

AIAS & CISA CONFERENCE

Politics and Narrative in Ireland's Decade of Commemorations

ABSTRACTS

Tuesday, 23 October,

Keynote, 17:00-18:30

Emilie Pine (University College Dublin)

'The Memory Marketplace: Gender, Witnessing and Performance':

This talk will focus on the recent upsurge in memory activism and the ways the social turn in commemoration culture enables us to answer perennial questions about how power and memory intersect – who owns memory, how is it traded, and how is it consumed.

The Waking the Feminists movement, and emerging policies on speaking up and calling out inequality and harassment across the arts, demonstrate how the past can be mobilised in progressive ways, and how commemoration can serve as a moment in which communities reflect on the past in order to galvanise present and future action. Memory activism depends on different kinds of performance – from the initial energy of the first voice being raised to the effort of long-term collective campaigning. It also depends on the idea that as producers and audiences of commemoration culture we can take up agentic roles as witnesses. Witnessing is a fundamentally limited role as producers and audiences work within the framework of a larger and change-resistant marketplace infrastructure, as well as being impacted by the limits of their own subjectivity and the current dominance of both empathy and presentism as the leading modes of engagement with the past. However, activism offers us another perspective on the performance of witnessing – and hope for how we can overcome the limits of commemoration fatigue. Activism calls on memory actors to pivot away from the idea of suffering being 'over there' or in the past, and instead to work towards solidarity and change, to conceive of memory work as a performance of accountability, and to insist on the utopian possibilities of witnessing the past.

Wednesday, 24 October

Session 1: Politics and History, 09.15-10.45

Fearghal McGarry (Queen's University Belfast)

'Complicating the Narrative: Historians and the Centenary of 1916':

Characterised by high levels of public engagement and a diverse programme of commemorative activities, the centenary of the Easter Rising in Ireland was widely acknowledged as a success. Some 250,000 people observed the formal ceremony outside the General Post Office, while 750,000 citizens participated in 'Reflecting the Rising' on Easter Monday. The tone of much of this remembrance was strikingly pluralistic, with previously neglected facets of the Rising – such as the role of women, Crown forces, and civilian fatalities – receiving far greater attention than during previous major anniversaries. Nonetheless, commemoration of 1916 remained a contested process. For some, the shift from nationalist to more conciliatory narratives entailed a hollowing out of the Rising's ideological significance. North of the border, the Rising was commemorated in very different, and more politicised, ways. This paper reflects critically on how historians responded to the privileged place in public discourse offered to them in 2016, and considers the extent to which they

contributed to the shift towards more pluralistic forms of remembrance. How effectively did they deal with the pressures of 'commemorationist history', ranging from the desire by the Irish State and other institutions for a usable history to the unprecedented degree to which the past was commodified as heritage? More positively, what aspects of the centenary might usefully inform commemoration of more difficult anniversaries that lie ahead?

Isabel Kusche (Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities)

'The Irish Republic after the Crisis: Commemorating the Easter Rising in the 2016 Election Campaign':

The centenary of the Easter Rising in 2016 coincided with a general election in Ireland. In the aftermath of the financial crisis political parties faced the challenge to mobilize an electorate that had experienced the implementation of severe austerity measures, both by the incumbent coalition government of Fine Gael and Labour and the previous one, led by Fianna Fáil. Against the background of the financial, economic and political turmoil of the crisis years the Easter Rising offered a potentially valuable source of legitimation as the pivotal event in the creation of the modern Irish state. This applies to the three parties that had shaped the patterns of political competition Ireland until the crisis as well as to Sinn Féin as a challenger of the status quo. A number of small parties and groups that had been founded in the course of the crisis could also potentially use the centenary to legitimize their claims to political influence. By analysing party manifestos and candidate video statements I will enquire which parties and candidates attempted to make use of this potential and how they related the events and the Proclamation of 1916 to problems of contemporary Ireland.

Session 2: Politics and Narrative on Stage and on Screen, 11:00-12:45

Isabelle Torrance (Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies)

'Oedipus in Derry (2013) and in Dublin (2015): Political Readings of Greek Tragedy North and South of the Irish Border':

This paper analyses two Irish productions of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in the first years of Ireland's 'Decade of Centenaries' commemorations and highlights their very different political concerns. Sam Shepard's *Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)* was commissioned by Stephen Rea for the Field Day Theatre in the Northern Irish city of Derry, and produced in 2013 when Derry was the UK's City of Culture. This paper argues that the tragedy speaks to a specifically Northern Irish audience by insisting that the impact of crimes lasts for generations on families, and that the truth is not a tool for reconciliation but only serves to renew violence and trauma. Meanwhile, in the Republic of Ireland, Wayne Jordan's *Oedipus*, produced at Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 2015, stars an Oedipus who had reached great material success only to be laid low by fate, implicitly reflecting financial crash which affected post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. In this production, retrieving the truth is valuable for the community, which can cast out its problematic leader and move on. It is no accident, this paper proposes, that Irish theatre turned to Sophocles' *Oedipus* tragedy both in the aftermath of Irish independence, with the 1920s *Oedipus* plays of W. B. Yeats and Pádraig de Brún, and in the its decade of centenary commemorations. What makes the Oedipus myth so relevant to Irish politics within this centenary framework is the way the tragedy poses important questions about leadership and community.

Stephen Joyce (Aarhus University)

'The Centenary on Screen: Transnational Productions of the Easter Rising':

The centenary of the Easter Rising was marked in the USA, the UK, and Ireland by three different film and television versions of the Rising on screen. Ireland's cinematic history has always involved co-productions and collaborations with the much larger American and British film industries, but the three different versions of a defining moment in Ireland's national history offer a chance to examine how screen narratives of Ireland are inflected by the needs and desires of producers and audiences in different countries. This paper examines the transnational production and reception of the three versions and the political narratives they construct around a crucial event in Irish history.

Session 3: Remembering Women, 13:30-15:00

Mary McAuliffe (University College Dublin)

'The Going Was Rough on the Female Sex: Gendered and Sexual Violence, 1919-1923':

As we move through these decades of centenaries Irishwomen's participation in and experience of the War of Independence and Civil War will now take centre stage. Narratives of the heroics of Cumann na mBan women, running safe houses, managing arms dumps, dispatch carrying and transporting arms are well established in the histories. As are the cultural myths of self-sacrificing mothers, wives and daughters whose actions after the war were couched almost exclusively in terms of remaking the secure, respectable, moral domestic space for the sake of the family and the nation. Women and the war, if spoken about at all, was often discussed as a time when proper femininity was disrupted, when their activities as militant republicans lead to behaviours, post war, as unmanageable, ungovernable revolutionaries. The experience of women was therefore best forgotten, in particular, the violence experienced by women, shameful and dishonouring as it was, was almost completely elided from histories of the period.

In recent decades feminist studies of conflict and trauma have shown the connection between history, memory, trauma and war. Using a gendered lens we can unlock the masculinist narratives of war, and with gender as a firm category of analysis, I will look at how we can change or disrupt that narrative. With the multiplicity of new sources, and re-readings of older sources we can, perhaps, better understand the gendered effects of war and political violence. For this paper, I wish to address how, in the post war years, women remembered and narrated gendered violence in revolutionary war and civil war. Why did they narrate this violence in particular ways, and was it different from the way violence against men was remembered and narrated? Using women's personal archives, military pension applications / BMH statements, memoirs, and (auto)biographical texts, as well as statements to contemporary newspapers, court proceedings, police reports and other sources, I will look at how women bore witness to their experiences or witnessing of gendered and sexual violence during the years, 1919-1923.

Laura McAtackney (Aarhus University)

'Thoughts on the Sustainability of Remembering Women from the Decade of Commemorations':

The importance of remembering the roles of women in the early part of the decade of commemorations has been noted and commented on in both academic publication and popular press. The social justice connection to women and contemporary politics, the role of women in organizing and directing many of the commemorative events as well as the sheer numbers of women who had hitherto been 'forgotten' were all highlighted as contributing factors as to why they became important at the centenary. At the

same time we know that remembering women in the past is never just about rewriting history. We are well versed and reflexive about how much the past relates to the present and commemorations are always about the contemporary so we accepted that 'now' was the time to remember women. However, I believe there are discussions that still need to be had, and lessons to be learnt from previous 'presents', about the sustainability of these new-found, gendered narratives. Some of the questions I will address in this talk include: will we continue to find more women to add to our understandings as we move into the second half of the decade (or is the Rising a highpoint)? Will these newly found women be adopted into the canon of 'revolutionary' Ireland or will they eventually recede back into forgetting? How do we ensure gendered narratives continue to be central to the more difficult commemorations of the War of Independence and Civil War?

Session 4: Narrative Transmission, National and International, 15:15-16:45

Dominic Bryan (Queen's University, Belfast)

'Memory, Identity and a Decade of Centenaries in Ireland: The Role of Ritual in the Transmission of Historical Narrative':

This paper takes an avowedly synchronic and political view on process of 'memory' and 'remembering' through, what had been called, the decade of centenaries. The paper will examine how rituals plays a key role in the apparent reproduction of the past in Northern Ireland. By examining the nature of ritual as 'time-defying' social constructions we can see that organisers and participants, through practice and narrative, are constructing and underpinning their identities. Within this the importance of history is eulogised and exaggerated whilst the role of contemporary political identity is disguised. The paper concludes that the conceptualisation of these processes as 'memory' further confirms this process and that it would be more helpful to utilise a model of identity and group boundary maintenance.

Sara Dybris McQuaid (Aarhus University)

'Remembering the 1916 Easter Rising and the End of Empire: Transnational Templates of Irish and Indian freedom struggles':

The centenary commemoration of the Easter Rising has seen new transnational narratives emerge alongside tried and tested mythologies. In this paper I explore the role of the Rising in inspiring other anti-colonial struggles around the British Empire, which has reverberated in a number of commemorative forms and products inspired by increased immigration to Ireland and changing Irish-British relations. Specifically, I am examining narratives of how revolutionary ideas, people and strategies were exchanged between Ireland and India in the RTE documentary 'An Easter Re-rising' by Pranjali Bhave, about the 1930 Chittagong Rising by the Indian Republican Army.

Conceived as an event with importance beyond the nation, commemorations of the Easter Rising in 2016 present the possibility of exploring not just a new form of transnational framework for remembrance and narratives in Ireland, but also an opportunity to heed Michael Rothberg's call for a deeper engagement between memory studies and postcolonial studies: Particularly, in terms of considering how violence gives shape to the temporality of memory, but also the ways in which social actors bring multiple traumatic pasts into a heterogeneous and changing present to resist violence and create unexpected solidarities (Rothberg 2009, Rothberg 2013). Beyond discussing these new transnational templates for narrating the Easter Rising, this paper argues that changing relations between the UK and Ireland (for the better) means that the glorification of violence and anglophobia is being replaced by (or returned to) a much less controversial critique of Empire, as a vehicle

for reasserting nationhood and negotiating Ireland's place in the world. Bringing the two strands together, the paper argues that the transnational template for narrating the rising, allows celebrations of violent struggle to continue, by displacement (From Ireland to India), and furthermore, allows Ireland to become a place of plural narratives and identities, while flattening the history of Chittagong to an exclusive site for Hindu nationalism.