



## 'Review of Lisa Godson and Joanna Bruck (eds), "Making 1916: Material and Visual Culture of the Easter Rising" (Liverpool University Press)'

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# Making 1916: Material and Visual Culture of the Easter Rising

Lisa Godson and Joanna Brück (eds), Liverpool University Press , 2015 . 320 pp., cloth, £25.00. ISBN: 9781781381229

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The relation of design to historical events is generally overlooked by Irish historians of all persuasions. This new anthology of 22 essays aims to reposition a range of quotidian and mundane Irish objects, emanating from a specific historical moment, into the expanded field of historical signification through a highly theorised framework drawn from material culture studies. To do this each contributor takes the events of the armed insurrection mounted by Irish republicans in Dublin during 24-29 April 1916, the first step on the revolutionary path to Irish independence and known as the Easter Rising, and/or their aftermath, as a starting point. The editors, Lisa Godson and Joanna Brück, contend that the Rising is ‘a key element of Irish consciousness – a foundation myth around which shared identities have been constructed’, and assert their desire not to ‘summarise or critically evaluate the events’ but rather reconsider the ‘material and visual culture of 1916 to include not only inert, bounded artefacts but also material practices, whether of the body or the ways places are interacted with’ (pp.1-2). The chapters all originate in papers given at a conference held in Dublin on 26-27 April 2013, entitled *Object Matters: Making 1916*, convened by the editors.<sup>1</sup>

The excellent introduction briefly sets out some of underlying and unifying ideas and explains the division of the book into four sections, dealing with the broad concepts of materiality, affectivity, revivalism and memory, but it doesn’t say why the essays are divided into ‘17 short case studies’ and ‘five longer and more in-depth essays’ (p. 2). Neither do the editors actually clarify the events of the ‘Easter Rising of 1916’ or their position (do they subscribe to orthodox or revisionist views, for instance), which did feel necessary given that the book is published in England and some of its potential audience may not be familiar with even the basic facts. However, the editors convincingly argue that the Easter Rising offers unprecedented opportunity to interrogate ‘how discourses of authenticity are constructed around particular objects’ in a specifically Irish context (p. 7). Employing material culture as a broad theoretical framework to unify the diverse foci of the chapters, which encompass studies of heritage policy, museology, the built environment, actual objects, spaces, souvenirs, performances, photography and painting, supports their desire to affirm that

‘things’ are ‘central to the construction of memory and, implicitly or overtly, [to] reflections on the ways memory and history are materialised and visualised’ (p. 8).

Helpful as this is design history, perhaps the least well known (and established in an Irish context) of all the disciplines encompassed in the volume’s broad sweep, is the one most at risk of being lost in the fray. ‘Design history’ and ‘material culture’ are often problematically used as interchangeable terms (particularly in Ireland) and any attempt to untangle them tends to ‘confine rather than define’ their meaning but, as Judy Attfield pointed out in this journal some years ago the use of material culture studies in the study of design history affords, at its crudest, a less rigid approach to investigating ‘the social life of things beyond their commodity phase.’<sup>2</sup> But the hybridised theoretical position this anthology collectively offers, rooted in interrogating the everyday and ephemeral, seems to suggest an alternative or opposition in binary terms to a deterministic, canonical history of Irish design that doesn’t really exist. Similarly, the volume’s title in its use of ‘material and visual culture’ as signage surely must tell us something about how much Irish design history remains tethered to its parent disciplines of anthropology and art history. The reason this point needs labouring is that this is clearly an important book for Irish design history.

The wealth of new information and fresh perspectives contained within the volume is impossible to cover in a short review but broadly speaking the successive chapters, although diverse, are alert to ‘the assumption that objects’ materiality makes their meaning somehow self-evident and incontestable is problematic’ (p. 14). The opening essays such as Brian Hand’s contextualisation of the 1916 Irish tricolour flag in examples of Chartist, socialist and suffragist agitprop and Jane Tynan discussion of Irish Volunteer uniforms in 1916, provide thoughtful re-examinations of iconic objects. Tynan’s tantalising speculation, however, that ‘the deployment of gender masquerade, mimicry, camouflage, disguise and bodily transformation’ (p. 31) was a prominent feature of 1916 dress is not borne out as her essay (like many) is too cursory but is taken up by Hilary O’Kelly in her examination of Celtic Revival dress in which she pays specific attention to men’s dress, which is almost always overlooked in Irish studies of national or ethnographic costume.

Modern masculinity is also obliquely the subject of Elaine Sisson’s chapter on the lavish historical pageant, put on for Dublin Civic Week in 1929, by the actor, theatre director and Diaghilev-like impresario Micheál MacLiammóir, entitled *The ford at the hurdles*, which in its final episode reimagined Easter 1916 as a stark expressionistic tableau. MacLiammóir designed the pageant’s costumes to reflect ancient Irish design even if he looked more directly to modish sources such as the Ballets Russes. MacLiammóir was in fact London-born (as Alfred Willmore) and had relocated across the Irish Sea and reinvented himself as a Corkman, in part, as a way to deal with his suppressed homosexuality. Joanna Brück further interrogates the construction of Irish masculinity in her analysis of the craftwork made by

men in post-Rising internment camps. It is in these interesting subtexts, hidden in the production and consumption of clothes and textiles, that illuminate how the emerging modern Irish state would ‘push to the margins every trace of the socialist, feminist, queer, liberationist impulses that infused its birth.’<sup>3</sup> These chapters are amongst the strongest in the volume.

A number of chapters deal with the issue of photographic records as material artefacts. Both Jack Elliott and Brian Crowley address the production and circulation of images of the martyred leaders of the Rising. Orla Fitzpatrick offers a reading of the emotive photographs of the widows and families of the executed Rising’s leaders in the Catholic press. And Justin Carville argues that the power of such images relied on ‘affective qualities’ (p. 236) but they were also, in their technological reproducibility, emblematic of the Rising’s modernity. An interesting coda to these chapters are the discussions by Ciara Chambers and Lisa Godson of the aftermath of 1916 as presented in British newsreels and the emergence mass religious performances in the Irish Free State.

Commemoration of 1916 in museums, and other heritage sites, has proved vexed. Lar Joyce and Brenda Malone map out the relation of 1916 to national patrimony in the collecting and display policies of the National Museum of Ireland, which now holds some ‘15,262 objects’ related to the events of the Rising (p. 188). Elizabeth Crooke’s discussion of the response in Northern Ireland centres on a project to include the Rising as part of a wider commemoration of the First World War, which remains highly politicised and incendiary in the region. And Pat Cooke reminds us that within museums ‘word, image and object can be inscribed within a single semiological process’ (p. 204). Two chapters, by Franc Myles and Damien Shiels, on heritage sites, such as the surviving buildings associated with the Rising, are especially interesting. Myles points to the ‘dislocation and confusion’ (p. 45) in knowledge about the actual extant buildings involved in the insurrection in Dublin that faced demolition as part of the property speculation of NAMA (National Asset Management Agency) – the bad bank set up by the Irish Government in 2009 the wake of the Irish financial crisis. Surprisingly, there were only a few chapters dealing with relation of graphic design, and other forms of word and image, to the Rising. Mary Ann Bolger and Laura McAtackney provided interesting case studies.

There is very little contextualising as to how the events of 1916, and their legacy, sit within the wider ‘Decade of Centenaries, 1912-1922’, on which both governments on the island of Ireland have made official statements and set up commissions, especially since the editors contend, with direct reference to the ‘decade of commemorations’, that ‘responses to these objects, images and practices – cherished and vilified, remembered and forgotten – have much to tell us about contemporary concepts of nationhood and identity’ (p. 2).<sup>4</sup> On that point aside from Nicholas Allen’s ‘afterword’, in which he argues that Irish separatism must be seen in relation to ‘its imperial counterparts of exchange and capital flow’ (p. 255), there

was no discussion of Ireland in relation to wider debates about global and transnational design. But overall, this is an insightful and well-edited anthology, which offers material and ideas not available elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://1916conference.wordpress.com> (accessed 30 November 2015). Five of the papers presented at the conference are not included in the volume.

<sup>2</sup> J. Attfield, 'Beyond the Pale: Reviewing the Relationship between Material Culture and Design History,' *Journal of Design History*, vol. 12, no. 4, p. 373.

<sup>3</sup> M. Gayle Backus, '“More useful washed and dead”: James Connelly, W.B. Yeats, and the sexual politics of ‘Easter 1916’', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2008, p. 76.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.decadeofcentenaries.com> set by the Republic of Ireland's Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht (accessed 8 December 2015); and <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/executive-statement-on-decade-of-centenaries> (accessed 12 December 2015).