MEMORY IN HISTORY

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WE LIVE IN AN AGE WHICH PRIDES itself on its historical sense. We are constantly being presented with mementos of the past, in the keeping of anniversaries, the preservation of archives, the building of monuments, and the outpouring of a vast number of specialized monographs on every conceivable historical topic. These highly complex and particular modes by which we remember the past are, to some extent, a recent phenomenon. As the French historian Pierre Nora has pointed out, before the nineteenth century only élites felt the need to preserve memories in this rather strained and artificial way. 'Ordinary people', Nora observes, 'felt the past to be so much a part of their present that they perceived no urgent need to record, objectify and preserve it.'[1] The memories of the élite are stored in a very different form from those of the masses. This is partly because, as Nora puts it, 'ordinary' people feel less the remoteness of the historical past, and rely more on living memory than on written records.

Memory is one means by which people acquire a sense of identity. Indeed, at the level of popular culture, 'communal memory' or 'folk memory' is sometimes the only means of access to that identity. Memory thus serves to unite individuals, giving them a sense of unity around a common national or ethnic identity. In Ireland today, we can see that for very many 'ordinary' Catholics and Protestants memory is a cause not so much of unity but of division. Communities nurtured in isolation from one another keep alive the bitter memories of past injuries and conquests as a badge of identity. These memories in turn help perpetuate political and religious strife.[2]

In her autobiographical musings Edna O'Brien boldly asserts: 'Time changes everything . . . There is no such thing as a perpetual hatred any more than there are unambiguous states of earthly love.'[3] The experience of sectarian conflict in Ireland would however seem to be the exception to the principle that O'Brien here indicates. Old enmities stubbornly refuse to change with the passage of time.[4] The conflicts of the past are brought to bear on our present concerns in a way which seems wholly inexplicable to the outsider. Perhaps, alternatively, it is more accurate to say that we read the past in the light of our present needs, be they religious, territorial or political.[5] Ireland appears to be

imbued with memory: past grievances somehow appear as more immediate realities than present-day concerns. Ireland is a land where the past is never allowed to be forgotten, a place where past and present are fused and determine inexorably the country's future direction. That direction too often leads inevitably to a perpetuation of violence and hatreds, in which each new hurt is added to the collective memory of the people, thereby sustaining a sense of grievance which, since it cannot be healed, seeks to be avenged.

But questions must arise. Are the memories of the past accurate? Is the sense of grievance felt by Catholics or Protestants in Northern Ireland today grounded on historical reality, or is it merely a result of prejudice or myth? Does the way in which Catholics remember differ from Protestant remembering? If so, what does this tell us about how memory functions as an instrument for preserving varying interpretations of the same historical reality?

The objectivity of history[6]

Before beginning to answer these questions it will be necessary first of all to say something on the nature of history as an academic discipline, and to contrast this activity with the process whereby communities maintain a communal historical consciousness.

History, in the words of G. R. Elton, concerns itself with exact knowledge.[7] To arrive at this 'exact knowledge' the historian is for the most part dependent on documents, on what Paul Ricoeur, following Marc Bloch, calls a 'trace', an impression of what has been.[8] Relying on such raw materials historians seek to construct a representation of the past which they believe accords with 'the facts'. By proceeding in this manner they claim to be engaged in an objective activity.

Memories of course are also representations of the past. They are also 'traces' in Ricoeur's sense, in that they too mediate the past and to some extent condition the way in which the 'facts of history' are received in the present. Such memories Bernard Lewis has characterized as 'remembered history', which can be usefully described as: '. . . the collective memory of a community or nation . . . what it, or its rulers and leaders, poets, and sages, choose to remember as significant, both as reality and symbol'.[9] On the other hand the problem with memories is that they can be false: we can tend to forget[10] and our memories are apt to be distorted when recounted across generations. Indeed John Passmore has gone so far as to reject Sir Henry Lambert's suggestion that the memories of participants in given historical events provided somehow superior data for the veracity of historical

claims. Passmore believes that the historian can take a wider view of any given event than the participants, since participants often, unwittingly, indulge in self-deception.[11]

Passmore however neglects the fact that historians too are capable of self-deception, sometimes on a grand scale. This, famously, is the charge of the late Karl Popper in *The open society and its enemies*: historians only select material which fits in with their own preconceived theories of history. All this should make us cautious in asserting that historians have a more privileged access to the past than the individual or collective memories of groups or nations. This is not to deny that the role of the historian must be to interrogate such memories, but neither can we neglect them as evidence of how people perceive their past. Such perception is often more powerfully relevant for how people actually behave in the present than any amount of 'objective' history writing. These issues have been at the core of very serious and often acrimonious debates in Irish historiographical circles for sixty years, but these disagreements have been all the more vehement since the present troubles began in Northern Ireland in 1969. Before moving on to the substantive issue of how memory is used in Northern Ireland's bloody strife, it will perhaps be useful to say something in outline about the nature of this controversy.

The revisionists and their critics

In the last twenty years or so a group of young Irish academics has sought to build on the scholarship of several outstanding historians of the 1930s, and put the teaching and researching of Irish history on a firmly objective footing.[12] Their overall aim is to produce 'value-free' history. Not only do they believe that such an enterprise is the proper work of a historian, they also hold that it will yield a more equitable understanding of the relationship between Ireland and Britain. One of their hopes is that their work will also help reduce national tensions and rivalries, and, in the Northern Ireland context, sectarian animosities. Although they reject the notion that they form a 'school', they are known collectively as 'revisionists'.

In particular Ronan Fanning has indicated that the task of the historian in 'doing' Irish history, especially its twentieth-century phase, must be a 'constant confrontation with mythologies designed to legitimate violence as a political weapon in a bid to overthrow the state'.[13] The revisionists charge their critics with being politically motivated in their approach to history, and of reducing it to a matter of 'faith', in which the essential characteristics become certainty and simplicity. The

story of Irish history becomes then more dependent on myth than on fact, and 'anti-revisionists' help to perpetuate a climate of hostility and prejudice, rooted in folk-memories rather than in 'what actually happened' in the course of Irish history.[14]

The anti-revisionists, however, reject the accusation that they find myth more congenial than reality. Desmond Fennel, for example, has suggested that revisionism's real intent is to present the current state of affairs in Northern Ireland as a situation which we Irish have brought upon ourselves rather than as a result of Britain's actions as a neo-colonial power. For Fennel, the revisionists present the violence and brutality of the northern conflict as fuelled by

> . . . the ideas and convictions inspiring our freedom struggle, by our nationalism. The cause of the present evil was not the wrong mind and action of British imperialist nationalism, but the wrong ideas and actions of our liberationist nationalism.[15]

The most formidable challenge to the revisionists' approach has come from Dr Brendan Bradshaw, a fellow of Queens' College Cambridge, himself an Irishman and a Catholic priest.[16] Whilst sharing the conviction that all historians must strive for objectivity, Bradshaw accuses the revisionists of omitting the 'catastrophic' dimensions of Irish history, of 'filtering out the trauma'. Thus, for example, revisionists have been singularly neglectful in writing about the great Irish famine, 1846–49, and have tended to read the seventeenth-century plantation of Ulster as an instance of internal British migration, while neglecting the experiences of the dispossessed. Bradshaw is also convinced that the barbarism of some of England's dealings with the Irish, the Cromwellian massacres following on from those of Mullaghmust, Smerwick and Rathlin in the mid-to-late sixteenth century, tends to get sanitized in revisionist historiography.

Taking his cue from Herbert Butterfield, Bradshaw points out that the function of the historian is to mediate between what actually occurred in history and present-day perceptions of what went on. That function, he maintains,

> . . . acquires a particular urgency . . . when, as in the case of Ireland, the communal memory retains a keen sense of the tragic dimensions of the national history. In such circumstances the mediating function of the historian is manifestly *not* fulfilled by stoking the memory of ancient wrongs and the bitterness of bygone times. But neither is it constructive to conspire to 'remove the pain from Irish history' . . . such stratagems

> serve only to establish a credibility gap between the professional historian's account of the past and the public perception of it: the bitter reality, recalled in song and story, continues to haunt the popular memory.[17]

This 'credibility gap' is a problem which even the revisionists themselves have recognized. They agonize as to why their view of the contents of Irish history, and of the means of 'doing history' has not had a greater impact at the popular level.[18] This issue brings us to the heart of our enquiry as to the use of memory in Irish history, and enables us to take up the questions of its function as raised in the introduction.

Memory and myth in Northern Ireland

In any state the emergence of a sense of nationality is bound to give rise to a 'demonization' of those who are considered to be the nation's enemies.[19] The problem in Northern Ireland is that the situation is composed not only of a clash of nationalities and cultures, but also of a contest between varying understandings of humanity's relationship with God. Politics, 'the art of the possible', is based on compromise. But the political and religious elements in the Northern Ireland conflict have been so intertwined as to make compromise virtually impossible, since religious principles of their nature should not be compromised.[20] Too often one's political enemies are also seen as the enemies of God. Thus, when each July and August Orangemen in Ireland march to commemorate the Battle of the Boyne and the Siege of Derry, they stress the religious nature of these occasions. The Bible, as well as the crown, is carried in procession. The Glorious Revolution gave us, so we are assured, 'our freedom, religion and laws'. The freedoms alluded to were not just deliverance 'from base coins and wooden clogs', but a liberation from the tyranny of Rome, a 'blasphemous' mass, five 'bastard' sacraments and idolatry.

In 1688, however, the Pope actually supported William III. The war in Ireland was part of a greater European struggle which saw the Pope at odds with Louis XIV, who was supporting the claims of the Catholic King James II against the usurpation of William and Mary. These facts are conveniently ignored. The collective amnesia of the Protestant community will not allow such details to complicate the perception of a glorious struggle against the forces of the Antichrist, through which God delivered and preserved Irish Protestants as a faithful remnant.

The idea that Northern Ireland Protestants are a chosen people, after the example of the children of Israel, has long held an important place in

Northern Ireland Protestant self-understanding. The rituals and biblical texts associated with certain strands of the Orange Order stress these themes by constant reference to Old Testament antecedents such as Moses and the Exodus experience, David and Goliath, Rahab and the battle of Jericho. Northern Ireland Protestants are encouraged to remember and read their own experience in the light of ancient Israel's.[21] God is to be worshipped in Protestant guise, as a vindicator of the Reformed faith against the onslaughts of Catholicism.

This particular self-understanding conforms exactly to what Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson described as 'constructed myths'. Such constructions have enormous power to rally given groups and to consolidate identity. But one of their chief functions is also to delineate who is included and who is excluded. Those who are excluded are frequently persecuted.[22] The memories preserved at the level of popular culture in the Protestant community stress the deliverance which God has granted the community from its enemies. The reassertion of such concepts in a ritualistic way each year serves as a link with events such as the Boyne victory, but also strengthens the resolve of those who take part to preserve the way of life gained by those hard-won triumphs. On the other hand these commemorations are themselves of relatively recent vintage and owe more to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century political developments than to the enduring reminiscences of Protestant folk-memory. The commemorations, stressing as they do God's vindication of Irish Protestantism, became all the more necessary by the mid-nineteenth century, when Ireland as a country was unique in the English-speaking world in having a Catholic majority and a Protestant minority.[23] Indeed Edna Longley points out that much of twentieth-century Ireland is based not on centuries-long memory, but on creations which are largely products of nineteenth-century romanticism and its cognates.[24]

Protestant memory then emphasizes the specifically religious nature of the Northern Irish conflict. Can the same be said for Catholic perceptions of the Irish past and the present? It is not without significance that when the 'Gaelic revival' got under way a hundred years ago the revivalists looked not to Ireland's Christian traditions for myths to revive the spirit of the nation but, rather, to its Celtic, pagan past.[25] The revival aimed to recreate what was a vanishing Celtic cultural heritage, and although, ironically, it was led by Protestants such as W. B. Yeats and Douglas Hyde, its effect was to give enormous cohesion to Irish Catholic identity.[26] The struggles of Celtic heroes continue to exercise a powerful imaginative hold on Catholic nationalist folk memory in

Northern Ireland. The exploits of warrior chiefs such as Fionn MacCuhall and his *Fianna* followers, and of Cuchulain in his death struggle, battling alone and to the end to repulse a foreign invader, are frequently represented in street murals in places such as west Belfast.

Here the note struck is one of sacrifice, endurance and the shedding of one's blood for a glorious cause, hence ensuring perpetual commemoration. Thus Patrick Pearse, one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, in his poem *Mise Eire*, depicts Ireland as a woman grieving over her sons who have gone out to fight and die, and whose names she will ever speak within her own heart. In a brilliantly argued essay, Professor Richard Kearney asks:

> Is it possible that the guiding motivation of militant Republicanism was, and is still to some extent . . . an exigency of sacrifice to some mythological Ireland: an ancestral deity who would respond to the martyrdom of her sons by rising from her ancient slumber to pursue her destiny?[27]

All this is not to suggest that Northern Irish Catholics are unmindful of the sufferings of their Catholic past. The cult of Catholic martyrs of the penal times is very much kept alive. Of course the irony is that the most famous of these, St Oliver Plunkett, the martyred seventeenth-century Archbishop of Armagh, was a product of a quintessentially Anglo-Irish culture of which the intellectual horizons could scarcely be said to conform to Catholic nationalist aspirations. Plunkett is a religious rather than a nationalist martyr, and his memory is kept for pious rather than political reasons. It is also perhaps worth commenting that Irish Catholicism generally has less of a 'martyr complex' about itself than its English counterpart. Here then is a major difference between Catholic and Protestant memories in that Catholics are less likely to draw on specifically Christian religious motifs in their present-day struggles for political change.

As has been noted however, the 1916 Rising still remains the primordial touchstone for Catholic memories of the battles to free Ireland from British rule. That revolution ended in ignominious defeat, but nonetheless a defeat from whose jaws victory, however partial, was gained. Not only is the symbolism deeply Christian, but the fact that the Rising was originally planned for Easter Sunday probably affects Catholic consciousness at a more profound level than explicit appeals ever would.

It would, however, be misleading simply to suggest that sections of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland continue to support the IRA

on the basis of communal memory of the 1916 Rising, or of the 'eight hundred years of British oppression'. Nor must we fall into the trap of thinking that the bloodlust of the IRA leaders in 1916 was a piece of peculiarly Irish exotica. After all the Rising occurred during one of the most barbarous instances of blood-letting in human history, spurred on by the jingoist and romantic pennings of writers such as Rudyard Kipling and Rupert Brooke.[28] Much more pertinent to the continued sense of Catholic grievance are the more immediate memories of injustices perpetrated since the partition of the country, and the instances of oppression and brutality suffered at the hands of the state security forces in the years following the outbreak of 'the troubles' in 1969.

Nonetheless it remains the case that the more recent painful memories of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland are added to a long-held awareness of its sufferings. This is perhaps the community's most enduring memory: the memory of being wronged, of being dispossessed, of being downtrodden, of being, like Christ, the victim of evil people's caprice. In Ireland this is the most significant difference in how Catholic and Protestants remember. Protestant folk memory celebrates Protestant triumphs and deliverance by God from the community's enemies, in the shape of James II, or from the attempt to include them in a Home Rule Ireland dominated by the Catholic Church.

For Catholics, on the other hand, their communal memories are always of defeats. No Irish revolution was ever successful in any conventional sense, and one of the most evocative memories of the recent past is that of the IRA hunger strike of 1981 in which ten young men starved themselves to death. That episode continues both to fascinate and appal the collective consciousness of the Northern Ireland Catholic community. However, one of the problems in Irish history is that the victims have a tendency to rise up and wreak vengeance on those who victimize them. That in a sense was Pearse's warning, 'Beware the risen people who shall take what ye would not give'.[29] This ability to strike back is also part of the collective memory of Northern Irish Catholic nationalism, in addition to its memory of victimhood.

Redemptive memory

'Reality', Wallace Stevens once observed, 'is not what it is. It consists of the many realities which it can be made into.'[30] One of the realities that one must hope for in Northern Ireland is the construction of a future where memories are healed, and where those that cannot be

healed can be forgotten. There has been much talk in Irish ecumenical circles in recent years of the need for reconciliation of memories.[31] There is however a sense in which such an enterprise will simply not work in the Irish context. As Terence P. McCaughey has pointed out, 'memory in itself is not necessarily salvific'. He rejects the view that only by respecting the two traditions with their memories and consciousness will we have lasting peace. Rather, he argues that 'neither of the traditions nor their supportive versions of history are anything more than the popular justification of pretensions to dominance by one group over the other'.[32]

It is not only that aspects of the Irish past are unsusceptible to an 'ecumenical' approach. Reconciliation would also demand a restructuring of identity and an obliteration of communal memory which would be impossible to achieve in fact, and would, in my view, be undesirable in principle anyway. This is not to say, as has already been suggested, that memories should not be interrogated so that the truth of our dealings with one another can be exposed. Identities, like memories, change over time. What needs to emerge is, as St Paul tells us, 'a new creation', in which forgiveness is the *leitmotif* for how Catholics and Protestants deal with one another. In this way the past and our memories are neither forgotten nor denied, but they are seen in a different perspective, in which they no longer axiomatically condition the present or the future.

Without being *parti pris*, I would suggest that this process is in more urgent need of attention at a religious level in the Protestant community than among Catholics. Protestants read the events of Ireland's past, and present, almost excusively in religious terms. Thus for example when the IRA kills British soldiers, or members of the local police force, Protestants allege that these attacks are on the Protestant community, and form a pattern of persecution stretching back to 1641, when Catholics persecuted thousands of Ulster Protestants. For its part the Catholic community regards such attacks as directed against the British state in Ireland. After all, the IRA has killed Catholic policemen, judges and soldiers; even Catholic army chaplains have not been spared their murderous hatred of British rule. Its struggle is essentially political, and is therefore, at least in principle, amenable to a political solution. For the Protestant community a whole way of life is under threat, and the basis of that way of life is the understanding that in the past God has not only given them the land, but has delivered them in a singular fashion from the hands of their Catholic enemies, time and again. If a political solution is to emerge, the memories which give rise to Protestant identity

must be seen as locked into a time warp, and as having little to say either theologically or politically to modern Irish reality.

For the Catholic community there is a need to reassess its past, to recapture the more positive aspects of its historical experience, and to see that the English have not always been unmitigated devils in their dealings with the Irish. Equally this is not to deny the reality of the suffering that the community has undergone at the hands of the English. But it is rather to accept that reconciliation is a secular as well as a religious impulse. It is a call to evaluate our memories, not for what they are in themselves but as a means for determining a different future, where both communities will be able to live in peace and harmony. The one essential element, for both communities, is forgiveness. This alone can lead to the redemption of our memories and our futures.

At a more fundamental level the Catholic community needs to accept the fact that the identity, experience and memory of the Protestant community in Northern Ireland leads it to reject the notion that it is Irish. That community wants to maintain its 'Britishness'. This is something we simply have to accept. Such acceptance does not mean that we cannot live on the same island, nor does it necessarily suggest that Ulster must always be part of the United Kingdom. It implies however that Catholics must accept that Protestant memory and experience of life in Ireland is radically different from Catholic memory and experience. Only if people can learn how to enter imaginatively into the other community's memory will the conditions for a lasting peace begin to appear.[33]

NOTES

[1] Quoted by J. R. Gills, 'Memory and identity: the history of a relationship' in Gills (ed), *Commemorations: the politics of national identity* (Princeton, 1994), p 6.

[2] Vincent Buckley, *Memory Ireland: insights into the contemporary Irish condition* (Harmondsworth, 1985), *passim*, has however argued that far from being a land of memory Ireland is in fact a place where people forget all too easily. He cogently argues that the country is quickly becoming a land without identity, and that, as Irish society seeks to demonstrate that it is as 'modern' as any other, the conditions for sustaining corporate memory are systematically being destroyed under pressure from a dominant Anglo-American culture.

[3] *Mother Ireland* (London, 1976), p 143.

[4] However, James McEvoy has indicated that the past has not been as riddled with sectarianism as is often suggested. See 'Catholic hopes and Protestant fears' in *The Crane Bag* vol 7, no 2 (1983), p 97.

[5] A point which Irish historians constantly stress. See for example R. F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch: connections in Irish and English history* (London, 1993), p 2.

[6] There is a vast literature on this topic. Some useful works are Patrick Gardiner (ed), *The philosophy of history* (Oxford, 1979); Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge,

1983); Paul Ricoeur, *The reality of the historical past* (Milwaukee, 1984); and, from a slightly different perspective, Maurice Mandelbaum, *The problem of historical knowledge: an answer to relativism* (London and New York, 1938 and 1967).

[7] *The practice of history* (London, 1967), p 82.

[8] Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p 4.

[9] *History: remembered, recovered, invented* (Princeton, 1975), p 12.

[10] As Ivan Berend has interestingly observed, the real value of history is to preserve the past so as 'to resist the human tendency to forget'. 'History as a scholarly discipline and *magistra vitae*' in Ciaran Brady (ed), *Ideology and the historians* (Dublin, 1991), p 189.

[11] 'The objectivity of history' in Gardiner, *op. cit.*, p 148.

[12] See for example, R. F. Foster, 'We are all revisionists now', *The Irish Review* no 1 (1986), pp 1–5; Steven G. Ellis, 'Nationalist historiography and the English and Gaelic worlds in the late Middle Ages', *Irish Historical Studies* vol xxv, no 97 (1986), pp 1–18; and Ronan Fanning, '"The great enchantment": uses and abuses of modern Irish history' in James Dooge (ed), *Ireland in the contemporary world: essays in honour of Garret Fitzgerald* (Dublin, 1986), pp 131–47.

[13] *Art. cit.*, p 142.

[14] Ronan Fanning, 'The meaning of revisionism' in *The Irish Review* no 4 (1988), pp 15ff.

[15] 'Against revisionism' in *The Irish Review* no 4 (1988), p 22.

[16] See 'Nationalism and historical scholarship in modern Ireland' in *Irish Historical Studies* vol xxviii (1989), pp 329–51.

[17] Bradshaw, *art. cit.*, p 341. Emphasis in the original.

[18] See for example Foster, *The Irish Review* (1986), p 2.

[19] Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds), *The myths we live by* (London and New York, 1990), p 5.

[20] I am grateful to Henry Grant SJ, who drew this aspect of the problem to my attention many years ago.

[21] Anthony D. Buckley, 'The chosen few: biblical texts in the symbolism of an Ulster secret society' in *The Irish Review* vol 2 (1987), pp 31–40.

[22] *Op. cit.*, pp 18–19.

[23] McEvoy, *art. cit.*, p 101.

[24] 'The Rising, the Somme and Irish memory' in Mairin Ni Dhonnchadha and Theo Dorgan, *Revising the Rising* (Derry, 1991), p 39. Longley also maintains, a little disingenuously in my view, that Northern Irish Protestant rhetoric is not in fact anti-Catholic but rather 'inner-directed mnemonic' (*ibid.*, p 37).

[25] Dennis O'Driscoll, 'Remembering the past: a reply to John Hill' in *The Crane Bag book of Irish studies* (Dublin, 1982), p 421.

[26] The Celtic revival is also a classic example of what Bernard Lewis calls 'recovered history', *op. cit.*, p 12.

[27] 'Myth and terror' in *The Crane Bag book of Irish studies*, p 275.

[28] This has been written about extensively, mostly by anti-revisionist historians and critics. See for example Seamus Deane, 'Wherever green is read' in *Revising the Rising*, pp 91–105, and Liam de Paor, 'The rebel mind: republican and loyalist' in Richard Kearney (ed), *The Irish mind: exploring intellectual traditions* (Dublin, 1985), pp 157–87.

[29] 'The rebel' in Brendan Kennelly (ed), *The Penguin book of Irish verse* (2nd edn, Harmondsworth, 1981), p 300.

[30] *Opus posthumous* (New York, 1966), p 178. See also Seamus Deane, *Celtic revivals: essays in modern Irish literature 1880–1980* (London and Boston, 1985), p 165.

[31] See Alan F. Falconer, *Reconciling memories* (Dublin, 1985).

[32] *Memory and redemption: church, politics and prophetic theology in Ireland* (Dublin, 1993), p 14.

[33] Paolo Morisi of Columbia University, New York, read an earlier draft of this essay. I am grateful for his incisive and helpful observations.