]](#footnote-26) Elsewhere, in my own writing I have wrestled with this relationship and agree with Harris that greater clarity is required in delineating their respective roles when examining the impact of the past on the present.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In truth, when developing the *Decade of Centenaries* resource the project did not take the work of Körber and Van Nieuwenhuyse and Wils directly into account. However, retrospectively, it concurs with much of their thinking. The resource focuses on the key events of the Decade, particularly as they impacted on one local area, west Belfast (an area then and now populated by Protestants and Catholics in largely segregated housing and prone to sectarian violence). It is designed to operate at two levels. Three of its five units divide the Decade into three periods chronologically, 1912-14, 1914-18 and 1919-22. These apply intrinsic objectives to historical investigation into the past. The other two modules, on Myth-busting and Commemoration, move to the extrinsic by asking students to explore the meaning of those past events have on the present. (Teaching materials can be viewed using the url provided in footnote 19).

Units 1-3 seek to embrace sound disciplinary history. They involve rigorous historical enquiry arranged around probing, enquiry questions, the investigation of primary and secondary source material and the identification and critical examination of differing interpretations. Particular emphasis is placed on the significance of key events, and reactions to them, *at the time* for local people of all social, political, cultural and religious traditions. However, to avoid stereotyping community identities, attention is also given to the experiences of individuals who thought or acted differently to the prevailing stances of their neighbours, thereby challenging monolithic positions.

The contemporary relevance of the Decade is examined through the Myth-busting and Commemoration modules. The former adopts a light-hearted, ‘so you think that ….’ approach by engaging students interactively in evidence informed activities to challenge common myths of the period held by both unionists and nationalists, many of which are potent in community memory today. The Commemoration module examines how aspects of the Decade have been remembered, and why the forms that this takes can change over time. Students study how the nature of commemorations has been shaped by different political agendas and circumstances; and why certain communities have been comfortable to commemorate some events but not others. In doing so, they see how cultural and political identity influences choice and action. Thus, by implication, through encouraging students to think meta-cognitively, Körber’s ‘meta level’, they will come to understand that their own backgrounds help shape how they interpret (and remember) the past. Much of this is taught through a detailed, evidence-based case-study of the 50th commemorations of the Easter Rising in 1966. Students are presented with a decision- making simulation of the problems and dilemmas facing the then unionist government in Northern Ireland – the right for free expression balanced against the fear of civil unrest – and the impact the resulting outcomes had on two individuals, one unionist and one nationalist, who subsequently gained notoriety by joining opposing paramilitary groups and becoming combatants in the Troubles which followed.

The overall aim of *The Decade of Anniversaries* project goes beyond historical understanding. It seeks to equip young people, as they move through the commemoration Decade, with the knowledge, critical awareness and resilience, to enable them to judge the appropriateness of the commemorations they witness and to contribute to the debate as to how these events should be remembered. Ideally, in line with Van Nieuwenhyse and Wits, discourse should be conducted beyond the history classroom through the NI Curriculum area, Local and Global Citizenship. Thus, potentially, young people are equipped to participate in the Decade as active and informed citizens. The Decade materials still require a systematic evaluation but classroom observations with students and teachers indicate that they have challenged and stimulated individual and collective mindsets. How far individuals carry the learning into their communities and act, is part of the wider, research challenge facing advocates of socially directed history teaching.

**Commemorating the Recent Past**

As the Decade proceeds, the application of the concept of Ethical and Shared Remembering is being evaluated and refined.[[28]](#footnote-28) Its efficacy will be further tested in the years ahead, as we approach the centenary of the partition of Ireland and the establishment of two separate states. However, learning is especially important given, as indicated previously, the onset of 50th anniversaries of the many brutal events of the Troubles (which will stretch over a thirty year period). The events of the centenary Decade are beyond living memory and the passing of time provides some distance. Dealing with the recent past raises additional difficulties in that participants are still alive and carry with them memories of atrocities, victimhood and a perceived lack of justice. It is no surprise that the fragile political system in Northern Ireland has, also, not yet reached any consensus on a mechanism for dealing with the legacy of the recent past and this remains one of the key obstacles to political and social progress. Consequently, civil society is regularly buffeted when new information of one past atrocity or another, committed during the Troubles, arises in isolation. This tends to result in a tit-for-tat blame game rather than society having the capacity to deal with legacy in its totality.

Understandably, teachers argue that they cannot be expected to shoulder this burden when it has been shirked by politicians. Yet, as time progresses there is evidence that young people in Northern Ireland, born post the Good Friday Agreement, are unclear as to the nature of the conflict and some, at least, are impatient at the partial silences of previous generations.[[29]](#footnote-29) In post-conflict societies “truth recovery” is a complex, multi-disciplinary process often conducted through the individual testimonies of those who lived at the time, be they classified as victims, perpetrators, bystanders or survivors. Such biography is, potentially, very powerful in allowing voices to be heard, and to facilitate redress. However, initially, when stories are being told this is likely to be in a cathartic environment where having the teller’s perspective heard is of paramount importance. Such personal stories can unlock the emotional barriers that resist the scrutiny of the recent past. Yet, at this point, it may be difficult to verify such testimony through the more distanced vista of historical investigation. Clarification as to history’s specific role lies in a telling distinction made by Minow when considering the nature of the outcomes of truth recovery programmes in South Africa and Guatemala.[[30]](#footnote-30) She refers to them as being about ‘psychological but not historical truth’.[[31]](#footnote-31); that the stories collected in such processes represent each person’s own grasp of the past. They are important fragments of the historical record but they are not at this stage likely to be subject to the critical scrutiny of the historical process. Minow identifies the particular role of historians (and, by extension, history teachers) to ‘connect seemingly disparate accounts of the violence, its causes, and its consequences’ and ‘combine distance and empathy with all involved, even the perpetrator, in order to pursue the aspiration of truthfulness’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Of course, in the history classroom that ‘truth’ is subject to the provisional and discursive nature of historical study. At that point it is vital that the learning is taken forward in the citizenship classroom to be mediated with the contemporary attitudes prevalent in communities.

A small group of teaching colleagues have attempted to translate this into practice. *Troubled Tales* is an example of risk-taking in history teaching. Two teachers, one in a Protestant school, one in a Catholic school asked students to collect at least one account of the Troubles from a parent, relative or neighbour. Much of what was submitted referred to the inconveniences caused to everyday life, but a few, inevitably, involved encounters with violence be that bombings, shootings, or even casualties within families. Each class synthesised their findings, then shared their accounts (and perspectives) with the class in the other school. They, then, cooperated to compile an archive which was displayed to parents, friends and politicians at an open evening in the Northern Ireland parliament building. The work is at an early stage but the outcome suggests that the use of oral testimony in classrooms, filtered through the lens of historical enquiry, can contribute to ethical remembering when studying the recent past. [[33]](#footnote-33)

**Conclusion**

Remembering the contentious past is fraught but cannot be ignored. The challenge lies in its emotive nature, but this can have positive as well as negative connotations. That people care is a powerful motivator for engagement – and can be used for positive affect. In the right civic environment, and with sensitive and rigorous historical intervention, that emotional engagement can be opened up to a new imagining of the past. Though default, in NI direction fell into the hands of civil society rather than politicians and, on balance, this has been a force for good in that it has enabled Ethical and Shared Remembering to frame the parameters for public commemoration and act as a check to triumphalism. Seeking common ground on past events, then opening up intercommunity dialogue can be a pre-curser to tackling the divisive past. Schools, too, have an important role in preparing young people for this, by studying the contentious past and pursuing how that should be remembered in the present for the common good. However, they, and civil society, cannot be expected to bring transformative change in isolation. Politicians must buy in to this and show leadership if the forces for change are to be fully mobilised.

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