

Ethical Remembering Commemoration in a New Context

(Johnston McMaster)

All history is remembered! Or is it? It would be more accurate to say that selective history is remembered. It would be even more precise to say that interpretations of history are remembered. What we commemorate are interpretations of history determined not by past facts but present needs and usually through a current ideological filtering of historical events.

The Draft Programme for Government in Northern Ireland, 2008-2011 has really nothing to say about the past. Most of those in government are part of the history of the conflict. They negotiated agreements as surely as they contributed to the conflict as did most of us actively or through silence. Yet the Draft Programme for Government has either ignored or denied the past. It might even be an attempt to move quickly on and leave the past behind. The problem is that we may forget the past and somewhere down the road repeat it. Or we can remember the past, critically reflect, learn from it and commit ourselves to *'never again'* and build a different and better future.

Remembering or Forgetting

Divided opinion goes back a long way. The ancient Hebrews couldn't agree on it, not even in their wisdom writings. Contradictory views are found in the books of Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiasticus. The former has a pessimistic view of history and suggests that it is best forgotten.

..... there is nothing new under the sun The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them (1 v 9 & 11).

History is just a meaningless, endless cycle of pre-determined events.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace (3 v 1 & 8).

There are no choices, history is inevitable, we are the prisoners of either fate or god. History is best forgotten and the past left unremembered.

A little later another Jewish writer thought differently. Ecclesiasticus by Jesus Ben Sira was all for remembering and commemoration.

Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations Some of those left behind a name, so that others declare their praise whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name lives on generation after generation (44 v 1, 8-10, 14).

The past must be remembered, the heroes recalled and commemorated generation after generation. So the Jewish people lived with the tension, to remember or forget, commemorate or obliterate, call up the past or delete it. This too is our dilemma and tension.

Yet Ireland has a culture of commemoration. Outsiders have told us that our memories are too long. Key defining moments in early 20th century history invoked the past and invoked God. The foundational documents of Northern Ireland and the Free State (Republic of Ireland in 1948) mirrored each other, commemorated perceived history and invoked God.

In September 1912 thousands of Ulster loyal men signed, some with their own blood, the Ulster Covenant, *'humbly relying on the God in whom our fathers in days of stress and trial confidently trusted'*. Four years later the 1916 Easter Proclamation began *'In the name of God and of the dead generations from whom she receives her old tradition of nationhood'*.

The respective foundation documents are in no doubt that religion and history are to be commemorated. The past is to be remembered along with the God who will repeat past actions and sustain in the present. In 1912 and 1916 there was nothing of the self-doubt and pessimism of Ecclesiastes, or pushing history into forgetfulness even God out of sight and out of mind. The fact was that in the years that led to and indeed followed partition, *'Religious divisions remained the bedrock of Irish politics'*.¹ The fathers and those of dead generations were all part of a cult of the dead, both Protestant and Catholic, whose names lived on generation after generation.

Almost a century on and with centenaries of 1912 and 1916 looming, we cannot avoid looking back. Even if some try to forget or suffer from amnesia, others will publicly commemorate and collective memory will be forced into our personal consciousness. But how shall we look back, especially in a new era, in a new political settlement?

*The value of looking back is to understand where we are and why; to honour that which was noble; to acknowledge and try to correct what went wrong.*²

At the same time we live with the challenge, not only of the present political climate, but the challenge to be history makers.

*Those who make history do so because they break new ground, and because they do not allow themselves to be completely bound by the precedents or traditions they have inherited or the weight of the dead generations.*³

We live with this critical dialectic of honouring the noble and refusing the burden or weight of the dead generations. There is a legacy of history that requires critical evaluation.

But Ireland not only has a culture of commemoration, it has a culture of silence. We are not alone in either of these cultural strands. The cultures of silence in the wake of genocide have been all too real, whether this be victims of the Holocaust, or the Bosnian, Armenian or Rwandan massacres. In 1912 and 1916 our ancestors brought about militarisation of Irish politics, which then gave us the Anglo-Irish War, the Civil War, the post-partition pogroms in Belfast and the recent Troubles of 35 years. As communities we have not critically analysed the causes and consequences of these events. Nor have we really unlocked the silence of those silenced through unspeakable pain and trauma. Even the years of distancing have not always expressed and released the pain. We have lived with *'structural amnesia, where the context for remembering is deliberately made impossible'*.⁴ Institutional and organisational as well as personal vested interests maintain silences because of involvement or complicity in acts of injustice, violence or corruption.

History requires ethical analysis which in turn requires appropriate attention to contexts. It is important to emphasise that *'ethical analysis is not extraneous or alien to historical understanding'*.⁵ Attention to context means that we cannot read history uncritically from the contemporary standpoint or current ethical perspectives. The perceived wisdom of the time needs to be engaged. What were the dominant ideologies and theo-ethical values of the time? Nationalisms and theories of race colour the world-view of 1912 and 1916. Spiritual self-consciousness was also alive through the Protestant theology of empire and the Catholic mystical blood sacrifice. Such spiritual self-consciousness is more absent than present in contemporary Ireland. It is more absent now than even in the world of 1969 when the most recent phase of violence erupted. Yet we cannot remain ethically silent because there were alternative critical voices in 1912, 1916 and 1969. Because there were alternative, minority and even subversive voices, we have permission to raise critical ethical questions of the past. We might call this ethical remembering and it has three foci.

- *Critical Evaluation of the Key Personalities, Characters and Motives*

Just who were Carson and Craig, Pearse and Markievicz? Where did they come from, what made them tick and what motivated and drove them? What was their value-base?

- *Critical Evaluation of Actions and Policies*

What philosophies, theologies, understandings of history, policies shaped and gave meaning to the actions of 1912 and 1916? What were the various groups and organisations up to, including government?

- *Critical Evaluation of the Consequences and Outcomes*⁶

What were the consequences of Covenant, Rising and Somme? What were the outcomes, consequences and legacies of these momentous events in Irish history? What price have subsequent generations paid for these events?

*There is a problem here for the ethicists, in that agents can never foresee with certainty all the consequences of their actions. Sometimes agents can be 'morally lucky' or 'morally unlucky', in the sense of the consequences of their actions turning out a lot better or a lot worse than might be expected.*⁷

Did Carson, Pearse or the Somme generals know fully what they were doing? Did they adequately think through where their actions would lead? Could they have known in advance what the outcomes would be? Is there ever enough moral vision to be able to anticipate the legacies, what the burdens of history will be for future generations?

Ethical remembering is not easy but it is necessary. History is not merely a record of past events.

*History takes on new shape if it is understood as a reconstruction of the past in relation to the present though the reappropriation of the repressed parts of history.*⁸

It is the recovery of these repressed parts that are also crucial to ethical remembering. Ben Sira in his book Ecclesiasticus was too uncritical of history remembered, and his advocacy of commemoration may have lacked ethical analysis. However, he was for the recovery of lost voices, the forgotten of history who often tell the alternative story with perspectives from below.

But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them. But these also were godly men (sic), whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten (44 v 9-10).

The lost voices and lost stories not only give us permission to ethically remember and to critically commemorate, they provide us with a counter-story to the dominant discourse of the time.

Ethical remembering or critical commemoration help us to face what one Irish historian suggested, though perhaps doubting the capacity for the honesty and truthfulness required to do it. At the end of her book on Robert Emmet she asked a question which is applicable to both Irish Nationalist and Ulster Unionist histories, including their mythologies and legend making.

*Irish nationality has consisted disproportionately of the celebration of heroic sacrifice and legends like that of Robert Emmet. Is it perhaps fear of what would be left that deters many from questioning such legends?*⁹

Whether or not, and how we answer that question will decide our remembering or forgetting, and will help or hinder us in the shaping of what is to come.

Remembering the Future

Every country has a culture of commemoration. This may be more obvious in Ireland than many other places, certainly commemoration is highly contested. The different groups in our history of conflict each have their chosen traumas and chosen glories. With the new and more hopeful phase in our peace process, enhancing confidence and creating the feeling that we are on the way to being at peace with ourselves, will the nature of commemoration change?

Within a decade we will commemorate some of the most significant events in modern Irish history and which have affected all of us in different ways. How will we remember in the future? Will the new atmosphere open up a more critical awareness, deconstruct myths, enable us to pick out positive aspects which we might even share and appreciate together. The history of commemoration has never remained the same. The centenary of the Siege of Derry in 1789 was an ecumenical occasion. The service in St Columb's Cathedral was attended by the Catholic bishop and priests of Derry as well as the Church of Ireland bishop and Protestant clergy. One hundred years later and since the ecumenical nature of commemoration has never been repeated. Obviously what was commemorated in 1789 and 1889 was very different. The interpretation of the siege had changed. The community pageant in 1989 in Derry Guild Hall square drew criticism from the Apprentice Boys and other Loyal Orders. Different anniversaries of single events have had different emphases. New light and new needs can change the focus over a hundred or even fifty years.

Two particular commemorations will be of special significance. In 2012 the centenary of the Ulster Covenant will be commemorated and in 2016 the centenary of the Easter Rising. The Covenant was a religio-political pledge by the Protestants of the north-east of Ireland to resist '*by any means necessary*' the British government's proposal for Irish Home Rule. Protestant opposition was in terms of religious militancy. The gun was brought into 20C Irish politics. The militarisation of Irish politics was complete when Protestant gun running was countered by Catholic/nationalist gun running. The Covenant event did not succeed in resisting Home Rule completely, but it did lead in 1921 to the exclusion of six northern counties from Irish Home rule and to the formation of Northern Ireland.

The 1912 Ulster Covenant will be commemorated, the question is how? In a new political atmosphere of settled governance and an advancing peace process moving closer to the desired future, how will Protestant/Unionist people remember? Will the commemoration become an attempt to assert the old Protestant/Unionist hegemony, or can the centenary become an opportunity to create a new covenant, more truly biblical, justice centred, non-violent and peace focussed? Will it be an occasion to celebrate that the gun is no longer a part of Irish politics and can we critically reflect on the question, is the religio-political mix inevitably violent?

Four years later we will have the centenary of the Easter Rising, which happened on Easter Monday, 1916. The Rising itself was never going to succeed and the leaders may have known that from the outset. It was quickly put down by British military but the British made the crucial mistake of executing fourteen of the Rising's leaders. That turned the Easter Rising against the British presence into the most successful failure in Irish history. As with 1912 violence and the myth of redemptive violence was at the heart of 1916, as was the theme of blood sacrifice necessary for the redemption or freedom of a country or cause.

How will we commemorate in 2016? Will the centenary become an occasion to assert old nationalist rhetoric and a now dated national vision, or can the myths of violence be critically demythologised? Will we have the courage to critically examine in 2012 or 2016 the destructive legacy of violence in Irish history, in the 20th century, and during the 35 years of violent conflict in Northern Ireland? Can the unfulfilled vision of the Easter Proclamation to '*cherish all the children of the nation equally*', be affirmed, socially, economically and culturally? Has any political group or party delivered that remarkable vision in any part of Ireland from 1916 until now? We might just remember 1916, not only with a critical and radical re-evaluation of violence in politics, pledge as in 2012 to keep the gun forever out of Irish politics, and commit ourselves more seriously to '*cherish all the children of the nation equally*'. That would be a new covenant, to use 1912 language.

This also takes us back to the fundamental failure of both 1912 and 1916, the failure to accept and practice religious and cultural diversity. Diversity was rejected for cultural hegemony. The north became a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people as Craig, the first Prime Minister said in response to De Valera's claim that the south was a Catholic state for Catholic people. Our ancestors did not deliver cultural diversity 100 years ago. Will our remembering in 2012 and 2016 become a real acknowledgement of an even larger cultural diversity in contemporary and changing Ireland?

In 2016 we will commemorate the centenary of the Battle of the Somme. The Ulster Covenant, Easter Rising and the Somme cannot be separated out, each from the other. There is a symbiotic relationship between the three historical events, they hang together.

The republicans of 1916 looked at the loyalists of Ulster, defying the government, creating illegal armies and putting a treasonable provisional government in place, and succeeding. The republicans thought they could do the same and there were even echoes of Covenant language in the Easter Proclamation. The blood sacrifice of republicans in the Easter Rising was mirrored by the blood sacrifice of the 36th Ulster Division, slaughtered at the Somme, a sacrifice it was believed placed Britain under a moral obligation to the Ulster Protestants loyalty and willingness to die for king and empire. There were no critical questions about bungling generals and war leaders, working class men as fodder for the battles of an elite world; no questioning of needless slaughter. Immediately the myths were created, myths of Protestant heroism and Catholic/republican treachery in Dublin. The high-jacking of commemoration followed for almost 90 years with nationalist Ireland airbrushing its thousands of war dead from history because they did not fit the nationalist myth or ideology of history.

In recent years we have moved towards a more inclusive remembering. We cannot underestimate the symbolism of President McAleese and Queen Elizabeth jointly dedicating a memorial to all the Irish dead at Messines in Belgium. The visits there by Unionist and Sinn Fein political representatives have been significant. The Somme Heritage Centre near Bangor is also an inclusive expression of commemoration.

In 2016 the centenary of the Somme will be commemorate and remembered. Sebastian Barry's novel 'A Long, Long Way' helps us to see the inextricable link between Easter Rising and Somme, the huge dilemmas for Irishmen involved in each of these events and Barry's portrayal of the obscenity of war.¹⁰

Will the centenary be a shared remembering, not of the glory of blood sacrifice and brutality and obscenity of war, but of tragedy, family loss and pain; a shared remembering of thousands of Irishmen and women whose lives were destroyed by war and violence? Can the commemoration be a commitment to just peace and a thankful recognition that we now live in a new Europe where for the first time in centuries this continent has resolved its conflicts and differences and is at peace?

We have remembering much closer to our own life experiences to deal with. In relation to the most recent violent conflict, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield asserts:

'We need to understand what happened, why it happened and whether (and if so how) it might have been avoided, moderated or brought to an earlier and more favourable conclusion'.¹¹

He also wonders if all the players in the conflict were puppets of historical inevitability. Was it unavoidable? Is history pre-determined or are there always alternative choices?

In a new phase of peacebuilding and political settlement, how do we remember events of the 35 years we have lived through? Bloody Sunday in 1972. The 20th anniversary of the Enniskillen bomb which cannot yet achieve inclusive remembering and where part of community is in denial. Next year the 10th anniversary of the Omagh bombing where there are still deep divisions over the descriptive words to be used on a memorial. The 1981 hunger strikes, the long litany of localised tragedies, bombings, killings, and all who still suffer the trauma and the physical and emotional scars which for many will never go away. And not forgetting those who cannot forget because they have no truth, no acknowledgement and therefore no closure.

There is too much to remember because there is too much that cannot be forgotten, too much pain and hurt. But must the remembering forever divide us? Must we live forever with the sectarianisation of memory, the exclusivity of commemoration? Or can we find ways of inclusive remembering, of entering into each others chosen traumas, of walking through history together? In the commemorations can we move beyond our victor/victim categories, our zero-sum politics, culture and religion, and experience liberation and healing from the burden of the past into a different future, a shared future based on compassion, justice, equality, diversity, interdependence and peace?

Potential Responses

Community education can be a source of empowerment for change. We may need such educational programmes centred on the commemorations of this next decade. This would require a community education curriculum and resources providing opportunity for Catholic and Protestant, Nationalist and Unionist to walk through these parts of history together.

There is a place for schools' projects focussing on the commemorations, twinning schools from across the educational divide. Through a multi-learning, multi-media approach a generation of young people would experience ways of commemorating in a new and shared future context.

Faith communities are communities of moral and ethical formation. They may have a role in enabling a more ethical and therefore inclusive form of remembering with faith resources enabling a liberating and healing of historical memory.

Community education programmes could again provide educational experiences through cultural diversity programmes, addressing the failure of 1912 and 1916 and the new cultural pluralism of contemporary Ireland.

Education at community level and in schools also needs to address the equality agenda, Section 75, Human Rights and Active Citizenship, not only local but European and global citizenship.

The local commemorations may be addressed through volunteer programmes of pastoral care and befriending. These can enable those traumatised and hurt to put their suffering into the political and historical context that caused it and to move through pain in the new social and political context that we are all trying to build. Such a pastoral care and healing programme would include clergy who are in everyday pastoral roles. All would require training in appropriate skills with access to professional resources. Such pastoral caring and befriending could be one to one or through small groups of mutual support.

The responsibility for understanding and healing the past and for building the desired future lies with the whole community. It is not solely the responsibility of victims/survivors or offenders. No one group has the definitive perspective on the past or the future. We all have responsibilities including the many bystanders. The responsibility for the future is shared.

In our new phase of political settlement and peacebuilding, we will need to learn how to commemorate differently. We will need to move towards a more ethical form of remembering, new ways of commemorating for a new time in Irish history. We cannot forget history, but we may be able to forgive it.

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