

A comparative survey of the historical debates surrounding Ireland, World War I and the Irish Civil War

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Irish historical debate tends to follow a familiar path. Defined against the enemy, Britain, one will find in the cases of the 1798 Rebellion, the Great Irish Famine, the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence a historiography encompassing nationalist, revisionists and post-revisionist writings. Traditional nationalist writings acclaim the heroic Irish and denigrate their oppressors. Revisionists, to a varying degree, attack the nationalist account before post-revisionists explore a less Manichean narrative. Rather than charting the development of the debates which pit the Irish against the British with predictable results, it is the intention of this article to explore Irish historical debates where the traditional template cannot be used. The article will examine Irish historians' reactions to events which, in the case of the First World War, saw the Irish fight with the British army and, in the Irish Civil War, saw the Irish turn on themselves. In these debates there is no obvious 'good guy' and 'bad guy', no 'us' and 'them'. Instead there is 'us' with 'them', and 'us' against 'us'.

As well as exploring the historians' efforts to chart a course through these sensitive areas, this essay will look at how these efforts were influenced by contemporary circumstances. Of particular interest will be the publications in the last twenty years when Ireland experienced a period of unprecedented economic boom and rapid modernisation. During this period, Ireland, for a while at least, went 'from being one of the poorest countries in Europe to one of the richest.'¹ Confidence grew and the church-induced conservatism crumbled. As well as the economic advancement there has been a remarkable political project undertaken as well. The Good Friday

¹ John Marcus, 'The Celtic Tiger: Ireland invests heavily in higher education, and benefits mightily' in *National Cross Talk*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Winter, 2007), p. 1.

Agreement of 1998 acknowledged that ‘the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, freely exercised and legitimate, is to maintain the Union and [...] that it would be wrong to make any change in the status of Northern Ireland save with the consent of a majority of its people’², thus beginning a process which incorporated Provisional IRA decommissioning, the St. Andrews agreement, 2006, and the establishment of an effective power-sharing executive. This remarkable progress culminated in the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to these shores, the first visit of a British monarch to the south this side of World War I. As part of an examination of the historical debates from the Irish revolution, 1913-1923, this essay will assess the influence of the economic, social and political development of Ireland since 1990 on the historical debates of Ireland and World War I and the Irish Civil War.

Prior to the work of David Fitzpatrick in the late 1980s, in seeking an account of Ireland and World War I, one could only look to the war-time propagandist books. Michael Mac Donagh’s *The Irish at the Front*, written in 1916, includes a foreword by Home Rule leader John Redmond who takes the opportunity to idolise the soldiers and seek recruitments. He describes the Irish soldiers as possessing ‘astonishing courage (...) beautiful faith (...) natural military genius (...) tenderness as well as strength’ and asks God to ‘bless them! And may Ireland cherish them in her bosom, know how to prove her love and pride and send their brothers leaping to keep full their battle-torn ranks and to keep high and glad their heroic hearts!’³

Redmond’s wishes were to be disregarded and the emerging Irish state was ambivalent towards the memory of the soldiers. For seventy years following the armistice on the Western Front, Ireland’s soldiers were little remembered. This had little to do with the character of the soldiers or their actions but with the preferences of the new state’s institutions for silence. All of the major parties, bar Labour, traced their roots to the Volunteers who

² Agreement Between the government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the government of Ireland, Article 1, Section III. (<http://www.dfa.ie/uploads/documents/Anglo-Irish/agreement.pdf>) (10 Jan. 2012).

³ Foreword to Michael MacDonagh, *The Irish at the Front* (London, 1916), p. 2.

stayed at home and executed the Easter Rising of 1916, an event perceived to be at odds with the enlistment of Irishmen in the British Army. All major parties and the dominant Catholic Church had actively and successfully campaigned against conscription in 1918. They were therefore unwilling to celebrate, or even acknowledge, the 200, -300,000 Irishmen who served in the war or the c.30,000 who lost their lives.⁴

Conditions never seemed right to re-assimilate the soldiers and the memory of World War I. The inter-war period saw Ireland look to prove its differences from Britain, not its similarities and shared experiences. Ireland proclaimed neutrality in World War II and did not want the narrative of World War I undermining its stubborn independence. Mass emigration, economic stagnation and the emergence of the troubles in the decades after the war contributed to further ignorance of World War I.

The Irishmen who had gone to war in 1914 with popular support and with the political backing of the IPP and many clergy, became transposed onto the British, anti-nationalist side and therefore ignored: 'from the Second World War the memory of the Great War was increasingly denied in the public life and self-understanding of independent Ireland. For 40 years, the National War Memorial was a ghostly ruin.'⁵ Tragically, Irish historians failed for so long to challenge the 'collective amnesia' of Irish society and did nothing to end the shameful neglect of veterans and the dead.⁶ It was not until 1986, and David Fitzpatrick's *Ireland and the First World War*, that historians resurrected the war as a subject for study. The bulk of the writings on World War I are therefore relatively new and debate has been limited. Themes rather than debates have emerged in the writings.

Fitzpatrick introduces a collection of articles on 'one of the great shaping factors in modern Irish history', which 'destabilised Irish politics

⁴ John Horne, 'Our War, Our History' in John Horne (ed.), *Our War: Ireland and the Great War* (Dublin, 2008), p. 6.

⁵ Horne, *Our War*, p. 14.

⁶ Neil Richardson, *A Coward if I Return, A Hero if I Fall: Stories of Irishmen in World War I* (Dublin, 2010), p. 15.

and helped create the conditions for the revolution which followed.’⁷ Beginning a strand of thought that would use World War I as a context rather than just an event to be documented, Fitzpatrick and his students detail the shaping role of the war on issues like Child Welfare, Nationalism in East Down, and the future of the Labour Party. Deirdre Lindsay’s article, “Labour and Conscription” comes to the interesting conclusion that Labour’s alignment with the two main nationalist parties to fight conscription ‘not only alienated much of Ulster’s working-class, but also imperilled Labour’s fundamental *raison d’être*: its primary commitment to the liberation of the worker from social and economic enslavement.’⁸ These articles make the war relevant and meaningful to us today.

It wasn’t until the year 2000, with the publication of Keith Jeffery’s *Ireland and the Great War*, that Fitzpatrick’s strand of thought was expanded upon. Jeffery plays with the idea of viewing ‘the development of “advanced nationalism”, the outbreak of the Easter Rising and so on not as some completely separate narrative distinct from the world war, but as an integral part of essentially the same story.’⁹ Given this hypothesis, Jeffery sees World War I not only as compatible with the nationalist, nation-building narrative, but as a foundation stone for the republic; ‘The First World War provided both the opportunity and the timing for the Irish republican rising of Easter 1916. It presented a suitably violent model for political action and defined the moment when that action was likely to occur [...] For Irish separatists, the Great War offered both moment and mode.’¹⁰

The idea of not only recognising the war, remembering the dead etc., but of cherishing the war as a part of the narrative of the birth of our nation is a massive step, one that has undoubtedly only been made possible by the transformation in contemporary Ireland. Only in a more liberal, less reverent

⁷ David Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Ireland and the First World War* (Dublin, 1986), p. vii.

⁸ Deirdre Lindsay, ‘Labour and Conscription’ in Fitzpatrick, *Ireland and World War I*, p. 89.

⁹ Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 2.

¹⁰ Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War*, p. 47.

Ireland could Jeffery reclaim the war or John Horne describe it as ‘Our War.’

Horne entitles his book *Our War* not merely because 27, -35,000 Irish soldiers were killed in battle but because it had a profound impact on the direction of the country.¹¹ Introducing his compilation of articles in 2008, he writes of the war, ‘while never the sole determinant, it contributed decisively to the major turning point of twentieth century Irish history, 1913-1923, which saw a polarisation and realignment of national and political identities that has lasted to the present.’¹² Contributors survey the impact of the war on Ireland, Catriona Pennell exploring the war’s duration as a vital element in the fall of Redmond and Home Rule, and David Fitzpatrick commenting that ‘if the world had remained at peace between 1914 and 1918, the Irish would surely have been poorer, less employable, and more troubled by class and sectarian conflict.’¹³

A second theme in historians work on World War I has been focused on the Irish soldiers who fought for the crown. Military histories like Johnstone’s *Orange, Green and Khaki* and Dungan’s *They Shall Not Grow Old* emerged in the 1990s while Tom Burnell’s *The Offaly War Dead* documents Offaly’s war dead from Lance Corporal Frederick James Abbott to Harry Younger of Pte. Regiment.¹⁴

Thomas Dooley’s *Irishmen or English Soldiers* tackles the stigma attached to the Irishmen who fought for Britain by explaining the practical considerations influencing Irishmen to sign up for the British.¹⁵ Dooley uses the case study of an ordinary labourer, James English, to argue that the Irishmen who served the crown did not betray their country. Of English he writes that, ‘economic theory, political strategy and military tactics did not

¹¹ Horne, *Our War*, p. 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹³ David Fitzpatrick, ‘Home Front and everyday life’ in Horne, *Our War*, p. 142.

¹⁴ Tom Johnstone, *Orange, Green and Khaki* (Dublin, 1992); Myles Dungan, *They Shall not Grow Old: Irish Soldiers and the Great War* (Dublin, 1997); Tom Burnell, *The Offaly War Dead: A History of the Casualties of the First World War* (Dublin, 2010).

¹⁵ Thomas Dooley, *Irishmen or English Soldiers? The Times and World of a Southern Catholic Irish Man (1876-1916) Enlisting in the British Army During the First World War* (Liverpool, 1995).

preoccupy him' but that he and so many others were attracted to the British army by more human and mundane reasons: '[the army] fed and clothed them and provided for their families. Enlistment meant a job which offered escape from drudgery. It promised excitement, the potential for advancement and a future. The army gave their lives purpose and importance.'¹⁶ The implicit message is that any reader may have chosen to sign up and for the same reasons had they been placed in the shoes of James English. However, Dooley's sympathy extended only to those who 'joined the pre-war regular British army in a context and under conditions different from those prevailing after war was declared and when the New Armies were raised.'¹⁷

Neil Richardson does more to revitalise the memory and the worthiness of those who signed up post-1914. He records that enlistment was not a rare and shameful activity but a widespread and acceptable phenomenon: '25 to 30% of Irishmen eligible for recruitment fought in the war.'¹⁸ He finds it understandable rather than treasonous that an Irishman would enlist to 'escape the poverty and the general hopelessness of life at home.'¹⁹

As great strides have been made in throwing off the veil of silence, the 'institutionalised social amnesia'²⁰, that has for so long been held over World War I, some historians have taken the issue of remembrance as a topic in itself. Keith Jeffrey's *Ireland and the Great War* dedicates an eponymously titled chapter to commemoration in which he charts the selective Irish memory of the war from the 'critical watershed' of World War II in which commemorations of World War I 'became explicit manifestations of Britishness'²¹ to the renewed interest of late, culminating 'in the late autumn of 1998 with the dedication on 11 November of the

¹⁶ Ibid., pp 213-4.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 214.

¹⁸ Richardson, *A Coward if I Return*, p. 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁰ Jeff Kildea, *Anzacs and Ireland* (Cork, 2007), p. 14.

²¹ Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War*, p. 135.

“Island of Ireland Peace Tower” on Messines Ridge in Belgium.’²² Jeffery, writing in John Horne’s *Our War* compilation in 2008, sounds a word of caution in terms of the memory of the war and how it is interpreted in the context of the peace process in Northern Ireland:

The Irish dead of the conflict have today been conscripted (as the Irish living of the war years never were) to serve in a very political, if well-meaning, project of mutual communal understanding and reconciliation. Although a number of people at the time hoped that common service in the trenches might actually bring Irishmen together and help heal the divisions between different political and religious groups, it may well be that most Irish soldiers could not have cared one way or the other.²³

In the past twenty years, there has been a rebirth in historical interest in, and popular remembrance of, Ireland and World War I.

The Civil War had to endure its share of silence and neglect as well; ‘outside of hagiographic biographies of Collins and de Valera and two valuable but non-academic books on the Civil War in the 1960s, it was not until 1988 that a “recognised student of history” [Michael Hopkinson] – significantly, a non-Irish one – devoted a book to the subject.’²⁴ Just like World War I, the Civil War does not fit snugly into the nationalist narrative that celebrates 1916 and the War of Independence most dearly. The Civil War, by its very nature, was a divisive and deeply hurtful episode in Irish history, one which would leave deep scars. De Valera noted in his preface to Dorothy Macardle’s *The Irish Republic* that ‘as the Irish people were then

²² Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War*, p.138; Note that Jeffrey was writing in the year 2000 before the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to the war memorial at Islandbridge, Dublin.

²³ Jeffery, ‘Echoes of War’ in Horne, *Our War*, p. 274.

²⁴ Gavin Foster, ‘In the Shadow of the Split: Writing the Irish Civil War’, *Field Day Review*, vol. 2 (2006), p. 297.

divided, so, it may be expected, will people in the future also be divided.’²⁵ Undoubtedly people held strong opinions on the war; Macardle wrote in 1937 that ‘no thinking person can be close to a conflict so intense and desperate without forming an opinion as to where the balance of justice lies’²⁶, but these views were not voiced. Because the divisions were not between the Irish and the common enemy, Britain, but were incestuous in nature, splitting compatriots, neighbours and even families, the divisive opinions were largely kept private. It was in nobody’s interest to bring divisions to the surface, especially not when veterans were still alive and ‘the identities of the two main political parties in the Republic of Ireland, the institutions of the state, and, for a long time, the governing personnel themselves all have their origins in the civil war.’²⁷

As a result, the debate on the Civil War was sparse and stagnant from P.S. O’Hegarty’s outline in 1924 until very recently. The key features of *The Victory of Sinn Féin* resonate throughout most of the sparse work in the area. The pro-Treaty side is favoured (albeit not with such obvious bias as O’Hegarty) and a Manichean debate is created which juxtaposes Michael Collins and Éamon de Valera, pro-Treatyites and anti-Treatyites, ballots and bullets. O’Hegarty describes Collins as the man who, ‘from the beginning to the end of this business, never said a bitter word’²⁸, and holds Éamon DeValera responsible ‘for *all* the bloodshed and suffering.’²⁹ The legitimacy of the pro-Treaty position is intimated by its popular endorsement; ‘The people wanted that Treaty, wanted it with all their hearts’, whereas the anti-Treatyites are described in a chapter entitled ‘Devil Era’ as ‘savage (...) There was unrestrained shooting and unrestrained looting and unrestrained

²⁵ Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish Republic: A Documented Chronicle of the Anglo-Irish Conflict and the Partitioning of Ireland with a Detailed Account of the Period, 1916-1923* (fourth ed., Dublin, 1951), p. 20.

²⁶ Macardle, *The Irish Republic*, p. 23

²⁷ Bill Kissane, *The Politics of the Irish Civil War* (Oxford, 2005), p. 2.

²⁸ P.S. O’Hegarty, *The Victory of Sinn Féin: How it Won it and How it Used it* (Dublin, 1924), p. 140.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72. [italics added for emphasis]

robbery, and a general attack upon the whole social fabric.’³⁰ He describes the pro-Treaty victory in the war as ‘the victory of the people (...) a victory for democratic government as against a military despotism, a victory for the ballot as against the bullet.’³¹ He also makes a key point, a point which would be emphasised time and again by later historians: that the split was inevitable (albeit it did not have to result in Civil War); ‘For one thing, Sinn Féin succeeded too quickly and too easily, and it was not prepared for that (...) That there should be differences of opinion in Sinn Féin when confronted with the Treaty was inevitable.’³²

Macardle would offer some balance to O’Hegarty’s polemical history with her hagiography of anti-Treatyite de Valera but restrained from attacking the pro-Treaty leaders as vehemently as O’Hegarty had savaged the anti-Treatyites. She accepts that Collins and Griffith ‘had not intended to precipitate Civil War.’³³ Nevertheless, she is adamant that ‘they had underestimated the sincerity of the opposition to the Treaty and the deep loyalty that underlay all differences among those who resisted it.’³⁴ Perhaps Macardle’s most telling contribution to the debate was to insert a more typical nationalist, anti-British element into the narrative when she describes the defeat of the republicans as ‘a victory for England, not for Ireland.’³⁵

The two books that emerged in the latter half of the 1960s, Eoin Neeson’s *The Civil War in Ireland 1922-23* (1966) and Calton Younger’s *Ireland’s Civil War* (1968), accumulate (and tame) the elements of O’Hegarty and Macardle’s work into a convenient and consensual narrative. Divisions are minimised. The pro-Treaty side is favoured slightly but the anti-Treatyites are not blamed outright. The war was inevitable, neither side could have prevented it. Eoin Neeson writes that ‘no matter what agreement was signed, other than the full Irish proposals, a splinter

³⁰ Ibid., pp 73, 124.

³¹ Ibid., p. 141.

³² Ibid., pp 148-9.

³³ Macardle, *The Irish Republic*, p. 758.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 758.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 861.

group was inevitable'³⁶, a sentiment echoed by Younger; 'revolutions overturn regimes; they do not immediately replace them. Moderates and extremists, realists and idealists unite in common purpose; once they have achieved it they diverge once more.'³⁷ The Civil War was not so much a bitter feud as a consequence of circumstance, a failing of the entire Sinn Féin family, a failing precipitated by the British who 'had sold Ireland a pup'³⁸ and who had given the Irish 'a Treaty plus an ultimatum.'³⁹ The inevitability of a split, the failing of the Sinn Féin movement as a whole, and 'the background responsibility' of Britain is a convenient way to share the blame thinly and universally, if at all.⁴⁰

By the beginning of the Troubles there was thus an acceptable, if not wholly accurate, version of events which allowed for a shameful episode to be brushed off without much damage to any party. No local studies were conducted when leading protagonists and their families were alive. Nobody was willing to stick their head above the parapet to challenge a version that was best left alone.

With the onset of the Troubles it is of little surprise that the debate did not develop greatly in ensuing years. The structure changed little (the inevitability and British influence are explored) but there was a greater leaning in favour of the pro-Treatyites as comparisons were made between the anti-democratic militia operating in Northern Ireland in the Troubles (the Provisional IRA) and the anti-democratic anti-Treatyites in the Civil War; 'by the mid-1970s, governmental concern with counterinsurgency demanded that the northern war's combatants be clearly categorized: terrorist and legitimate, criminal and lawful, democratic and anti-

³⁶ Eoin Neeson, *The Civil War in Ireland, 1922-23* (Cork, 1966), p. 58.

³⁷ Carlton Younger, *Ireland's Civil War* (London, 1968), p. 35.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 506.

democratic.’⁴¹ As a result, the extremism of the anti-Treatyites, their ‘fanatical idealism’⁴², and their ‘emotionalism’⁴³ was played up in contrast to the ‘stubborn realism’ of the democratic Free State army who ‘were salvaging the best that could be achieved, with their backs to the wall.’⁴⁴ This led Curran to conclude that ‘whether the state was to be ruled by the people or by a revolutionary junta was the most important question confronting Ireland in 1922.’⁴⁵

Michael Hopkinson’s *Green Against Green* (1988) pointed the way towards a deeper and more insightful engagement with the war. Moving away from viewing it as the result of a mere political split, in his chapter entitled “The Treaty Split”, as well as looking at the role of ‘the Political Reaction to the Treaty’, further chapters include: ‘the Military Reaction to the Treaty’, ‘the IRB and the Treaty’ and ‘Social Considerations and the Treaty Response.’ Hopkinson argues that ‘in many localities personal choices, loyalties and animosities had considerable relevance to choices made over the Treaty.’⁴⁶

However, it has not been until very recently that a less centralised analysis has been pursued. Peter Hart has taken a closer look at the IRA in Cork while John Borgonovo’s *The Battle for Cork, July-August 1922*, described as being ‘no re-working of the Civil War as “democracy versus republican militarism” narrative’⁴⁷, explores the intricacies of the Civil War in Cork, providing facts and analysis to make less politicised observations.⁴⁸

⁴¹ John M. Regan, ‘Historiographical Reviews: Southern Irish Nationalism as a Historical Problem’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 50, no. 1 (2007), p. 216.

⁴² Joseph M. Curran, *The Birth of the Irish Free State, 1921-23* (Alabama, 1980), p. 281.

⁴³ Tim Pat Coogan, *The Irish Civil War: Its Origins and Course* (London, 1999), p. 28.

⁴⁴ Helen Litton, *The Irish Civil War: An Illustrated History* (Dublin, 1995), p. 131.

⁴⁵ Curran, *The Birth of the Irish Free State*, p. 280.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴⁷ John Dorney, ‘Book Review: John Borgonovo, *The Battle for Cork, July-August 1922*, Mercier 2011’, *The Irish Story* (Dec 2011),

(<http://www.theirishstory.com/2011/12/08/book-review-the-battle-for-cork-july-august-1922/#.Tw6wZaU2-So>) (10 Jan 2012).

⁴⁸ *The I.R.A. and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916-1923* (Oxford, 1998); It must be noted that Hart’s work has proved controversial with his accounts of the Kilmichael Ambush and Dunmanway Killings drawing criticism. Doubts have also been raised about the validity of anonymous interviews Hart refers to in his work.

It is interesting to note that neither Hart nor Borgonovo hail from these shores. Meanwhile Gavin Foster has appealed for the importance of ‘the woefully under-theorised and imprecisely deployed concept’ of social class to be reflected in the history of the war.⁴⁹

While Hart and Borgonovo have done much to reshape the stale critique of the Civil War, John M. Regan has challenged it head on. Gavin Foster wrote in 2006 that in histories of the Civil War, there is ‘a widespread tendency to reduce the complexities of allegiances and the tumult and chaos of the period to seductively simple binaries in which the pro-Treaty side predictably emerges as the clear moral victor over intransigent republicanism.’⁵⁰ Regan sets out not just to challenge this tendency, but to reverse it. He suggests that ‘Michael Collins and the Treatyite leadership fought, however extraneously, in the empire’s interest’, and that ‘Collins’s position as an icon of southern nationalism deserves serious reinterpretation.’⁵¹ Challenging the ballots versus bullets argument in favour of the pro-Treaty side, he argues that ‘Collins assumed powers best described as dictatorial between the middle of July and his death in an ambush on 22 August’, and that ‘transfers between panel candidates indicate significant voter solidarity on the issue of coalition government which, in the absence of any superior authority, undermines interpretations suggesting a mandate for the treaty, treatyites, the Provisional government, or any democratic premise for the Civil War.’⁵² This is dramatic stuff from Regan, unthinkable until recently. Just like the revived interest and analysis of World War I, this has only been made possible by the remarkable transformation of Ireland and, in particular, the peace process of Northern Ireland. While it is debatable whether the Troubles contributed greatly towards a restructuring of the debate, it seems that there was an ‘avoidance

⁴⁹ Gavin Foster, ‘Class Dismissed? The debate over a social basis to the Treaty split and Irish civil war’, *Saothar*, vol. 33 (2008), p. 84.

⁵⁰ Foster, ‘In the Shadow of the Split’, p. 297.

⁵¹ Regan, ‘Southern Nationalism as a Historical Problem’, p. 208.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp 212 , 215.

of probing and problematic questions.’⁵³ It is only understandable that historians did not want to be arguing in favour of anti-Treatyites, who were perceived to be anti-democratic, at a time when an anti-democratic, secret army was engaged in an un-mandated war. The similarities between the Civil War and the Northern Troubles were too close and the subject matter too sensitive. The Good Friday Agreement, The St. Andrews Agreement and the success of the power-sharing executive in the north of late have allowed for a more systematic and more controversial approach to the study of the Civil War.

Susan Sontag maintains that ‘what is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important...’⁵⁴ Her idea is that the character of a nation’s memory is a matter of editing. Some aspects of an event are emphasised to give a particular slant to the memory of an event and to indoctrinate new generations while other aspects are edited out. The editing process is closely tied to contemporary conditions. Aspects that do not fit contemporary demands get edited out while the more convenient stuff is kept. In Ireland this has certainly been true. Our collective memory of the Irish revolutionary period 1913-1923 is dominated by certain events to the detriment of others. The portrait of Patrick Pearse is an icon of the period; there stands on O’Connell Street in Dublin a statue of Jim Larkin, arms outstretched, reminding Dubliners and the nation of the 1913 lockout; every summer the events of Bloody Sunday are subconsciously remembered as GAA fans pack the Hogan stand in Croke Park.⁵⁵ At least until recently Ireland’s collective memory has been selective to say the least. The Garden of Remembrance at Islandbridge for Irish World War I veterans was left unfinished for forty years, their contribution did not fit the narrative of

⁵³ Regan, ‘Southern Nationalism as a Historical Problem’, p. 218.

⁵⁴ Susan Sontag quoted in Jeremy Harding, ‘Humanitarian Art: Review of *Regarding the Pain of Others* by Susan Sontag’, London Review of Books, Vol. 25 No. 16, 21 Aug. 2003, pp 22-3 (<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n16/jeremy-harding/humanitarian-art>) (12 Jan 2012).

⁵⁵ The Hogan Stand is named after Tipperary captain Michael Hogan, one of fourteen casualties in Croke Park on Bloody Sunday, 1920.

memory. The Civil War was similarly shunned, a shameful shadow that could not be shrugged off, only ignored.

However, this editing process has been reversed to a degree. Most recent, and most obvious, has been the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Islandbridge, ‘relatively unknown to the greater public before the visit.’⁵⁶ The Civil War was brought back to life in the form of film with Neil Jordan’s *Michael Collins* and Ken Loach’s *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*.⁵⁷ This process has been facilitated by some mundane factors – the distance of time makes controversial subjects more approachable as does the retirement and passing of key protagonists – but also by more spectacular developments which have propelled Ireland into the twenty-first century as a liberal, cosmopolitan, European country with the maturity to look back with some objectivity and comprehensiveness. The Celtic Tiger years modernised and momentarily enriched (in a monetary sense at least) Irish society. The over-arching power of the Catholic Church declined with child-sex abuse scandals. The Provisional IRA ceasefires of 1994 and 1997 and the subsequent Good Friday Agreement set the island on the (long and windy) road to peace. In November 2004, Ireland came top of a European Economic Unit survey into the quality of life in European countries, leading Dan O’Brien of *The Irish Times* to muse that ‘the key to life satisfaction, it seems, is to have the best of both worlds: the good of the modern and the best of tradition, a trick that is notoriously difficult to pull off, because when the old stifling stuff is ditched (think dictatorial clergymen, arranged marriages and excessive deference) many good things seems to get lost as well.’⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Seán McCárthaigh, ‘Forgotten Irish war dead honoured by queen’s visit’ in *Irish Examiner*, 19 May 2011.

⁵⁷ It must be noted that although Jordan’s *Michael Collins* helped to remove the taboo surrounding the Civil War, the film was highly controversial given that the year of its release coincided with a resumption of the Provisional IRA’s campaign and the anachronistic use of a car bomb in the film

⁵⁸ Dan O’Brien, ‘Ireland Comes Top For Quality of Life, 17 November 2004’, in Dan O’Brien, *Ireland, Europe and the World: Writings on a New Century* (Dublin, 2009), p. 37.

As far as the history of World War I and the Civil War is concerned, we have struck a much better balance between the ‘old stifling stuff’ and the ‘good of the modern.’ As the nation has become more open and willing to discuss controversial issues, historians have begun to engage with World War I and the Civil War. However, it is time that historians used this environment to challenge perceptions, to challenge the memory that has been edited for us. Whilst it was perhaps excusable that the silence and consent regarding the Civil War was tolerated for reasons of reconciliation and peace, it is inexcusable that the ‘amnesia’ surrounding World War I, which was constructed in a mean and deliberate fashion, was not challenged until the general mood allowed.

Hart, Borgonovo and Regan have shown the way forward for a richer study of the Civil War which should provide us with a fascinating insight into who we are and where we have come from. Historians of World War I must also continue to challenge common perceptions. As the centenary anniversary of that war approaches, historians must be wary of the tendency to use the war for the political purpose of promoting common ties between Unionists and Nationalists. Richard Grayson’s *Belfast Boys* explains ‘how men could fight in the same army against a common foe, but hold different views about how Ireland should be governed.’⁵⁹ While this is true, we must be careful not to let the current peace process or the excitement of Queen Elizabeth II’s visit let us lose sight of the essential fact that Unionists and Nationalists went to war for opposing reasons or that only for the war, a civil war between Unionists and Nationalists looked possible. While there is a temptation to allow present day considerations shape our views of the past, historians’ first concern must always be with historical fact.

⁵⁹ Richard Grayson, *Belfast Boys, How Unionists and Nationalists fought and died together in the First World War* (London, 2009), p. xv.

