

## **REVIEW: COMMEMORATING IRELAND**

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Eberhard Bort (ed.), **Commemorating Ireland: History, Politics, Culture**,  
Dublin and Portland, Oregon: Irish Academic Press, 2004, 293 +xii pp,  
hb, £40, ISBN 0 7165 2768 5; pb, £20, ISBN 0 7165 2796 0.

Eberhard Bort, or Paddy Bort as he is better known to regulars in Sandy Bell's and the Royal Oak, has for several years been both a convivial and energising force in Edinburgh intellectual and creative life. His love of traditional Scottish and Irish song and music is transparent. So too is his passion for theatre, especially theatre from both sides of Ireland's border.

His knowledge of the latter, as well as of Irish literature generally, is as immense as his enthusiasm but he is a practitioner too. Few of those lucky enough to have seen it will have forgotten his barnstorming performance as the loquacious Dublin barman in the Royal Oak's Festival production of Flann O'Brien's comic masterpiece **Thirst**. This *tour de force* deserves and should be given a wider audience.

One major event he was instrumental in setting up under the University's auspices was the 11/12 September 1998 conference on **Commemorating Ireland**. Though Ireland's bicentennial remembrance of the 1798 United Irish rising was by then well under way, the conference went considerably beyond it to address the very nature of commemoration and of historical memory itself. These concerns are now echoed in a splendid book which has finally emerged from the conference, though not all the papers and talks contributed are in fact incorporated in the text.

Historical commemoration, Eberhard points out in his illuminating introduction to the book, has its pitfalls because of the different and sometimes conflicting goals which it can serve within any society divided historically by inherited conflict. This insight is developed by several contributors who argue that an important measure of a country's emotional and democratic maturity lies in how it chooses to come to terms with and

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render historical memory. Israel, as Professor Paul Arthur points out, needed time before it was ready to do this. In 1948, he reminds us, a two-hundred-page textbook on Jewish history was published there which offered just one page on what later become known as the Holocaust.

This word, which only acquired its current usage in the 1970s, was of course the right one for describing what happened to so many of Europe's Jewish people at the hands of the Third Reich. 'Holocaust studies' have assumed a very necessary place in many education systems and school curricula but it was almost inevitable that the attempt would be made in the United States to incorporate Irish experience within them.

Dr Mary Daly explores the background to this in a powerful essay on how the rituals of commemoration can be pressed into the service of political causes, or indeed causes which become 'politically correct'. She cites a teaching package on the Irish famine approved by the state of New Jersey in 1995, which hardly mentioned either over-population or potato blight, let alone the fact that a very large Irish migration to North America took place before the famine as well as after it. Many of these migrants were, of course, Ulster Protestants whom the Irish-American lobby were anxious to edit out of the story, while claiming descent from post-famine migrants could easily become a way of invoking a superior form of victimhood.

Ireland, Dr Daly reminds us, has had three major commemorations in recent years. 1991, the seventy fifth anniversary of the Easter Rising, was a low-key affair outside the ranks of Sinn Féin and the Provisional IRA. Official remembrance of the potato famine, one hundred and fifty years after it, was, she points out, shoe-horned into quite a tight and historically misleading period of time, ending in the summer of 1997 to clear the stage for events to mark the bi-centenary of the United Irish Rising of 1798.

Professor Roy Foster, in his recent book of essays, **The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland**, has brought his rapier wit to bear on some of the more crass aspects of the 1798 commemoration, especially where the Irish Tourist Board was let loose on it. Both Dr Daly and Dr Peter Collins place the famine and the 1798 commemorations under the microscope of scholarly examination. Both occasions had agendas, not necessarily dishonourable ones. Mary Robinson used her presidency to make the case for famine commemoration as a moral act through which an

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increasingly consumerist Irish society could reach into its own history in order to understand the vulnerability of the Third World's poor.

Bob Geldof had led the way with Band Aid for Ethiopia in 1985, and so putting the official famine commemorations into a context of global poverty could only do good. Along the way, however, detailed micro-studies of what happened locally, how far relief measures succeeded and whether the only way to understand events was within a nationalist narrative of Irish history, were sacrificed to the bigger commemorative picture.

This happened with the 1798 commemorations too, because putting a heavy focus on the rising's all-Ireland dimension, and the role in it of Protestants, could be seen to serve the purposes of the 'peace process' for Northern Ireland, which had yielded up the Belfast Agreement earlier in the year. Again, the detail of what happened locally, its variegated nature, the realities of sectarian vengeance and ancestral land vendettas as factors in what drove events, were talked down, except by historians.

Smiling spokesmen of an IRA murder machine put on hold were able to present themselves laughably as heirs of Wolfe Tone and Henry Joy McCracken and 'theme park' history arrived on Belfast's Falls Road at the Easter 1998 commemorations of 1916, when columns of marchers, kitted out as pikemen of two centuries earlier, kept step with paramilitary bands in eyeshades and combat gear.

Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien wrote over thirty years ago of the dangers of Irish people commemorating themselves to death, like 'sleepwalkers locked in some eternal ritual of re-enactment'. One by-product of the ceasefires in Northern Ireland and of the Belfast Agreement has been the arrival of a virtual cottage industry of commemoration of those killed in the troubles, especially in republican areas, though Loyalists are also part of it.

Not all victims of the conflict are commemorated. Remembrance can always be a selective process as other contributors to this superb book remind us. 1991 passed with hardly any public events in Ireland to make the centenary of Parnell's death, while in 1977 the agenda of official commemoration appears to have been too crowded to allow any space for the death of Daniel O'Connell in 1847. De Valera, in 1945, threw his support behind major events to mark the death of Thomas Davis a century earlier, but in 1995 it went almost unobserved.

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Paradoxes like these are considered by several contributors. Tony Canavan, in an essay entitled 'The Poppy My Father Wore' reviews the background of why an Irish president with an inclusive agenda such as Mary McAleese still feels unable to wear a poppy in public even though she has been to France to join the Queen in honouring Ireland's war dead from both sides of the border.

This form of remembrance is part of the tangled skein of Irish and Ulster identity. Gerald Dawe, in some marvellous poetry which he uses in his chapter, and Aileen Howard, in her essay on Frank McGuinness's great play, **Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme**, go some way to unravel for us the way folk memory can shape our sense of what we are. It does exactly that in the climactic moment of McGuinness's play when the Ulster soldiers exchange Orange collarettes with each other before going 'over the top' to their certain deaths.

Sean O'Casey, as both a Socialist and a dramatic genius, arrived at his own way of remembering and rendering great events in Irish history. They did not fit with the simplistic narratives required by a new Irish state and served merely to drive him out of it, as Christopher Murray shows us in a fine chapter entitled 'History into Drama'.

One of the most interesting chapters is the work of Dr Ray Burnett. He stays close to the remit of examining what shapes historical and political commemoration. In Edinburgh's history, he argues, this has taken the form of a struggle between those with power and those without it for control of the city's cultural landscape. His focus is initially the highly charged debate in the 1830s and early 1840s over how and where the radical martyrs of 1794 should be commemorated. Respectable Edinburgh tried both to deny a Calton Hill site for any commemoration and to push aside the radical movement's affinities with republican France and insurgent Ireland. The battle for a Calton memorial was won, though it was adorned with what Lord Cockburn thankfully called a 'sparing inscription' on it. The hill, and the monument's presence in the old burial ground, soon became a magnet for large Chartist rallies, and Dr Burnett invokes this history to make a compelling case for the new Scottish Parliament being built on a site symbolic of the struggle for democratic rights.

This is an excellently sourced and thoughtful contribution to the book. Dr Burnett loses his way, however, when he seeks to make connections between these events and more recent Edinburgh controversies over the James

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Connolly commemoration parade. A modest Cowgate memorial was raised to him in good faith by the city's labour movement in 1968. Much water has gone under the bridge since then and even more blood, most of it shed by Irish republicans in a brutal, sectarian and divisive war which they have sought to dignify as an anti-imperialist struggle.

The Connolly commemoration controversy, Dr Burnett argues, is proof of the city's unease with its own radical history. In fact the unease, shared by most of Edinburgh Trade unionists and Labour party members, was over the thought of letting Connolly's memory be hijacked by Provo-Fascist apologists who used heavy police protection to chant IRA slogans in the city's streets at bemused and often hostile bystanders. Organisations and participants in this commemoration in its present form need to accept that to most of Edinburgh it is about as welcome as a turd in a swimming pool.

A collection of essays on the theme of this book would be incomplete without offerings from Owen Dudley Edwards and Professor Chris Harvie. At the 1998 conference, Mr Edwards gave a paper entitled: 'Journeys' End in Death: The Road Through Drumcree', though in Portadown in the 1990s, the road through Drumcree was never a problem. It was the Orange walk from there back into Portadown's centre down the Garvaghy Road which was, or had become, one. Edwards has altered the title of his contribution in **Commemorating Ireland** to 'The Rivers to Drumcree'. Easily the longest piece in the book and hugely scholarly, this is really a reflection on the symbolism of rivers in Irish history, although it does incorporate a few telling insights into the rituals of commemoration as well.

Professor Harvie invites us to see nineteenth and early twentieth century Irish history as a case study in thwarted modernisation, at least outside the Lagan Valley. The warring relationship between Catholic nationalism and the forces of economic change are well explored, but perhaps, as with the essay by Owen Dudley Edwards, the relationship between what we are offered and the book's theme only emerges as an indirect one. This could possibly also be said of the essays from Neal Ascherson and Professor Malcolm Anderson who choose to ponder both historical memory and remembrance itself in contexts which are German, Russian, Scottish and French, but not Irish.

They do this with both erudition and panache but the collection's title is **Commemorating Ireland**. That said, an editor's instincts are usually to give free rein to his or her contributors and there is an abundance of rewarding material here for those readers who come to this book with Irish history – and

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how we recall and interpret it – as their first priority. We are all in debt to Eberhard Bort for his work in organising the 1998 conference and now for making available to us this exceptionally fine and well-produced book.

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