

## THE DECADE OF CENTENARIES

Address by **Dr. Martin Mansergh**, Member of the Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations, to the Church of Ireland Men's Society in the Royal College of Surgeons, Saturday, 1 June 2013, at 1 pm

To those who have travelled today from Northern Ireland, you are very welcome to Dublin. I have known Dr. Roddy Evans for about 30 years, since I first met with a group associated with the ideals of moral rearmament in a mutual friend's house in Dalkey, where James Joyce once taught. Roddy has corresponded with me from time to time, and has sent me short pamphlets and newsletters which he has written or contributed to, all of which try to put a specifically Christian perspective on the many problems arising from the history of our shared island.

The decade of centenaries refers back to the ten-year period between 1912 and 1922/3, beginning with the introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill in the House of Commons and the signing up to the Ulster Covenant in opposition to it, and ending with the coming into being, no longer on any provisional basis, of the Governments of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland on 6/7 December 1922. In practice, I suspect the decade will finish with the centenary of the end of the Irish civil war in 1923. It was a hugely important and formative, but also deeply troubled, decade in the history of this island and its relationship with its neighbouring island Great Britain. It was filled with important events, and heavily influenced in many respects by the First World War. Thousands of Irish people from North and South and from all traditions fought in that war in the British Army, remembering that at that time the whole of Ireland was still part of the United Kingdom, though after 1916 much of it becoming progressively detached. Over the past 20 years the War Memorial Gardens designed by Edwin Lutyens have been beautifully restored, and the Messines Tower built by a cross-community workforce was inaugurated jointly by the Queen, President McAleese and the King of the Belgians in November 1998. In November 2008, as Minister of State I represented the Government at ceremonies around 11 November at the Menin Gate in Flanders. I was also with Dr. Paisley when he visited Glasnevin Cemetery and said prayers at some gravestones recently installed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which can be found today in different parts of the country.

Obviously, the Great War will be the main focus of commemoration in Britain, while the achievement of independence will be the central focus in the Republic, but not neglecting other events of the time such as the Dublin Lock-Out in 1913 and the women's suffrage movement, the origins of which in Ireland are to be found amongst the smaller Protestant denominations in the North from the 1860s. The centenary of Northern Ireland coming into being between 1920 and 1922 will no doubt be commemorated, when the time comes, particularly amongst the Unionist community. There will be one or two commemorations from other times, the millennium of the battle of Clontarf and of Brian Boru's death in 1014 portrayed as a victory over the Norsemen, as well as the bicentenary of the battle of Waterloo won under the command of the duke of Wellington, someone the Irish Catholic Bishops would call in 1830 'the most distinguished of Ireland's sons' in gratitude for his role in enacting Catholic Emancipation, when he was Prime Minister.

In my own mind anyway, the decade actually started, like the hugely popular TV series *Downton Abbey*, with the sinking of the *Titanic*. I have visited the Titanic Quarter, and am very impressed with the Museum. There is a southern dimension, in that the last sighting from land was from Queenstown, now Cobh, and the famous photographer Fr. Browne, who had been unceremoniously ordered off the maiden voyage by his Bishop, left a record of the liner on the first part of its maiden voyage and sailing away from the Irish coast. The Museum is a fine monument to the industrial prowess of Belfast. Indeed, I well remember leading a delegation of semi-State bodies to Harland & Wolff and other

heavy industries in April 1982 at the invitation of the trade union leaders who came down to see Taoiseach Charles Haughey in the hope of generating more work on the island of Ireland. I also much admire the new Public Records Office of Northern Ireland in the Titanic Quarter. Indeed, I received a slight shock there, when I came across a letter from a great-great uncle, a Colonel Mansergh, who lived in Warrenpoint and was both secretary of the Golf Club and the local branch of the Ulster Unionist Party, giving an account to Captain R.H.Hall on 6 April 1914 of monies he had collected since 1912 for the Carson Fund. For many people, North and South, part of the interest of the decade lies in discovering more about the involvement of family members a couple of generations back. The digitisation of records greatly facilitates research into the lives of the vast majority of people who did not make it into the history books hitherto. The census records of 1901 and 1911 are already online. There is a keen interest among historians to get access to the 1926 Census, so as to be able to measure the population changes as a result of world war and revolution.

A particular point of interest will be to try and pin down both the incidence and the reasons for the drop in the Protestant population of the twenty-six counties between 1911 and 1926, though it is only fair to point out that there had been significant drops, though not anything of that magnitude, in every ten-year census from 1861. A little bit like the aristocracy before the French revolution, who in the words of one memoir writer walked on a carpet of flowers that concealed the abyss, the more privileged element in the minority which included many churchmen were oblivious to the weakness of their position outside Ulster, no doubt imagining like the American loyalists in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that their strong British connections would protect them from all ill. As President Gorbachev warned the Politburo of the German Democratic Republic only a month or so before the fall of the Berlin Wall, 'history punishes those who move too late'. Or to adapt the words on the Parnell monument, those who try as a small minority to stand in the path of progress towards nationhood are liable to get hurt. They were lucky that the land question had been broadly settled under British rule, but the survival of the community in large parts of the country was for a short period felt to be a matter of touch and go.

The new Government which took office here in March 2011 set about establishing structures for handling the decade of centenaries. There is no doubt that the success of the Queen's visit here in May 2011 helped establish a new atmosphere in British-Irish and North-South relations. The Taoiseach Enda Kenny takes a keen personal interest in the subject, with the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht Jimmy Deenihan having departmental responsibility. There is an all-party parliamentary committee, which he chairs and which meets in Government Buildings, which has an input into programme development. There is also an advisory committee of historians chaired by Dr. Maurice Manning, and I am his deputy. Both committees meet regularly about every 4-6 weeks. The advisory committee is there to make recommendations on potentially contentious issues, and to watch over the historical integrity of what is undertaken, but it is not there to impose an official line, or to muzzle any of its members who are not constrained in what they choose to write or say. Its Northern member is Dr. Eamon Phoenix, who edits an often fascinating daily historical column from the archive of the *Irish News*. The committee has met a number of different groups, including ones from Northern Ireland; it has made site visits to places of historic significance, which might be refurbished, such as the two or three surviving buildings of Richmond Barracks or Kilmainham Courthouse, and begun a programme of public meetings around the country. There is a good deal of interest and enthusiasm amongst the history teachers and members of local historical associations. The question of installing a museum in an inner courtyard of the GPO is actively being discussed. An online monthly newsletter *Century Ireland@CenturyIRL* that has been recently launched will draw on the archives, and is being produced by Boston College in collaboration with the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

Some professional historians and public intellectuals have reservations about the whole notion of commemorations. The argument is made that we have enough already, or that they have been triumphalist and divisive in the past, or alternatively that they oversimplify and make it unrealistically benign in order to serve present political needs. Where in the past, say the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1966 was criticized for stirring division, today the opposite criticism is being made, that history is being subordinated to the needs of the peace process, and that there is not enough acrimony.

None of these criticisms are to be entirely dismissed, but they overlook a simple reality. In a democracy, there is a strong public desire to remember at landmarks in the passage of years, and sometimes annually, the ideals, the losses and sacrifices, and the achievements of the past, depending on which of those are applicable. People and public ceremonial tend not to dwell so much on the darker side of past events, of which historians are there to remind us.

I remember at the time of the bicentenary of the French revolution in 1989 the French Government sent round a message to friendly governments. It was to the effect: 'Your country may wish to celebrate the French revolution. We would be grateful if you could concentrate on events like the Declaration of the Rights of Man and avoid images of violence'. I read with amusement recently that President Hollande had cancelled a project of his predecessor President Sarkozy for a museum of the history of France, on the grounds that it would be too divisive. There is some criticism in Britain of the Government's plans for the commemoration of World War I as being too much in the questioning spirit of the war poets and not wanting to offend EU partner Germany with not enough emphasis on the fact that Britain won. In the Republic, certain people are watching closely to see if the State is playing down 1916 or playing up too much Irish participation in World War I and overpraising John Redmond, in 1914 leader of Nationalist Ireland and of the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster.

People do expect government to play a lead role alongside civic initiative in organising or at any rate supporting public commemorative programmes. If government stepped back, there would be plenty of others more than willing to step into the vacuum and create their own narrative of continuity and ownership. Would it really be wise to turn to those who championed armed struggle till quite recently, and say, 'We want nothing more to do with Irish history. It is all yours'? To put it bluntly, neither the Government nor the political parties, with the exception of Sinn Féin, want official commemorations to suggest that either the 1916 Rising or the struggle for independence in some way justify the paramilitary campaigns of violence in Northern Ireland since 1970, or continued Republican dissident activity to this day. There would be a certain parallel in Northern Ireland, where the modern UVF is clearly claiming an identity with the Ulster Volunteers formed in 1913. The Unionist parties seem to have let the modern paramilitary organisation set the pace. In the Republic, we have long used the term 'Old IRA' to draw the crucial distinction.

There is an on-going debate amongst historians and commentators as to whether that distinction is valid. For better or for worse, the international community in the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to accept the principle of national self-determination and government by consent, and that people had the right to fight where this was denied. The problem was how to square the rights of resistant minorities. Elder statesman Arthur Balfour, quoted in Ronan Fanning's excellent new book *Fatal Path. British Government and Irish Revolution 1910-1922*, claimed that partition as embodied in the Government of Ireland Act, 1920, which provided for two Home Rule parliaments in Ireland, put Irish policy on all fours with the European principle of self-determination, which no American could say was unfair. Though never publicly admitted as British policy at the time, it was probably a more valid description of the Treaty settlement, which established the Irish Free State, the Northern Ireland Parliament

having already been opened by George V the previous June. There is no similarly accepted principle, which could have justified the forced incorporation of Northern Ireland with its Unionist majority into a united Ireland as a result of a 25-year IRA campaign, but the Good Friday Agreement is based on the principle of concurrent self-determination embodied both in its ratification North and South in 1998 and its mechanism for constitutional change which would again require referendums North and South. It was a mechanism applied in 2004 in Cyprus, but the referendums went different ways, and Cypriot unity was rejected by the Greek Cypriots, because of the terms and conditions, even though in principle they had always favoured it. There the British, who are no longer of course the sovereign power, are quite prepared to act as persuaders for unity, but so far it has made no difference. Tony Blair's adviser Jonathan Powell and myself spent three days on the peace line, talking to both the Greek and Turkish Cypriot negotiators about the Northern Ireland peace process a few years ago.

In on-going controversy about the need to cut the public service pay and pensions bill, some in the trade unions who favour a more militant approach have invoked the spirit of the 1913 Lock-Out. It has not raised the temperature very much. There are one or two posters hanging on lamp posts round the city centre, inviting people to a meeting on the topic, 'Is revolution still possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?' One of our independent socialist deputies called for mass mobilisation against the new property tax. The only mass mobilisation in the following 48 hours was of tens of thousands of people rushing to sign up for it before the deadline expired.

In a book of essays just published edited by John Horne and Edward Madigan on commemoration and the decade of centenaries, the point is made that the focus on some of the most formative events in this island's story in a holistic manner and of course with the benefit of hindsight may cause some renewed critical thinking about our past, particularly in the direction of making it more inclusive and less one-dimensional. While most of us probably identify with one or other cause at the time, the peace process has enabled us to transcend the conflict between Unionism and Nationalism as it continued till 1998 and to support the arrangements in the Good Friday and subsequent agreements which bring them closer together.

Nobody in 1912 North or South who engaged in the political struggle for or against Home Rule could have anticipated the outcome ten years later, independence, partition, devolved government in Northern Ireland, or the upheaval and bloodshed that would be involved, even if on quite a small scale compared with other conflicts and revolutions or even a day at the front in World War I. Thankfully, a North-South sectarian civil war was avoided then and since, which is not to ignore some very ugly bombings and massacres close to or across the border.

One is bound to ask oneself were opportunities missed for achieving a more benign outcome without conflict. Speaking personally, I can identify several worth discussing without becoming too prescriptive about the solution that should have been adopted and without ignoring the political forces at play. Home Rule was resisted by Unionists and repudiated by Republicans, yet it was potentially a historic compromise, which would have kept Ireland in the United Kingdom, while giving it internal self-government. The Unionist objection to it was less fear of it sliding into republican separation, as the fact that it cut off Ulster from a direct relationship with Britain, which would henceforth mainly have to go through Dublin. A second regret would be that Bonar Law's blank cheque to resistance led to rival volunteer forces arming. By 1914, compromise was close, but not achieved, except on paper, as Casement described it, a sort of promissory note in return for Redmond committing to the war. The high-profile executions probably did much more than the Rising itself to radicalise public opinion. Agreement reached between Carson and Redmond on immediate implementation of Home Rule in the South was fatally vetoed by Southern Unionists, who subsequently failed in the Irish Convention of

1917-8 to persuade Ulster Unionists to accept in changed circumstances Home Rule for the island as a whole.

At that stage, with a whole raft of nation states in formation from the ruins of collapsing empires, popular opinion had moved beyond Home Rule. There are those who argue today that Home Rule could in time have evolved peacefully into independence. It would have been wonderful if the type of peaceful transformation that took place in most Eastern European countries in 1989 could have happened earlier. In that regard, my attention was drawn recently to a passage in *Ghosts of Empire. Britain's Legacies in the Modern World* by Kwasi Kwarteng, a historian of Ghanaian parentage, who is now a Tory MP. Gertrude Bell, a contemporary of Lawrence of Arabia, and like him an expert on the Middle East, was sitting next to an Iraqi politician at the end of 1920, and explaining to him in her excellent Arabic that 'complete independence' was what Britain 'ultimately wished to give'. He replied: 'My Lady, "complete independence" is never given; it is always taken'. So it was in Ireland, or at least the major part of it.

The commemorative period will be an opportunity to review the entirety of the last 100 years, and also to try and see where we go in the future. While we may pay homage to the past and seek to learn from it, neither 1690 nor 1912, 1916 or 1918 provide more than at best limited guides for the future. We are in a different world today. When in the context of our economic problems I make reference in the words of the 1916 Proclamation to 'our gallant allies in Europe', there tends to be a hollow laugh in the audience, as people think of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt and the austere approach of the Lutheran Pastor's daughter from the former East Germany who today occupies the Chancellery in Berlin. Notwithstanding all that, if we can learn from the lessons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is every prospect that the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be a vast improvement, and a period when all parts of this island can enjoy real freedom and prosperity.