

Centenary (Ireland)

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Summary

Irish engagement with the First World War was active and intense and yet, for much of the 20th century, commemoration of the war in Ireland was marked by division, antagonism, and amnesia. In the years before 2014, however, a shared memory of the war was increasingly promoted to improve relations between the divided communities on the island, and between Britain and Ireland. The centenaries of the conflict were thus anticipated by some as a moment in which a process of bridge building that was already well underway could be continued and reinforced. This article will consider centenary commemoration across Ireland and comment on the degree to which commemorative rhetoric and activity influenced popular engagement with the past on the one hand and inter-state and cross-community relations on the other.

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Introduction

Modern [Ireland](#), north and south, was forged in the fire of the First World War. The events that occurred and mentalities that evolved on the island between 1914 and 1918 ultimately led to partition and the break-up of the United Kingdom, as the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland were formed in the years that followed the Armistice. The political impact of the war in Ireland was therefore transformative, and the conflict has cast a very long shadow in terms of Irish experience and [memory](#). Well over 200,000 Irishmen fought with the British forces during the war and tens of thousands of [women](#) from across the island served as military

[nurses](#) and [auxiliaries](#) in those same forces.¹ Irish civilians also gave moral and material support to the troops throughout the conflict and many Irish families suffered the pain of [bereavement](#) when their loved ones failed to return from the front. Sources vary as to the precise figures, but between 35,000 and 50,000 Irishmen [lost their lives](#) in the fighting, a death toll which gave rise to a tide of grief not experienced in Ireland since the Great Famine of the 1840s. Irish involvement in the First World War was thus active and intense. Despite this, however, commemoration of the war across much of the island in the century or so since the conflict ended has been marked by ambivalence, indifference, and division.

A key reason for this is that in April 1916, a group of armed insurgents proclaimed an independent republic and staged a rebellion in Dublin. The event that would become known as the [Easter Rising](#) initially met with a mixed response from the Irish populace but soon inspired an extraordinary resurgence of popular republicanism across the island, the rhetoric of which was often heavily anti-British and anti-war. In the UK general elections that followed the Armistice, the now clearly separatist Sinn Féin party won the overwhelming majority of Irish seats and eclipsed the more moderate Irish Parliamentary Party, which had been seeking a limited form of devolved government, or [home rule](#), in the years before the war. In January 1919, the elected Sinn Féin members established a separate parliament, known as *Dáil Eireann* (Assembly of Ireland), in Dublin and over the course of the next two and a half years a war of [increasing violence](#) was fought between the forces of the British state (or Crown forces) and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). The Irish War of Independence effectively ended with a truce in mid-July 1921, by which stage the British government had partitioned the island under the terms of the 1920 Government of Ireland Act. Partition would be formally accepted by the nationalist representatives who signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921 but passionate disagreement over this and other aspects of the settlement would lead to the outbreak of a bloody civil war between nationalist factions in June 1922. Ultimately, the forces of the newly established Irish Free State prevailed over the anti-treaty IRA and unionists in the north of the island came to preside over a six-county region that would become formally known as Northern Ireland. This section of the ancient province of Ulster would be ruled autonomously from Belfast but would remain within the broader jurisdiction of the United Kingdom.

By the summer of 1923, an uneasy but essentially stable peace had descended over the island, but the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, and partition would shape the way people remembered and commemorated the First World War in Ireland for the rest of the century. Among [nationalists](#), who made up the vast majority in independent Ireland, a competing narrative of republican patriotism and martyrdom had emerged which would consistently overshadow the memory of the Irishmen who had served in the British forces between 1914 and 1918. For the unionist majority in Northern Ireland, in stark contrast, the

memory of the First World War attained something close to a sacred significance.² This polarised view of the period of the war intensified during the 1960s and was reinforced by the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland in 1969. Starting in the 1980s and gathering pace in the aftermath of the Provisional IRA ceasefire in 1994, nationalists of all stripes began to show more interest in the First World War and over the past twenty years there has been a great popular and political rediscovery of the conflict across the island.³ Importantly, the [historiography](#) on Irish engagement with the war, which was virtually non-existent in the 1990s, is now genuinely rich and extensive. Indeed, the Irish experience of the conflict has received more historiographical attention, from a specifically national perspective, than that of England, Scotland, or Wales.⁴

Irish commemoration of the First World War has thus been complex and often divisive, and any consideration of Irish approaches to the centenaries of the conflict should take this context into account. Official centenary commemoration in Ireland has also taken a consciously longer view than in other countries affected by the war, with the Irish government focusing on a “Decade of Centenaries” from 2012 to 2023. This article will trace the evolution of Irish commemoration of the war up to 2014 before considering the various ways in which the “war to end all wars” was remembered at an official and more popular level in the midst of the island’s commemorative decade.

Irish First World War Commemoration from the 1920s to the 1990s

The world war was commemorated by both unionists and nationalists in most parts of the island throughout the 1920 and 1930s. The country had been fundamentally transformed, however, by the rise of militant republicanism and the perceived significance of the war and the degree to which veterans were lauded varied a great deal depending on the community in question. For northern unionists, who were invariably Protestant and of Scottish or English descent, the war was a deeply personal and meaningful event that had to be publicly remembered. The 36th (Ulster) Division had, initially, been largely composed of men from the Ulster Volunteer Force, the staunchly unionist paramilitary organisation established in 1913 to resist the introduction of home rule. The proud memory of the Division’s service on the [Western Front](#) thus bound unionist families and communities together in the uncertainty that marked the post-war period. The terrible losses suffered by the Division on the first day of the [Battle of the Somme](#) were honoured with particular fervour and the 1916 offensive soon came to rival the 17th century Battle of the Boyne in unionist iconography.⁵

For many unionists, the blood sacrifice of the men who had died on 1 July had purchased the

right of the six counties to remain within the United Kingdom and guaranteed the legitimacy of the Northern Irish statelet.⁶ The sense of a great debt owed by the living to the dead, which was strong enough in [Britain](#), was thus especially intense in unionist-dominated Northern Ireland. Armistice Day ceremonies and 1 July commemorations in Belfast and other northern towns were extremely well-attended throughout the inter-war years and became occasions for staunch professions of loyalty to the British monarchy and the British state.⁷ Unionist commemorative energies focused, and continue to focus, on the dozens of memorials erected across Ulster in the decade or so after the war, including the Diamond War Memorial in Derry, unveiled in 1927, and the prominent Cenotaph in the centre of Belfast, unveiled in 1929. The Ulster Tower at [Thiepval](#) in the Somme Valley has also been a major focal point for unionist commemoration since it was erected at the relatively early date of 1921.⁸

Nationalist veterans and their families in Northern Ireland struggled to engage with this emerging commemorative culture, and elsewhere on the island remembrance of the war was more complex and often more muted. And yet Armistice Day commemorative services and parades were often very well-attended in Dublin, Cork and Limerick in the years after 1918. [Poppies](#) were also commonly worn in the Free State and the British Legion had an expanding network of outlets in the south.⁹ In terms of community-driven public memorialisation, major war memorials were unveiled, often at significant expense, in Dublin and other towns and cities throughout independent Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s and became the focus of regular memorial services for the dead.¹⁰ The living who had served in the British forces were honoured too, as housing for veterans, funded by both the British and Irish governments, was built and made available to men from across the island in the decade or so after the war. The fates of Irish veterans in the early 1920s reflect the complexity of popular attitudes toward the Great War; at least some ex-servicemen fought in the ranks of the IRA during the War of Independence, while others were targeted by republicans. Nationalist veterans were subjected to sectarian violence in Ulster, irrespective of war service, and many veterans of all kinds joined the newly-established Free State army and the police forces that were founded north and south during this period. Popular perceptions of veterans were thus quite varied and by no means always negative. Indeed, research by Paul Taylor and Michael Robinson has demonstrated that, in the matter of pensions and other benefits, [Irish veterans](#) of the Great War were treated reasonably well by the state in the inter-war years, and, in some respects, received better treatment than their counterparts in Britain.¹¹

There can be little doubt, however, that in terms of popular esteem and official commemoration, there was much greater emphasis in independent Ireland on the men who

had fought against the British forces at Easter 1916 and during the War of Independence than on the Irishmen who has served in the theatres of the Great War.¹² For many nationalists, the story of the birth of the state was intimately bound up with the story of the struggle against the British. As such, the narrative of service in the British forces occupied an increasingly marginal place in the official nationalist memory of the 1914-1918 period. At a more popular level, Armistice Day ceremonies were occasionally marred by violent clashes between republican activists and veterans of the Great War, and at least some returning veterans experienced ostracization and prejudice.¹³ And while the national war memorial gardens in Dublin were a major, state-supported architectural project, they were deliberately sited at a remove from the centre of the city, just south of the Phoenix Park at Islandbridge.¹⁴ The memory of the Irishmen who served in the Great War was thus eclipsed in independent Ireland by a countervailing memory of republican resistance to British rule. They were by no means forgotten, however, and, as Keith Jeffery has noted, the two decades between 1918 and 1939 was a period of “widespread and active commemoration” of the war in Ireland.¹⁵

In the decades after the Second World War, the divisive potential of Irish commemorative culture became more apparent. The highly territorial fiftieth anniversary commemorations of both the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme in 1966 fuelled further division and mistrust between north and south and, more ominously, between the nationalist and unionist communities within Northern Ireland. At both a popular and official level, the Easter Rising was widely celebrated as a nation-making event in the Republic of Ireland and among the nationalist community in the north.¹⁶ In Northern Ireland, however, commemorations of the Rising attracted openly antagonistic responses from unionist figures, including the evangelical Protestant minister [Ian Paisley \(1926-2014\)](#), who accused nationalists of disloyalty to the state.¹⁷ The two communities, and indeed the two states, would be driven further apart by the violent eruption of the Northern Ireland Conflict in 1969. During this period of sustained violence, which would continue until the mid-1990s, nationalists across the island became disconnected from the memory and commemoration of the First World War. In the north in particular, commemoration of the war was seen as being inextricably linked to British and unionist culture and experience, and war memorials were occasionally vandalised.¹⁸ By the 1980s, the Easter Rising dominated the popular and official memory of the 1914-1918 period in the Republic and the Irishmen who served in the British forces during the Great War had been largely forgotten. Those who wore poppies on Remembrance Sunday in Dublin and elsewhere across the south did so discreetly, usually behind the closed doors of Protestant churches and schools.¹⁹ Kevin Myers occasionally mentioned the Irish war dead in his regular column in the *Irish Times*, but otherwise the Irish experience of the

conflict was rarely discussed in public in the first half of the decade.²⁰ In a stark metaphor for the fading of the dead of the First World War from Irish memory, the once-impressive memorial gardens at Islandbridge in Dublin, which has been designed by [Edwin Lutyens \(1869-1944\)](#), had fallen into a state of serious neglect.²¹

In Northern Ireland, by contrast, unionists continued to wear the poppy and commemorate both world wars publicly at Remembrance Sunday services. The Provisional IRA bombing of one such service in November 1987 would have a long-lasting effect on Irish commemorative culture. The bomb was detonated in a building beside the cenotaph in Enniskillen, a market town in Co. Fermanagh, as a crowd of civilians and service personnel gathered for a remembrance ceremony. Eleven men and women, all Protestants and all but one a civilian, were killed and the bombing caused a wave of popular revulsion across Britain and Ireland. In the south, public figures and ordinary citizens alike expressed solidarity with the victims and denounced the IRA's campaign of violence. Numerous commentators have acknowledged the Enniskillen bombing as a key turning point in the Irish memory of the First World War, noting a greater public interest in discussing and commemorating the conflict from 1987 onward.²² Media interest in the war increased somewhat as well and a memorable documentary on the Irish experience of the conflict, "And Roses Grow There Now" presented by [Gay Byrne \(1934-2019\)](#), whose father had served in the British [cavalry](#) during the war, was broadcast on Irish television in November 1988.

The pace of change was gradual, and the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland continued to limit the inclusivity and the fervour of official commemorations of both the First World War and the Irish Revolution. However, the peace process established in the aftermath of the Provisional IRA ceasefire in August 1994 would lead to the emergence of more consciously inclusive attitudes to commemoration. Importantly, the late 1990s saw the beginnings of conscious efforts to use a shared memory of the Great War to promote better relations between the divided communities in Northern Ireland, between the governments and people of the two Irelands, and, ultimately, between Britain and Ireland. This use of the memory of the conflict to promote mutual understanding between divided communities was in keeping with the "parity of esteem" ethos of the momentous peace accord concluded in April 1998, which became known as the Good Friday Agreement or Belfast Agreement. The accord was signed by the Taoiseach (prime minister), Bertie Ahern, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and representatives of eight nationalist and unionist political parties from Northern Ireland. Territorial views of the past still persisted, but the signing of the agreement arguably marked the dawning of a more open and inclusive era of commemoration on the island.

A particularly ambitious example of bridge-building through First World War commemoration

occurred on 11 November 1998, when the Irish and British heads of state, President Mary McAleese and Queen Elizabeth II, formally opened the Island of Ireland Peace Park at Mesen (formerly Messines) in West Flanders. The small park is marked by a thirty-four-metre-high reconstruction of an Irish round tower and was designed to honour the memory of all Irishmen who lost their lives in the First World War. This site was chosen as men from the largely Catholic and nationalist 16th (Irish) Division had fought alongside men of the predominantly Protestant 36th (Ulster) Division there at the Battle of Messines in June 1917.²³ The symbolism of the memorial park is thus self-consciously conciliatory. That it had to be located in [Belgium](#), rather than Ireland, reveals the deficit of trust that still existed between the divided communities and between the neighbouring states. In the first decade of the new century, however, tentative signs of change in the cultural landscape began to emerge and commemorative gestures were made on Irish soil that would have been hard to imagine during the Troubles.²⁴

A Decade of Centenaries

From at least the spring of 2010 onwards, the forthcoming centenaries of the First World War were framed in Ireland as part of a “Decade of Centenaries” that would begin with the 100th anniversary of the introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill in 2012 and end with that of the conclusion of the Irish Civil War in 2023. The milestones of the 1914-1918 conflict were therefore set to be marked amidst a wider series of events commemorating the signing of the Ulster Covenant in September 1912, the 1913 Lockout (a major industrial dispute that took place in Dublin), the 1916 Rising, the formation of *Dáil Éireann* in 1919, the Irish War of Independence, the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, and the subsequent civil conflict. This expansive view of the period reflects the importance of the broader era of the world war, both before 1914 and after 1918, in Irish memory. It also theoretically allowed for a more inclusive approach to remembrance by placing equal commemorative value on the Irish Revolution and the First World War. Within the period of the world war, moreover, the Easter Rising, traditionally remembered by nationalists, would be accorded no less significance than the Battle of the Somme, traditionally the focus of unionist memory. The latter had been overlooked by successive governments in the Republic, with the first official commemoration of the Somme only taking place relatively recently in 2006. As such, the decade-long approach adhered to the inclusive “parity of esteem” principle of the ongoing peace process and was promoted by Irish politicians and diplomats from the outset.²⁵

The desire to avoid the sort of cultural divisions generated by the 1966 commemorations, and to instead use the centenaries as an opportunity to improve cross-community relations,

directly informed the creation of a government-sponsored “Decade of Centenaries” programme which was formally announced in 2011. In a carefully worded mission statement, the programme’s website highlighted the government’s inclusive, all-island vision for the decade:

The programme encompasses the different traditions on the island of Ireland and aims to enhance understanding of and respect for events of importance among the population as a whole ... The programme aims to offer fresh insights and constructive dialogue, and to foster deeper mutual understanding among people from the different traditions.²⁶

A centenary advisory committee, composed of academic historians and representatives of the National Library of Ireland and the Irish Defence Forces, was appointed by the Taoiseach Enda Kenny in 2011. Formal Remembrance of the First World War and the Irish Revolution were also used to enhance Anglo-Irish relations in May 2011 when Queen Elizabeth II became the first British head of state to visit the Republic of Ireland since independence in 1922. The Queen laid wreaths both at the National War Memorial at Islandbridge and the republican Garden of Remembrance memorial on Parnell Square in Dublin, and the carefully choreographed visit was widely deemed to have been a success.²⁷ During the reciprocal Irish state visit to Britain in April 2014, in a very significant moment in the history of Irish commemoration of the Great War, President Michael D. Higgins laid a laurel wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey.

2014

The first major Irish commemorative event of the Great War centenaries was the dedication of a “cross of sacrifice” at Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin at the end of July 2014. The messaging of the event built on what were then excellent Anglo-Irish relations and reflected the conciliatory spirit with which political leaders across Ireland and in Britain hoped to move through the entire centenary sequence. The symbolism of the ceremony itself reveals a great deal about the complexities of Irish commemoration, with the setting of Glasnevin being particularly symbolic. As the final resting place of some of the most iconic figures in modern Irish nationalism, from [Charles Stewart Parnell \(1846-1891\)](#) to [Michael Collins \(1860-1922\)](#), it would be hard to overstate the resonance of this “Irish Valhalla” in the popular memory of the island. For generations of Irish men and women, this 19th century graveyard on the north side of the capital has been intimately linked with the national struggle for independence from British rule. Yet in 2014, few Irish people would have known that Glasnevin is also the site of the graves of over 180 men and one woman who died while serving with the British forces during the First World War.

Most of these service personnel were Irish and many of them died while convalescing in Dublin after being wounded on the Western Front. Unlike their comrades who were buried on the fighting fronts during the war years, however, the graves of the war dead at Glasnevin were not marked with Imperial War Graves Commission headstones in the decade or so after 1918. Indeed, many of them were buried in unmarked graves in the cemetery's "poor ground". Moreover, the practice of erecting a stone cross inlaid with a bronze sword in any cemetery with more than forty war burials, which was honoured in Britain and across the former battlefields in the 1920s, was not observed in the Irish Free State.²⁸ As 2014 approached, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) felt that erecting a cross of sacrifice at one of the six sites in the Republic with over forty war-related burials would make for a positive commemorative gesture. Given its place in the Irish imagination and its patriotic associations, it was agreed that Glasnevin Cemetery would be the most appropriate location for the memorial. Discussions duly began between the CWGC, the Glasnevin Trust, the Irish Office of Public Works, and the Department of the Taoiseach, and a seven-metre cross was formally dedicated at the cemetery on 31 July 2014.

The various elements of the dedication ceremony were consciously designed to highlight friendship and co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic on the one hand, and between the British and Irish governments on the other. The presence of the Irish head of state, President Higgins, and the President of the CWGC, the Duke of Kent, along with both the British and Irish ministers of culture, conferred significant diplomatic and cultural weight on the occasion.²⁹ The brief speeches each of these figures gave also embraced the conciliatory "parity of esteem" rhetoric associated with the peace process. President Higgins notably made a point of expressing regret that the Irish war dead and their families had not traditionally been accorded the recognition he felt they deserved. He also expressed respect for the "ideals" of the dead, and his insistence that their motivations for volunteering should not be judged seemed to acknowledge that many of the Irishmen who served in British uniforms were patriots who believed they were serving Irish interests.³⁰ Indeed, the dedication of such a prominent memorial commemorating service in the British forces amongst the colourful range of nationalist memorials at Glasnevin reflects the close familial links between the Irishmen and women who served in the Great War and those who supported the Irish Revolution.³¹

In terms of ceremonial choreography, the presence of both Irish and British military colour parties was particularly striking and historic. The British colour party was composed of soldiers representing the Royal Irish Regiment, a formation that recruits and is headquartered in Northern Ireland. Their participation in the ceremony thus evoked positive co-operation and, importantly, shared history between north and south. The forty-piece

military band that provided music for the occasion was also composed of musicians from both the Irish Defence Forces and the British army. Yet, in a somewhat foreboding reminder of the antagonism that commemoration of the Great War can still arouse among certain sections of the Irish public, the ceremony was occasionally interrupted by a small but vocal group of protesters who had gathered outside the gates of the cemetery. This protest had been organised by Republican Sinn Féin, a dissident group that remains opposed to the Good Friday Agreement and the broader peace process.³²

On 4 August, just days after the ceremony at Glasnevin, President Higgins joined King Philippe of Belgium and other European leaders at Liège to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the war. That evening the president also attended a major international ceremony at St. Symphorien Cemetery at [Mons](#) which had been organised by the British government in partnership with the CWGC. This formerly little-known cemetery had been chosen as the setting for the first significant international ceremony of the centenaries staged by the British government partly because it had been created by the German authorities during the war for the respectful interment of both British and German soldiers who had mostly been killed at the Battle of Mons.³³ The symbolism of the site thus reflected the spirit of international co-operation that the former belligerent states enjoyed within the European Union a century after the outbreak of the war. As the cemetery is the final resting place of at least thirty Irishmen who were serving with the British forces when they were killed, President Higgins's attendance was particularly fitting.

On 12 November 2014, the government formally announced its plans for the commemorations of the centenary of the Easter Rising in 2016, pledging €22 million in funding for "flagship" centenary-related projects. The ambitious programme, simply entitled *Ireland 2016*, proposed to commemorate the Rising according to five intersecting themes, as follows:

- **Remember:** recalling the shared history of the island of Ireland.
- **Reconcile:** honouring all who have built peace and brought people together.
- **Imagine:** releasing the creativity of the Irish people, in particular young people.
- **Present:** creatively showing Irish achievements to the world.
- **Celebrate:** family, community, and friendship and renewing a commitment to the ideals of the 1916 Proclamation.³⁴

Socially aware and inclusive, with a positive emphasis on peace and shared experiences, these themes reflect the degree to which centenary commemoration of the events of the Great War invariably sought to address the issues of the present as well as remembering the

events of the past. Historians and other commentators were understandably disturbed, however, by the absence of any meaningful references to the Easter Rising, the Irish Revolution, or indeed the Great War in the promotional video the government issued to accompany the publication of its 2016 commemorative programme. Entitled “Ireland Inspires 1916”, the video foregrounds reconciliation and highlights some key 21st century figures but features no images from the period of the Rising and seems to have been designed more to promote tourism than to encourage informed reflection on a revolutionary past.³⁵ The formal launch of the official commemorative programme for the year in which the Rising and the Battle of the Somme would be commemorated was thus somewhat marred by criticism of the Kenny administration’s messaging on the centenaries.³⁶

2015

Numerous local and more national commemorative events, including ceremonies organised by coastal communities in Cork to mark the centenary of the [sinking of RMS Lusitania](#) at the beginning of May, took place over the course of 2015.³⁷ In terms of centenaries of significant military milestones of the war, however, the ill-fated [Gallipoli campaign](#) was the main focus of 2015. Tens of thousands of Irishmen served in both the British and [ANZAC](#) forces throughout the campaign and the 10th (Irish) Division participated in the second major wave of landings at Suvla Bay in August. As many as 2,700 members of the division lost their lives in the Dardanelles and these losses had a major impact on the home front.³⁸ The Irish experience of this theatre of war had long been overlooked, at least by comparison with the Western Front, and a series of projects and events in 2015 went some way toward reinstating Gallipoli in the national consciousness. On 2 February the National Museum of Ireland at Collins Barracks in Dublin launched “Pals: The Irish at Gallipoli”, an immersive exhibition that ran throughout the spring, and the Irish Historical Society and *History Ireland* magazine both held public debates on the campaign in the weeks before the centenary of the Allied landings in April. President Higgins and the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs Charlie Flanagan, also both travelled to Turkey to attend the Commonwealth and Ireland centenary ceremony at Cape Helles on 24 April.³⁹

A notable attempt to engage the interest of young people in the centenaries was made in September when the Irish Department of Education and Skills launched a series of initiatives in anticipation of the following year. These were designed to encourage primary and secondary school students to reflect on the history and legacy of the Easter Rising and the First World War and included an all-Ireland schools’ drama competition. Primary school students were also invited to record and narrate local and family history from their

communities in a wide variety of formats, including essays, artwork, and video or audio files. This particular initiative was presented as a digital age follow-up to the Irish Folklore Commission's Schools' Collection, which collected material from 50,000 Irish school children in the 1930s.⁴⁰ In November, the Irish government formally announced its official programme for the commemoration of the Battle of the Somme the following year, and, on Remembrance Sunday, the Taoiseach went to Enniskillen for the fifth year in a row and joined Northern Ireland's First Minister Arlene Foster at the ceremony at the city's cenotaph.

2016

No other year in modern history looms larger in Irish memory than 1916. The Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme are so central to the foundation myths of the Republic and Northern Ireland that their centenaries were always likely to draw more media attention and cultural energy than any of the other milestones in the 2014-2018 commemorative sequence. Although there has been a traditional tendency to consider the Rising and the Great War as only tenuously linked, the profound connections between the two have been increasingly recognised since the turn of the new century. As 2016 approached, there was thus a good deal of sometimes contentious public debate about how the rebellion in Dublin and the later offensive on the Western Front should be interpreted and remembered. The lively national discussion on the legacy of the Rising in Ireland contrasted somewhat with Britain, where there was little popular awareness of the centenary and only a limited amount of media attention concerning either the rebellion or its commemorations.

In the Republic, there was a certain amount of introspective commentary in the media about the state of the nation and the extent to which successive generations of Irish leaders and citizens had built the sort of society envisioned by the Easter rebels.⁴¹ There was also at least some denunciation of the violence wrought by those who led the Rising and the subsequent revolution, notably from former Taoiseach and ex-Fine Gael leader John Bruton.⁴² Overall, however, historians, journalists, and other observers tended to cast the Rising in a positive light, as a great nation-making drama.⁴³ The national broadcaster, Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), also produced a significant amount of centenary-related television and radio programming, and the men and women who fought during Easter week were invariably portrayed as earnest, patriotic, and courageous, if not always heroic.⁴⁴ Indeed, the rebellion, although a failure in military terms, was generally interpreted and represented as the birth of the Irish republic and the start of a movement that led to independence for most of the island. In contrast to commemorations of the military events that took place in the more conventional theatres of the First World War, the centenary of the Rising was thus looked

forward to by many as an occasion for celebration rather than solemn remembrance.

Another difference between commemorations of the Rising and those of the battles that took place on the Western Front and elsewhere is that the former has traditionally been remembered not on the date on which it began, 24 April, but on Easter Sunday. The main official state-organised commemorative event – a military parade that proceeded through central Dublin – was therefore scheduled for 27 March 2016. On the evening before the parade, President Higgins opened three days of formal commemorations by delivering a speech to over 3,500 descendants of the men and women of the Rising at the Royal Dublin Society building. The president lauded the bravery and commitment of the rebels but noted the conservatism of the independent state born in 1922 and made a pointed appeal to the citizens of the 21st century to continue striving to build an inclusive, egalitarian republic:

We must ensure that our journey into the future is a collective one; one in which the homeless, the migrant, the disadvantaged, the marginalised and each and every citizen can find homes, are fellow travellers on our journey which includes all of the multitude of voices that together speak of, and for, a new Ireland born out of contemporary imagination and challenges.⁴⁵

The following day, some 3,700 members of the Irish Defence Forces were joined by descendants of the insurgents in a five-hour procession through the city that passed some of the key sites of the rebellion, including the General Post Office on O'Connell St. which had served as the rebel headquarters in 1916. Over 250,000 people, including significant numbers who had travelled from overseas, turned out to watch the parade and the atmosphere in the city was celebratory.⁴⁶ On Easter Monday, 28 March, the capital was taken over by a highly ambitious history and culture festival inspired by the era of the Rising and organised and sponsored by RTÉ in partnership with the government. The "Reflecting the Rising" programme featured an extraordinary range of mostly family-oriented events, including historical exhibitions, live performances of music and theatre, food tastings, film screenings, and no fewer than 300 talks by historians.⁴⁷ The festival was ultimately attended by about 750,000 people, a remarkable turn-out in a city of about 1 million residents, making it the largest public history event in the history of the state.⁴⁸

Dublin was very much the main stage for the national centenary commemorations, but hundreds of commemorative events took place across the island over the course of Easter weekend.⁴⁹ Many of these had been planned for some years but their scope and ambition were usually subject to the amount of funding local councils could practically provide. The

issue of funding was particularly contentious in Northern Ireland, where there were local tensions about commemorative emphasis. By the end of 2015, the eleven town and city councils across the six counties had pledged to make over £500,000 available for commemorative events to mark the centenaries of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme. At least some unionist-majority councils, such as Castlereagh and Lisburn, planned to commemorate the Somme but not the Rising and perceptions that funding was unevenly allocated clearly provoked a degree of ill-feeling among both nationalist and unionist councillors and members of these communities across Ulster. Yet, in a clear acknowledgement of the principle of parity of esteem, Belfast City Council insisted that the £250,000 of funding it hoped to provide for 2016 centenary events would be divided equally between commemorations for the Rising and the Somme.⁵⁰

On Easter Sunday, thousands of mostly nationalist citizens lined the Falls Road in West Belfast as the centenary parade made its way to the republican plot in Milltown Cemetery, where the crowd was addressed by Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams.⁵¹ There was no formal unionist representation at this event, or indeed at any major commemoration of the Easter Rising. The leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Arlene Foster, had clarified her views on the rebellion, and the prospect of commemorating it, in an interview with the BBC just before she took office as First Minister of Northern Ireland in January 2016:

... it would be wrong as a unionist to go and commemorate a rising which took place against the State of the United Kingdom and indeed, gave succour to a lot of violent republicans during the years of the Troubles here in Northern Ireland.⁵²

The fact that the men and women of the Rising were revered by Sinn Féin and the Provisional IRA, which had perpetrated much of the violence during the Troubles, ensured that unionist leaders were unwilling to participate in commemorations of the rebellion. Foster's lack of enthusiasm for republican commemoration was echoed by other unionist figures and some were openly hostile to the memory of the Rising.⁵³ The prevalence of such tensions highlights the degree to which the past remains contested in Northern Ireland, and the still limited sense in which lasting conciliation can be achieved through commemoration of the events of the First World War. Commemoration of the Rising was occasionally contentious in the Republic too, and the "Necrology Wall", which was formally unveiled at Glasnevin Cemetery in April 2016, attracted a mixed response from the public and representatives of various commemorative interests. The memorial consists of a series of black marble panels on which the names of all the dead of the Irish Revolution, combatant and civilian, Irish and British, from the Easter Rising to the Civil War, are to be inscribed. When it was initially unveiled, it featured the names of 488 civilians, Irish volunteers, members of the Irish Citizen Army,

policemen and British soldiers who were killed on Easter week 1916. Some commentators welcomed the inclusive spirit of the wall while others denounced what they viewed as the inappropriate equivalence it seemed to draw between British soldiers and Irish revolutionaries.⁵⁴

By comparison with the centenaries of the Rising, the centenary of the Battle of the Somme in July was marked in more of an all-island and cross-community spirit. Thousands of Irishmen from either side of the traditional political and cultural divide had lost their lives in the 1916 offensive and representatives of both communities were willing to commemorate it. Unionist politicians, civic leaders, and clergy were naturally energetic in their approach to the commemoration of the first day of the battle, which has always been central to their community's memory and identity. The Loyalist elements of the community marked the centenary with particular fervour and played a key role in organising a major parade in Belfast on 18 June. An estimated 15,000 people, representing various commemorative associations and other interest groups, marched into the city in four separate processions that converged on Belfast City Hall, where a lone piper played as wreaths were laid at the Cenotaph. The parade was followed by a re-enactment of the 36th Division's advance on 1 July in Woodvale Park in the north of the city. These events were deliberately staged two weeks ahead of the actual centenary date so that those who participated could also attend the official commemorative events at Thiepval in France.⁵⁵

Nationalist leaders were also generally keen to acknowledge Irish participation in the battle. The deployment of the mostly nationalist 16th (Irish) Division at the end of the second phase of the offensive in September had been well-documented in popular books and in the media since the 1990s and there was quite a strong political and cultural desire in the Republic for the Somme to be appropriately remembered.⁵⁶ On 1 July President Higgins duly joined British Prime Minister David Cameron, Chancellor Angela Merkel and President François Hollande at the international commemorative ceremony at Thiepval, the site of both the Ulster Tower and the famous memorial to the missing designed by Edwin Lutyens. The Irish dimension to the story of the offensive was highlighted by an NCO of the Irish Defence Forces, who read an excerpt from a letter written by [Tom Kettle \(1880-1916\)](#), the former nationalist MP who was killed on the Somme front in September 1916. The sense of 21st century harmony between the former belligerent states was somewhat marred by the result of the Brexit referendum, which had taken place on 23 June, just a week before the centenary. The British electorate's decision to leave the European Union had caused significant rancour within the United Kingdom and immediately placed the future of relations between Britain on the one hand and Ireland, France and Germany on the other in a position of acute uncertainty. President

Higgins and the other heads of state who gathered at Thiepval declined to comment on the referendum, but the *Irish Times* report on the ceremony noted that David Cameron, who had already announced his resignation, looked “gloomy and pensive”.⁵⁷

As with the centenary of the Easter Rising, some of the most memorable commemorations of the Somme were artistic rather than purely ceremonial, with the anniversary of the offensive inspiring numerous creative projects across the island. The West Cork Chamber Music Festival opened on 1 July, for example, with a performance of *Devil’s Dwelling Place*, a new work by Northern Irish composer Deirdre Gribbin, which was specially commissioned for the centenary of the Somme.⁵⁸ Gribbin’s great-uncle had fought in the offensive and survived long enough to return to Belfast, where he succumbed to the effects of mustard gas poisoning.⁵⁹ Creative Centenaries, which sponsored events in partnership with the Northern Ireland Nerve Centre organisation throughout the decade of the centenaries, also staged lectures, exhibitions, film-screenings, and other projects relating to both the Rising and the Battle of the Somme.⁶⁰

2017 - 2018

The most notable centenary event of 2017 was the much-anticipated anniversary of the Battle of Messines, which was marked in West Flanders in June. As noted above, the memory of the battle has been used since the 1990s to highlight shared experience between the divided communities in Northern Ireland and between north and south. On the morning of 7 June, Taoiseach Enda Kenny laid a wreath at the grave of [Willie Redmond \(1861-1917\)](#) in Locker. Redmond, an Irish nationalist MP and brother of the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, was mortally wounded during the battle while serving as an officer with the Royal Irish Regiment. Later in the day, there was a major ceremony at the Island of Ireland Peace Park at Mesen at which Kenny was joined by the Duke of Cambridge, representing the United Kingdom, and Princess Astrid, representing Belgium. At another ceremony, held shortly afterward at the village of Wytschaete, a new memorial to Willie Redmond and all the Irishmen who lost their lives in the battle was unveiled. The memorial features a plaque and a bronze silhouette of Redmond and [John Meeke \(1894-1923\)](#), a soldier of the Ulster Division who attempted to rescue him from the battlefield. Its symbolism thus consciously emphasises shared experience and conciliation. The memorial is sited beside the older Celtic cross memorial to the 16th (Irish) Division and was jointly sponsored and designed by the Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association and the local council of Heuvelland. The end of the following month saw the centenary of the death of Francis Ledwidge (1887-1917), who was killed on the first day of the Third Battle of Ypres. Ledwidge was a poet, Labour activist, and nationalist

and is one of Ireland's most well-known casualties of the fighting on the Western Front.

Irish leaders and ordinary citizens continued to engage with commemorative projects in the final centenary year, and both the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and President Higgins formally observed the anniversary of the Armistice on 11 November. Varadkar attended the major multi-state ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, while Higgins presided over a ceremony at Glasnevin Cemetery. In his speech, Higgins highlighted the journey of discovery into the First World War that Irish people had taken over the course of the previous four years and appealed for renewed commitments to peace in the 21st century. Yet perhaps the most revealing centenary-related "event" of 2018 was the public response to a giant sculpture that was installed in St. Stephen's Green in central Dublin at the beginning of November. The "Haunting Soldier" is a six-metre-high figure of a British [infantryman](#) of the Great War fashioned almost entirely from scrap metal. It was created by Slovakian artist Martin Galbavy and constructed by Chris Hannam at his forge in Dorset in the south-west of England in 2017. Dublin-based solicitor, Sabina Purcell, felt the sculpture would make a fitting tribute to Irish veterans of the Great War and secured a state grant to have it transported to Ireland in time for the centenary of the Armistice. The public response to the sculpture was overwhelmingly positive, and thousands of Dubliners came to see the soldier in the weeks after it was unveiled by the Minister for Culture, Josepha Madigan. Less than a week before it was due to be returned to England, however, an unidentified vandal threw red paint over the figure under the cover of darkness. Numerous public figures and ordinary members of the public criticised the attack in the press and on social media and expressed support for the sculpture and the memory of the soldiers it was designed to represent. A "farewell ceremony" at the site of the sculpture on 25 November was very well-attended and journalist Ronan McGreevy, a frequent commentator on the centenaries, noted that the soldier, and its defacement, had "galvanised many into remembrance of the First World War".⁶¹

Conclusion

In the years after the Armistice, and for much of the 20th century, commemorations of the Great War in Ireland tended to be divisive and polarising and often fuelled territorial and exclusive understandings of the past. From the 1980s onward, however, the memory of the conflict was increasingly used to build cross-community bridges. Many senior Irish political representatives, including the head of state and the Taoiseach, thus approached the centenaries of the First World War as a series of opportunities to highlight shared experience and further improve relations between north and south, and between Ireland and Britain. This vision seemed to be realised at the first event of the centenaries at Glasnevin in 2014, which was planned and performed in a cross-community, Anglo-Irish spirit. Yet by 2016, which was

always going to be the biggest year of the centenary sequence in Ireland, the official drive to use commemoration of the past to ease the tensions of the present had begun to encounter difficulties.

The centenary of the Easter Rising was generally regarded to have been marked in an imaginative and inclusive fashion, with a welcome emphasis on the role of women and the suffering of civilians and a lively national conversation about the legacy of the rebellion. Many unionists, however, felt unable to engage with the commemorations of an event and a movement that seemed antithetical to their own traditions. Even more ominously, the Brexit referendum, which took place in the UK at the end of June 2016, cast a shadow over the commemorations of the Battle of the Somme a week later. Diplomatic relations between Ireland and Britain and, crucially, between Northern Ireland and the Republic, were fundamentally altered by the British electorate's decision to leave the European Union and would become quite sour over the following couple of years. Indeed, while Anglo-Irish relations were warm and positive when the centenaries began in the summer of 2014, they had deteriorated significantly by the time the centenaries ended in November 2018. The limits of reconciliation through commemoration were also revealed in Northern Ireland where, despite some notable moments of cross-community remembrance, the traditional tendency for the past to reinforce rather than surmount division generally persisted during the centenaries. The commemorative decade would become yet more contentious as it moved beyond the First World War and into the even more divisive territory of the centenaries of the Irish War of Independence, from 2019 to 2021, and the centenary of the partition of the island in 2021.⁶²

From a more positive perspective, the centenaries occasioned an extraordinary degree of popular and scholarly exploration of the First World War across the island. Dozens of well-researched and accessible books on different aspects of the Irish experience of the conflict have been published since 2013, with contributions from Padraig Yeates, Ronan McGreevy, [Richard Grayson](#), Niamh Gallagher, Fionnuala Walsh, and others leaving a notably rich historiographical legacy.⁶³ These fresh print narratives have been augmented by a vast amount of informative and engaging online historical content produced during the period of the centenaries; the Century Project, created by the *Irish Times*, and the Century Ireland website, which has been jointly run by Boston College and RTÉ, are just two of the more prominent examples of this sort of material. It should also be emphasised that, in contrast to previous significant anniversaries, such as 1966 and 1996, there was no particularly dominant official narrative of Irish engagement in the First World War during the centenaries. Across the Republic, at least, there was a generalised respect both for the Irishmen and women who served with the British forces and those who fought against those forces, but

there was also plenty of room for new perspectives on the Great War and the Irish Revolution. Importantly, historians were by no means regarded as the only legitimate interpreters of the past and writers, artists, and musicians all played a valuable role in public commemoration. As the journalist and author Fintan O'Toole has noted with regard to 2016, the official centenary commemoration programme "placed artistic events front and centre".⁶⁴ The centenaries were thus arguably allowed to become a moment of genuine re-appraisal and re-imagination of an extraordinarily pivotal moment in Irish history.

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Notes

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3. The Irish Republican Army remained active in the decades after the Irish Revolution ended in 1923, although it was proscribed by both British and Irish governments and enjoyed much less popular support than it had from 1919 to 1921. In the period after the outbreak of the Northern Ireland Conflict in the late 1960s, the IRA re-emerged as a significant paramilitary force. In December 1969, the force split between the more Belfast-oriented Provisional IRA and the Dublin-based Official IRA. By 1972, the Provisionals had emerged as the more dominant and more active faction. [↑](#)
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10. Jeffery, Ireland and the Great War 2000, pp. 129-130. ↑
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22. See, for example, Leonard, The Twinge of Memory 1996, p. 109; Clark, Two Traditions 2013, p. 70; Pennell, 'Choreographed by the Angels?', pp. 261-262. In 1988, the Royal British Legion sold some 45,000 poppies in the Republic, which was more than twice the average annual number when street sales were discontinued there in 1971. See Leonard, The Twinge of Memory 1996, p. 110. ↑
23. Pennell, Choreographed by the Angels?, p. 263. ↑
24. In a notable incident in July 2002, the Sinn Féin Mayor of Belfast, Alex Maskey, became the first republican leader to lay a wreath at the city's cenotaph. Maskey laid a laurel rather than a poppy wreath, and did so two hours before the service began, but the gesture was nonetheless widely interpreted as a sign of change in the cultural landscape in Northern Ireland. See Hartley, Tom: 'The Long Road', in: Horne / Madigan (eds.), Towards Commemoration 2013, p. 87. ↑
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26. <https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/about/> (retrieved: 12 August 2020). ↑
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External Links

- [Arlene Foster says rebellion 'gave succour to violent republicanism' \(BBC\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Century Ireland 1913-1923 \(RTE\) \(Institutional Website\)](#)
- [Decades of Centenaries \(Institutional Website\)](#)
- [Decades of Centenaries \(National Archives An Chartlann Náisiúnta\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Easter Rising commemorations: 50 events for 2016 \(The Irish Times\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Hearne, Rory: A Rising Shame, in: Broadsheet, March 2016 \(Broadsheet\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Higgins, Roisín / Holohan, Carole / O'Donnell, Catherine: 1966 and all that. The 50th anniversary commemorations, in: History Ireland 2/4, March/April 2006 \(History Ireland\) \(Article\)](#)
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