Explaining the Past Through Artefacts: 1998 Historical Exhibitions in Ireland and Northern Ireland

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Dit artikel gaat na op welke wijze tentoonstellingen nuttig kunnen zijn voor historici bij hun onderzoek naar interpretaties en constructies van het verleden. Het focust op twee historische tentoonstellingen over de Irish Rebellion (Ierse Rebellie) van 1798, die in 1998 plaatsvonden in twee nationale musea in Ierland, met name het National Museum of Ireland (NMI) in Dublin en het Ulster Museum (UM) in Belfast. Meer specifiek gaat het om " Fellowship of Freedom : The United Irishmen and the Rebellion of 1798" en " Up in Arms : The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland, a bicentenary exhibition", respectievelijk gehouden in het NMI en het UM. De tentoonstellingen in 1998 waren uitzonderlijk omdat ze een direct antwoord vormden op eerdere interpretaties van het conflict en omdat ze tot doel hadden nieuwe officiële versies van de geschiedenis te creëren. De afbeeldingen die gebruikt werden in deze tentoonstellingen kunnen nuttig zijn als historische bronnen voor het onderzoek naar de onderwerpen die ze voorstellen, naar de productiecontext, maar ook naar de context waarin ze worden tentoongesteld. Dit onderzoek is van belang omdat de interpretatie van beelden bijdraagt aan de onophoudelijke constructie van ons cultureel erfgoed. Een interessante invalshoek bij de studie van de herinterpretatie van het verleden is de focus op de relatie tussen beelden en tekst, met andere woorden het kijken naar hoe beelden werden geïnterpreteerd en (ruimtelijk) georganiseerd om bepaalde versies over het verleden te produceren. Eerst vergelijk ik in dit artikel hoe de Irish Rebellion gedefinieerd werd aan de hand van afbeeldingen, met specifieke aandacht voor de coverontwerpen van de catalogi en ander drukwerk en voor de mate waarin gewelddadige scènes een plaats kregen in de visuele representatie van de gebeurtenissen in 1798. Daarna probeer ik te verduidelijken hoe verschillende interpretaties en de uiteenlopende ordening van de afbeeldingen in de tentoonstellingen ruimere constructies van het verleden kunnen onthullen.

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The 1990s political process of reconciliation in Northern Ireland strongly encouraged reinterpreting the past in new and less divisive ways, especially between nationalist and unionist traditions. One consequence was an increase in the number of commemorations in Ireland and Northern Ireland in the 1990s. Because commemorations are bridges between the events commemorated and the present, they offer historians an ideal look at how societies remember and how they use the past to identify themselves. Nevertheless, remembrance is more a process than a product [1]. Thus, attention must be paid to agents and their practices of remembrance. Commemorative exhibitions belong to this field.

Analyzing images and their display is anything but an easy process. On the one hand, images are part of exhibition spaces (various rooms and itineraries) and chronologies. On the other hand, their display depends on the political, economic and social situations of the institutions that organized the exhibition. In addition to the images themselves, a large number of criteria therefore must be taken into consideration. First, by displaying stored artefacts of the past, curators produce a cultural memory [2]. Second, the display of artefacts produces exchanges (or social memory) among the producers – curators, historians, politicians etc. – and the visitors who not only receive but also interpret the narratives. At the crossroads, the images are used– interpreted, organized and connected – to produce narratives of the past.

Among a vast number of historical exhibitions, I concentrate on two shows dedicated to the 1798 Rebellion. This protest crystallized opposition between the United Irishmen [3] and the Irish/British authorities [4]. The 1798

(1) See the field of studies on social memory initiated by Maurice HALBWACHS, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1952, 299 p., originally published in *Les Travaux de L'Année Sociologique*, Paris, F. Alcan, 1925, 211 p.

(2) See J. ASSMAN, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Munich, 1992, 344 p.

(3) The Society of the United Irishmen was created in Belfast in 1791 and banned in 1794. Initially mostly made up of Presbyterians, the original intention was to reform the political system in Ireland, regardless of the denomination to obtain full political equality to both Presbyterians and Catholics.

(4) Since the 1542 Crown of Ireland Act and until the 1801 Act of Union, the Kingdom of Ireland had a Parliament in Dublin. Although the Parliament received legislative independence in 1782, the executive power continued to be under British control.

Rebellion broke out in May and ended with the battle of Ballinamuck on 8 September in which the French troops sent to back-up to the United Irishmen were defeated. Although the uprising failed and was followed by the 1800 Act of Union ([5]), this event and its remembrance are highly significant in the study of the changing representations of the past in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Because of the links – military or not – forged between the United Irishmen, the French Troops, the British army and other brotherhoods such as the Orange Order ([6]), the Rebellion was largely interpreted within various collective memories, and interpreted differently from one collective memory to the next. Opposite interpretations were notably parts of the distinction between nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist traditions ([7]). On the one hand, the fact that the United Irishmen were represented – within republican quarters – as the first Irish Republicans and, on the other hand, the fact that the Orange Order was one of the bases of the unionist tradition, made any representation of the Rebellion a bone of contention. As a consequence, no official exhibition about the 1798 Rebellion in Northern Ireland was organized before 1998. In the South, in addition to the official exhibition arranged for the 150th anniversary of the Rebellion at the National Museum of Ireland (NMI) in 1948, plenty of examples can be found at local levels, especially in Wexford. In 1998, agents of national museums had thus to deal with different legacies: a total official oblivion in the North and a long association with Republican traditions in the South.

The purpose of this paper is to make clear how the way in which images were displayed, arranged and interpreted in "official" ([8]) exhibitions, can inform the construction of narratives about the past. The two case studies I am dealing with were organized in the two national museums – the Ulster Museum (UM) and the NMI, in Belfast and Dublin respectively – for the bicentenary of the Rebellion in 1998 ([9]). In the context of the Peace Process ([10]), the two exhibitions reflected the different systems of (re)interpretation of the Rebellion in, to some extent, a similar desire to come to terms with the past

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(5) It unified the Kingdom of Great Britain and the Kingdom of Ireland and established the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

(6) It was founded in 1795, partly to counteract the spread of the Defenders and the United Irishmen. Most of its members belonged to the Established Church.

(7) Although Nationalists and, above all, Unionists should not be considered as a unified group with unified visions, the opposite interpretations of the past became features of identification.

(8) The exhibitions were organized in national museums which depended upon the government. Although a few specificities must be taken into consideration, both institutions were, in 1998, public bodies.

(9) In Belfast, the title was *Up in Arms: The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland. A Bicentenary Exhibition*. And in Dublin, *Fellowship of Freedom: The United Irishmen and the Rebellion of 1798*. At the NMI, the exhibition was the result of the cooperation between the NMI and the National Library of Ireland. As one will see below, Kevin Whelan was, as historical adviser and writer of the exhibition book, a major agent in the process.

(10) The *Good Friday Agreement*, or *Belfast Agreement*, was signed in Belfast on 10 April 1998 by the British and Irish governments and most of the Northern Irish political parties, with the significant exception of the Democratic Unionist Party. The two commemorative exhibitions opened at the Ulster Museum (Belfast) and the National Museum of Ireland (Dublin) respectively on 3 April and on 23 May.

and depoliticize 1798. In that sense, the 1998 exhibitions must be studied in the context of two hundred years of remembrance and oblivion.

Due to the large number of images displayed and produced for the event, this study must be restricted. The major aspect analyzed here will be the representations of violence. "Representations" is the operative word here: I will not be looking at 1798 uses of violence, but, rather, how those acts of violence were interpreted and represented in 1998. First, I will analyze the images displayed on the covers of catalogues, programmes and guides in order to investigate the space given to violence in the general (re)presentations of the 1798 Rebellion. Second, due to the multiple aspects of violence and the number of artefacts displayed, I limit my analysis to the study of representations of violence perpetrated by rebels against prisoners and civilians ([11]). More specifically, I will consider images of what happened in Scullabogue and on the Wexford Bridge ([12]).

Fellowship of Freedom and *Up in Arms* : Two different approaches towards violence ([13])

Both labelled the 1798 Rebellion as the central event, yet the two exhibitions had clearly different titles. The UM exhibition was called *Up in Arms: The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland, a bicentenary exhibition*, with an obvious military meaning that stressed the insurrectionary dimension of 1798. The exhibition displayed at the NMI was called *Fellowship of Freedom* : *The United Irishmen and the Rebellion of 1798*, thus highlighting much more the political ideals promoted by a particular group. Whereas *Up in Arms* concentrated, starting with the catalogue cover, on the act of rebelling, its Dublin counterpart promoted the unity, the brotherhood and the political ideals of the United Irishmen. This initial observation should be considered in relation to images, especially from the covers of published materials. Interestingly enough, the UM produced a logo for the event (Annex 1). Similarly to the title, there was no reference to the United Irishmen in the logo, which depicted a compact crowd of anonymous individuals instead. Although some shadows may be distinguished, the individuals remained unidentifiable. No leader could be isolated. Despite the *Liberty flag* which proclaimed a political goal, attention was drawn more to the act of rebelling, the act of being "up" and "in arms".

The rebels were indeed represented "in arms". Two sorts of weapons appeared on the logo. First – in the foreground – was a pitchfork. Both the position and the type of weapon were striking and revealing choices. As we will see below, the pike and not the pitchfork has been commonly associated with the 1798 Rebellion ; in fact another nickname for the rebel*s* has been *pikemen*. Moreover, if one leafs through the *Up in Arms'* catalogue, one notices

the absence, despite the logo, of pitchforks in the contemporary representations of the rebels. One could argue that this was just a detail, a minor point within the logo, coming only from general representations of 18th century revolts, and not revealing much about the interpretations. Nevertheless, details, as clues for investigation, are often the tip of the iceberg. Pitchforks were weapons of reaction, *i.e.*, weapons used in the first stages of uprisings. With the spread and organization of the protest, this sort of weapon tended to be replaced by more sophisticated arms. Pitchforks symbolized the agrarian dimension of the 1798 Rebellion which could therefore be re-contextualized as one of the long-term agrarian revolts of the 18th century. More than an association between the uprising and the United Irishmen, this detail invited the connection of 1798 to other agrarian protests coordinated by groups such as the Whiteboys or the Rightboys in the second half of the 18th century. The pike was the second ([14]) sort of weapon represented on the logo. Defined in the *Up in Arms'* exhibition's guide as "the rebels' main, and in most cases only, weapon" ([15]), the pikes' inclusion in the logo is not really surprising. The pike has been, since 1798, closely associated with the rebellion.

The *Fellowship of Freedom* programmes, guides, and other published materials, on the other hand, promoted much more the United Irishmen and the political dimension of 1798 ([16]). In addition to the subtitle, which made a direct reference to the group, the various covers ([17]) used the image of Theobald Wolfe Tone ([18]), founder of the United Irishmen. The uses of Wolfe Tone's images within the two exhibitions are worthy of their own study and will not be further examined here. Yet, the covers and the preface made it clear that the United Irishmen and their ideals of political reforms and non-sectarian administration were the version of the past to be remembered, because, as the historical adviser pointed out, "Like the United Irishmen, we face the task today of negotiating an agreed political structure, capable of representing Irish people in all their inherited complexities" ([19]). As for the images of violence, no representation of 1798 as an armed conflict was promoted. Except for the presence of pikes in the left corner of the leaflet covers, no image related to the military dimension was used. Whereas the *Up in Arms'* covers represented the 1798 Rebellion as a military event, a historical chronologically delimited moment, the NMI exhibition included

(13) Although it is a synchronic comparison, due to the unequal space given to violence, this first section is to be much more dedicated to *Up in Arms*.

(14) From the foreground to the background.

(15) *Up in Arms,1798 Rebellion in Ireland, Exhibition Guide*, Belfast, Ulster Museum, 1998, p. 12.

(16) It does not mean that *Up in Arms* underlined only the military dimension of 1798, but it did not display, as *Fellowship of Freedom* did, the political dimension as the aspect to be remembered.

(17) Except the cover of the exhibition book.

(18) Commonly known as Wolfe Tone. Founding member of the Society of the United Irishmen and in close relationship with French revolutionaries, Wolfe Tone became the symbol of the international dimension of the United Irishmen. In contact with French revolutionaries, the United Irishmen belonged to the category of patriots which radicalized their positions and flourished as echoes of the French Revolution in the 1790s.

(19) K. WHELAN, *Fellowship of Freedom: The United Irishmen and 1798*, Cork, Cork University Press, 1998, preface of the exhibition book, p. ix.

more symbolic figures and characters to stress the legacy of the United Irishmen's ideals [20].

The discrepancy between the general narratives about the Rebellion was not limited to the covers. Given the dissimilar definitions of the political and military dimensions of the conflict, attention should be paid to the manner in which images of violence were displayed, interpreted and incorporated in larger narratives about the past.

The United Irishmen and the representations of violence

The point here is not to qualify the 1798 Rebellion but to examine 1998 definitions and interpretations of violence. For instance, to what extent were the United Irishmen considered part of and responsible for the different acts of violence perpetrated in 1798? Considering that they were introduced in *Fellowship of Freedom* as having "succeeded, if only briefly, in bringing together Protestants, Catholics and Presbyterians" [21], and therefore could appear as models in the 1998 political context [22], it might be worth examining how, and to what extent, the United Irishmen and the Rebellion itself, were associated with acts of violence against civilians and prisoners.

The *Portrait of an Irish Chief*, exhibited in both exhibitions, may help in answering this question. Originally published in London in June 1798, this drawing by the famous caricaturist John Gillray depicted, according to *Up in Arms'* captions, a rebel "in the style of an orator" [23]. The various interpretations of this drawing are striking. The copy displayed at the UM was used to describe a typical United Irishman "with coarse features and the cropped hair of a rebel" and his clothes "a round hat (…) a double-breasted coat with looped-up skirts, pantaloons and half-boots, and a long saber" [24]. The purpose of the display was therefore informative and strictly descriptive. Very little was said about the background of the image. The caption stated "In the plain below are tiny fugitives, burning buildings and clouds of smoke" [25]. The link established between the leader and the burning background was not obvious at all. One might wonder to what extent this "Irish Chief", presented by the catalogue as being in a "typical oratorical pose", encouraged the rebels to protect the "fugitives" and other "victims" after the burning of villages by government/British troops or if his call to violence maybe was directed less against the military troops than against loyalist civilians [26]. In order to resolve this ambiguity, it

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(20) See for instance, in the right corner, the feminine character, holding the Irish harp, as one representation of Erin/Eire, in *Fellowship of Freedom, Exhibition Leaflet*, Dublin, National Museum of Ireland, 1998.

(21) *Fellowship of Freedom, Exhibition Leaflet*, p. 3.

(22) The *Good Friday Agreement*, or *Belfast Agreement*, was signed during the opening week of *Up in Arms* (10 April 1998), and was endorsed by referendum in Ireland and Northern Ireland the opening week of *Fellowship of Freedom* (23 May 1998).

(23) W.A. MAGUIRE, ed., *Up in Arms: The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland. A Bicentenary Exhibition*, Belfast, Ulster Museum, 1998, p. 227.

(24) *Ibid*., p. 227.

(25) *Ibid*., p. 227.

(26) Which were opposed to the Rebellion and loyal to the British authorities.

is worth analyzing the image in the context of its production, notably by comparing it with Gillray's other caricatures. He produced different representations of the Rebellion, most of them in June 1798, and all of them ([27]) depicted rebels as responsible for violence, also against civilians. Despite this obviously critical perception of the United Irishmen, nothing about the possible meaning of the *Portrait* was mentioned in the caption of *Up in Arms*. The informative depiction of one leader was chosen as the preferred narrative whereas the political meaning was ignored. Several hypotheses may be suggested. First, the warlike features of the United Irishmen were already depicted in other images from Gillray ([28]), and did not need further explanations. Second, contrary to other images from Gillray, *The Portrait of an Irish Chief* was accurate enough to be used to study the rebels' outfits. Finally, and maybe most enlightening, the image was also displayed for the supposed resemblance of the character to Henry Grattan, a very active Irish politician in the 1780s ([29]). Despite all these reasons, the fact remained that the deep criticism of the United Irishmen was ignored. Perhaps, the reason was, above all, the wish to silence the unionist interpretation of 1798 as being a merely sectarian and non-political revolt.

In *Fellowship of Freedom*, the *Portrait of an Irish Chief* was similarly displayed in the section about the uprising, called *The 1798 Rebellion: Theatres of War*. But, its interpretation and its use were very different. The image was not in any way displayed to depict any 1798 historical fact, and, in a certain sense, any resemblance between the image and the 1798 Rebellion context was purely coincidental, even "imaginary" ([30]). The exhibition book stated that "This drawing (…) is entirely imaginary and bombastic, designed to exploit the commercial possibilities of the war in Ireland" ([31]). Certainly, the sketch did not refer to any particular event of the uprising, and, might therefore be defined as "imaginary". But, the caption thus denies any link between the Irish leader or the United Irishmen with the acts of violence. The interpretation of this picture was the consequence of a particular approach. *Fellowship of Freedom* was not only an exhibition about the 1798 Rebellion but also – maybe above all – about how 1798 had been interpreted – or rather misinterpreted – ever since. This explained why Kevin Whelan (Professor at Notre Dame University and historical adviser to the exhibition ([32])) also wrote that the image "published in London (…) is designed to exploit the commercial possibilities of the war in Ireland" ([33]). With these words, the exhibition historical adviser made it clear that the image tells us more about

(27) At least, every copy displayed at the exhibitions. See for instance, *The United Irishmen upon Duty* and *United Irishmen in Training*. *Up in Arms, Exhibition Catalogue*, Belfast, Ulster Museum, 1998.

(28) See note 27.

(29) W.A. MAGUIRE, ed., *Up in Arms*, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

(30) K. WHELAN, *Fellowship of Freedom*, *op. cit.*, p. 100. Kevin Whelan, Professor at Notre Dame University, was historical adviser of the exhibition.

(31) *Ibid.*, p. 100.

(32) Specialist of the late 18th century, he published in 1996, *The Tree of Liberty. Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity, 1760-1830*, Dublin, University of Notre Dame Press, 1996, 236 p.

(33) K. WHELAN, *Fellowship of Freedom*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

the use of the Rebellion as a political tool in Britain than about the situation in Ireland. In *Up in Arms*, the image ignored the issue of violence but was used to describe the 1798 context, whereas in *Fellowship of Freedom* the association between rebels and violence was contested by focusing on the anachronistic dimension of the item. This discrepancy came from the fact that the Dublin exhibition intended to make clear how wrong the previous memories of 1798 were, largely for political purposes. Contrary to *Up in Arms,* which focused almost exclusively on 1798, *Fellowship of Freedom* displayed a history of the 1798 memory. The processes are even more obvious in the representations of 1798 "massacres".

Representing and interpreting 1798 "massacres" ([34])

Among the various acts of violence that punctuated the 1798 Rebellion, the main battles and tragic losses occurred in County Wexford. One particular type of violence was very controversial between nationalist and unionist interpretations: the violence perpetrated by the rebels ([35]) against prisoners at Scullabogue and at Wexford Bridge on 5 and 20 June 1798 respectively. What happened in Scullabogue and in Wexford has been seen by many commentators (although recent works have largely challenged this stand) as proof that the conflict in South-East Ireland was at heart sectarian. It is worth examining how such inflammatory events were represented in the 1998 context of political reconciliation.

There are very few images of these two events. The most famous examples are etchings from George Cruikshank, entitled in the UM exhibition: *Massacre at Scullabogue* and *The Rebels Executing their Prisoners on the Bridge at Wexford* (Annex 2). *Massacre at Scullabogue* shows "people" trapped in a burning barn. It portrayed men but also women and one child – impaled on a spear or a pike – trying to escape the burning barn. Surrounded by a crowd – armed with pikes, swords and muskets – who set the barn on fire, the individuals were portrayed as civilians ([36]) and families, praying more than fighting ; in other words, they were portrayed as victims in total contrast to the attackers. George Cruikshank used a similar tone to depict prisoners executed by the rebels on a bridge at Wexford. While the image did not make it clear whether they were soldiers or civilians, the prisoners were executed in the midst of the crowd. They were, according to *Up in Arms'* catalogue, "ceremoniously (if acrobatically) piked" ([37]) in a way which could look like a sacrifice ; this dimension contrasted with the attitudes of women who were

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(34) Fraught with connotations, the word does not come from the author's definitions but is directly related to the the exhibition texts. See below.

(35) The word to be used is controversial itself. Can one use the words "United Irishmen"? Were the United Irishmen involved in the violence? Directly or not? Was violence only the tragic consequence of disorganization? The debate is crucial since the cases were used by some Unionists to characterize the whole uprising. Therefore, using the words "rebels" and/or "United Irishmen" to depict the perpetrators is all but insignificant.

(36) The victims had no military feature.

(37) W.A. MAGUIRE, ed., *Up in Arms, op. cit.*, p. 214.

represented as not only participating in the executions but also enjoying them, dancing, drinking and smiling. Men, sometimes barefoot, often with "ape-like jaws" ([38]), were represented as being more driven by cruelty than by any political purpose. According to these images, the rebels were responsible for the killing of hundreds of unarmed people, and did not seem to pursue any political purpose. The lack of political dimension even raised questions about the term "rebels", since violent animal instincts more than any aim of political reform, were depicted as being the common denominator.

Another crucial aspect of these images was the promotion of the sectarian dimension to define the Rebellion. In the image of Wexford Bridge, a flag bearing the initials "MWS" was raised. Though the meaning was debated, it was interpreted by some unionist historians as standing for "Murder Without Sin" which meant that rebels – supposedly Catholics – could murder Protestants with impunity, without fearing any divine punishment ([39]). Actually, both etchings were published in 1845 in Hamilton Maxwell's *History of the Irish Rebellion in 1798* in order to illustrate the sectarian aspect of the Rebellion and the massacres of Protestants, victims of Catholics' fury. According to these interpretations, the Rebellion – in which priests had a major role – was led by Catholics and was intended to attack Protestants and their property.

However antagonistic the historical and memorial interpretations of this event might have been, in 1998 the majority of historians agreed on the fact that hundreds of prisoners were killed, either burnt in Scullabogue on 5 June 1798 or piked in Wexford ([40]). The purpose is to examine how the two displays dealt with the images. First of all, the identification of the persons killed differed in each exhibition. Whereas the *Up in Arms'* catalogue described them as "Protestant civilian prisoners, and a few Catholics associated with them" ([41]), in the *Fellowship of Freedom'*s book, Whelan stated that they were "loyalists (including Catholics)" ([42]). The nuance might seem subtle, but, although both captions highlighted the presence of Catholics, and in doing so, lessened any sectarian interpretation of the event, the UM captions stressed more openly the non-military identification of victims whereas *Fellowship of Freedom* put the political commitment front and center. *Fellowship of Freedom* gave a political identity – loyalists – to those more openly considered to be victims by *Up in Arms*. This distinction also came from the absence of larger explanations within *Up in Arms* captions. Whereas, though not justifying what happened, *Fellowship of Freedom* showed a political dimension – a political explanation – of the presence of prisoners in the barn, *Up in Arms'* caption did not produce a narrative to explain both the presence of prisoners and

(38) *Idem.* , p. 213

(39) See O.R. GOWAN, *Murder Without Sin. The Rebellion of 1798*, first published 1859, reprinted by the Education Committee of The Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, Belfast, 1998, 105 p.

(40) The point here is not to judge the reality of the "massacres" but to replace narratives of the exhibitions in a larger context of history production.

(41) W.A. MAGUIRE, ed., *Up in Arms, op. cit.*, p. 218.

(42) K. WHELAN, *Fellowship of Freedom*, *op. cit*., p. 74. It referred, similarly to the loyalists in the American Revolution, to the individuals loyal to the Crown, and so opposed to the Rebellion.

their massacre. As with the previous image of the Irish Chief, *Up in Arms* focused on visual depictions of the rebels and the battles, and sort of played down any general interpretation of the Rebellion. The discrepancy between the two interpretations of the images came from the different exhibitions' objectives. In Belfast, the curators of the display wanted to reconcile both nationalists' and unionists' remembrances of the Rebellion, and in order to do that, sectarian interpretations were ignored. The goal was not to show how Nationalists and Unionists were wrong about 1798 but how they could find a common interpretation. By contrast, the curators of *Fellowship of Freedom* intended to deconstruct and challenge the sectarian interpretation of 1798. As an odd consequence, the sectarian interpretations of 1798 had, in a sense, more visual space in Dublin than in Belfast.

Directly related to the definition of victims, the issue of responsibility is also enlightening. In *Up in Arms*, the explanation of the massacre remained rather vague. For instance, in the catalogue, within a hundred-word caption dedicated to the *Massacre at Scullabogue*, the rebels, the United Irishmen, and other perpetrators were not mentioned even once. Passive sentences were used to describe what happened ; for instance "more than one hundred (…) were burnt alive" [43]. Similarly, in describing the image of Wexford Bridge, the *Up in Arms* catalogue stated that "One victim is being (…) piked aloft as exultant women dance and cheer" [44]. The only word referring to those who behaved in a proactive dimension – who were responsible – was in the original title *The Rebels Executing their Prisoners on the Bridge at Wexford*.

For *Fellowship of Freedom*, the images depicting Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge appeared only within sections about 1798 memory, and the captions, as we will see below, were more related to 19th century interpretations than to 1798 historical facts. Nevertheless, the exhibition book included, in the section about the Rebellion in Leinster, another drawing about what happened at Scullabogue. The aggressors were "local units" which "carried out a hasty reprisal against these prisoners" [45]. The "reprisal" is to be understood, according to Whelan, as related to the fact that "retreating rebels from New Ross carried lurid stories of army reprisal as far as Scullabogue" [46]. The "massacre" was therefore included in a system of interpretation through which Scullabogue, as a reaction, could not be understood without considering what the British army had done. Thus, contrary to the *Up in Arms'* interpretations, Scullabogue acquired, in *Fellowship of Freedom*, a meaning – not a justification – that is, a reprisal, and an explanation, that is, "the breakdown of control in the aftermath of the defeat" [47]. Although a few historians criticized these interpretations of what had happened at Scullabogue [48], the point here is not to question the responsibility of the United

(43) W.A. MAGUIRE, ed., *Up in Arms, op. cit.*, p. 218.
(44) *Ibid*.
(45) K. WHELAN, *Fellowship of Freedom*, *op. cit.*, p.74.
(46) *Ibid*. The battle of New Ross opposed the rebels to the British Troops on 5 June 1798.
(47) *Ibid*.
(48) The two main examples were: R. FOSTER, *Irish story: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ireland*, London, Allen Lane, 2001, 281 p. and T. DUNNE, *Rebellions: Memoir, Memory and 1798*, Dublin, Lilliput Press, 2004, 336 p.

Irishmen in the "massacre" but to shed some light on the dissymmetrical processes of presenting the past, and their implications.

As regards events in Scullabogue and Wexford, *Up in Arms* did not make any mention of aggressors. In so doing, it left unsolved the contentious issue of who the perpetrators really were. Were they local rebels acting on their own, or were the massacres the results of a willful United Irishmen policy? By not stressing any identification for the perpetrators, *Up in Arms* sort of induced the limited significance of Scullabogue and therefore denied any general United Irishmen policy of massacre. The disappearance of perpetrators in Northern Ireland's official narrative about 1798 can be explained by the fact that, in order to reach present reconciliation between opposite memories – and therefore opposite groups – agents of memorialization can be tempted to make perpetrators disappear – in other words, to forget the perpetrators – in order to give room to victims only. Besides, the recognition of victims by both sides – Nationalists and Unionists – was a crucial step in the Northern Irish Peace Process which led to the *Good Friday Agreement* stating that "it is essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation" ([49]).

The aim of the exhibition was not to rekindle past conflicts by focusing on responsibility and perpetrators, but to bring together communities that disagreed over the interpretations of 1798. The UM notably intended to show Unionists that the 1798 Rebellion was also their historical legacy, since Presbyterians were largely represented among the United Irishmen. *Up in Arms* subtly represented 1798 as an armed conflict without highlighting moral responsibility for the violence. On the other hand, *Fellowship of Freedom* did not keep silence on the issue of responsibility and tried to explain what happened. Often, to explain is to illuminate causes and consequences, and that is what Whelan did. One acknowledged purpose of the exhibition was to shed light on the historical uses and misuses of the Rebellion legacy, especially significant in the 1998 context ([50]). That is why making sense of what happened in 1798 was crucial. Whereas *Up in Arms* focused strictly on Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge, *Fellowship of Freedom* placed the event in a larger context, thus providing some sort of explanation; the perpetrators were not denied but responsibility for the "massacre" which "occurred against the instructions of the United Irish leadership" was limited to "local units" ([51]). By explaining the local context of such a "massacre", *Fellowship of Freedom* denied any sectarian generalization and protected the legacy of the United Irishmen who remained an example for the reconciliation in Ireland. The "massacres" of Loyalists at Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge were portrayed as events disconnected from the Rebellion, and from the United Irishmen. The distinction made between the United Irish leadership and "local units" of rebels is important in understanding how Scullabogue

(49) *The Belfast Agreement*, in M. Cox, A. Guelke, F. Stephen, eds., *A Farewell to Arms? From "Long War" to Long Peace in Northern Ireland*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 302.

(50) "The 1790s are crucial in the evolution of modern Ireland (…) Like the United Irishmen, we face the task today of negotiating an agreed political structure", K. Whelan, *Fellowship of Freedom*, *op. cit.*, preface, p. ix.

(51) *Idem*, p.74.

was presented in *Fellowship of Freedom*. It was considered as an isolated event, not directly related – since it "occurred against the instructions of the United Irish leadership" – with the political ideals of the Rebellion ; more a *faux pas* than something planned. Accordingly, while assimilating the Rebellion to the United Irishmen movement, *Fellowship of Freedom* also sort of ignored the perpetrators of 1798 violence.

In *Up in Arms*, the significance of both Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge was, to some extent, challenged as well. Initially exhibited by Cruikshank under the title *Irish Rebellion: Burning the Barn Full of People*, the etching of Scullabogue was entitled *Massacre at Scullabogue*. Certainly, the word "massacre" might imply more of a moral judgment than the expression "burning the barn" ([52]), but this transformed the message of the image, which was no longer about the Rebellion, but only about Scullabogue. The caption mentioned Scullabogue as "one of the most infamous episodes of the rebellion in Wexford" ([53]). Scullabogue remained one single event of the Wexford rebellion, not representative of the whole Rebellion. That could explain why the images were not selected to appear within the *Up in Arms* guide. Both exhibitions downplayed the significance of the "massacres", yet the considerations were not similar. In *Up in Arms,* Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge were presented as tragic and not representative events, but as part of the 1798 Rebellion nonetheless. On the contrary, the *Fellowship of Freedom* book tended to interpret the events at Scullabogue as isolated, "against the instructions of the United Irishmen": that is, the events were not part of the main current. One could even wonder whether Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge were part of the Rebellion or rather part of 1798 remembrance.

In order to answer this question, the arrangement of the display must be analyzed in its entirety. The position and the arrangement of images in the display were fundamental since they implied a certain point of view. In Belfast, Cruikshank's etchings were displayed in the section about "*The rebellion in the South*" ([54]) as representations of what happened. On the other side, in *Fellowship of Freedom*, Cruikshank's etchings were part of the section on *Historiography: "The Second Fighting of '98"* which, with the final section entitled *Memory : '98 after '98* ([55]) analyzed not strictly what happened in 1798 but rather how it had been remembered ([56]). As clear evidence, Kevin Whelan wrote that the images of Scullabogue were "non-contemporary and entirely fanciful" ([57]). Certainly, in doing so, Whelan did not deny the killing of Loyalists in Scullabogue ([58]) but denied any historical dimensions to Cruikshank's representations: in other words, he denied the sectarian interpretations of Scullabogue and of the Wexford Rebellion at

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(52) In addition, this could be due to the need to clarify the topic.

(53) W.A. MAGUIRE, ed., *Up in Arms, op. cit.*, p. 218.

(54) *Up in Arms*, *Exhibition Guide*, p. 12.

(55) Dublin, NMI archives, Collins Barracks, Registration Department, *Exhibition outline*, A1/98/047.

(56) In that sense, the *Fellowship of Freedom* book was slightly different since it also showed a representation of *Massacre at Scullabogue* in the section about the *Rebellion in Leinster*.

(57) K. WHELAN, *Fellowship of Freedom*, *op. cit.*, p.137.

(58) Indeed, K. Whelan explained what happened in Scullabogue on p. 74.

large. According to the display, the etchings were representative of the 1840s and not of the 1790s.

The display of images in dissimilar sections was informed by the overall purpose of each exhibition. For Whelan, the "non-contemporary" drawings gave more information about the remembrance of 1798 than about the event itself. Although exhibited in the section about historiography, the image of Scullabogue was included in the exhibition book, in the section about the "Politics of Memory" and surrounded by images coming from the 1798 centenary commemorations ([59]). By placing the image in this section, both the show and the exhibition book created a particular context of display that distinguished the historical topic (1798) from the 1840s image production – in other words, the 1798 memory. Contrary to the way they were displayed in *Up in Arms*, the etchings were not displayed as directly related to 1798. In *Fellowship of Freedom*, the etchings were used as representations of the "19th century imagination" ([60]) and were part of a system of meaning whose aim was to show how 1798 has been politicized. Split between the unionist version of a "sectarian bloodbath" ([61]) and its Catholic nationalist matching piece defining the Rebellion as a "struggle for faith and fatherland" ([62]), the history of 1798 remembrance became the prism through which the images had to be perceived.

This visual mode of presentation was crucial to understand the past that was proposed to the visitors ([63]). We reach here one of the fundamental discrepancies between *Fellowship of Freedom* and *Up in Arms* : the relationship between memory and history, between visual and written information. In *Fellowship of Freedom*, the images of Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge were subordinated to the historical interpretations. The images were presented in a very historical manner, giving more significance to the context of production than to the event depicted. For instance, about Cruikshank's etching of Wexford Bridge, Whelan wrote that this marks "the early Victorian emergence of racial stereotyping with the rebels portrayed as simian Celts" ([64]). The image had to be understood not as evidence of rebels' acts of violence but as something which "touched a powerful Protestant psyche of persecution" ([65]). The initial message produced by the image was then totally controlled and included in another narrative explaining how the image was constructed to justify political discourses. Images were shrewdly subordinated to a powerful narrative that aimed at changing the presuppositions about 1798. The control of the image was much stricter in *Fellowship of Freedom* than in *Up in Arms,* in which the display of historical artefacts remained prominent ([66]).

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(59) *Idem*, p. 136-137.
(60) *Idem*, p.121.
(61) *Idem*, p. 123
(62) *Idem*, p. 124.
(63) Unfortunately, very few materials were kept about the reactions from the visitors; visitors' book, cards…
(64) *Idem*, p. 123.
(65) *Ibid.*
(66) More than three times more artefacts were displayed for *Up in Arms* (300). Yet, it does not mean that *Up in Arms* was devoid of any narrative. *Up in Arms* took into consideration historical interpretations, but the difference of purpose implied other emphases.

To conclude, the organization of the display is highly valuable to analyze of 1998 narratives about the past. Contrary to exhibitions held in 1948 at the NMI and in 1967 at the UM ([67]) in which artefacts were displayed with little contextualization ([68]), the overall organization and the control of the text accompanying images produced more complex narratives. To some extent, both 1998 exhibitions were intended to depoliticize the remembrance of the 1798 Rebellion, to smooth over past conflicts and, as a consequence, bring peace to the present. Accordingly, both displays challenged the political uses of the Rebellion by Unionists and Nationalists. The discrepancy came more from the re-politicization of the Rebellion legacy. In *Fellowship of Freedom*, the intention to stress the United Irishmen as models for the 1998 Peace Process produced a sort of denial of violence, associating it more with 19th-century remembrance than with the Rebellion as such. The exhibition, and the commemoration at large, served to detach 1798 from its Nationalist and Unionist features, in order to promote a version that could be used as model for the Peace Process. The political ideals of unity were the aspect of the past to be remembered, and not the sectarian or political divisions. On the other side, the Belfast exhibition was used, by the Community Relations Council, as a contribution to the Peace Process, reconciling both communities in a shared official past. *Up in Arms* sought to stress the 1798 legacy for both Nationalists and Unionists ; therefore, the display was more a response to the political process of creating a commonly accepted official past. The military dimension of the Rebellion and the acts of violence it produced were not counterproductive to display as long as they were not interpreted as repre-senting an overall distinction between Catholics and Protestants. In that sense, violence was an integral part of the Rebellion, which was interpreted as an armed conflict in the late 18th century context of agrarian and anti-tax insur-rections in which the opponents – British Troops, the Orange Order – had their own space. Thus, the posterior uses of 1798 in order to justify sectarian political divisions were challenged not by showing their "imaginary" and mythical constructions but rather by displaying a historical version of the Rebellion which gave an account of complex 20th century Northern Irish identification systems.

(67) In 1948, the exhibition was part of the commemoration of the Rebellion for its 150th anniversary. In 1967, the Ulster Museum organized a small exhibition dedicated to Henry Joy McCracken, one of the most famous leaders of the uprising in Ulster.

(68) One might speak of artefact fetishism. The significance came from the object and not so much from its meaning in a historical context.

Annex 1:
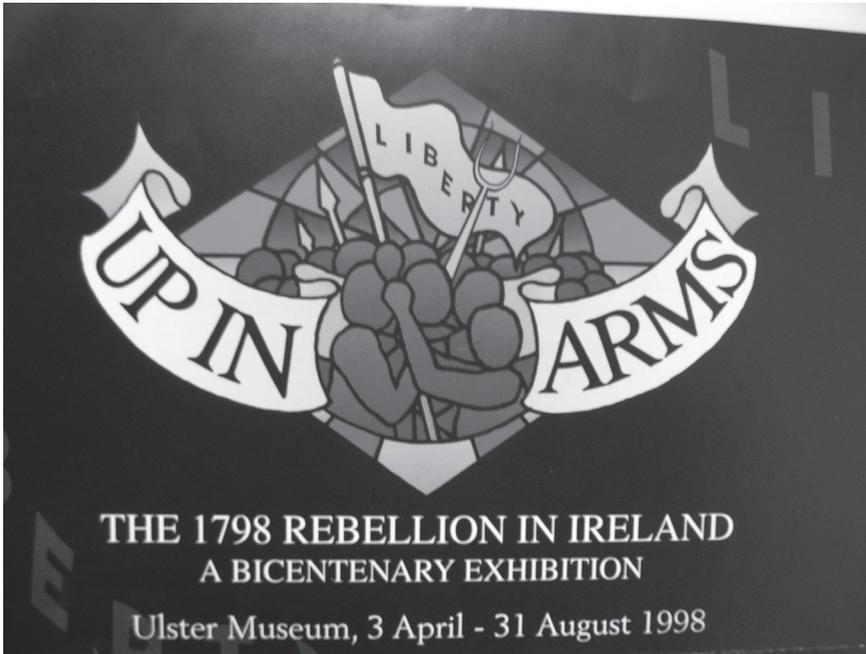
Logo of the exhibition held at the Ulster Museum, "Courtesy of the Trustees of the National Museums Northern Ireland".

Annex 2:

G. CRUIKSHANK, *The Rebels Executing their Prisoners on the Bridge at Wexford*, in W.H. MAXWELL, *History of the Irish Rebellion in 1798*, London, Baily, 1845 (Public document, Google book, 12 May 2009).

ABSTRACT

Thomas CAUVIN, *Explaining the Past Through Artefacts : 1998 Historical Exhibitions in Ireland and Northern Ireland*

The purpose of this article is to examine how exhibitions can help historians to study interpretations and constructions of the past. The article focuses on historical exhibitions dealing with the 1798 Rebellion and held in 1998 in two national museums of Ireland, the National Museum of Ireland (NMI) in Dublin and the Ulster Museum (UM) in Belfast. The two exhibitions examined are "Fellowship of Freedom : The United Irishmen and the Rebellion of 1798" and "Up in Arms: The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland, a bicentenary exhibition" held at the NMI and UM respectively. The 1998 exhibitions were particularly remarkable since they were direct responses to previous interpretations of the Irish Conflict and aimed at producing new official narratives of the past. Images may be analyzed as historical sources for the topics they deal with, for the context of their production, but also for the context of their display, since interpretation of images contributes to the constant construction of cultural heritage. In order to analyze the reinterpretations of the past, one meaningful approach, then, is to focus on the relationships between images and texts, or in other words, how images were interpreted and organized to produce narratives of the past. First, I compare how the 1798 Rebellion was defined through images, especially the covers of published materials, and to what extent scenes of violence were included in the visual representations of 1798. Second, I intend to clarify how the different interpretations and arrangements of images reveal the larger constructions of the past.

RÉSUMÉ

Thomas CAUVIN, *L'histoire expliquée par des objets: les expositions historiques de 1998 en Irlande et en Irlande du Nord*

Cet article examine en quoi des expositions peuvent aider les historiens à mieux appréhender les représentations du passé. L'étude se concentre sur deux expositions commémorant la rébellion irlandaise de 1798, l'une tenue à Dublin (*National Museum of Ireland*), l'autre à Belfast (*Ulster Museum*). L'une des particularités de ces expositions étaient leurs directes connections avec les interprétations précédentes, en voulant produire de nouveaux discours officiels. Les images peuvent non seulement être utilisées dans l'analyse historique du sujet qu'elles représentent, pour leur contexte de production, mais également pour le contexte de l'exposition, puisque l'interprétation des images participe à la construction d'un patrimoine culturel. Afin d'analyser ces constantes réinterprétations du passé, il est très intéressant de se connecter sur les liens entre textes et images, en d'autres termes, comment les images ont été utilisées dans la production des récits du passé. En premier lieu, je compare comment la Rébellion de 1798 a été définie grâce à des images, notamment les représentations de violence dans les couvertures des publications. Puis, je m'attache à clarifier en quoi les différents interprétations et les multiples arrangements d'objets relèvent de constructions plus générales du passé.

SAMENVATTING

Thomas CAUVIN, *Het verleden verklaard via artefacten: historische tentoonstellingen in Ierland en Noord-Ierland*

Dit artikel gaat na op welke wijze tentoonstellingen nuttig kunnen zijn voor historici bij hun onderzoek naar interpretaties en constructies van het verleden. Het focust op twee historische tentoonstellingen over de Irish Rebellion (Ierse Rebellie) van 1798, die in 1998 plaatsvonden in twee nationale musea in Ierland, met name het National Museum of Ireland (NMI) in Dublin en het Ulster Museum (UM) in Belfast. Meer specifiek gaat het om "Fellowship of Freedom : The United Irishmen and the Rebellion of 1798" en "Up in Arms: The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland, a bicentenary exhibition", respectievelijk gehouden in het NMI en het UM. De tentoonstellingen in 1998 waren uitzonderlijk omdat ze een direct antwoord vormden op eerdere interpretaties van het conflict en omdat ze tot doel hadden nieuwe officiële versies van de geschiedenis te creëren. De afbeeldingen die gebruikt werden in deze tentoonstellingen kunnen nuttig zijn als historische bronnen voor het onderzoek naar de onderwerpen die ze voorstellen, naar de productiecontext, maar ook naar de context waarin ze worden tentoongesteld. Dit onderzoek is van belang omdat de interpretatie van beelden bijdraagt aan de onophoudelijke constructie van ons cultureel erfgoed. Een interessante invalshoek bij de studie van de herinterpretatie van het verleden is de focus op de relatie tussen beelden en tekst, met andere woorden het kijken naar hoe beelden werden geïnterpreteerd en (ruimtelijk) georganiseerd om bepaalde versies over het verleden te produceren. Eerst vergelijk ik in dit artikel hoe de Irish Rebellion gedefinieerd werd aan de hand van afbeeldingen, met specifieke aandacht voor de coverontwerpen van de catalogi en ander drukwerk en voor de mate waarin gewelddadige scènes een plaats kregen in de visuele representatie van de gebeurtenissen in 1798. Daarna probeer ik te verduidelijken hoe verschillende interpretaties en de uiteenlopende ordening van de afbeeldingen in de tentoonstellingen ruimere constructies van het verleden kunnen onthullen.