



# The Afterlives of the 1966 and 2016 Easter Rising Commemorations

Vojtěch Halama

## ABSTRACT

National commemorations are historical events, too. While re-imagining the past to correspond with contemporary sentiments, they are themselves open to reinterpretation by future observers. The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising was intended to be a liminal event, paying tribute to the veterans of the revolutionary generation while recalibrating the national narrative to be more conciliatory and less militaristic. Yet, the anniversary later became neglected as one of the sparks of the conflict in Northern Ireland and subsequently served as the grand negative example of what needs to be avoided during the preparations for the Easter Rising centenary in 2016. The organisers of this centenary eventually introduced a highly diverse programme that held inclusivity at its centre. Nonetheless, with Brexit or Covid-19 in mind, one might wonder what the afterlife of the centennial mosaic of narratives will look like. Will the popular success of the event last, or will it be overshadowed or even neglected in the future?

## KEYWORDS

Ireland, Easter Rising, commemoration, afterlife, founding myth, narrative

## INTRODUCTION

The 1916 Easter Rising was an event of symbolic significance far exceeding its military and political results. Directed against the British rule in Ireland, it was carried out by over a thousand insurrectionists concentrated in Dublin. It was quickly defeated, its leaders executed, and the declared Irish Republic failed to materialise, but both its radical ideology and rich symbolic repertoire became a reference point for the subsequent struggle for independence, as well as many narratives that emerged afterwards. It has effectively become the founding myth of the modern Irish state. Moreover, its defeat, the subsequent executions of its leaders — often intellectuals and artists — and the fact that most of its admirers only retrospectively took interest in what happened and why, created a vacuum ‘into which multiple motives and messages have been projected.’<sup>1</sup> A potent multivocal symbol,

---

1 R. HIGGINS, *Transforming 1916: Meaning, Memory and the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Easter Rising*, Cork 2012, p. 7.



the '1916' can act as a reference point in cultural, social and economic agendas, and often symbolises wider emancipatory processes (or their failure) during the Irish revolutionary decade.

Official commemorations of the event have thus always been a challenge. National commemorations, in general, are about the present rather than the past, and they are about identity rather than memory.<sup>2</sup> They are present-centred and present-motivated acts organised by specific actors with specific agendas, in this case, the state. They help to shape national identity, a subjective identification representing only one of many identities that each person has, that often relies on a sense of shared history.<sup>3</sup> The relation with this past, nevertheless, is prone to change, and as sociologist Brad West puts it, 'for the national past to be re-enchanted in the contemporary age both the ritual engagement with it and the meaning which emerges from it must be consistent with contemporary sentiment.'<sup>4</sup> The Rising is thus reinvented every time it is commemorated, serving the needs of the contemporary state and society and, simultaneously, reflecting their transformations.

However, this article aims to point out that commemorations are historical events on their own. Such as the interpretations of the Rising have changed over the years, interpretations of its commemorations have changed likewise. The afterlives of the commemorative programmes have differed from the contemporary perceptions and the anniversaries will continue to be reinterpreted in the same manner as the original event does.<sup>5</sup>

This article addresses the afterlives of two major commemorations of the Rising in 1966 and 2016. While the retrospective reception of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary is a well-known story, the afterlife of the centenary commemoration is still forming, and it is uncertain how its legacy will be translated in the future. The article examines how both commemorations appeared in their contemporary contexts and how this contrasted (1966) or may contrast (2016) with their retrospective interpretations.<sup>6</sup> Further, it analyses how the former anniversary influenced the latter — and whether the centenary might experience a similar afterlife to that of the 1966 event.

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1966 seemed to have marked the end of the era, recalibrating the national narrative to make it more conciliatory and rational and less militaristic

- 
- 2 D. BRYAN, *Ritual, identity and nation: when the historian becomes the high priest of commemoration*, in: R. S. GRAYSON — F. MCGARRY, *Remembering 1916. The Easter Rising, the Somme and the Politics of Memory in Ireland*, Cambridge 2016, pp. 29.
  - 3 A. BILGRAMI, *Identity* in: J. M. BERNSTEIN — A. OPHIR — A. L. STOLER, *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, New York 2018, pp. 159–166; A. D. SMITH, *National Identity*, London 1991.
  - 4 B. WEST, *Re-enchanting Nationalisms: Rituals and Remembrances in a Postmodern Age*, New York 2015, p. 11.
  - 5 For more on “afterlives” of events and the mnemohistory approach, see M. TAMM (ed.), *Afterlife of Events. Perspectives on Mnemohistory*. London 2015.
  - 6 Some passages of text on the events in their contemporary context have been meanwhile used in V. HALAMA, *From Director to Coordinator: The Irish State and the Official Commemoration of the Easter Rising in 1966 and 2016*, in: O. PILNÝ — R. MARKUS — D. THEINOVÁ; J. LITTLE (eds.), *Ireland: Interfaces and Dialogues*, Trier 2022, pp. 53–64



and emotive. However, this has been overshadowed by what came shortly after: the conflict in Northern Ireland and the violence done in the name of those who signed the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916. The Troubles has brought the myth to the opposite extreme of denunciation and the 1966 event itself, according to historian Roisín Higgins, became ‘as mythical and misunderstood as 1916.’<sup>7</sup> Seven years after the Easter Rising centenary in 2016, one might wonder about its possible afterlives. For many contemporaries, it was a remarkable achievement in terms of extent, complexity, richness of the programme, organisational as well as participatory inclusivity, cultural and academic production, and many other aspects. Yet Brexit, COVID-19 or controversies of commemorating the Irish Civil War, among others, loom over its legacy. Will the centenary become “just as mythical and misunderstood” as the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary?

### THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE EASTER RISING

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising took place in 1966, in the middle of a socio-economic transformation and opening the country towards European cooperation. Abandoning economic protectionism and anti-modernism of the previous era, the new Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Seán Lemass reformed the Irish economy towards economic planning, free trade, and support of multi-national business. The reforms were intended to transform the traditional rural poverty into industrial prosperity, and if Éamon de Valera, the previous leading national figure, had always prioritised politics over economy, the preferences became reversed in the Lemass era. On the other hand, historian Mary Daly suggests that ‘[f]or many people, including many politicians, economic development and reorienting the economy were seen as a means of protecting institutions and values that were central to Irish society’.<sup>8</sup> Modernisation was to be confined to material living standards and social services, while cultural change was perceived as unnecessary, or rather undesired, by many. The central contradiction of the 1960s Ireland was that economic modernisation did not go hand in hand with a sociocultural change.

The anniversary commemorations were similarly characterised by both transformations and continuities. It was a liminal event aiming to pay a proper tribute to the past but then turn fully to the future. On the one hand, many veterans of the Irish revolutionary decade were still alive in 1966 and the organisers had to respond to their social memory as well as to demands for recognition and respect, as the living memory of the revolution was slowly fading away.<sup>9</sup> Instilling ‘into our youth an appreciation of the value of their heritage and of the sacrifices made for it,’ thus repre-

7 R. HIGGINS, *Transforming 1916*, p. 1.

8 M. DALY, *Sixties Ireland: Reshaping the Economy, State and Society, 1957–1973*, Cambridge 2016, pp. 371–372.

9 M. DALY, *Less a Commemoration of the Actual Achievements and More a Commemoration of the Hopes of the Men of 1916*, in: M. DALY — M. O’CALLAGHAN (eds.), *1916 in 1966: Commemorating the Easter Rising*, Dublin 2007, pp. 22–23; D. FERRITER, *A Nation and not a Rabble*, London 2015, pp. 356–357.



sented an important task for the programme organisers.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Lemass had little interest in traditionalist sentiments, even though he was a veteran of the Rising himself. His concept of ‘pragmatic nationalism’ assumed that the differences of the past must be overcome in favour of economic improvement and the modernisation of the country. The focus was on the rational, not the emotional. ‘For the next fifty years,’ he emphasised, ‘the symbol of patriotism is not the armed Irish Volunteer, but the student in the technical college, the planning officer, the busy executive of industry and trade union, the progressive farmer, the builders and workers on whose skills and enthusiasm the country’s future depends.’<sup>11</sup> Lemass constantly called for ‘working in harmony on the task of nation-building [...] and striving for a common goal.’<sup>12</sup> The state aspired to unite different intra-nationalist groups behind its flag, and to call them to march towards the future of national prosperity: to attend civic duties, to make a difference, to help the country flourish.

Lemass desired neither complicating the official narrative nor opening the old wounds. He chaired the organisational committee himself and had set it up from members of Fianna Fáil and civil servants, omitting the oppositional political parties and dismissing the more radical Republicans who had demanded to be put in charge of the planning. Such republicans still overwhelmingly controlled local commemoration in provincial Ireland; the state nevertheless adopted a rather non-confrontational stance and the clashes with them were largely contained during the 1966 Easter week.<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis was on the reconciliation of the civil war cleavage. The pro-Fianna Fáil *Irish Press* editorialised in 1966 that the Rising brought together ‘diverse elements in the nation’, providing them with a common purpose and thus common ground. Similarly, the editorial hoped, the ‘jubilee celebrations’ would lead to ‘a better understanding between the sponsors of all forms of national endeavour and a clearer realisation that their various activities are part of, or could be knit into, a universal pattern making for unity in national effort.’<sup>14</sup> However, the organisers incorporated (as was the case of the labour movement) or omitted (the Irish soldiers who fought in the First World War) other identities; the role of the women was likewise downplayed. Nevertheless, apart from the Catholic Church, which held a central position in the commemorative events, the government also encouraged the Protestant churches and the Jewish community to mark the anniversary, their ceremonies being specifically included in the official programme.<sup>15</sup>

The message to the world in a more general sense was that ‘the Rising is the basis of the excellent relations that now exist between Ireland and England,’ enabling the 1965 Free Trade Agreement and ensuring Ireland’s active position in the wider

---

10 National Archives of Ireland (NAI), Department of the Taoiseach (DT) 2017/12/2, Seán F. Lemass: *Cuimhneachán 1916. A Message from the Government to the School Managers and Teachers of Ireland and to the Children under Their Care*.

11 *Irish Press*, 22 April 1966.

12 *Ibid.*

13 M. DALY, *Less a Commemoration of the Actual Achievements...*, pp. 39–44.

14 *Irish Press*, 8 April 1966.

15 *Cuimhneachán 1916*, Dublin 1966, pp. 4–5.



world.<sup>16</sup> In line with this approach, the Minister for Foreign Affairs Frank Aiken promoted good relations with Britain in an article published in *The Guardian*, eloquently named *Our Brother Enemies*, and Edward J. Hitzel, the British officer who accepted de Valera's surrender in 1916, was 'a guest of honour of the State' at a ceremony in Boland Mills.<sup>17</sup> Ireland was presented as a state that had overcome its past enmities and was now a mature, trustworthy and active member of the international community.

Finally, there was a twofold approach towards Northern Ireland, the bitter result of necessary revolutionary compromises. Éamon de Valera, the President of Ireland and the only surviving commandant of the Rising, was consistent in his traditionalist approach and his aspirations to a united Ireland, calling for the end of the partition of the island by 'the uniting of all the people and the forgetting of past differences and dissensions.' This 'forgetting', characteristically, meant ending the fact that the Northern Unionists 'at the moment do not agree with the views of the rest of the country.'<sup>18</sup> Lemass's attitude, on the other hand, was characterised by putting pragmatism before empty declaratory statements.<sup>19</sup> Lemass initiated series of meetings with his northern counterpart, the Prime Minister Terence O'Neill, and furthered mutual cooperation. In contrast to the previous anti-partitionist policies, the new strategy was to mute down provocations towards the North. An example can be eloquently seen in Lemass' directives to the national broadcasting service, the RTÉ, demanding avoidance of comments on Northern Ireland that might upset the Unionists.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, too little attention was paid to the possibly radicalising effects of the anniversary itself on the relations with and within Northern Ireland. The promising North-South *détente* was disrupted by a period of political instability in 1966, when O'Neil came under significant pressure from his own hardliners and loyalist radicals. Lemass at least continued to avoid provocations during the commemorations, dodging calls in the Dáil for a greater involvement in events in the North.<sup>21</sup>

## THE AFTERLIFE OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY

The outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland in 1969 diverted the development and substantially changed the discourse. The movement against socio-economic inequalities experienced by the nationalist minority led to clashes between the Unionists

16 NAI, Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) 2000/14/81, *Letter from P. Keating to Frank Coffey*, 17 January 1966.

17 NAI, DFA 2000/14/94, Frank Aiken: *Our Brother Enemies*; R. O'DWYER, *The Golden Jubilee of the 1916 Easter Rising*, in: G. DOHERTY — D. KEOGH (eds.), 1916. *The Long Revolution*, Cork 2007, pp. 356–360.

18 *Irish Press*, 18 April 1966.

19 M. KENNEDY, *Northern Ireland and cross-border co-operation*, in: B. GIRVIN — G. MURPHY (eds.), *The Lemass Era. Politics and Society in the Ireland of Seán Lemass*, Dublin 2005, pp. 99–121.

20 R. SAVAGE, *Introducing television in the age of Seán Lemass*, in: B. GIRVIN — G. MURPHY (eds.), *The Lemass Era. Politics and Society in the Ireland of Seán Lemass*, Dublin 2005, pp. 205–207

21 *Irish Press*, 4 March 1966.



and Nationalists and radicalised communities within the already polarised society. The situation was then exploited by the resurgent republican organisation, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), that claimed tradition going back to the Irish struggle for independence. Aiming for a united Irish republic envisaged by the 1916 Proclamation, the PIRA could — and did — easily draw from the rich well of Irish revolutionary imagery. The Troubles thus revived the physical force republicanism, bringing back the militant, exclusive revolutionary ideology that Lemass hoped to overcome during the 1960s. Typically for ethno-political conflicts, the situation also created a need for symbols that would express, deepen, and reinforce the psychocultural interpretations of the belligerents and the communities the Provisional IRA aimed to gain support from. The Irish state was suddenly confronted with its own ideal of “provisional” democracy declared by visionary minority.<sup>22</sup>

Sharing the same ideological source, the large-scale armed campaign in Northern Ireland forced the Irish establishment to either avoid using this legacy for public representation, or risk being viewed as supportive of sectarian violence. Silence, therefore, had become the chief strategy of the state. Abandoning the annual military parade in 1972, it had avoided any major official involvement in commemorating or discussing the 1916 legacy. Political, and to a degree cultural, memory of the Easter Rising was effectively hijacked by the PIRA radicals, deepening the existing cleavages, and preventing not only a consensus, but also any multi-voiced discussion. Indeed, the Irish people found themselves in a situation in which they could only, to use Declan Kiberd’s phrase, ‘either throw in their lot with the Provos, or go over to the ranks of anti-nationalist revisionism. There was no room for liberal tolerance or intellectual subtlety in these matters, no middle ground to be occupied.’<sup>23</sup>

This ‘anti-nationalist revisionism’ represented the other extreme of the spectrum. If the IRA based the legitimacy of its armed struggle on the eschatological interpretation of Irish history, referring to the 800 years of unbroken struggle that would eventually lead to a ‘united, Gaelic and free’ Ireland without British presence, revisionism aimed to limit, or even mute, historical significance of Irish nationalism and delegitimise the Easter Rising as anti-democratic.<sup>24</sup> The doyen of politically motivated revisionists, Conor Cruise O’Brien, claimed in his seminal work *States of Ireland* that disagreement with the IRA’s violence was not enough: the whole Irish political culture, based on the irredentionist ‘cult of 1916’, was to be rejected in favour of the more democratic traditions within Irish nationalism.<sup>25</sup> Many scholars, nonetheless, simply perceived the topic as off limits.

Considering all that, the 1966 Golden Jubilee quickly became a neglected, controversial reference point, an example of what was supposed to be wrong with Irish nationalism, and a subject of blame for the violence in Northern Ireland. Unionists certainly had their objections, both during the conflict and the peace process. In the

22 J. M. REGAN, *Myth and the Irish State*, Sallins 2014, pp. 29–30

23 D. KIBERD, *The Elephant of Revolutionary Forgetfulness*, in: M. NÍ DHONNCHADHA — T. DORGAN (eds.), *Revising the Rising, Derry 1991*, pp. 9–10.

24 For an overview, see R. PERRY, *Revising Irish History: The Northern Ireland Conflict and the War of Ideas*, in: *Journal of European Studies* Vol. 40, No. 4, 2010, pp. 329–354.

25 C. CRUISE O’BRIEN, *States of Ireland*, London 1974.



early 1990s, David Trimble, the representative of moderate Unionism and a co-lau-reate of the Nobel Peace Prize for his involvement in negotiating the Good Friday Agreement, has denounced the event as ‘an orgy of self-congratulation’ celebrating the ‘bloodthirsty’ and anti-democratic legacy that obscures Ireland’s British heritage.<sup>26</sup> *Insurrection*, the TV series produced for the occasion, remained locked up in the RTÉ vault for fears that the heroic narrative could be seen as supportive of the sectarian violence in the North. Revisionists in the South like Conor Cruise O’Brien criticised the Jubilee as ‘a year in which ghosts were bound to walk’,<sup>27</sup> and the attitude survived well into the 2010s: just a year before the centenary, journalist Dennis Kennedy denounced the Golden Jubilee for replacing ‘the long slog of democratic politics’ with ‘the false and terrible beauty of violence’ in the official narrative.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, historian Roisín Higgins has asserted that the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary ‘has been remembered as a moment of unrestrained triumphalism which fuelled divisions between unionists and nationalists,’ that it had become ‘as mythical and misunderstood as 1916.’<sup>29</sup> The supposed triumphalism of the 1966 Golden Jubilee constituted the dominant part of the inhabited cultural and political memory. It was present in political speeches of senior politicians as well as among young students in the early 1990s.<sup>30</sup> The 2006 re-introduction of state commemoration revived the personal memories of many of those who were young in the 1960s. Catriona Crowe’s recollection of the Jubilee as ‘the golden age of innocence before anything happened in the North’, deeply impressing her as a child, seems somewhat characteristic of them.<sup>31</sup> The 1966 references also occurred during Dáil and Seanad debates on the coming centenary, ranging from dismisses of Lemass’s programme as ‘grotesque, triumphalist celebration’ to more balanced reviews: ‘Were we too triumphant in 1966? We probably were. Was there too much militarism about it? There probably was. [But] we were a young and emerging nation in 1966 and we had to show a little teaspach [Gaelic for ‘exuberance’], which is only natural.’<sup>32</sup>

There was another reason for why the Golden Jubilee resurfaced as a subject of discussion in the 2000s. Following the opening of the governmental archives in the late 1990s, the topic became a subject of academic research. Perhaps the most prominent piece on the topic resulted from an extensive research project by the Royal Irish Academy: Mary C. Daly’s edited book *1916 in 1966: Commemorating the Easter Rising*. Published shortly after the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rising, the book gained remarkable popularity, its launch being attended by the then Taoiseach himself. With the centenary in sight, the book hardly went unnoticed by those who would later be involved in the preparations.

---

26 D. TRIMBLE, *The Easter Rebellion of 1916*, Lurgan 1992.

27 C. CRUISE O’BRIEN, *States of Ireland*, p. 143.

28 D. KENNEDY, *Casting a Cold Eye on 1916 (and 1966)*, in: *History Ireland* Vol. 23, No. 5, 2015, pp. 10–11.

29 R. HIGGINS, *Transforming 1916*, p. 1.

30 D. KIBERD, *The Elephant of Revolutionary Forgetfulness*, pp. 2–3.

31 Catriona Crowe (*1916 and Me — Full Interview*), 21 November 2016. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVIwkYZRpRA> [Accessed 4 April 2023].

32 *Senead Éireann Debate*, 223:7, 22 May 2013.

Roisín Higgins notes that ‘the view of those who were young in 1966 has helped to sustain the idea that the jubilee was an occasion of unthinking nationalism.’<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in a revealing interview, Maurice Manning, the head of the Expert Advisory Group for the centenary, claimed that after the 1966 event, which he saw as a triumphalist ceremony owned by Fianna Fáil, he had lost interest in the topic, being uneasy especially with the fact that ‘there was no space in 1966 for people who didn’t belong to the mainstream tradition.’<sup>34</sup> The strong leadership of the Expert Advisory Group was indeed followed by the organising committee, as confirmed by John Concannon, the much younger director of the official centennial platform *Ireland 2016*. It was in opposition to this ‘singular, triumphalist, male, militaristic’ event, he claimed, that the centenary program was prepared.<sup>35</sup> The perceived urge for a departure from the 1966 approach, not only in much broader inclusivity but also in better communication with the public, has been best summed by Senator Ned O’Sullivan in 2013: ‘We may have made mistakes in 1966 and we must learn from them.’<sup>36</sup>

## THE CENTENARY AND ITS POSSIBLE AFTERLIVES

Inclusivity, equality, and pluralism became the centrepieces of the centenary commemoration in 2016. Two advisory committees overseeing the commemorations were set up already in 2011 in preparation for the wider ‘Decade of Centenaries’ programme. The first was the Expert Advisory Group on Commemorations, consisting of historians from every major Irish academic institution. It was set up to advise the government ‘on historical matters’ and to ‘consult widely with academic, community and voluntary groups and members of the public to ensure that significant events are commemorated accurately, proportionately and appropriately in tone.’ Its chairperson, historian Maurice Manning, has proclaimed that the group had a duty to prevent the hijacking of the centenary ‘by the government or anyone else’.<sup>37</sup> The second advisory group, the All Party Oireachtas Group on Commemorations, brought together representatives of ‘all parties in the Oireachtas as well as independents’, including representatives of Sinn Féin. The group was meeting regularly to ensure that the commemorative events were ‘conducted on a non-partisan, inclusive basis.’<sup>38</sup> After the initial controversies, the preparations gathered a new momentum after inclusion of two public figures who became central to the programme: Heather Humphreys, the Monaghan-born Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and John Concannon, the director of the National Tourism Developed Authority in Ireland. Highly

33 R. HIGGINS, *Transforming 1916*, p. 2.

34 Maurice Manning (*1916 and Me — Full Interview*), 21 November 2016. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqBppBcChVw> [Accessed 27 April 2023].

35 John Concannon (*1916 and Me — Full Interview*), 21 November 2016. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ggfcf\\_e82IY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ggfcf_e82IY) [Accessed 27 April 2023].

36 *Senead Éireann Debate*, 223:7, 22 May 2013.

37 D. FERRITER, *1916 in 2016: personal reflections of an Irish historian*, in: *Irish Historical Studies*, 42:161, 2018, p. 165.

38 Ireland 2016 <<https://www.ireland2016.gov.ie/about>> [accessed 27 April 2023].





improving the organisational management as well as public relations, their engagement resulted in renewed energies and refocusing of the programme, as revealed by a member of the all-party group.<sup>39</sup>

The official commemoration in its character aimed at reconciling as many divides on the island as possible. The Expert Advisory Group advised bridging the past cleavages by acknowledging ‘the multiple identities and traditions which are part of the overall story and of the different ideals and sacrifice associated with them’.<sup>40</sup> Thus, apart from the Rising and the revolutionary legacy, the programme included recognition of constitutional nationalism, the labour movement, the Irish soldiers fighting in the First World War and other previously side-lined traditions. Moreover, it was accompanied by the official commemoration of the Battle of the Somme, and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and with Britain was also being addressed throughout the year. This approach applied to the current cleavages, responding to the broadening sense of Irish identity. The centenary video *Mise Éire // I am Ireland* included statements from Irish citizens with many different backgrounds. ‘*Mise Éire*’ was proudly pronounced by a ginger schoolgirl as well as by Asian immigrants in their shop, by the young and the old, the urban and the rural, men and women, by the immigrants and their children as well as by representatives of the Diaspora.<sup>41</sup> ‘Ireland 2016 will belong to everyone on this island and to our friends and families overseas — regardless of political or family background, or personal interpretation of our modern history’ was the mantra repeated in many official statements.<sup>42</sup> In this “postmodern” inclusivity, ‘everyone’ referred to *each and every* individual, avoiding categorisation and rather providing a space for a unique mosaic of experiences, interests and opinions.

This approach was central to many speeches throughout the centenary year. During the Easter Sunday army parade and wreath-laying at the General Post Office, the Army Chaplain Seamus Madigan’s centenary prayer revolved around ‘singing a new song’, different from the troubled past. This was to be ‘a song of compassion, inclusion and engagement, a song of listening, social justice and respect for all, a song of unity, diversity, equality and peace.’<sup>43</sup> The President Michael D. Higgins repeatedly called for generosity in embracing ‘the multitude of stories that comprise our past, in all their bewildering contradictions and differences,’ and that next to the leaders of the Rising, others are too worth the remembering, ‘all those who suffered, so many who were too poor, too marginalised and too disenfranchised to be heard.’<sup>44</sup> While commemoration of the revolutionary elites continued, the centenary became extensively focused on the lived experience of communities,

39 Mark Daly (1916 and Me — Full Interview), 21 November 2016 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_fV09v8GIdw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fV09v8GIdw)> [accessed 27 April 2023].

40 IRELAND 2016, *Centenary Programme*, 2015, pp. 62–64.

41 Ireland 2016 // Éire 2016 — Official Channel, *Mise Éire // I am Ireland*, 2015 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xgodcJQAdM&t>> [accessed 27 April 2023].

42 IRELAND 2016, *Centenary Programme*, p. 8.

43 IRELAND 2016, *Easter Sunday Commemoration 2016*, 27.03.16, pp. 5–6.

44 M. D. HIGGINS, *A Special Message from President Michael D Higgins*, in: *Centenary Programme Guide*, Irish Independent, 5. 3. 2016, p. 2.

families and individuals in 1916 regardless of their status or involvement in the national struggle.

Still, within the commemorative mosaic, the official narrative retained dominant position. 'There is no doubt that the narrative of 1916 is an intrinsic part of our DNA as a State,' proclaimed the Taoiseach Enda Kenny, and the state certainly did not adopt a neutral stance.<sup>45</sup> The army parade on Easter Sunday represented one of the highlights, and most of the state events were true to the words of Mark Daly, a member of the all-party committee: 'there is no hierarchy of victims, but there is a hierarchy of causes.'<sup>46</sup> Importantly, in claiming the political legacy of the Rising, the state helped to prevent the hijacking of the anniversary by the more radical republican groups. This was a looming threat, especially in the first years of the Decade of Centenaries programme: Sinn Féin dismissed the 2014 launch as a 'bad joke' and initiated its own commemorative programme, which claimed to be truly 'Ireland-wide [and] broad-based.'<sup>47</sup> These plans, nevertheless, failed to materialise, and as Humphreys emphasised, 'the commemorations should not be claimed by any one group or sector of society; rather they should belong to everyone.'<sup>48</sup>

One notable example of this result was the Interfaith Service at the Remembrance Wall at the Glasnevin Cemetery. The event included reconciliatory prayers by representatives of all the current major religions in Ireland (including Islam) and of the Humanist Association. More importantly, the Remembrance Wall listed those who died during the Rising in alphabetical order, mixing the Irish volunteers, the British soldiers, and the civilians without a hierarchy.<sup>49</sup> In commemorating the lost bare lives, rather than the heroic sacrifices of the national narrative, it resonated with the ultimate inclusivity but also sparked controversy among those who resented what they saw as 'senseless and ahistorical treatment of their national heroes.'<sup>50</sup>

The traditional means of commemoration, such as parades and ceremonies, were accompanied by more creative events. Journalist Fintan O'Toole, among others, has highlighted the 'new pride in our artists and a new understanding of what the imagination means to a republic'.<sup>51</sup> In this regard, it was probably the RTÉ event on Easter Monday 2016, *Reflecting the Rising*, that has represented a ground-breaking peak of

45 *Speech by the Taoiseach at the launch of Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme*, 31 March 2015 <<https://www.finegael.ie/speech-by-the-taoiseach-at-the-launch-of-ireland-2016-centenary-programme/>> [accessed 27 April 2023].

46 *Mark Daly (1916 and Me — Full Interview)*, 21 November 2016 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_fV09v8GIcw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fV09v8GIcw)> [accessed 27 April 2023].

47 *An Phoblacht*, 1 December 2014 <<http://www.anphoblacht.com/contents/24594>> [accessed 27 April 2023].

48 *Seanad Éireann Debates*, 242:3, 29 September 2015.

49 IRELAND 2016, *Interfaith Service at the Remembrance Wall Glasnevin Cemetery*, 03.04.16.

50 M. MOLONEY, *1916 memorial wall including British forces "inappropriate and insulting", say Rising relatives*, in: *An Phoblacht*, 11. April 2016, <<https://www.anphoblacht.com/contents/25882>> [accessed 27 April 2023].

51 F. O'TOOLE, *In 2016, official Ireland trusted artists. Please do it again*, in: *The Irish Times*, 29 October 2016 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/sponsored/in-2016-official-ireland-trusted-artists-please-do-it-again-1.2845647>> [accessed 27 April 2023].



the programme. The ‘biggest public event in Irish history’<sup>52</sup> involved over three hundred debates, cultural events, workshops, and other activities everywhere around the Dublin city centre, many of the ticketed events being sold out far in advance. The bellow-up characteristics of this event offered participation in ‘a good-humoured family day’<sup>53</sup> truly to anyone, without any demand for cheering for any type of Irish nationalism. Active participation of communities was encouraged, even in projects for children such as a series of workshops culminating in an event hosted by the President, letting the children and young people express their vision for the next generations, as well as decide the character of commemoration of the children who died during the Rising.<sup>54</sup> As one commentator noted, ‘for a little while at least, almost everybody was an authority on the subject and most of us developed a point of view on the rightness and wrongness of what took place a century ago.’<sup>55</sup>

Nonetheless, how will the centenary be remembered is far from certain. In the current *Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies*, historian and the director of the Irish government’s commemorative project *Century Ireland* Mike Cronin judges the centenary in a way somewhat similar to the retrospective criticisms of the 1966 event. While the Decade of Centenaries project potentially offered an opportunity to commemorate a variety of narratives and experiences, the state, according to Cronin, instead ‘mobilized a simple narrative of sacrifice in the name of nationhood’, even though with ‘important correctives’ regarding especially the role of women and the civilian casualties.<sup>56</sup> Cronin claims that ‘cultural performances, if they interrogated history, were often criticised and misunderstood’ and that the government failed to appreciate the value of scholarship.<sup>57</sup> He seems to suggest that anything commendable that emerged during the centenary was done despite the state, not in cooperation with it. Perhaps the achievement of an inclusive mosaic of narratives, somewhat dazzling for many contemporaries, will fade in the eyes of future observers, particularly after scholarly assessments with the advantage of distance.

Furthermore, the widespread involvement and funding of artists might not be seen as enough by future observers. The public memory of the event might become dominated by the *Waking the Feminists* campaign initiated after the national Abbey Theatre announced its 2016 programme with only one work by a female playwright. The campaign ignited a wider discussion on the underrepresentation of women in

52 R. MCGREEVY, *Thousands defy Luas strike for Reflecting the Rising events*, in: *The Irish Times*, 28 March 2016 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/thousands-defy-luas-strike-for-reflecting-the-rising-events-1.2590146>> [accessed 27 April 2023].

53 M. LORD, *What a shame we can’t do this every year*, in: *The Irish Times*, 29 March 2016 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/miriam-lord-what-a-shame-we-can-t-do-this-every-year-1.2590155>> [accessed 27 April 2023].

54 DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS, *Children Seen and Heard 1916–2016. Report of consultations with children and young people on their vision for Ireland and on remembering the children who died in 1916*, Dublin 2016.

55 *The Centenary Conversations*, *The Irish Times*, 29. 10. 2016, p. 3.

56 M. CRONIN, *Repackaging history and mobilizing Easter 1916: commemorations in a time of downturn and austerity*, in: R. FOX — M. CRONIN — B. Ó CONCHUBHAIR, *Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies*, Abingdon — New York 2021, p. 466.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 467.



Irish theatre and culture and gained financial support from the Arts Council of Ireland for further inquiry into gender equality. As a result, major theatres in Ireland adopted the *Gender Equality in Practice in Irish Theatre*, a document ensuring proper representation for the future.<sup>58</sup> The campaign also boosted the larger inclusion of female scholars as keynote speakers at events during and after the Easter Rising centenary.<sup>59</sup> Given the publicity and impact of these developments, they might become the core memory of the centenary for some and might serve as a guideline for organisers of the next anniversaries.

Obviously, Brexit might play a significant role in remembering the centenary. Questions regarding the Irish border and the status of Northern Ireland has presented a looming threat since the Brexit referendum in 2016. While the process has proceeded relatively peacefully so far, the Decade of Centenaries might still be retrospectively overshadowed by some developments in the North that are yet to come. Moreover, even though the centenary was conducted in a conciliatory manner, it is debatable whether the republic's emphasis on the Easter Rising could possibly attract any positive attention of the northern Unionists, whose political parties declined invitations to participate in the ceremonies. Even though the state had included commemoration of the Battle of Somme in the programme, the Unionists' key event of the year, some commentators argued that commemorating the Rising was 'fatally divisive' for 'anyone unwilling or unable to honour the Rising as the defining act of Irishness'.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, the commemorative curve fell sharply after the end of 2016, even though the centenaries related to the actual state creation were yet to come. Unlike the Easter Rising, the latter events are not a source of ideals, but rather of disillusionment, and the 'hyper-charged commemoration' of 2016 now seems almost disproportionate to the rest of the Decade of Centenaries.<sup>61</sup> Events, projects and talks continued to appear, but certain commemorative fatigue was evident in the following years. The Covid-19 pandemic also contributed to disruption of the momentum, diverting the attention but also: 'Communities that had spent years preparing for centenary events were forced to hold them online, and public gatherings were replaced by keyboard warriors giving incendiary takes on Irish history.'<sup>62</sup> True, the Decade of Centenaries

58 B. O'CONNELL, *Waking the Feminists: Gender "Counts"*, in O. FRAWLEY (ed.), *Women and the Decade of Commemorations*, Bloomington 2021, pp. 242–266.

59 O. FRAWLEY, *Introduction: Naming Names; Countering Oblivious Remembering in the Decade of Commemorations*, in O. FRAWLEY (ed.), pp. 1–21.

60 D. KENNEDY, 'Pride in 'inclusive' 1916 commemoration rings hollow' in *The Irish Times*, 7 November 2016 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/pride-in-inclusive-1916-commemoration-rings-hollow-1.2856808>> [accessed 27 April 2023].

61 B. KISSANE, *State formation, contested legitimacy and civil war in independent Ireland 1922–23*, in *Civil Wars and their Legacy*, Queen's University Belfast, 10 March 2017 <<http://history-hub.ie/commemorating-partition-and-civil-wars-in-ireland-2020-23>> [accessed 27 April 2023].

62 R. MCGREEVY, *2021's truce, treaty and Northern Ireland commemorations will test our goodwill*, in: *Irish Times*, 2 January 2021 <[www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/2021-s-truce-treaty-and-northern-ireland-commemorations-will-test-our-goodwill-1.4440819](http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/2021-s-truce-treaty-and-northern-ireland-commemorations-will-test-our-goodwill-1.4440819)> [accessed 27 April 2023].



format has allowed wider distribution of commemorative attention and appropriate attention could thus be paid to previously marginalised historical events, especially including people and groups who had not identified with the Easter Rising. Nevertheless, it may well be the case that for many, the 1916 centenary will overshadow the rest of the commemorative period and will be remembered as one of the respectable achievements between the 2008–2013 economic crisis and the post-2020 Covid-19 pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

Commemorations are historical events, too. Our perception of them can shift over time, and they can be instrumentalised for contemporary agendas just like the events they commemorate. Their afterlives often widen the gap between their historical and memorial value: the contemporary context is replaced by a retrospective view.

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1966 was a liminal event: the last grasp of the revolutionary generation's living social memory and, at the same time, a supposed stepping-stone towards reconciliation and cooperation amongst various traditions on the island. It aimed to pay a proper tribute to the surviving veterans, overcome the existing cleavages within Irish nationalism and highlight contemporary economic achievements. Seán Lemass, the chief organiser of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, promoted practical patriotism rather than ethnic nationalism, and the central message revolved around civic duties and helping the country to flourish using other means than the founding fathers did fifty years ago. The event, nevertheless, became retrospectively associated with the outburst of violence in Northern Ireland in 1969 and the subsequent armed conflict. Furthermore, during the years surrounding the centenary commemorations, mentioning the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary was usually related to its lack of diversity and 'triumphalist' character. The organisers of the centenary instrumentalised, not necessarily consciously, the 1966 memory as a negative example to be put in stark contrast with what needs to be prepared for the next anniversary.

The Easter Rising centenary in 2016, then, was centred around inclusivity, diversity, and pluralism. The official programme prepared in cooperation with academics and an all-party committee represented a mosaic of narratives and experiences. 'Everyone' became the buzzword of the programme, even though the state did not remain neutral. The goal was indeed to 'broaden sympathies, without having to abandon loyalties',<sup>63</sup> allowing for a complexity of narratives under the central organisational umbrella while preventing complete disintegration into vagueness as well as hijacking the centenary by radical republicans. The organisers' strategies included facilitating local initiatives, inciting creative engagement, and supporting artists. The commemoration was furthermore 'characterised by pride, dignity and considerable depth of research and analysis,' a member of the Expert Advisory Group has reviewed.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> IRELAND 2016, *Centenary Programme*, pp. 62–64.

<sup>64</sup> D. FERRITER, *1916 in 2016*, p. 174.



The centenary was a popular success with hundreds of events and enormous cultural and academic production. Yet, the fate of its afterlife is quite uncertain. Brexit and the disputes regarding the Irish border have not ignited any large-scale violence so far but may still heavily overshadow the centenary in the eyes of future observers. Furthermore, what can be now understood as enriching counter-narratives could gain central status in remembering the 2016 commemorations, providing a guideline of what needs to be avoided during future occasions. The centenary might even become criticised for the sole fact of commemorating the Rising, an event perhaps too militant, ideologically distant, and irrelevant for the Irish society of the future.

On the other hand, the Easter Rising is deeply embedded in Irish national identity and cultural memory. It has been described as a founding myth of the state, but it is much more than that. 'For many people in Ireland,' writes Roisín Higgins, '1916 transcends the state and is the most vivid symbolic representation of the nation.'<sup>65</sup> The Rising evokes hope, courage and, perhaps above all, change. Furthermore, the cultural memory of the revolutionary decade has not been yet overshadowed by any other major event of the last century. Even the Troubles helped to sustain this memory, highlighting the symbolical importance of the '1916' (for good or bad) after the living social memory had died out. The commemorative fatigue following the centenary year proved that the Rising, not the subsequent and often bitter struggle for independence and the civil war, represents a symbol that is able to appeal to the Irish civil society. The warning of anthropologist Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, originally pronounced in 1991, might be well relevant to the foreseeable future: 'Nineteen sixteen will not go away.'<sup>66</sup>

---

65 R. HIGGINS, *Transforming 1916*, p. 5.

66 G. Ó CRUALAOICH, *Responding to the Rising*, in: G. DOHERTY — D. KEOGH (eds.), *1916. The Long Revolution*, Cork 2007, p. 68.