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ARTICLES (PEER REVIEWED)

## Complicated Pasts, Promising Futures: Public History on the Island of Ireland

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When writing about Ireland, even the geographical region to which the name refers brings with it the need to discuss history. The island of Ireland has a long history of colonization by its closest geographical neighbour, Britain. In a simplistic retelling of a complex history, Ireland was first colonized by Anglo-Normans in the 1100s. British control tightened throughout the 1500s and 1600s, and was ratified through a series of legislature in the 1800s. Unrest led to a series of ‘rebellions’, war of independence, and civil wars. After a series of escalations in the 1910s the Irish Free State was created in 1922. The creation of the Irish Free State (renamed Republic of Ireland in 1949) split Ireland, and six counties in the North East of the island, Northern Ireland, remained under the governance of the British state. Currently the island is comprised of the Republic of Ireland, which constitutes the majority of the island, and Northern Ireland, which remains under British control. In Northern Ireland, a violent period of conflict known as The Troubles occurred between 1969 and 1998, inflamed by ideas of republicanism and nationalism with paramilitary organizations on both sides of the political divide, and the British Army responsible for the deaths that occurred during this unrest. So not only does the island of Ireland contain one postcolonial country, but a part of another country that is a post-conflict society.<sup>1</sup>

Public history is still a reasonably new concept across the island of Ireland and public history as an academic discipline has only been articulated and cemented within the past ten years. Academic historians across the island are highly active in disseminating their research

to the public, primarily through television documentaries and newspapers. But as Thomas Cauvin and Ciaran O'Neill have noted, this does not mean that they regularly engage with the public in the way that public historians understand, that is, as equal participants in building historical knowledge.<sup>2</sup> There are a range of courses which are teaching a new generation of historians how to be public historians (in the participatory sense) through MA degree courses in Public History at Queen's University Belfast (Northern Ireland), Public History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Limerick, and Public History at University College Dublin (both in the Republic), in addition to an MPhil degree in Public History and Cultural Heritage at Trinity College Dublin, as well as several MAs training new generations of museum practitioners and archivists. There is a steadily growing body of academic work which theorises public history on the Ireland of Ireland, notably by Olwen Purdue, who has pioneered the practice of public history in Northern Ireland, as well as by Cauvin and O'Neill.<sup>3</sup> Before this, little had been theorized about the nature of public history on the island, other than to express fears about its implications for academic historians.<sup>4</sup> New work about public history on the island challenges ideas of a fixed idea of public history, with Purdue challenging future public historians to engage with the 'unique opportunities' of trialing public history initiatives in Northern Ireland, where 'the stories of the past continue to resonate so strongly in the present.'<sup>5</sup> Although there is a large interest in Irish history, and a very keen public, public history as a way of 'doing history' is still in its relative infancy across the island.

Public history on the island of Ireland is complex, and at times contradictory, but without a doubt overwhelmingly popular. This article takes a very broad definition of public history, including but not limited to history projects by members of the public, television shows, dark tourism, and the work of professional historians. Family history is one of the key ways that Irish people engage with their heritage, and the overwhelming popularity of this historical genre is testament to resources that heritage sites have made available to Irish peoples globally. An increasing interest in technology can also be seen, with institutions turning to the digital to extend their networks and entice visitors. Difficult histories are, given the postcolonial and post-conflict societies present on the island, dealt with in a number of ways, and the penultimate section of this essay gives an overview of the ways Ireland has dealt with its difficult pasts, with the final section reflecting on the ongoing Decade of Centenaries. Overall, public history on the island of Ireland is academically engaged and increasingly sensitive to the needs of its complex history.

## Family History

The island of Ireland, like many other areas worldwide, has a passionate relationship with family history. Interest in family history is particularly notable in the Republic where genealogical research is supported by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. It hosts a free website with digitized collections of family history research material.<sup>6</sup> Genealogical companies, such as the Irish Ancestry Research Centre, are popular, with some offering University accredited genealogical courses in addition to private research. In 2005 Ciara Breathnach established the first MA in the History of Family, based at the University of Limerick. Historical societies, such as the Genealogical Society of Ireland in the Republic and the North of Ireland Family History Society in Northern Ireland offer community support for genealogists and family history researchers. While there are more opportunities for genealogical research in the Republic, when compared with the north, these initiatives largely point to a shared history, with resources which trace the history of pre-twentieth century families accessible to all whose ancestors hailed from any part of the island.

This interest in family history, and the wealth of digitized research material, services and societies is, in part, due to the large numbers of families who form the Irish diaspora. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs 70 million people worldwide claim Irish heritage.<sup>7</sup> The Irish diaspora are voracious consumers of public history. The magazine *Irish Roots*, which focuses on tracing ancestors, is costed for

Irish, British, US, Australian and Canadian consumers, reflecting the areas with the highest concentration of people with Irish ancestry worldwide. Opened in 1976, the living history site, the Ulster American Folk Park, shows what life was like for emigrants to the US in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The park is also home to the Mellon Centre for Migration Studies, established in 1998, which is a dedicated resource centre for the migration of Irish peoples. The Centre offers a large specialized library and hosts the Irish Emigration Database which has digitized a wide range of sources about Irish migration to North America (1700-1950). This interest in diaspora history more broadly is also reflected in the recent success of the *Bad Bridget* podcast, created by academics Elaine Farrell and Leanne McCormick, whose research project about criminal Irish women in North America has been turned into a highly successful public history podcast.<sup>8</sup> Not only is there appetite for family history knowledge on the island of Ireland, but outside of that, with people of Irish ancestry in the USA, Canada and Australia helping to fuel state level, private, academic and grassroots public history initiatives.

## Technology and Public History

The interest in digital technology hinted at through the digitization of family history material has been formalized in other areas of public history. Dublin boasts the first fully interactive digital museum, EPIC: The Irish Emigration Museum, which relies on digital technology to tell the story of Irish people globally. Instead of physical objects, the story of Irish emigrants is exclusively told through interactive digital exhibits.<sup>9</sup> This privately owned museum has been awarded a swathe of tourism awards, including Europe's Leading Tourist Attraction in the 2020 World Travel Awards. The museum is unashamedly targeted at members of the Irish diaspora. For St Patrick's Day (17 March) 2021 the museum asked people to add their name to a new exhibition which projects the names of emigrants and the year they left Ireland onto a wall in the museum.<sup>10</sup>

Digital databases for historical research are also immensely popular across the island. The Digital Repository of Ireland is a digital repository for humanities, social science, and cultural heritage data in Ireland. They host open access collections of heritage data and offer training in online research methods. Online archives more broadly are also becoming increasingly popular, with many documents digitized and made publicly available for the Decade of Centenaries. The Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN) is a particularly important digital resource in Northern Ireland, with digitized resources relating to The Troubles, and Northern Irish politics since 1968. Threatened with closure over a lack of financing, the Irish Government recently donated funding through the Department of Foreign Affairs' reconciliation fund, designed to facilitate relationship building activities between Northern Ireland and the Republic to ensure the archive's future.<sup>11</sup>

This working relationship between north and south can also be seen in museums. The Irish Museums Association adopts an all-Ireland approach to the development of museum professionals. This includes advice for collecting Covid-19 related material, based on collecting guidelines developed by the National Museum of Ireland. As many museums react to the new circumstances they find themselves in, museums have increasingly turned towards the digital, with online talks, exhibitions, and activities for children all made available over the past year. Initiatives like #IrishMuseumsOnline have collated digital museum outputs to use on social media to create an all-Ireland touchpoint for web-based museum content. However Covid-19 has likely increased the divide between museums who have the resources to provide digital content and those that do not. A 2016 report found that museum staff needed further training and additional resources in improving levels of digitization, including creating and implementing digital strategies.<sup>12</sup> Although social media outreach was, and is, still strong in Irish museums, as the pandemic has continued, better financed institutions have been able to digitally engage audiences in more sustained manner.<sup>13</sup>

Grassroots groups are also turning to semi-digital initiatives to record their own histories in the wake of the pandemic. The Northern Irish history project ‘The Troubles I’ve Seen’, run by Richard O’Leary, asks people to find and record queer objects in their homes as a response to lockdowns hampering in-person research plans.<sup>14</sup> The project ‘Archiving the 8<sup>th</sup>’ tracks the physical and digital archives of activist groups involved in the successful campaign for abortion rights as voted for in a 2018 referendum to allow legal abortions in the Republic of Ireland.<sup>15</sup> Although led by public historians, these projects involve academic historians and members of the public who want to volunteer, helping to formalize, fund and co-ordinate public history projects across the island of Ireland.

## Difficult Histories

The island of Ireland has a range of difficult histories, from civic violence to the abuse of women and children by the state. Many of these historical events ended within the past thirty years, and represent a lived experience for many across the island, making public history on these topics difficult to mediate. Purdue has emphasized the significance of academic historians working with others in a way which ‘challenges dangerous reductionist and partisan historical narratives, and allows space to face up to past trauma.’<sup>16</sup> There are a range of public history projects which seek to explore the tensions of the past and build understanding among the communities affected, which range from academic led reports to the hit television shows.

Both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland are in the process of understanding and redressing state enacted violence on women and children perpetuated through Mother and Baby Homes. These homes were run by the state and had secular and religious (overwhelmingly Catholic) dormitories. Unmarried pregnant women, who were often not in a position to continue a relationship with the father of their child, were placed in the homes to give birth. After giving birth their children were taken away and raised in an institution or adopted. These homes were open until 1998 in the Republic and 1990 in Northern Ireland. Both the Government of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Executive commissioned reports into the Mother and Baby Homes, both of which were released in early 2021.<sup>17</sup> The report in the Republic was spurred by the work of the historian Catharine Corless into a number of unrecorded burials of children in the Tuam Home site. Her research in the early 2010s caught public attention and ultimately, alongside pressure groups, led to the commission of a report into the Homes. A campaign by the activist group Mixed Race Irish led to the Commission including research into the treatment of mixed race children in the report, although the conclusion of the report, that all unmarried mothers were discriminated against, fails to recognize the specific ways that race was discriminated against in the homes.<sup>18</sup>

Professional historians were involved in both reports but it is clear that the Northern Irish report was led by historians, rather than being involved as part of a wider team of historians and legal experts, and as was the case in the Republic. While both reports used witness testimony the Northern Irish report has been praised for its sensitive use of oral history and its empathetic and ethical use of the histories of those affected.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the Irish report has been lambasted by prominent academics for its weak methodology and lack of nuance and for ignoring witness testimony.<sup>20</sup> The historical and public implications of this stark difference between the reports are only beginning to be probed. What is immediately clear is that witness testimony in the form of oral histories taken by professional oral historians has, in the Northern Irish report, been publicly acknowledged as an empathetic and crucial way of understanding the past.<sup>21</sup> What this means for future inquiries into the abuses suffered by women and children at the hands of the state remains to be seen, but marks an area where historians are actively engaged in supporting complex inquiries into the past.

Difficult histories are also being engaged with by a wider range of people, from grassroots groups to those in the media. In Northern Ireland, The Troubles (1969–1998), a period of conflict begun on the faultlines of national, ethnic and sectarian divides was caused by a complex interplay of various factors. The conflict

resulted in the deaths of over 3,500 people and has left a legacy of trauma in Northern Ireland. It is still very much in living history and there was only a piecemeal and limited reconciliation process.<sup>22</sup> Various groups are still seeking reparations against other actors, in particular the British Army. Some public history projects seek to advocate on behalf of people targeted during the conflict, such as the Museum of Free Derry, founded by family members of people killed on Bloody Sunday.<sup>23</sup> Echoes of the conflict still reverberate through Northern Ireland, where murals to victims of The Troubles appear in both nationalist and unionist areas, and 'Peace Walls' still divide the city of Belfast.

There are a range of public history projects concerned with The Troubles which seek to bring understanding and aid communities through healing. The independent group Healing Through Remembering, established in 2001, has run a series of campaigns about discussing recent traumatic pasts, such as the 'Whatever you say, say something!' campaign (2008-2011) and the Voyager project (2013-2014) which focused on broaching difficult conversations among and between affected communities.<sup>24</sup> In the digital realm, the Prisons Memory Archive, an oral and video history project recorded the memories of those jailed and working in the Maze and Long Kesh/Armagh Gaol prisons and made some of these available for public view.<sup>25</sup> This project again focused on a shared and difficult past, highlighting experiences of loyalist and republican ex-prisoners. A new project led by Alison Garden seeks to understand 'mixed marriages' from different communities, engaging with a range of public history professionals to understand how love has been contested, challenged and accepted across the island.<sup>26</sup>

One of the most popular public history outputs which makes reference to The Troubles in recent years has been the television show *Derry Girls*. Set amidst a backdrop of 1990s Derry/Londonderry, the comedy series follows the lives of four Irish Catholic girls and one of their English cousins. The show proved so popular that National Museums Northern Ireland bought one of the props from the show which showed the comedic 'differences' between Catholics and Protestants which is now the basis of a new exhibition focusing on shared commonalities between Northern Irish communities.<sup>27</sup>

Troubles sites have brought with them a wealth of dark tourists wanting to explore this painful past, although dark tourist sites are popular across the island of Ireland. Tourism is a key driver for the heritage industry across the island of Ireland. In 2019 Northern Ireland welcomed 5.3 million tourists with the Republic of Ireland welcoming 11.3 million tourists during the same year.<sup>28</sup> While not all of these tourists were cast in the role of dark tourists, there are a considerable number of people who will have engaged with the island's past through heritage initiatives. Dark tourism is rife in the cities of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. Black cab tours, walking tours, and other monetized experiences, some of which are run by ex-members of political organizations involved in the conflict, are highly popular visitor experiences.<sup>29</sup> There is an ongoing debate about the benefits of this tourism to the Northern Irish economy, with fears that these sites will become places of pilgrimage which have the power to retrench, rather than bridge, what is still a raw history. Dark tourism is also popular in the Republic of Ireland. Private enterprises, such as the Glasnevin Cemetery Museum, which has won national and international cultural awards, capitalize on Ireland's dark past.<sup>30</sup> Dark tourism is now such a given on the island that a new popular history book, written by academic and public historian Gillian O'Brien, explicitly examines 'Ireland's places of famine, death and rebellion'.<sup>31</sup>

Although there is a large appetite for dark history both from international tourists, the island of Ireland contains some difficult history that it is not yet ready for consumption by tourists, and covers events that are only beginning to be discussed at a public level. While Ireland was, in itself, a colonized country, Irish people also played a distinct role in colonizing other, often non-white, overseas territories. For example, in 1901 white Irish settlers formed one quarter of the total settler population in Australia. Ireland is only beginning to come to terms with its colonial past. Projects such as Briony Widdis's exploration of colonial objects in Northern Irish museum collections, and new research into the colonial history of Trinity College Dublin, led by Ciaran O'Neill and Patrick Walsh, will begin to unpick the legacies of white Irish power. Despite



these beginnings, it is clear that there is still a long way to go in addressing the complex role of Ireland as a colonial actor.

## Decade of Centenaries

One of the most visible sites of state-led public history in recent years have been the commemorative events marking Ireland's twentieth century history. The Decade of Centenaries (2012-2022) marks several key events which shaped the current island of Ireland, from the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912, through the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme in 1916, to the Civil War and Partition of Ireland in 1922. Different centenaries have different implications for different communities on the island of Ireland. For example, the Easter Rising is largely celebrated in the Republic, whereas involvement in the First World War is now, although not historically, primarily remembered by Unionist communities in Northern Ireland.<sup>32</sup> The Irish government is largely responsible for these commemorations – although Northern Irish representatives were consulted – and marks a clear area where the state is attempting to control public narratives of the past.

State commemorations of the Decade of Centenaries aims to ensure that events are remembered 'appropriately, proportionately, respectfully and with sensitivity ... to promote a deeper understanding of the significant events that took place during this period and recognise that the shared historical experience of those years gave rise to very different narratives and memories.'<sup>33</sup> Events have ranged from restaging the events of the 1913 Dublin lockout, with people in historically appropriate dress, to a pop up Women's Museum which explored women's (substantial) involvement in Irish politics. 2016 posed a particularly difficult year of commemorations, as it held two politically polarized events, the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme. These events are now held as opposing points of a divisive history, with Republicans claiming the Easter Rising and Ulster Unionists claiming the battle as key moments in their political awakenings. Commemorative events in 2016 sought to complicate the simplistic narratives formed by each community, by showing that Irish Catholics were involved in the war efforts, and that commemorative events concerning the Rising were inclusive and non-partisan.<sup>34</sup>

Despite these calls for inclusivity, there have been strong criticisms of centenary events. The anthropologist Dominic Bryan is highly critical of the involvement of historians in these commemorations, arguing that they are called upon to legitimize the importance of history in Irish identity by those who are use remembrance for political reasons.<sup>35</sup> Oona Frawley has highlighted how women's histories have been excluded from the planning and delivery of the commemorative events of the past several years.<sup>36</sup> Despite over 40 years of academic publishing on Irish women's history, and a wealth of academic women to draw from, the Irish government's expert advisory group only contained three women (to seven men), rising to four women (to eight men), and with only one (male) representative for the whole of Northern Ireland. Work by Laura McAtackney, Maeve Casserly and Eli Davies shows that when women are shown in commemorative events they are likely to be those already well known by the populace, or, when new women are introduced into the historical narrative, are portrayed inaccurately, as passive bystanders instead of active participants in the events depicted.<sup>37</sup> At the time of writing, the Decade of Centenaries is still ongoing, with 2022's commemoration of the partition of Ireland set to be a particularly difficult centenary to navigate. While events have become more inclusive as the Decade advances, it remains to be seen if future commemorations will fall back on publicly accepted (male) tropes or whether a historically nuanced interpretation of events will be presented to the public.

## Conclusions

The Decade of Centenaries is perhaps a useful place to end this discussion about the nature of public history on the island of Ireland. A series of public seminars (2020) which reflected on the commemorations has

been marked by their inclusion of expert academics.<sup>38</sup> In many ways the seminars are characteristic of Irish approaches to public history. They were supported by both the government and RTÉ (a national newspaper) and focus on trying to understand how Ireland can remember its many pasts. While the public prominence of academic historians is important, it signifies their role as experts leading history in public. Collaborative public history projects do exist on the island of Ireland, but experts are still held in the highest regard. Grassroots projects which allow community groups and public historians room to collaborate are on the rise, but public history as a radical method of ‘doing history’ is still in its relative infancy here. With the difficult histories at play across the island, it is easy to see why this reliance on experts is preferred, especially by the state, as recent conflict in Northern Ireland, and emotive centenaries across the whole island have the potential to reopen old wounds. But something is lost in not embracing collaborative history methods more broadly. Public history across the island of Ireland is academically engaged, aware of the benefits of digitization and digital access, sensitive to the needs of the Irish diaspora and voraciously consumed by a historically curious public.

## Endnotes

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