

'Remembering': Victims, Survivors and Commemoration

**Introduction to Commemoration,
and to Commemoration in Northern Ireland**

by Dr Sara McDowell (2007)

What is commemoration?

To commemorate is to encapsulate the memory of someone or something in a specific place or at a particular time. As Nagle (2006, page no.12) suggests "birthdays, deaths, wedding anniversaries, wars and battles, victories, rebellions, defeats, emancipations and liberations, genocide and atrocities all merit being consigned to remembrance for *aeternum* by means of, amongst other things, liturgy, parade, rite, sacrament, service, show and solemnity". Commemorations are conceived, imagined and shaped in the present and their functions are wide-ranging and diverse.

Why do we commemorate?

Commemorating the past is an essential part of the present and is important for a number of reasons. As Harris (1998, 39) notes: "something essential to our understanding as human beings is connected to the notion of memory; it is the pivot of our culture" and therefore is inexorably tied to our sense of identity. Leerssen suggests that the impulse to commemorate and remember is "inspired primarily by the apprehension that one might forget" (2001, 209). Yet memory and the process of commemorating the past are inherently more complex as we remember the past 'in the light of our needs and aspirations' (Walker 1996, 59). The process of remembering, therefore, is inherently multifaceted and intricately related to our ability to formulate and challenge identities in the present. According to Walker (1996, 59): "Our concern about the past is strongly influenced by our present occupations, which colour the sense of history we develop". Without the ability to remember, a sense of self, identity, culture and heritage is lost. Lowenthal (1985, 8) asserts that that through the act of remembrance, cultures and traditions are formed, maintained and destroyed, as memories are conflated and embellished. Identities are construed and validated as well as rejected and contested while the adoption and cultivation of an aspect of the past serves to reinforce a sense of natural belonging, purpose and place (Lowenthal 1985). Commemoration can help bond a community or group while simultaneously excluding others. For Longley memorialisation is a means whereby communities "renew their own *religio*: literally what ties them together, the rope around the individual sticks" (1994, 6).

Identities and memories are inevitably selective in that they serve particular interests and ideologies (Gillis 1994, 14). Gergen proposes that Americans and Europeans are compulsive consumers of the past "shopping for what best suits their particular sense of self at that time" (cited in Gillis, 1994, 17). The consumer analogy of shopping is particularly relevant to commemoration. The idea that the past is chosen deliberately and subsequently consumed is appropriate but, arguably, demeaning in that it trivialises that which people consider sacred. Moments, events and themes from an array of histories are consequently 'bought' for present consumption or even to conform to the latest 'fashion'. Again, memories are seen as selective and partial and used to fulfil individual, group or communal requirements of identity at a particular time and in a particular space:

Times change, and as they do, people look back on the past and reinterpret events and ideas. They look for patterns, for order, and for coherence in past events to support changing social, economic, and cultural values (Foote 1998, 3).

As such, the past is continuously re-used and reshaped for the present and future. Lowenthal, reflecting on the reasons for commemorating particular aspects of the past, argues that societies change or alter the past because they often need or want more they have been bequeathed. He believes that most people exaggerate their cultural antiquity or conceal its relative recentness. Subsequently new, more appropriate histories are 'invented' (1985). Hobsbawn and Ranger argue:

Invented traditions are taken to mean a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983, 1).

This use of the past is a characteristic of modern communities and groups as they continuously retell and commemorate their pasts. Tosh suggests that while social groupings need a record of prior experience, they also require a narrative of the past which serves to explain or justify the present, often at the cost of historical accuracy. He observes: "Memories are modified to suit particular situations or circumstances and do not always correlate with historical truths" (Tosh 1991, 2). These histories can become distorted and permeated with inaccuracies and myths during the selection process. Yet these inaccuracies are often deliberate. The dimensions of 'forgetting' in memory construction are sometimes just as crucial for the cultivation of identity (Rowlands, 1999).

Commemoration can take place on a number of levels, private, public and social, and, as Kilmurray notes, while we all remember the facts, these 'facts' are determined by the ways in which we know them or wish to know them (1998, 43). Context is all-important in any assessment of remembering the past. The social, economic or political composition of the audience viewing the commemoration will decide the way in which it is received and subsequently interpreted. Consequently, present-day attitudes, politics, economics, and social orders will directly condition the way in which a memory is represented and why that memory has been recalled and reused. Commemorations then are entirely controlled by the context in which they are created or viewed and thus meaning is affected by time and place. They can mean something to one person, while simultaneously meaning very little or nothing at all to another. Longley has argued that commemorations are "as selective as sympathies": "they honour *our* dead not *your* dead" (1994, 69). This reading of the partisan nature of the process of commemoration emphasises the divisions that occur even when the same person or event is being remembered. Individuals, groups or communities in society all tend to remember different aspects of the past, but they tend to do so in diverse ways and with alternative methods. The past validates present attitudes and actions by reaffirming a link with a former one. Historicity legitimates the present. Societies justify current attitudes and future aspirations by linking them to past traditions which helps bond and unify factionalism.

Commemoration in Northern Ireland

In the aftermath of every conflict there is a period of reflection, remembrance and renegotiation as society attempts to deal with its past. Commemoration is an integral and inherent part of this process (Edkins 2003). Remembering the Troubles dead has assumed paramount importance in the peace process years and has remained characterised by contestation. The 'aftermath' of the Troubles has instigated a wave of remembering and representation, not only of the very recent past, but also of many other aspects of history which found new meanings in a post-conflict context. Ulster-Scots heritage, emigration, the Irish Famine, Great War commemoration and other events from earlier conflicts were among a wide range of memories drawn upon in the post-ceasefire years (Rolston 1995). The search for a 'usable past', a term employed by Moeller (2003) to describe a highly selective and manipulative past, has proliferated since the first paramilitary ceasefires in 1994. Memory has been (and continues to be) extensively and selectively inscribed onto urban and rural landscapes through a variety of different physical forms, from monuments to street murals, from memorial plaques to gardens of remembrance, and from statues to street names. Preserving sites associated with the conflict such as military barracks and prisons, and sites in which deaths occurred, has also assumed prominence.

Commemorative icons such as plaques, murals, monuments, and conflict-related sites including prisons and other military installations, have the capacity to carry meaning. These symbols constitute what Pierre Nora has labelled '*lieux de memoire*' (sites of memory) because of their ability to embody the past and stimulate remembering in fixed locales. As Nevins (2005, 268) explains: "all memories have a geography. We recall memories, in part, through specific sites and attach our recollections to particular places".

Commemorations in Northern Ireland are multi-faceted and have many diverse functions. While memorials are constructed primarily to acknowledge the dead and express loss, they are also subject to manipulation by competing territorial ideologies. Commemorating the past in Northern Ireland is enmeshed in the victimhood debate which has gained increasing currency in the peace-time years. Memorials are often constructed to vie for the status of victimhood. The victim in any conflict is void of blame, their actions legitimated and deserving of sympathy. Memorials to members of the security forces, Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries and civilians all claim the status of victim in Northern Ireland. Memorials help concretise these claims in public spaces. Notions of power are also inherent to the commemorative process. The dominant group usually dictates who or what is remembered and is influential in determining where and when the commemoration will take place.

Given the segregation of residential space in Northern Ireland, commemorations can also play a part in the marking of territory. Some memorials are strategically placed within and outside a geographic space. As such, they demarcate dichotomous boundaries for those who live within territories, as well as for those who live outside the territory (Yiftachel and Ghanem 2004). Memorials can also operate as sites of resistance or points of contestation (Bender and Winer 2001). In Northern Ireland physical memorials are often attacked and vandalised if the memory they evoke is not shared or respected.

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Web Page Information

<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/victims/memorials/smcd07commemoration.html>

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