



One Common Event, Two Distinct Narratives: Commemorative Displays in National Museums in Ireland and Northern Ireland in the 1990s

Thomas Cauvin

European University Institute

Abstract

The article explores the production of historical narratives in two national museums, the National Museum of Ireland (Dublin, Republic of Ireland) and the Ulster Museum (Belfast, Northern Ireland) in the context of political reconciliation. In 1998, the Irish and British governments associated with most of Northern Ireland's political parties, agreed to set the bases for restoring peace through the Good Friday Agreement. This was in this context that the two national museums arranged exhibitions for the bicentenary of the 1798 Rebellion, which had been at the heart of the opposition between nationalist and unionist conceptions of the relations between Ireland and Britain. The purpose of the article is to question how, and to what extent, the organisation of the commemorations impacted on the construction of historical narratives in the two national museums in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The two commemorative exhibitions and their organisation reveal how the 1990s politics of reconciliation contributed to building new historical narratives in Ireland and Northern Ireland's national museums. However, I argue that the two exhibitions were still representative of the opposition between cultural diversity and national unity supported respectively in Northern Ireland and in the Republic.

Introduction

Any definition of the term nation in the island of Ireland fosters vigorous debates and controversies. Politically, the island has been divided into two entities since the 1920s. Following the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, the South practically acquired political independence, whereas the North remained part of the United Kingdom. The relations between the two parts of the island and Britain have been central to the definition of national issues, especially regarding national museums. The National Museum of Ireland (hereafter NMI) was established shortly after Ireland gained its independence and the core collections came from the Dublin Museum of Science and Arts, founded in 1877 (Crook 2000). In Northern Ireland, the creation of the national Ulster Museum (hereafter UM) only took place in the early 1960s (Nesbitt 1979). The chronological gap between the establishment of the two national museums stems from the different political contexts on each side of the border. While the Irish Free State rapidly elaborated national cultural policies, the issue was much more divisive in Northern Ireland due to the opposition between nationalist and unionist communities (Bardon 2005).

Each of the two museums are divided into several departments, however only the historical collections are examined in this presentation. Furthermore, although both institutions have a long history, the article focuses merely on reinterpretations of the past in the 1990s. The reason for doing so comes from the particular political contexts in Ireland and Northern Ireland during the 1990s. Indeed, since the late 1960s, the North had been dealing with a sectarian civil war, known as the 'Troubles', in which republicans (mostly Catholics) and royalists (mostly Protestants) opposed each other over the status of Northern Ireland and the political rights of the catholic minority. The 1990s were marked by peacemaking policies. A major step in the peace process was the signature of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, in which Irish and British governments associated with most of Northern Ireland's political parties, agreed to set the bases for restoring peace (Cox, Guelke and Stephen 2006). Encouraged by the peace process, the political definitions of the Irish nation, the Ulster region and the United Kingdom as a whole were redefined in the 1990s. The purpose of this article is therefore to question the extent to which this political reappraisal contributed to building new historical narratives in Ireland and Northern Ireland's national museums (Czarniawska-Joerges 2004).

In order to do so, two particular exhibitions are considered. In 1998, both museums arranged exhibitions for the bicentenary of the 1798 Rebellion. In 1798, in the wave of revolutionary uprisings in America and Europe, Irish patriots – under the guidance of the Society of the United Irishmen – radicalised and rebelled for Ireland's independence (McBride 2009). Although the uprising was suppressed by the British troops and was followed by the 1800 Act of Union between Ireland and the United Kingdom, the 1798 Rebellion has remained a landmark in nationalist Irish history, and has been considered as the birth of Irish republicanism. On the other hand, loyalists have traditionally interpreted the 1798 Rebellion as a catholic and sectarian plot against Protestants and their property in Ireland, in other words, devoid of any political dimension (Collins 2004). The event has therefore been at the crux of the opposition between nationalist (or republican) and loyalist historical narratives in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Importantly, the bicentenary of the 1798 Rebellion coincided with the year of the Good Friday Agreement, giving therefore even more relevance to the study of the commemorations

The aim of this article is not to examine the entire production of historical narratives by both national museums ; this would have required considering other sections of the museums such as the Antiquities departments in this survey. My intention is rather to question how, and to what extent, commemorations impacted on the construction of historical narratives in the two national museums in Ireland and Northern Ireland. This article will not however merely describe and compare these narratives of the 1798 Rebellion. The organisation of the two commemorative exhibitions indeed revealed wider tensions in interpreting the past on both side of the border. Indeed, my research concurs with Allan Megill's argument that the master narrative 'is often partly hidden, lying in the background, to be deployed selectively' (Megill 1998 : 15). The focus on the two commemorative exhibitions reveals and compares the wider frames of interpretation of the past. The first section of the article demonstrates a wide rapprochement of the historical narratives produced by the two national museums. The research goes on to highlight that this rapprochement is limited due to disagreements over the ways to achieve political reconciliation. The Ulster Museum promoted a past driven by cultural diversity whereas the National Museum of Ireland continues to exclude protestant loyalists from the national past.

1998 exhibitions and the rapprochement of historical narratives

The 1998 commemorative exhibitions were the very first of their kind. No modern temporary historical exhibition had ever been organised in both museums about the same event. Each exhibition – entitled in Belfast *Up in Arms : the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland. A Bicentenary Exhibition* and in Dublin *Fellowship of Freedom : the United Irishmen and the 1798 Rebellion* – dealt with the same insurrection. It was the first time the Ulster Museum entirely devoted a temporary event to the Rebellion. The absence of official commemorations in twentieth century Northern Ireland was due to both the political domination of unionists and their traditional interpretation of 1798 which was highly critical of the rebels. According to authors such as William Maxwell or Robert Gowan, the 1798 Rebellion was first of all a massacre of Protestants undertaken by Catholics and led by their priests (Maxwell 1845, Gowan 1998). The only commemorations in Northern Ireland were celebrated by republicans, notably in 1948 (Collins 2004). Generally, official commemorations supported by unionists in Northern Ireland underlined the union with Britain and focused on events such as the 1690 Battle of the Boyne, the 1800 Act of Union or the 1916 Battle of the Somme, in which Ulster protestants fought side by side with other British troops. These political narratives contrasted with those promoted in the Republic of Ireland. The 1798 Rebellion, as well as other insurrections such as the 1916 Easter Rising, was celebrated by Irish governments. In the South, the political narratives highlighted an Irish history driven by the struggle for independence. The 1798 Rebellion was therefore part of the NMI's permanent collections as early as the late 1930s.

Regarding previous commemorations, the bicentenary demonstrated a rapprochement of the historical narratives. In the two national museums, this materialised by a similar intention to debunk the myths about 1798, either the nationalist or the unionist political uses of the past. The companion volume of the Dublin exhibition argued that 'while the past cannot be restored, memory can' ; the purpose was to retrieve the memory which had been deliberately suppressed (Whelan 1998 : x). Likewise, the UM outreach officer – Jane Leonard – endeavoured to make the unionist community aware of its 1798 legacy. The bicentenary was marked by a wish to promote

inclusive and non-sectarian interpretations of the past. In doing so, the national museums provided uncommon critical approach of the past and its representations. The museums intended to correct the perverted representations of a controversial event such as the 1798 Rebellion. The distinction between the past and its representations stemmed from the new roles given to academic historians. In addition to the museums' curators, the historical adviser (Kevin Whelan) in the NMI and the outreach officer (Jane Leonard) in the UM, played crucial roles in presenting new narratives of the past (Whelan 1987, 1993, Leonard 1997). This resulted from the intention to provide new interpretations of the past during the peace process. Historians traditionally write history and produce narratives of the past ; they were better armed than curators to provide new interpretations of the 1798 Rebellion.

Another similarity between the exhibitions was their move from the insular to the international context. This enlargement of the context materialised within the first sections of the displays. Both museums began by highlighting the late eighteenth century revolutionary context. The American and French revolutions were the core of the first three sections of the exhibitions. Hence, similar views of the war in the thirteen colonies and the fall of the Bastille in France were used in the displays. The enlargement of the framework of representations was not limited to the 1998 displays; it marked the overall museums' exhibiting policies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Thus the two museums produced similar new permanent history exhibitions in 2003 (Ulster Museum) and 2006 (National Museum of Ireland). Both exhibitions had very similar titles and sections. They both included sections about the various conflicts in Ireland but also about the Irish soldiers involved in international conflicts, notably through the United Nations. Thus, the 1998 exhibitions symbolized a broader rapprochement of historical narratives North and South. Nonetheless, the two institutions still diverged on the manner in which historical myths should be debunked and this revealed wider political disagreements about the interpretations of the past.

Europeanisation and reconciliation: the roles of the Ulster Museum toward communities

The UM's commemorative exhibition derived from two new modes of presenting the past : the consideration for two sorts of public and the Europeanisation of the framework of interpretation. The definition of two sorts of public was part of the definition of Northern Ireland as being a space of dialogue between two communities ; the catholic nationalists and the protestant unionists. For instance, the decision to mount the 1998 exhibition had its origin in the late 1980s when the keeper of the local history department (William Maguire) decided to arrange a display for the tercentenary of the 1690 Battle of the Boyne (1990). The decision to mount the 1990 exhibition implied, according to him, a similar commemorative exhibition for the 1798 Rebellion in 1998. The fact that the Battle of the Boyne was celebrated by unionists and the 1798 Rebellion by nationalists would avoid any criticism of museum bias. This mirrored how the peace process was conceived in Northern Ireland from the late 1980s. In order to make peace, various organisations such as the Community Relations Council promoted equal representations between the two main traditions (Frazer and Fitzduff 1986). This policy of parity of esteem allowed a rapprochement between historical narratives North and South, since it encouraged the commemoration of the 1798 Rebellion.

The focus on the two traditions materialised in the UM's display which was supposed to be visited by both the nationalist and unionist communities. Hence, much more than the exhibition in the South, the UM highlighted both the rebels and the counter-rebellion troops. The counter-rebellion forces were constituted of British troops, militia and loyalist organisations such as the Orange Order. In giving space to the Orange Order in the exhibition, the museum provided bridges between the 1790s and the present unionist community. The consideration for both sides of the conflict was particularly expressed in the centerpiece of the display: Thomas Robinson's painting *The Battle of Ballynahinch*. It depicts the battle which took place on the 12th of June 1798 between rebels under the command of Henry Munro and the army of Major-General Nugent in charge of the British and governmental troops. Robinson's counter-rebellion narrative is expressed through the presence, in the foreground, of the royal troops and officers, notably the injured captain Henry Evatt. The only visible United Irishman is Hugh McCullough, a prisoner depicted on the lower left corner of the canvas. The painting represents the victory of the royal troops' over the rebels, present in the background as disorganised troops (Cullen 2000 : 161). The use of the painting in 1998 was different. The painting was used on the cover of the catalogue and most of published materials regarding the advertising of the exhibition. In doing so, the staff reframed the image and produced new narratives. The cover of the catalogue opposed more openly the United Irishman and the British officers ; most of the background devoted to the battlefield was erased (Maguire 1998). Though a minor visual element in the composition of the original image, the United Irishman appeared with more emphasis on the catalogue. Likewise in the section about the painting, the school activity book opposed two snapshots of the United Irishman and Captain Evatt. The way Thomas Robinson's painting was used in 1998 derived from more inclusive representations of the past and the constant focus on both sides of the story, the rebellion and the counter-rebellion. This contrasted with the Dublin exhibition which hardly gave space to counter-rebellion forces. The Ulster Museum did not commemorate the rebels but the historical event as an overall opposition between the United Irishmen and the royal troops to which was associated the Orange Order. This also reflected more important shifts in representing the past in Northern Ireland in the 1990s.

The 1998 Ulster Museum exhibition was mostly mounted by the keeper of the local history collection (Trevor Parkhill) and the outreach officer (Jane Leonard). Leonard was in charge of the community relations in the Ulster Museum and endeavoured to present the 1798 Rebellion as part of both nationalist and unionist history. An historian working on the history of commemorations in Ireland and Northern Ireland, Leonard was hired in 1997 thanks to European funding. Since 1995, cultural projects dealing with community relations in Northern Ireland were helped by the European Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland (EUSSPPR, commonly known as PEACE). Created in July 1995 by the European Commission, the EUSSPPR was extended twice and is still implemented today (Hughes 2010 : 17). Between 1995 and 1999, the programme provided 692 million euro and financed 15.000 projects. The funding allocated to the Ulster Museum belonged to the SSP 4.5 entitled 'Promoting pathways to Reconciliation : Building inclusive communities', from which the Museum received £87.500. As a counterpart, the UM had to implement the scheme for the SSP 4.5 which aimed to 'facilitate the development of (...) responses to sectarianism' and 'enable local

people to deal with the causes and effects of communal conflict and to contribute to peace-building in the longer-term'.

Through this programme, the UM enhanced its capacity to appear as a site of cross-community dialogue. Contrary to the NMI which was mostly funded by the Irish government, the UM was not directly under the financial supervision of the British government. Obtaining its European funding from a non-governmental agency, the UM reached a step further in the production of multicultural narratives. In order to support political reconciliation, the UM's exhibition demonstrated that both Catholics and Protestants rebelled in 1798. The Rebellion was not, as the traditional loyalist interpretation had argued, a catholic insurrection. This argument was similarly highlighted in Dublin to help reconciliation. However, unlike the Dublin exhibition, the UM's display went further and enlarged the historical narratives of the 1798 Rebellion to the counter-rebellion forces to demonstrate that both republicans and loyalists had their place in the history of Ulster. The commemorative exhibition of the 1798 Rebellion expressed a conception of Ireland defined as a multicultural entity in which Catholics and Protestants cohabited. In doing so, it contrasted with the Dublin exhibition which promoted a much more nationalist view of the past.

Museum, historians and political narratives in the Republic of Ireland

The Republic of Ireland was part of the peace process in Northern Ireland and the Irish government signed the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998. The exhibition organised by the NMI for the bicentenary of the 1798 Rebellion opened two days after the voters accepted the Agreement by referendum (23 May 1998). None the less, the politics of reconciliation differed North and South of the border and this impacted on how the past was reinterpreted during the commemorations. The Irish government set up a Commemoration Committee which issued a mission statement for the bicentenary. It stressed the need to emphasize the United Irishmen and their pluralist ideals instead of the military violence and sectarian dimensions of the insurrection. The unity between what happened in the North and in the South had to be highlighted. This differed with the commemoration in the North as there only the rebels were celebrated ; the counter-rebellion forces and the Protestants who had remained loyal to the crown were not part of the past to be remembered. The Rebellion alone was defined as a 'forward looking' event, model for the 1998 peace process. Indeed, the catalogue of the exhibition's preface pointed out that 'like the United Irishmen we face the task today of negotiating an agreed political structure' (Whelan 1998 : x). The catalogue was written by Kevin Whelan who played a crucial role in the bicentenary program. As an historian specialising in the eighteenth century, Whelan was both the historical adviser of the NMI's exhibition and the historical adviser of the government. He wrote several of the Prime Minister's speeches for the bicentenary and was part of the lecture tour organised by the government in the United States. More importantly, he was the bridge between the Commemoration Committee (of which he was a member) and the NMI. It was the first time an external historian was directly involved in the organisation of a commemorative exhibition at the NMI. Whelan wrote the text panels, the catalogue and was responsible for the selection of artefacts. His role was crucial to understanding the reappraisal of the historical narratives of 1798 in the national museum.

Whelan was part of the historiographical debates that the NMI had, so far, stayed outside of. Historical revisionism emerged in the late 1960s and became dominant in the 1980s and early 1990s (Brady 1994). Its aims were mostly to challenge Irish traditional nationalist history which stressed the continuous Irish nation against seven centuries of British domination. In their attempts to dissociate history from myths, revisionist historians reinterpreted Irish nationalist landmarks such as the 1798 Rebellion in more critical ways. In 1989, Roy Foster, one of the well-known figures of historical revisionism, defined the 1798 Rebellion in Wexford as ‘a localized *jacquerie* (...) leading to bloodletting and massacre on an appalling scale. The rationale was more aggressively sectarian than the United Irishmen theory had ever allowed for’ (Foster 1989 : 182). Whelan was part of the debates and strongly opposed historical revisionism and its critical approach towards the 1798 Rebellion (Whelan 2004). Supporter of anti (or post) revisionism, he sought to demonstrate that the sectarian dimension of the Rebellion was itself a myth, created for political purpose in the nineteenth century to distinguish nationalist and loyalist sides (Whelan 1996). Whelan supported a much more optimistic version of the past which supported the government’s way of celebrating the 1798 Rebellion in the context of political reconciliation. In organising the exhibition, Whelan forced the NMI to take position in the political and historiographical debates and to provide new narratives.

Following the Commemoration Committee’s suggestions, the NMI focused almost exclusively on the United Irishmen and ignored the counter-rebellion forces. The title of the exhibition revealed this focus on *the United Irishmen and the 1798 Rebellion*. The *Fellowship of Freedom* was commemorated, not the insurrection itself. Inclusivity was not reached by promoting sections about both sides of the conflict, but by presenting the United Irishmen as examples of political and religious pluralism. Also revelatory of the links between the exhibition and the anti-revisionist arguments supported by the Irish government, was the manner 1798 sectarian violence was put on display in 1998. The insurrection in Wexford was marked by the involvement of certain catholic priests such as Father John Murphy and Father Michael Murphy. Traditionally highlighted by Loyalists as a sign of the sectarian catholic dimension of 1798, Father Michael Murphy was represented on the cover of the 1996 booklet published by the NMI and the keeper of the Arts and Industry department – Michael Kenny – devoted to the museum’s 1798 collections (Kenny 1996). The front cover was dedicated entirely to the 1898 commemorative plaque of the death of Father Michael Murphy whose death was considered in the caption as ‘a severe blow to the morale of the insurgent forces’ (Kenny 1996 : 25). Two years later, the priests disappeared from the foreground of the 1998 exhibition. Whelan explained how the catholic priests were wrongly used to define 1798 as a catholic revolt. He pointed out that, in 1898 for the centenary of the Rebellion, a Roman clerical collar was added to the painting of Father John Murphy to ‘more fully identify him iconographically with the modern catholic priesthood’ (Whelan 1998 : 126-127).

Whelan argued that the sectarian interpretations of the Rebellion were only constituted in the nineteenth century. He proposed George Cruikshank’s very critical depictions of the ‘massacres’ in Wexford in June 1798 as examples. He argued that these representations were ‘entirely fanciful’ (Whelan 1998 : 123, 137). This was also expressed through the scenography of the display. The last section was, unlike the previous ones, not composed of artefacts and images about the history of 1798 but its memory. Entitled *’98 after ’98 : the politics of memory*, the last

section grouped every depiction of historical violence against prisoners and civilians. In doing so, the display distinguished between the history of the pluralist ideals of the United Irishmen and the ‘fanciful’ memory of the sectarian violence. In line with the Commemoration Committee statement, attention was drawn to the political and pluralist ideals of the United Irishmen and scenes of violence and sectarian divisions between Catholics and Protestants were mostly challenged. The new narratives promoted in 1998 were therefore much more political and sanitised. In mounting such a display, the NMI was associated with political definition of the national past and historical anti-revisionism which proposed much more optimistic versions of the past. This resulted in the promotion of particular historical narratives and the limited rapprochement with the Ulster Museum.

Conclusions

To conclude, the bicentenary of the 1798 Rebellion demonstrated how the politics of reconciliation contributed to a rapprochement of historical narratives through the need to challenge exclusively sectarian interpretations of the past. The similarity between the Ulster Museum and the National Museum of Ireland in 1998 derived from an agreed vision of the need to challenge conflicting memories. This was partly achieved through the enlargement of the framework of representations, going beyond Ireland, allowing for the construction of more similar narratives of the past. However, the rapprochement for the purposes of the exhibitions did not produce completely similar interpretations of the past. The local political contexts played a major role in the museums’ reinterpretations of the past. Hence, the NMI expressed the anti-revisionist approach and the Irish government’s focus on national unity. Focusing on the United Irishmen, the 1998 exhibition in Dublin revealed how Loyalists were still the “others”, at best mentioned, but never commemorated.

The bicentenary of the 1798 Rebellion was a major example of the impact of commemorations on historical narratives provided by national museums in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Commemorations of historical conflicts such as the 1690 Battle of the Boyne, the 1798 Rebellion and the 1916 Easter Rising were marked by processes of political uses of the past. In 1998, the Irish government’s involvement – especially through funding – facilitated the work of an external historical adviser and the reappraisal of historical narratives from the NMI. Much more than the UM’s exhibition, the NMI’s display was in the hands of the historical adviser. None the less, the particular context of political reconciliation in 1998 had a different afterlife in Dublin and Belfast. In the Ulster Museum, the work undertaken by Jane Leonard as outreach officer did not stop after the bicentenary of the 1798 Rebellion. Thanks to the funding from the European Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, she worked at the Ulster Museum until 2006. The new narratives experienced in 1998 for the bicentenary were reproduced through several exhibitions such as *War and Conflict in Twentieth Century Ireland* (travelling display) in 2001 and the 2003 new permanent military history exhibition entitled *Conflict: The Irish at War*. Unlike the 1998 display, the new exhibitions were not directly connected to official commemorations. They derived from the broader process of cultural demobilisation implemented through European funding (Horne 2002). It revealed a new role for the Ulster National Museum as a site of dialogue between communities. In Dublin, the influence of Kevin Whelan was limited to the bicentenary of the 1798 Rebellion. The latest historical exhibitions, that is the 2006 permanent

exhibitions devoted to the 1916 Easter Rising (*Understanding 1916*) and the Irish military history (*Soldiers and Chiefs: The Irish at war at home and abroad*) did not directly involve external historians. Even more than within the 1998 display, the international context was present in the 2006 exhibition. Half of the *Soldiers and Chiefs* exhibition concerned those Irish who fought abroad, in the US civil war, the First and Second World Wars and the United Nations peacekeeping operations. However, the 2006 displays were much less historiographically committed than the 1998 exhibition. Instead of highlighting a positive past as model for the present peace process – as in 1998 – the 2006 displays were more driven by transnational dimensions of Irish history. More than political influence, the latest exhibitions were built in regard to the new commercial market driven by tourism and European funding for regional development. The political use of the past in Dublin and Belfast in 1998 had therefore different trajectories: it contributed to giving new roles to the Ulster Museum but it faded rapidly in the National Museum of Ireland with the normalization of the peace process after the Good Friday Agreement.

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