

Representing a Conflict during the Peace Process: The 1798 Rebellion Bicentenary in Ireland and Northern Ireland

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The 1798 Rebellion pitched rebels, led by the United Irishmen, against the Irish/British authorities. Although, the Rebellion failed and was followed by the 1801 Act of Union, its remembrance became highly politicized. Different interpretations divide indeed Nationalists and Unionists, and contributed to build mental barriers. Nevertheless, the bicentenary of the Rebellion coincided with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, a major step in the Peace Process in Northern Ireland. The challenge was then, in a context of political reconciliation process, to commemorate a conflict which had been very divisive.

The comparison of commemorative exhibitions held at national museums in Dublin and Belfast first focuses on the artefacts, their interpretations, their uses and their displays in order to highlight the various ways of reconciling opposite narratives. Then, the analysis intends to consider the whole memorialization process. In order to do so, it makes clear how the museums acted as a bridge both between the different agents of memorialization (curators, politicians, European Union civil servants...etc.) and between the different publics visiting the displays.

Plenty of works about Northern Ireland have been dedicated to the Northern Irish conflict and its resolution. Until the 1990s, most of the studies focused on the community building process – above all the Unionists and the Nationalists. Since then, due to the political context of Peace Process, scholars – above all political scientists – have been more and more interested in the process of reconciliation. One dimension common to the different fields of analysis has been the political uses of the past. One example of the close connection between the uses of the past and the political context was the increase of the number of commemorations in the 1990s – sort of memory boom¹ –, both in Ireland and Northern Ireland. These commemorations notably help societies to come to term with painful and divisive events to which belonged the 1798 Rebellion.

This protest, which lasted less than six months², crystallized opposition between the United Irishmen³ and the Irish/British authorities. Although the uprising failed and was

¹ For a definition of the memory boom and its different social aspects, see, Winter, J., (2006), “Notes on the Memory Boom: War, Remembrance and the Uses of the Past”, in Bell, D., ed., *Memory, Trauma and World Politics. Reflections on the Relationship between Past and Present*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp. 54-73.

² The 1798 Rebellion broke out in May and ended with the battle of Ballinamuck on 8 September in which the French Troops sent as back-up to the rebels were defeated.

followed by the 1801 Act of Union⁴, this event and its remembrance are highly significant in the study of the changing representations of the past in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Because of the links – military or not – forged between the United Irishmen, the French Troops, the British army and other brotherhoods such as the Orange Order⁵, the Rebellion was largely and differently interpreted within various collective memories and remained a burning issue, especially between Nationalist/Republican and Unionist/Loyalist⁶. On the one hand, the fact that the United Irishmen were represented – within Republican circles – as the first Irish Republicans and, on the other hand, the fact that the Orange Order was one of the bases of the Unionist tradition which defined the Rebellion as a massacre of Protestant civilians, made any representation of the event a bone of contention.

In 1998, the very divisive 1798 Rebellion was commemorated in a political context of reconciliation. The bicentenary took place in the context of the *Good Friday Agreement* which was a major step in the Peace Process⁷. What I am studying is a process of memorialization in a political context of reconciliation both between Loyalists and Republicans, and between Irish and Northern Irish authorities with the contribution of British and European Union civil servants. Among various commemorative events, two exhibitions were almost simultaneously held at the Ulster Museum (Belfast) and at the National Museum of Ireland (Dublin)⁸. The purpose of this work is not only to study the exhibitions narratives about the Rebellion in a context of political reconciliation but also to examine how the displays contributed to the conciliation of the public remembrance. The comparison intends to help to recognize the specificities of each process of memorialization and especially the role played by the institutions in the reconciliation process. Indeed, the national museums were public institutions under the supervision of the governments and therefore contributed to the establishment of an official past which was a crucial issue in pacifying the relations between

³ The Society of the United Irishmen was created in Belfast in 1791 and banned in 1794. Initially mostly made up of Presbyterians, the original intention was to reform the political system in Ireland, regardless of the denomination to obtain full political equality to both Presbyterians and Catholics.

⁴ It unified the Kingdom of Great Britain and the Kingdom of Ireland and established the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

⁵ It was founded in 1795, partly to counteract the spread of the Defenders and the United Irishmen. Most of its members belonged to the Established Church of Ireland.

⁶ Although Nationalists and, above all, Unionists should not be considered as a unified group with unified visions, the opposite interpretations of the past became features of identification.

⁷ The *Good Friday Agreement*, or *Belfast Agreement*, was signed in Belfast on 10 April 1998 by the British and Irish governments and most of the Northern Irish political parties, with the significant exception of the Democratic Unionist Party. The two commemorative exhibitions opened at the Ulster Museum (Belfast) and the National Museum of Ireland (Dublin) respectively on 3 April and on 23 May.

⁸ In Belfast (UM), the title was *Up in Arms: The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland. A Bicentenary Exhibition* and in Dublin (NMI), *Fellowship of Freedom: The United Irishmen and the Rebellion of 1798*. As one will see below, Kevin Whelan was, as historical adviser and writer of the exhibition book, a major agent in the process.

communities. In a period in which any official display of the Troubles was hardly possible, exhibitions dealing with older conflicts were vantage points to question the restructuration of the memory wars since the 1960s.

This paper is structured according to one major interrogation. To what extent did the exhibitions contribute to the process of reconciliation in Ireland and Northern Ireland? Largely related to the exhibiting practices, the study is first of all a comparison of the narratives produced by the display of artefacts and the production of texts. I am wondering how a much divisive past was displayed in a context of political reconciliation, especially by focusing on the representations of the rebels, the victims and the enemies. Being a complicated process, the memorialization of the 1798 Rebellion is to be examined through the memory producers ; in other words what was the role of the museums and their agents in a transnational and fragmented society in which the State had to face the challenge of more and more actors (historians, local clubs and associations, teachers' associations, European Union programmes...etc.) ? In addition to the part played by the museums in the memory production, studying the role of the institutions in the reconciliation process also includes an analysis of the narratives decoding by the public and the debates that the exhibitions generated.

The comparison of two commemorative exhibitions : historical challenge ?

The simultaneity of the two official commemorative exhibitions of the 1798 Rebellion was a narrative itself. It was the first time since the 1921 Partition, and therefore the existence of two politically distinct parts, that the Rebellion was commonly commemorated in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Whereas official exhibitions were organized in the South in 1938 and 1948, nothing occurred in the North. Before going into details, this simple commonality was an act of reconciliation, certainly between North and South, but above all between the two communities in Northern Ireland. The long term chronology is the reason why I think historical works and therefore historians have a significant role to play in the studies of reconciliation process. Indeed, the 1998 exhibitions were (re)action towards a certain past, that is, the political uses of the 1798 Rebellion. The Dublin exhibition, *Fellowship of Freedom* cannot be understood without taking into account the long term nationalist interpretations of

1798. The work done by the historical adviser⁹ was a direct critical response to *Faith and Fatherland*, the theoretical model initially promoted by Father Kavanagh in 1870 who identified the revolt as an act of defense from the Catholic peasantry, led by heroic priests, against the provocation of sectarian tormentors¹⁰. For instance, the extreme reluctance to acknowledge sectarian acts of violence during the Rebellion was partly a consequence of the general challenge of previous interpretation. This memorialization backlash can only be gauged by long term analysis.

Likewise, the exhibition held at the Ulster Museum in Belfast had to be included in the long term context of 1798 official oblivion in Northern Ireland. In order to contribute to the reconciliation, the exhibition intended to prove the Unionists that Protestants were also part of the Rebellion, not only as counter-revolt actors within the Orange Order – as it has been claimed – but also among the rebels themselves¹¹. The display and the production of narratives were shaped by this long oblivion and the desire not to bury the past but to highlight the contribution instead.

Displaying artefacts, a matter of reconciliation ?

Part of the research may be also defined as internalist, in the sense that I pay much attention to the display of artefacts. In doing so, the aim is to question which narratives of the conflict were produced in the context of political reconciliation. In order to do so, I follow the anthropological works made about the use – to be understood as exchange – of objects¹². I examine how objects from the past and notably from 1798 were defined, interpreted and organized in 1998 in both exhibitions. The comparison is supposed to help to analyze the (re)conciliation of official interpretations on the past. Moreover, it can allow clarifying how artefacts were used to soften the divisions. In this last approach, artefacts are considered not only as objects but also – or above all – as practices.

Attention is particularly paid to three types of narratives. The definitions of the actors – rebels or counter-rebellion forces – brought fruitful results to understand the reinterpretations of the United Irishmen, the role of the clergy and the Orange Order. Within this category, the definitions of the victims and the relationships with their perpetrators were a controversial

⁹ Kevin Whelan, historian of the late XIXth century Ireland.

¹⁰ Kavanagh, P., (1870), *A Popular history of the Insurrection of 1798*, Dublin.

¹¹ Indeed, most of the founding fathers of the Society of the United Irishmen were Ulster Presbyterians.

¹² Among others, see Thomas, N., (1991), *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge ; and Appadurai, A., (1986), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

aspect in 1998. The spatial and social limits of the revolt were the second types of narrative and gave clues to how the event was reinterpreted to fit the context of reconciliation. It is of some use to analyze the definitions of the territories and the use of expressions such as “nation” or “identity”. Were the United Irishmen depicted as an “Irish nation” ? What did the presence of various sections about the US and French Revolutions produce on the general narratives of the display? Finally, the interpretations of the purposes of the Rebellion give an insight on how the exhibitions dealt with the religious dimensions of the uprising. The religious identification of the actors and victims was one of the main criteria in the opposition between unionist and nationalist remembrance of 1798.

One of the best examples dealing with the definition of victims and the sectarian issue was the display of images from the “Massacre of Scullabogue”. In June 1798, several hundreds of prisoners were burned alive in a barn in Scullabogue, County Wexford. Given that the majority of the prisoners were protestant this event was used by Unionists to prove the sectarian dimension of the revolt and the absence of any political purpose. The point is then to compare how the very same images of Scullabogue were displayed in both exhibitions. For instance, the comparison shows that the Belfast exhibition tended to erase any mention of the perpetrators¹³. On the other hand, the Dublin exhibition displayed the very same image in the section on 1798 remembrance, and in doing so, tended to assimilate this act of violence not to 1798 but to its remembrance. More generally, the anthropological approach allows considering the images as practices related to the negotiations of memories. Dealing with religion, the Belfast exhibition highlighted the presence of Catholics and Protestants in order to conciliate the communities in a common past. The Dublin exhibition, in contrast, sort of ignored any religious divisions because it aimed at challenging the previous tradition which stressed the sectarian divisions. This made clear the different methods of display used to conciliate the previous divisive narratives.

By focusing on the use of artefacts, one might examine the reconciliation of narratives, but the most challenging question remains related to the role of the institutions as bridge between various actors of the memorialization process. The museums helped also to break mental barriers by putting into contact distinct and even opposite actors.

The museum, a bridge in the process of reconciliation

¹³ In the published exhibition book, not even one word was dedicated to those responsible for the massacre in a four hundred word caption, Maguire, W.A., (1998) *Up in Arms : The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland. A Bicentenary Exhibition*, exhibition book, Ulster Museum, Belfast, p. 218.

Although the purposes of the exhibitions were clearly a challenge of the previous divisive 1798 memories, the role of the museums in the whole process of reconciliation was somehow more arduous to analyze. Certainly, their role in the building State process had clearly been to fix a national heritage as criteria of identification, but their contribution in the 1990s was hazier. The museums had both to face the challenge of the national master narratives, the fragmentation of the national community and were asked to contribute to the reconciliation process.

In fact, the museums were above all bridges between the actors of the reconciliation. By looking at the museums' archives, one finds out that the museum agents were in close contact with members of the governments, of European Union Reconciliation Programmes, Teacher Associations, historians and historical associations. For instance, the Irish Government 1798 Commemoration Committee funded the Dublin exhibition but also contributed to the Belfast exhibition funding, and in so doing, helped to build a transnational remembrance. The challenge of the political frontiers came also from the role played by the European Programme for Peace and Reconciliation which allowed the work, at the Ulster Museum, of an officer to reconcile communities through the past¹⁴. This commitment from the Ulster Museum to reconcile communities through 1798 remembrance was nonetheless one reason explaining the absence of common exhibition between the North and South. Although an offer was made by one curator from the National Museum of Ireland, no such event occurred, certainly due to practical reason, but also due to different objectives.

In addition to their activity of contact between the different producers of memory, the museums were also, on the one hand, a bridge between the producers and the public, and on the other hand, a bridge between the different publics. The study of the museums as actors of the memorialization, helps examining how and to what extent they succeeded in erasing some mental divisions between the communities. Although the relative lack of information about the visitors makes this analyze difficult, some aspects came to light. First of all, the work of reconciliation tried hard to enlarge the museums public, especially by focusing its attention on community networks. One success of the Ulster Museum's Outreach Officer was to challenge the community identifications by using the past. Directly related with the Peace Process and the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, attention was paid to visitors as members of a community – Nationalists and Unionists. This favoured visits from groups

¹⁴ From 1997 to 2003, Jane Leonard worked at Outreach Officer at the Belfast Museum.

coming from areas dominating by strong community feelings. The study of visitor books and School Activity Books permits to have a better, while imperfect, appreciation of the reactions.

To conclude, the most important impact of the exhibitions was probably felt more on the medium term. Analyzing the public debates within the press make clear that any consideration on the exhibitions and on the commemoration at large was perceived as a judgment of the reconciliation itself. Therefore, very few criticisms were made, at least on the exhibitions narratives. The tensions appeared later, when the political context permitted more public divergences. Yet, by considering the exhibition impact as not strictly related to the display itself but rather delimited by the memorialization process, one finds out that the 1998 exhibitions played a role in the whole exhibiting process, and contributed to shape war exhibitions at least up to 2006.

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