

The Glasnevin Necrology Memorial: Exhibiting Ireland's Dark Heritage

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, MAY 8 2022

It is almost a full century since the bitterly conflictual events of 1916–1923 which resulted in the violent disintegration of Ireland's colonial history with Britain, and a brutal civil war among those accepting division of the country and those fighting on for unity of the whole island. It led to the crude partition of the island, and the formation of new governments (and new civil societies) on either side of a divided Irish border. A hundred years is a long time in any country's history but at the same time too short to repair a narrative rudely torn asunder by political division and sectarianism, which inevitably erupted in sustained political violence in Northern Ireland in 1969. Civil disturbances ushered in a dismal period of archaic violence known as "the troubles." Those cataclysmic events in turn resurrected old memories of the early twentieth century and still more ancient conflicts, sustaining a cycle of violence and a looming dark heritage; propelling it unavoidably and violently into the active and inconvenient present. The fate of a major public monument, the Necrology Wall at Glasnevin in Dublin is symbolic of a living past. It may also prove a litmus-test for the malignance of dark heritage and its toxicity for the present, even years after we believed the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 has nurtured a new nation of Irish peacebuilders.

The Politics of Dark Heritage

In Ireland, political history often seems condemned to a continuous rancorous re-enactment. Past events rudely resurface in the vivid present. This public memorial, a necrology wall, was erected at Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin to remember all those who died in the Irish Revolution. It is now (unceremoniously) being discontinued because of safety and vandalism concerns. The Board of the Dublin Cemeteries Trust took the decision after an "extensive debate," according to its chairperson David Bunworth. He said the wall had been vandalized three times and it would be impossible to stop a fourth such incident. The names of those who died in the Easter Rising will be removed from the wall too. Instead, he said the trust would erect a separate memorial to all those who died in the 1916-1923 period (without any inclusion of names which had been so contentious.) This would be preserved along with a book commemorating all the dead from that period who are buried in the cemetery.

Why is Ireland's dark heritage of the early twentieth century, and specifically of the years 1916–1923 still poisoning the atmosphere of its contemporary present? Why are the ghosts of its past conflict actors still haunting the temporal geography of Ireland today? To begin to answer that question one would have to understand the acrimonious bifurcation of Ireland which occurred at the tail end of this chronology of frenzied events that are commemorated by Glasnevin's Necrology Wall. As visceral as these happening were at the time, they have diminished little in toxicity as the dates have become shibboleths for every recent political conflagration ever since. Numerous incidents of vandalism of the Necrology Wall have persuaded cemetery administrators that the monument must close. The Necrology Wall remembers every single person killed in conflicts in Ireland between the years 1916 and 1923, including British soldiers and IRA (Irish Republican Army) members. Dublin Cemeteries Trust announced in March 2022 it would discontinue the Wall "with great regret", and only after repeated acts of vandalism of a "severe nature" on the wall. Indeed, Canada's Ambassador to Ireland, Kevin Vickers, (himself a decorated Canadian service hero who had bravely defended the Canadian parliament from terror attack), at a public event in the Glasnevin Cemetery in May 2016, got entangled with a protestor who he sought to remove. The events of a hundred years ago re-emerged with the full malodorous bundle of the dirty laundry of the past.

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The Trust's David Bunworth said they had considered other options, such as fencing off the wall. "But that lost the whole spirit of what we're trying to do, which was about peace and reconciliation, it was about being non-judgmental, about being non-hierarchical," he said, "But the vandalism caused us to say to the project that we can't continue with it.... It is the firm view of Dublin Cemeteries Trust that if the wall were to be repaired.... it would be vandalized again," it announced. The memorial is an ongoing project which would have eventually recorded the names of every man, woman and child who died over a turbulent period in Irish history, from the start of the 1916 Easter Rising through to the end of the Irish Civil War in 1923. It was first unveiled in April 2016, during the centenary commemoration of the Easter Rising. The wall was unceremoniously attacked with sledgehammers and paint bombs in February 2020, while in April 2017 paint was thrown over it in an incident the trust described as "callous vandalism". The wall had originally been inspired by the Ring of Remembrance at Ablain-Saint-Nazaire in France which, from 2014, has remembered 580,000 soldiers from all sides killed in the first World War.

Remembering or Denying the Past?

So why does Ireland remain so chronically divided over its dark heritage of almost a century ago? Why are Ireland's "war dead" more contentious than the Europeans souls lost in WW1? During the Decade of centenaries leading up to 2023, Ireland has been confronted with the ghosts of a heritage largely and perhaps deliberately downplayed in preceding years. It is like the relics of a Nazi grandfather long concealed in the attic. Nobody invokes his memory. Memorializing that past still splits families, divides mixed religions, and causes political controversy. The primary political parties take their roots directly from the blood of the civil war period and invoke its imagery as political ammunition.

Well, the Glasnevin monument was highly controversial from its very inception. It is a remembrance wall showing the names of all those who died during the Easter Rising, Irish and British, military, and civilian. 1916 relatives' groups and some republican groups have criticized the decision to remember British forces alongside those who led the armed insurrection against British rule in Ireland. Indeed, several protesters gathered outside the cemetery at its opening to demonstrate as an inter-faith service took place inside. The Glasnevin Trust said the memorial was an attempt to present the historical facts, without hierarchy or judgement. George McCullough, chief executive of The Glasnevin Trust, said "it was an emotional experience for many of those who had lost loved ones in the Easter Rising".

The distinguished RTE newscaster, Joe Duffy protested the decision to stop the project. "The simple common denominator in this wall is that all those people died violently between 1916 and 1923," he said. "Brought down by thuggery and violence, a wall remembering people who are dead. Surely our mature country can remember all those who died – most of them Irish – regardless of the uniform they wore...the Irish government should step in to preserve the wall..." He continued to complain that the names of child victims were being removed along with all the others who died in 1916. He was joined by Dubliners Fred and Ann Baker who are relatives of child-victim Eleanor Warbrook (15.) "I am deeply saddened and shocked that vandalism and thuggery has triumphed in removing the only memorial in the world that names the children and the civilian men and women killed that week," he said. "They are our history. Many are buried in unmarked graves. Duffy's intervention has crystallized debate about this confrontation of Ireland's history in a state which had buried its "uncomfortable past", the name often applied in the relevant heritage historiography.

Former minister for Justice, Charlie Flanagan said the decision by the trust was a "victory for bullies." Continuing Charlie Flanagan said, "Today's news is... a victory for bullying and intolerance...today's decision demonstrates that we have some road to travel towards real respect for the different traditions and multiple narratives of these islands." There were political voices opposing this memorialization, although fewer in number. However, independent councillor Nial Ring said there were vociferous opponents. "This decision is a triumph of common sense and for respect for the people who fought and died for Ireland," he said. The Dublin Cemeteries Trust said that the black granite wall, which was erected in 2010, will remain in place and the names already inscribed will be replaced by blank panels. It said they were considering a stand-alone monument to mark all those who died in the conflict.

Britain's Prince Charles and the then minister for arts, Heather Humphreys had laid wreaths at the necrology wall in

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2017. The wall was unveiled during the Easter Rising commemorations in April 2016. Were the attacks just thuggish vandalism or a more sinister reflection of unresolved issues in the Irish psyche. Unfortunately, agreement is on the latter, and that no amount of security would resolve the contention around commemoration. Chair, Mr Bunworth summarized that no option could provide a viable, long-term solution given the inevitability of further attacks on the memorial, the trust concluded. Additional security around the wall could have seen vandals target other graves in the cemetery connected with the Irish Revolution, it concluded. "We did this about peace and reconciliation in a non-hierarchical way, but it is unsustainable to have it rebuilt and redone again," he said. "We never wanted to be divisive. We have taken the decision with great regret. We had a lot of regrets about this. We will not be able to highlight every name and individual, but we will remember everybody in a standalone monument in the cemetery. He added that the names of those who died in the Easter Rising must be removed because the wall was vandalized beyond repair. The Board genuinely feared a proliferation of dark heritage, with reprisal and counter-reprisal inflicted on innocent graves.

Commemorating Cultural Tradition in a Divided Society

Speaking recently, Irish Minister for Culture, Catherine Ryan, emphasizes that the commemoration of cultural tradition in Ireland requires great sensitivity:

This year we remember and reflect upon the momentous events that occurred in 1921, leading to the truce of July 11th and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in London on December 6th – seminal moments in our journey towards self-determination and sovereignty. The history of this period belongs to all of us, and I am very mindful of the complexities that lie ahead. My objective as Minister with responsibility for leading the Decade of Centenaries is to promote a respectful, authentic, measured, and non-partisan approach to the sensitive period of commemorations ahead of us. One of the cornerstones of is to continue to further peace and reconciliation on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain and to promote an ethos of inclusivity.

The Government's approach was guided by the Expert Advisory Group (EAG), under Dr Maurice Manning and Dr Martin Mansergh. To support this, the Minister's priority was to create interesting and imaginative opportunities that encourage as many people as possible to explore Ireland's shared history, in all its complexity. One of the many aspects of the revolution which had previously been neglected, was the critical engagement of women in the Irish revolution. As Minister Ryan stated in 1921:

It is vital too that we continue to document and illuminate the experiences and contribution of women during the Irish revolutionary period. The voices of some of these women have never been heard or may have long since been forgotten. I am delighted that these women are now taking their rightful place in history. Mná 100 is a new online women's strand curated by my department, which will shine a light on the lives of women during this period in a sensitive and impartial manner...t to highlight women's participation in political, military, professional and domestic roles...

Several intractable issues surfaced during the decade, which despite media perspiration, proved irresolvable. There were several controversies relating to President Higgins, foremost of which was how an Irish President could even diplomatically attend a conference celebrating the partition of his country. Gracefully, the President, who had been at the foremost in reconciliation, passed on the invite, but not before raising unionist sensitivities about his non-attendance. Dark heritage clutching the events of the present from the depths of the grave.

Then the issue of the celebration of those who had been subject to the penal regime surfaced, most particularly regarding the conflict archaeology of the Maze prison which had been the site of enforced internment. The site had been the scene of public protest, state torture, hunger strikes and sectarian murders. There was discussion and design proposals backed with 18m of European funding, to convert the former penitentiary into a Conflict Resolution Centre. These stalled due to loyalist fears that such a Centre could easily become a shrine for republican hagiography with prominent tangible heritage such as the cell of hunger striker Bobby Sands, having secured a preservation order. There were also several controversial issues arising from generic dark heritage in Ireland, not least the history of famine, and the quality of response of the colonial administration as the native people starved. As

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other experts pointed out, there was also progress to be made in the present to address deficiencies in the past in respecting "The New Irish", in the neglected field of minority communities and especially people of Black Irish heritage

However, Glasnevin proved the most contentious of all, controversial primarily due to the inclusion of British soldiers and RIC members. Cllr Perry regretted: "In some quarters this decision is being described as a victory for those who vandalized the wall...We all understand and support the need for peace and reconciliation... there are better ways." What could have been an elegant totem of peace and reconciliation has become one of division and exceptionalism. It appeared inevitable to many at the time of its unveiling that the controversial wall would meet with sustained protests. It was pointed out that the listing of British Army forces, sent to quell the fight for Irish independence, alongside those who fought and died to make Ireland free and independent was "inappropriate and insulting." It has been said that no other country would entertain such senseless and historical treatment of their national heroes. A poignant example was cited on the 12 May panel of the wall where a British soldier listed between executed leaders James Connolly and Seán Mac Diarmada (icons of the Irish revolution) was a member of the British Army's South Staffordshire Regiment. The Staffordshires were responsible for the North King Street Massacre in which fifteen Dublin men and boys were rounded up, summarily executed, and buried in the yards and cellars of their homes.

Historiographical Imbrolios

The events at Glasnevin crystallize and perhaps ossify a selection of contentious memories in relation to the decade of centenaries and show that in contemporary Ireland the past is far from past. There were complaints about balance and representativeness, about the fortunes of the Protestant minority in an independent Ireland and whether they proved to be a privileged elite or a marginalized scattering. As Roy Foster and Diarmaid Ferriter have pointed out it would almost have been inconceivable if no-one had felt excluded, such is the sensitivity of dates and events. Many of these issues were to be resolved by the initiative of the centenaries Expert group. Several round-table academic and public events were indeed held on the issue of centenaries. The New Wall of Remembrance to all 488 who died in 1916 had a mixed response from its earliest rendition. Gail Walker, writing in the Belfast Telegraph stated sarcastically, "When it comes to equating victims of conflict, the writing is on the (desecrated) wall". Thus (perhaps) as an example of how not to handle 'legacy' on the island of Ireland, Dublin's Glasnevin Cemetery is a case study of concern. The latest "severe" vandalism to its memorial to all the people killed in conflicts in Ireland between 1916 and 1923 prompted the cemetery authorities to dismantle it completely. The wall had certainly listed dead members of the Royal Irish Constabulary and British soldiers, but media coverage which inspired grassroots protests played down the vital detail that the Wall carried the names of civilians and IRA volunteers. In other words, this was not an example of West Brit flag-waving in the face of the risen people, but a straight-forward list of all who lost their lives during that historic conflict, children included. However, while one might attribute the reaction to politics and emotion, the idea of equating the dead in such a way proved unacceptable to republicanism in Ireland. This was the reason in 2020 that so many officials in the Republic, from mayors to TDs, boycotted a state ceremony for pre-partition police forces.

Fianna Fail justice spokesperson Jim O'Callaghan said that while it was appropriate they be remembered, it should not be in the context of the Decade of Centenaries. "I do not believe there is a moral equivalence between the struggle for Irish independence between the years 1912 and 1922 and the effort made to suppress that struggle by the military forces of the colonial power. "Dublin City Councilors had also objected to the event, citing the RIC's "intolerable record of barbarism". Indeed, the Council voted not to be represented at such a memorial. Depressingly, writing about Glasnevin, Tánaiste Leo Varadkar described events as a "terrible and a huge setback for reconciliation", he said those "who repeatedly vandalized the wall were driven by feelings of hatred, narrow nationalism and anger" and added: "We are better than this as a nation. These are not our values. We need to be willing to reach out to the 1 million people on our island who identify as British or British and Irish."

Conclusions

Recently a policing review in South Armagh questioned whether memorials to murdered RUC officers should be on public view within police stations. This too is a deeply divisive issue as to one side these victims are noble and

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sacrificing officers of state, while to another they are just stoolpigeons in an unending war. There is no easy solution, and sometimes the only compromise proffered is to memorialize them more discreetly, away from the emotion of public view. However (of course) who Ireland regards, from its dark heritage, as worthy of memorization, changes with the political tide. Seamus Maguire, missing for half a century, re-emerges to join the list of "the disappeared" (the unfortunate internecine victims of a more modern civil war) but is still missing. The sole photographic image of Jean McConville is a powerful reminder of those who have no memorial at all. What should have happened at Glasnevin? What would the state have done in response to vandalism at the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin's Parnell Square. We might consider if history itself, needs protected from the people who choose which bodies are dug up and which are left unidentified and forgotten; those who, in the poet Louis MacNeice's words, "pigeon-hole the souls of the killed/Into sheep and goats, patriots and traitors." Normally, in societies at peace, communities do this because as a country they find ways of accommodating all those who live within it. Fighting over graveyards and in their precincts is certainly not the way to construct a united island. Far from memorializing the dead, the controversy over the Necrology Wall just shows how far Ireland remains steeped in dark heritage.

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Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.