

EXHUMING PASSIONS

*The Pressure of the Past in
Ireland and Australia*

Editors

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Introduction: 'Poison and Remedy':
The Pressure of the Past in Ireland and Australia
Stuart Ward and Katie Holmes

Public disputes over memory and the uses of the past have become a customary feature of contemporary political cultures. Although the rendering of the past has always been prone to partisan projections, in recent decades the public mediation of social divisions through rival historical interpretations has become more visible and visceral. Whether it be debates about wartime resistance against Nazism, apologies for slavery, or the entrenchment of a national historical 'canon' in schools, the politics of the past seem ever-present. Often these debates are sparked by anniversaries, such as the fiftieth anniversary of Hiroshima in 1994, the 400th jubilee of the Dutch East India Company in 2002, or the 2004 centenary of German colonial atrocities in Namibia. At other times the focus is on civic emblems, the erection of monuments, museum exhibitions and other *lieux de mémoire*.

Since the early 1990s, writers, artists and academics the world over have echoed Benjamin Stora's attempt to lay bare the 'secrets', 'silence', 'the unsaid', and intentional 'forgetting' (*oubli*) embedded in the civic landscape.¹ Stora's work chronicled the rediscovery of the Algerian War in France – a process of historical revision and public reappraisal which he termed 'the acceleration of memory'.² This process had its counterparts throughout Europe and elsewhere, as witnessed by Caroline Elkins's study of the silences that attended the 'brutal end of empire in Kenya', or Alessandro Triulzi's work on the 'long-standing failure of Italian public memory to come to terms with its colonial past'.³ In a similar vein, a 2001 parliamentary inquiry into Belgium's disastrous handling of the Congo crisis concluded that the people suffered from an 'unaccepted past'.⁴

In the 1990s, Rosenzweig and Thelen dubbed this the 'presence of the past', implying (unintentionally) something inert and passive

in the civic culture.⁵ This formula is reworked here as the 'pressure of the past' to capture the rhetorical jostling and surface tension this 'presence' invariably signals. Although seemingly ubiquitous, the resort to history as a means of waging contemporary conflict carries greater urgency in some contexts than in others. Ireland and Australia represent two case studies that are often singled out for their peculiar brand of bitterly disputed remembrance. The Irish in particular have long been branded a people mired in their primordial rivalries. In 1996, Brian Walker remarked that 'we seem to use the past as explanation for the present more often than most places'.⁶ Graeme Dawson concurs that 'the past in Ireland is often seen as peculiarly problematic and intractable', while Rebecca Graff-McRae notes that the very word 'commemoration' carries 'the weight of conflict' in an Irish context.⁷ Thus, the past is routinely invoked as both an explanation for Ireland's social and political ills, and an impenetrable barrier to their resolution. Leon Uris concluded his *Trinity* with the words: 'In Ireland, there is no future, only the past happening over and over', while in 1992 the *Belfast Irish News* diagnosed Ireland's enduring social ills as the work of 'those who believe that it is more important to build a country fit for our ancestors rather than our children'.⁸ In this characterization, the Irish are 'prisoners of their past, impelled towards violent confrontation by their atavistic passions'.⁹ This view of entrenched collective memory as fundamental to Irish culture yet jeopardizing its future has been reiterated through the decades. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1966, the Belfast writer W.R. Rogers lamented that the Irish were so wedded to their tragic history that they were incapable of embracing a modern future: 'The more we try, the more memories of old Ireland return to us. We are like the Australian aborigine who, presented with a new boomerang, spent the rest of his life trying to throw his old boomerang away.'¹⁰

It was an improbable metaphor. Yet, ironically, it was at this very time that Indigenous Australians – long dismissed as a 'mere melancholy footnote' in Australian historical awareness – began to secure a new prominence in Australia's own emergent brand of commemorative discord. In 1968, the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner famously diagnosed 'the great Australian silence' – an entrenched 'cult of forgetfulness' on all matters pertaining to Australia's Indigenous peoples. He predicted that 'the aborigines having been "out" of history for a century and a half are now coming back "into" history with a vengeance'.¹¹ Twelve years later, in 1980, Bernard Smith described an

Australia haunted by the legacy of Indigenous dispossession – by a 'nightmare to be thrust out of our minds ... Yet like the traumatic experiences of childhood it continues to haunt our dreams.'¹² This extraordinary shift was sustained by a new generation of researchers who documented the widespread incidence of frontier violence and Indigenous land-theft throughout the colonial era, which in turn sparked a series of legal challenges and official enquiries into the darker recesses of Australia's past. Prominent among these were the 1992 High Court *Mabo* decision, which recognized the principle of prior Indigenous land ownership, and the 1997 Royal Commission into the removal of Aboriginal children from their families – the so-called 'Stolen Generations' – which raised the spectre of genocide as central to Australia's colonial inheritance.

None of these findings went unchallenged, and from the early 1990s a pronounced struggle over the ownership of Australian history spilled out of the universities and law courts and into newspapers, schools, talkback radio and federal politics. Prominent among the combatants was former conservative prime minister John Howard, who railed against what he saw as 'the attempt to rewrite Australian history in the service of a partisan political cause'. Other prominent figures spoke of the 'fabrication' of Aboriginal history, and the insidious promotion of a 'black armband' perspective on the nation's origins.¹³ Stuart MacIntyre dubbed this often acrimonious debate Australia's 'history wars' – the recurring cycle of historical claim and counterclaim, rooted in but not confined to debates over Indigenous dispossession, which came to dominate Australian public life in the Howard era.¹⁴ It has frequently been likened to 'an Australian historikerstreit', underlining the perception of a country acutely plagued by collective memory.¹⁵

The reality, however, is more complex. The very notion of 'collective memory' is as contested as it is problematic, raising long-standing theoretical debates about how groups remember. The field is vast, unwieldy and marked by a conceptual looseness about the range of social phenomena that might fall within its ambit. Some fifteen years ago, Alon Confino voiced concern that 'the term "memory" is depreciated by surplus use',¹⁶ and while these concerns have been constantly reiterated, there remains an ingrained reluctance to tie the concept down. No one, it seems, wishes to 'operationalize collective memory positivistically to generate empirically verifiable covering laws'.¹⁷ Yet there are a number of basic theoretical propositions that are broadly shared. One relates to the way in which individual memories

are socially mediated – sorted, segmented, and made sense of with reference to group belonging. This was the major insight of Maurice Halbwachs, generally regarded as the founder of modern memory studies in the 1920s and 1930s. He set out to demonstrate how, when we as individuals remember, ‘our confidence in the accuracy of our impression increases ... if it can be supported by others’. That is to say, group dynamics enhance, enrich and lend meaning to the process of recall. He then extended this to a general proposition about the durability of social memories, which were inevitably linked to the survival of the social groups which sustained them. Conversely, the nurturing of collective memory was fundamentally about group durability – about securing the cohesion and viability of communities into the future.¹⁸ Jeffrey Olick’s reformulation of Halbwachs is particularly useful: ‘It is not just that we remember as members of groups but that we also constitute those groups and their members simultaneously in the act, thus “re-member-ing”’.¹⁹

Seen in this light, the notion of the Irish, or Australians, or anyone else being peculiarly ‘mired in the past’ is a misconception. Equally, the tendency to blame ‘history’ for the enduring social divisions of the present is to confuse the battleground with the cause. Ian McBride raises the possibility that ‘present actions are not determined by the past, but rather the reverse: that what we choose to remember is dictated by our contemporary concerns’.²⁰ To the extent that any given community seems particularly disposed to wage ‘history wars’, this surely says more about existing social and political divisions in the present, even where those divisions are the clear material legacies of historical iniquity. In short, the pressure of the past is more a matter of perception than verifiable proposition.

It is a perception that is sustained in a multitude of ways, but especially in the public performance of historical grievance, conflict and reconciliation. The ‘performance of memory’ refers to ‘a set of acts, some embodied in speech, others in movement and gestures, others in art’, which rehearse and recharge the emotions and ideologies invested in the original memory or story.²¹ The peace process in Ireland and the Indigenous ‘Reconciliation’ process in Australia are two prominent spheres where these practices are exhibited. Both were responses to social and political tensions ignited in the civil rights movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Both achieved special prominence as a solution to their respective national problems in the 1990s, and both were rooted in the notion of a divided people in need of mutual accommodation – of past wounds that needed to be

healed. Both were sustained by revisionist histories that met with trenchant and often highly emotional resistance from those who discerned manipulative scholarly practices at work. And the prevailing political rhetoric in both cases was typified by references to 'drawing a line over the past'; 'coming to terms' with history, and finding an appropriate way of remembering without reigniting the very enmities that needed to be bridged.

The parallels are borne out further by comparing the founding texts of the peace process and the reconciliation movement. In the December 1993 'Downing Street Declaration', John Major and Albert Reynolds pledged action 'to remove the causes of conflict, to overcome the legacy of history and to heal the divisions which have resulted'. Six years later in Australia, the National Council for Reconciliation issued its 1999 'draft declaration' couched in remarkably similar terms: 'Our nation must have the courage to own the truth, to heal the wounds of its past so that we can move on together at peace with ourselves.' The sentiments and sensibilities conveyed were practically interchangeable.

Atoning for the past has become a recurring theme in Irish and Australian politics. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's official apology to the 'Stolen Generations' in 2008 brought to a close a decade-long debate about the ethics and efficacy of apologizing on behalf of our historical forebears (Chapter 4). He followed this up a year later with a widely publicized call for a 'truce to the history wars'. It was, he said, 'time to leave behind us the polarisation that began to infect every discussion of our nation's past'.²² Tony Blair's 'implicit apology' for the Irish famine in 1997 was similarly occasioned by divided opinions over the effectiveness of harnessing history for these purposes. Even more highly charged have been the repeated demands for an official apology for clerical abuse in church institutions funded by the Irish state (Chapter 3). British Prime Minister David Cameron's 2010 apology for civilian deaths at the hands of the British Army on 'Bloody Sunday', by contrast, was generally welcomed as part of the necessary process of healing in the North (Chapter 2).

Perhaps the clearest parallel between Irish and Australian experience was a recent appeal by the then Irish Taoiseach, Brian Cowan, for a less combative approach to Ireland's past. In an echo of Kevin Rudd, he reflected on the debilitating process whereby 'we created separate histories – British and Irish, orange and green, republican, nationalist, unionist, loyalist – deep wells from which we thought

we could draw succour'. But looking ahead to the centenary of the Easter Rising in 2016, he called for a spirited recovery of 'our shared history': 'We should not allow ourselves to be history's slaves. We must strive instead to take the opportunity commemorations afford us to reflect on and better understand our shared identities.'²³

These prime ministerial edicts bear witness to the extraordinary potency and divisiveness of collective remembrance in Ireland and Australia. In calling for an end to the bickering, political leaders in both countries have found a more secure footing in the future, in 'moving forward', rather than 'dwelling' on the past. As Anne Dolan remarks in this volume, 'If writing about violence was considered the means to encourage violence, then studying shared traditions and experiences is now prescribed as the best method to cajole along the peace.'²⁴

These developments have by no means been confined to the spheres of history and politics. Artists, too, have inevitably become attuned to the tensions and contradictions inherent in publicly contested histories, and have explored these for creative effect (Chapter 6). Novels as diverse as Thomas Keneally's *Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972), David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993) and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2006) all turned to history as a means of recovering perspectives 'lost' to history. Yet, inevitably, controversy ensued. Grenville's novel in particular – about the clash of aspirations and outlook between an emancipated convict and the aborigines whose land he unwittingly appropriated – brought a minor storm of protest. Several historians objected to the author's claim that fiction could rise above the petty squabbling of the history warriors, and 'experience' the past with a texture and nuance that were bound to elude historical scholarship.²⁵ Others objected that it was 'morally impossible for settler Australians to regret or apologize for the conquest on which colonial Australia was built'.²⁶ A new phase in the history wars had been declared (Chapter 10).²⁷

In Ireland the Field Day Company, originally founded with a view to establishing a 'fifth province' from which to view past and present conflicts, became increasingly controversial as its writers and critics adopted an anti-revisionist, post-colonial edge. Creative writing – in the works of Seamus Heaney, Seamus Deane, Brian Friel and others – has remained a prominent site for understanding and interpreting the nature of Irish history and identity. Often, artists, writers and film-makers have worked self-consciously to recover lives, experiences and voices that had been submerged by an older

historical consensus. This was Sebastian Barry's avowed intention in writing his award-winning *A Long Long Way* (2005) and *The Secret Scripture* (2008) – referring to his work as redressing 'the damage [that] came after independence, when a new narrative had to be established in order to assist the birth of a country'.²⁸ Yet the business of 'recovery' also involves the downgrading of prior orthodoxies, and Barry's work has thus been labelled variously as 'anti-nationalist allegory', 'politically naive', 'in-service reading for a fairly standardized brand of revisionism' and 'an ideological ally' of British conservatism.²⁹

Commemorative sites and museums have played an equally important role in staging and dramatizing disputed memories. New commemorative landmarks have proliferated in Ireland and Australia over the past two decades, whether it be the Battle of the Boyne Commemorative Centre in Meath (or its 1798 counterpart in Enniscorthy); the Myall Creek Massacre walk near Inverell, NSW; the Great Famine Commemoration Exhibition in Skibereen; or the ever-changing civic landscape in Canberra, with new memorials sprouting along the shores of Lake Burley-Griffin each year. Here again, popular consensus has proved elusive. The entrance to the National Museum in Canberra (opened in 2001) featured a replica of Daniel Libeskind's lightning-flash zigzag feature at the Jewish museum in Berlin, much to the disdain of some critics.³⁰ In Dublin, finding an appropriate symbol to replace the statue of Lord Nelson exploded on O'Connell Street in 1966 would consume thirty years of debate, before it was agreed to erect the 'Spire of Dublin' – a design chosen for its symbolism of 'optimism for the future' rather than the sordid divisions of the past (Chapter 13).³¹

Perhaps the most visible struggle over ownership of the past can be seen in the cinema, where the climate of historical revisionism has produced a variety of often controversial offerings. From Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* to Philip Noyce's *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Ken Loach's *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, John Hillcoat's *The Proposition*, Steve McQueen's *Hunger* and even Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*, a subtext of disputed historical interpretation provides the core narrative tension and the source of audience and critical engagement. And film-makers have been favourite targets of criticism for the artistic licence this has entailed. Even before the release of *Michael Collins*, the production team was subjected to a barrage of complaint for the (leaked, and later revoked) decision to stage the carnage of Bloody Sunday at a hurling match (as opposed to Gaelic football).³² Personal abuse was hurled at Philip Noyce for allegedly

treating his Aboriginal child actresses in much the same way as their white captors were depicted in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.³³ And Baz Luhrman's *Australia* was hauled over the coals for every conceivable embellishment of what 'really' happened, despite ample indications that 'reality' was the furthest thing from the director's mind. For Melbourne's *Herald Sun*, Luhrmann's film was no less than 'a ludicrous and nasty rewriting of our history' (Chapters 7 and 11).³⁴

Yet creative writers, dramatists and film-makers turn to the past with concerns and preoccupations that transcend the mere 'historical', and often with an acute awareness of the blurred distinctions between 'history', 'memory' and the creative impulse. Sebastian Barry's work, for example, is littered with references to 'the difficulty, that my memories and my imaginings are lying deeply in the same place'.³⁵ Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* questioned the reliability or even possibility of historical memory, offering instead 'a fully imagined act of historical impersonation'.³⁶ More striking, however, than these artistic departures from a strictly verifiable historical record is the prevailing climate of scepticism towards virtually any representation of the past, ever ready to pounce on cue; a climate that seems to thrive in Australia as much as Ireland.

* * *

In his pioneering 1995 study of the remembrance of the First World War, Jay Winter emphasized the importance of a comparative approach to memory studies. Commemorative traditions and the material conditions that shape them, he argued, are rarely, if ever, anchored firmly in the national context that gives them meaning. He critiqued the earlier work of national specialists such as Pierre Nora for its 'antiquarian and reverential tone', and pervasive 'search for some ineffable quality called "Frenchness"'.³⁷ As useful as these studies were, he summarized the challenge for memory studies that lay ahead: 'The problem remains – that interpretations of 'modern memory' – as global a term as one can find – are rarely examined in a comparative perspective. Once this is done, the distorting effects of a narrowly national approach become apparent.'³⁸

Since that time, a more 'global' term has emerged in the proliferation of 'transnational' studies – a perspective that (purportedly, but not always) moves beyond the analytical strictures of the nation. Put simply, memories transcend national boundaries; they are sustained by global networks of mediation and communication, and are

susceptible to profound revision over time from influences far beyond their national origins. Public acts of commemoration are often staged with an international audience in mind, and claims for official recognition of historical grievances become more effective when targeted globally. Heidemarie Uhl calls this the 'transnational synchronisation of memory cultures', taking as her example the unpalatable Holocaust memories that circulated rapidly throughout the former Nazi-occupied countries of wartime Europe in the 1990s.³⁹ Other examples include the Europe-wide debates about the legacies of colonialism referred to in the opening paragraphs above, or the global proliferation of official apologies (and demands for the same). Assman and Conrad make a convincing case for a global optics:

Until recently, the dynamics of memory production unfolded primarily within the bounds of the nation state; coming to terms with the past was largely a national project. Under the impact of global mobility and movement, this has changed fundamentally. Global conditions have powerfully impacted on memory debates and, at the same time, memory has entered the global stage and global discourse. Today, memory and the global have to be studied together, as it has become impossible to understand the trajectories of memory outside a global frame of reference.⁴⁰

Yet it is striking how much research in the prodigiously broad field of memory studies remains harnessed to national preoccupations. This volume brings together a cohort of Irish and Australian scholars from the disciplines of history, anthropology, politics, literary criticism, sociology, and film studies, to reconsider their respective national cultures of remembrance in the light of parallel developments on the other side of the world. The overriding themes, issues and collaborations were devised and developed at a series of workshops in Canberra and Dublin in 2009 and 2010, sponsored by the Australian Academy for the Humanities and the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. The resultant essays pose a series of questions about the interplay between the local, the national and the transnational in shaping patterns of collective memory – questions that cannot adequately be addressed by recourse to one national context alone. To what extent, for example, can Ireland and Australia be said to share a particular penchant for fighting 'history wars'? To what extent are their political and civic

cultures peculiarly animated by rival conceptions of history? What remains distinctive about their commemorative practices and patterns of remembrance? Can their similarities best be understood in terms of shared historical legacies, or a global dynamics that affect all modern, participatory democracies? In short, what might be gained from studying these two contexts within the same frame?

Winter has recently refined his thoughts on the way cultures of remembrance permeate national boundaries, putting forward the idea of two distinct 'memory booms', or 'generations of memory', that redefined commemorative space in the twentieth century. His framework is particularly useful for making sense of the similarities and differences in Irish and Australian experience. Winter's first 'memory boom' occurred between the 1880s and the end of the First World War, a time when new national formations in Europe needed 'to invent or unearth an illustrious past to justify and stabilize their nascent political forms'.⁴¹ Drawing on the analytical tradition founded by Halbwachs, Winter emphasized the profound demographic and technological changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution that ushered in new ways of conceiving mass identities under the rubric of nationalism – which in turn produced new national cultures of remembrance. This coincided with the availability of more powerful means of dissemination – the mass circulation press, the leisure industry, the art market, photography, the cinema – which widened the potential scope of memory communities.⁴² The hallmarks of this first boom were the celebration of national days, 'statue-mania', the veneration of 'newly found' national traditions, and the enhanced status of history as part of civic education in schools. It was generally couched in terms of 'unities and certainties', ideally suited as a means 'to fortify identities, in particular national identities'.⁴³

It is Winter's second 'memory boom' that is of more immediate interest to us here. This he dates from the 1970s, emerging out of the fragmentation and dislocation of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Here, memory became 'a metaphor for ways of casting about in the ruins of earlier identities and finding elements of what has been called a "usable past"'. It ushered in the age of the 'eyewitness', the testimony of voices hitherto suppressed, of the victims, the bereaved. It brought a new multivalency where one group of 'memory carriers' could no longer easily eclipse others. Moreover, he argued that memory became 'moral in character', with an emphasis on violence, trauma, and the idea of collective memory as part of a social healing process. It became as much about exposing

lies as celebrating truths. As such, the whole business of 'official commemoration' became shot through with inherent ambiguities: 'among them was the use of a form of political culture developed in the first "memory boom" to mark a set of events of an entirely different political and moral order'.⁴⁴ These features are particularly pertinent to the themes addressed in this volume. As Christina Twomey notes in her chapter, 'by the 1990s, in both Ireland and Australia, the language of trauma had positioned the survivors of tragic events in a sympathetic light as the authentic voice of that experience'.⁴⁵

This volume is structured around two sets of problems that emerge directly out of this second 'memory boom'. Part One deals with the prevailing tendencies and characteristics that Winter identifies as typical of collective remembrance since the 1960s – the testimony of victims, the survivors of trauma, the spectre of loss, the recovery of marginalized voices. Michael Rothberg has recently put forward the concept of 'Multidirectional Memory' as an alternative to the 'competitive memory' assumptions that permeate much of the scholarship on disputed cultures of remembrance (or 'history wars'). In particular, Rothberg challenges the notion that 'the interaction of different collective memories within [the public] sphere takes the form of a zero-sum struggle for pre-eminence ... a struggle for recognition in which there can only be winners and losers'. Instead, he offers a different way of viewing the interaction between divergent historical memories as an intercultural dynamic, multilayered and rearticulated by countless individuals and groups which coexist freely and draw sustenance from each other. While he concedes that 'competitive scenarios can derive from these restless articulations', so too can 'visions that construct solidarity out of the specificities, overlaps and echoes of different historical experiences'.⁴⁶

Multidirectional memory is particularly useful in explaining not only why the inherent tensions and rivalries of the second memory boom never culminated in resounding 'victories', but also how these same tensions have been harnessed to peace and reconciliation projects, borrowing freely from rival traditions of remembrance. The chapters in this section deal with the myriad ways that narratives of trauma, victimhood and loss have manifested themselves in contemporary Irish and Australian remembrance, covering such issues as the phenomenon of official apologies for the sufferings of the past; the revelations of widespread clerical abuse as a particularly intractable source of enduring controversy; the 'stolen generations'

of Indigenous children returning as adults to tell their stories publicly; the language and imagery deemed permissible in the remembrance of violence and killing; the systemic state violence uncovered in public institutions such as mental asylums; the use of individual testimony as a highly charged vehicle for recovering repressed memory; and the projection of these wide-ranging social traumas in the cinema. Judith Brett's chapter points to a striking parallel whereby two countries long used to conceiving of themselves as colonial victims are forced to see themselves as agents 'of injustice and oppression against some of [their] own people and accept responsibility'.⁴⁷

Part Two addresses one of the key contexts that ushered in the second memory boom, the eclipse of the European imperial order since the 1950s and 1960s. Curiously, Jay Winter attributed the second memory boom entirely to the fragmentations of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and puzzled over why 'fully three decades had to pass before the new obsession with memory took on its full features'. He reasoned implausibly that post-war reconstruction demanded narratives of heroic wartime resistance, and it was only when 'that narrative work had done its job' that the deeper, permanent shifts signalled by the war could come to the fore.⁴⁸ Yet it surely makes more sense to look for developments in the intervening years that reshaped the public sphere in which collective memories were articulated. Of particular significance for Ireland and Australia was the rapid pace of global decolonization, which not only reordered the political and economic order in the post-1945 era, but also brought a global ideological revulsion against the imperial idea and the features with which it was commonly associated – racism, militarism and national chauvinism. For Australia, this brought the curtain down on a whole host of imperially-derived civic rites, rituals and commemorative customs, from the celebration of Empire Day to the singing of 'God Save the Queen'. It also ushered in a period of hesitancy and disorientation when it came to devising new, post-imperial emblems of nationhood in an era suspicious of nationalism.⁴⁹

In Ireland the impact was different but the effects were largely similar. The collapse of British imperial dominance undermined the immediacy of a once-potent counterpoint of Irish nationalism, while at the same time emboldening the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland. One further consequence was that it marked the beginning of a process whereby the Catholic militancy of Padraic Pearce was discredited, partly out of concerns about the 'prominence of the gun'

in Irish politics, but also under the influence of the more general redundancy of romantic nationalism in a post-imperial age. As McBride writes: 'While British and French historians responded to the painful readjustments brought about by imperial decline, decolonisation and postwar immigration, neither was confronted so directly with the violent expression of historically based ideologies.'⁵⁰

The result in both cases was the beginning of a new note of ambivalence in the articulation of national remembrance, which was particularly evident when it came to colonial legacies and the memory of empire. The chapters in this section range from the radically shifting patterns of First World War commemoration, to the British monarchy as a site of memory; the remembrance of imperial (or in the case of Ireland, anti-imperial) struggles such as the Easter Rising and Anzac Day; the changing urban culture of Canberra and Dublin in the post-imperial era; the representation of the colonial past in film and fiction; and the influences of post-colonial cultures of remembrance on the landscape itself. The chapters seek no simple correlation between Ireland and Australia as 'post-colonial' societies, and in several respects the differences between the two are more striking than the similarities. But, nonetheless, a cumulative pattern emerges whereby events of global importance have had a special significance for these one-time 'Dominions' of empire.

Perhaps what ultimately distinguishes the acrimony and urgency of the uses of the past in Ireland and Australia is the magnitude of the stakes involved. Commenting in 1996 on the strident reactions to the new Indigenous history (and its legal consequences), Bain Attwood underlined the effects of 'a new historical narrative which portends for conservatives the end of [Australian] history as they have conceived it and, therefore, the end of Australia'.⁵¹ The same year, the loyalist leader Ian Paisley Jr observed how 'over the past years the Loyalists of Ulster have watched the deliberate devaluation of their history, culture and British identity ... The past is to a large degree our present politics.'⁵² And as Roisín Higgins argues in this volume, in the Republic of Ireland the commemoration of the Easter Rising has witnessed increasing emphasis on 'the ways in which the country had failed to meet the ideals of the Easter leaders'.⁵³ It is a message that has only multiplied in the light of Ireland's recent economic woes, with the *Irish Times* leading a chorus of: 'Is this what the men of 1916 died for?'⁵⁴ The loss of economic sovereignty is associated instinctively with the squandering of a historical legacy, the betrayal of collective memory.

If, as Maurice Halbwachs claimed nearly a century ago, the duration of social memory is 'limited by the force of things to the duration of the group', then it becomes clear why memories tied to the legitimacy and self-understanding of entire communities are such volatile substances.⁵⁵ And why Samuel Beckett defined 'memory' as 'a clinical laboratory stocked with poison and remedy, stimulant and sedative'.⁵⁶

NOTES

1. B. Stora, *La Gangrène et l'oubli: la mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie* [Gangrene and Oblivion: The Memory of the Algerian War] (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).
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- and History, 50, 3 (2004), pp.425–33; the term also appears in Doug Munro, 'The History Wars', *Journal of Social History*, 40, 3 (2007), pp.786–8. The term *Historikerstreit* refers to the debate over the place of Nazism and the Holocaust that broke out of German universities and into widespread public and political controversy in the 1980s. The literature is vast, but a useful introduction in English is Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989).
16. A. Confino, 'Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method', *American Historical Review*, 102, 5 (1997), pp.1386–403, at p.1387.
 17. J.K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p.17. Yet there have been untold attempts at conceptual refinement, often by way of substituting the term 'collective memory' for something more specific. Olick himself proposed 'social memory studies' (*ibid.*, p.34); Jay Winter has also critiqued collective memory as a term 'framed to mean virtually anything at all', and has vowed to 'abandon the term whenever possible'. His preferred substitute is 'collective remembrance' (or alternatively 'historical remembrance'), thereby relating the concept to specific evidence and agency in place of the more passive and ubiquitous 'memory'. See J. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), pp.4–5. James V. Wertsch prefers a further variant, 'collective remembering', because it emphasizes 'mediated action', and so on: see James V. Wertsch, 'Collective Memory', in P. Boyer and J. V. Wertsch (eds), *Memory in Mind and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.117–133, at p.118. Yet as Olick notes, 'to try to change an established designation is to waste time tilting at semantic windmills': see Olick, *Politics of Regret*, p.34.
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 19. Olick, *Politics of Regret*, p.29. As Ian McBride notes, this position 'runs the risk of circularity' – if memories are both conditioned by and constitutive of group dynamics, which comes first, the memory or the group? See McBride, 'Memory and National Identity', pp.12–13.
 20. McBride, 'Memory and National Identity', pp.5–6.
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 30. See, for example, K. Windschuttle, 'Doctored Evidence and Invented Incidents in Aboriginal Historiography', in Attwood and Foster (eds), *Frontier Conflict*, pp.99–112, at p.99.
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 35. S. Barry, *The Secret Scripture* (London: Viking, 2008), p.227.
 36. *The New York Times*, 7 January 2001.

37. J. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.10.
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39. Quoted in A. Assman and S. Conrad, *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), p.5.
40. *Ibid.*, p.2.
41. Winter, *Remembering War*, p.23.
42. The influence of modernist theorists of nationalism such as Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger is also evident here.
43. Winter, *Remembering War*, pp.23, 19.
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47. See chapter by Brett, p.71.
48. Winter, *Remembering War*, p.26.
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50. McBride, 'Memory and National Identity', p.39.
51. B. Attwood, 'Mabo, Australia and the End of History', in B. Attwood, *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp.100–116, at p.100.
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53. See chapter by Higgins, p.156.
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PART ONE

LEGACIES OF LOSS

‘It is not possible for this history to be truthful ...’

Anne Dolan

In March 1934 the Court of Criminal Appeal in London heard the case of the Crown *v.* Hunt. Doris Hunt had stolen a handbag from Dickins & Jones in Regent Street and had been sentenced to six months in jail. It was six months because she had been caught doing this before. She stole things; she pilfered things even though she always had the money to pay. But after just one month in jail the medical examiner made a case for her release. Doris Hunt was 23 years old in March 1934 but she still had the mind of a child – a child of 9 or 10, a mind fixed in time by what the judge called ‘a shock of an appalling character’.¹ As a child of 9 or 10, Doris Hunt had watched her father die.

Almost thirteen years before, in June 1921, the Hunts – William Hunt, his wife and daughter – were having tea in the parlour of the Mayfair Hotel in Dublin with Enfield White and his wife. Four or maybe six or possibly eight men came into the parlour and shot William Hunt three times. He was shot in the chest. He was turned over on the ground and shot twice more in the back. ‘You are dead DI Hunt’ was all that one of the four or six or eight was heard to mutter before he fired.² Enfield White was shot in the back and in the face and survived³ Doris Hunt was grazed by one of the bullets that killed her father as she ran to him on the floor.⁴ There were bullet marks all over the room, embedded in the walls, in the floor, in the window frames. The other guests in the parlour were terrified by what they saw, terrified enough by the thought of a similar fate to remember nothing when the time came to stand before a court of inquiry. No one could be sure in the confusion how many men had come in and continued to fire until their revolvers were empty. The dead man’s wife, Alice, could only say that they were all ‘lads’, maybe 17 to 20 years old, all dressed in old, dark grey suits. She remembered no faces, just that one wore a mask. She remembered

one man's torn sock, remembered the details around the edges as if fright and confusion had taken over everything in between.⁵ In 1922 she was awarded £1,200 compensation for the loss of her husband.⁶ A further £1,500 was granted to her daughter, but money did not prevent the 'sad case' that came before the courts in the spring of 1934.⁷ Doris Hunt was released into her mother's care in March 1934. What happened in Dublin in June 1921 was enough to convince the Court of Criminal Appeal to send her home.

Doris Hunt is 'a sad case', an even sadder one if she is the same Doris Hunt who ran away when she was 15, who took a 4-year-old child and went missing for two days in the spring of 1927.⁸ She is presumably one of many sad, not very significant cases that can be found if the consequences of violence in Ireland in the first decades of the twentieth century can be traced to their bitterest ends. But what is to be done with Doris Hunt? She is an uneasy, uncomfortable, embarrassing little example. There is an implicit accusation in her pathetic case. There is an implicit accusation in so much of so many cases to suggest that the 'four glorious years' of the Irish Republican Army's (IRA) fight for freedom, the foundation myth of the Irish Free State and later the Irish Republic, was just as tainted and tarnished as any other mere mortal nation or state.⁹ Here its champions only fought with their faces covered, only shot when their opponent had no chance to fire back, fought with the means and methods of assassination and not war. Here it was won in fear and fright, in the screaming and the shouting and the panic. It knowingly or unknowingly took the fear for granted of the frightened wife and child, counted on their presence as the very thing that made Hunt vulnerable and easier to kill. Here in the Mayfair Hotel war was fought by unsteady, untrained hands, by men who fired repeatedly and erratically, as the walls and the floor and the window frames seemed to tell. But here it was also fought carefully, and all the more callously for that: Hunt had to be turned over and shot again to make sure that he was dead.

There is, of course, an easier alternative narrative, one that can be more readily absorbed into a traditional version of events. The Court of Criminal Appeal called Doris Hunt's father 'an officer in the "Black and Tans"'.¹⁰ To be more correct about it, he was an officer in the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary. The Auxiliaries were thought tough, irascible and undisciplined even by their own authorities' relatively loose rules; they were responsible, and perceived to be responsible, for some of the worse excesses of

Britain's war in Ireland.¹¹ Coming to the end of the war of independence, Hunt's death can be read as another hard-counted casualty in the IRA's fight for freedom, an enemy of the Republic to be cast out, put down, killed in the easiest, safest, quickest possible manner. In a war of independence fought largely by itinerant bands of men with a limited supply of arms, by squads of plain-clothed gunmen slipping in and out of crowds, this kind of death makes a practical kind of sense. Hunt was vulnerable, outnumbered, unlikely to shoot back. He was killed with the least risk to the men sent to shoot him: so be it that it happened in front of his wife and child. For every Alice and Doris Hunt there were good Irish women and children who had suffered tragedy and brutality and indignity at the hands of the British forces in Ireland, and their cases are and were just as readily found. At best, Doris and Alice Hunt were the unfortunate consequences of the type of guerrilla warfare that an under-resourced army had to wage against an empire; at worst they were a useful opportunity, a distraction for husband and father, a weakness that this kind of warfare was obliged to exploit. It can all be justified, rationalized, made relatively clean and tidy; it can be recast as yet another coup for IRA intelligence, it can be retold as a patriotic act, as maybe a dirty deed but still a dirty deed for a greater good.

The legacy of Britain's violence in Ireland, of course, raises the same questions for historians of Britain. The victors of the Great War endured the comparisons to the 'Hun' even before their forces burned Cork in December 1920, when they were seen to be beyond government control, when they were at odds with all that was noble and becoming sacrosanct in the memory of the Great War; they bore the brunt of American pressure, of public opinion at home that despaired of dead soldiers coming back from Ireland when 1914–18 had already brought so much of death.¹² They were reminded again and again of Britain's Irish past whenever British forces were employed abroad: in Palestine, Cyprus, in Kenya, in Malaya and, later, of course, in Northern Ireland. The number of times the phrase 'Black and Tan', and the wanton, irreverent, indiscipline it stood for, was bandied about in debate at Westminster throughout the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and beyond suggests that this was never a simple past for Britain either. Yet how Britain dealt with its violence in Ireland, its wrongs, its rationalizations, its acceptance of terror to fight terror, is certainly the work of another paper; Irish narratives of Irish violence are at issue here.

The question asked above – what is to be done with Doris Hunt? – is just shorthand for a number of questions that the kind of sources

that can piece her story together demand to be asked. What is the point and purpose of this kind of detailed evidence? What is the place of violence in a history of violence? What are the consequences of writing out the details explicitly, of numbering the wounds, of hearing the shouts or mutterings of hatred or forgiveness or indifference at death? Do the sights and the sounds – even the smells and sensations – of death, always alter the meaning that can be drawn from them? Do the details of the violent deeds done always undermine, always have to compete with, the details of the violence endured? Do the details always make the heroic struggle into a sequence of dirty deeds? It may be implicitly unfair to tell one story, one girl's story at that, whose weakness, whose age and gender and whose continued suffering make it even more of an affront to any assumed limits and practices and forms of violence or war. It must be considered what the purpose of retelling personal tragedy can be when it seems to plead for an emotional more than a rational response, when it maybe knowingly influences that reaction. Perhaps it is a kind of sleight of hand, a cheap trick at Doris Hunt's expense, to make a political point, to win the equivalent of an historical parlour game at the comfort of almost a century's remove. Perhaps the wider narrative is lost in the particular, in the detail. How does the personal experience take its place in any wider narrative? Maybe these individual stories de-historicize the violence, take it out of its context, where it might be considered, justified, rationalized or explained, and demand sympathy instead. Maybe the inherent accusations from Doris Hunt's case, like the accusations levelled from each and every side, almost implicitly call for sides to be taken. For some, the detail of this kind of violence will always accuse, will always reduce everything to innocence and guilt, to placing pride in the past at odds with the shame of what had to be done. Judgement can even be heard in the language. 'Murderer', 'victim', 'perpetrator', 'soldier', 'killer' – all have a moral currency suggestive of propriety and impropriety, of right and wrong. And in turn we have to ask: whose sense of propriety, whose right and wrong? For some, Doris Hunt's story will always demand more attention than the four or six or eight men sent to shoot her father. Empathy may not extend as readily to the 'lads', the teenagers, the young men Alice Hunt identified, as it does to her own and her daughter's plight. The fear of shooting, the erratic nervous shots, the years of living after with the sights and the screams, the frightened child and the deed done is a harder leap for the historical imagination to make. It is harder to

understand how violence was explained or justified or lived with later. While considering the victims of violence may undermine the notion of this as a romantic or heroic period, there is a sense that some victims take precedence over others; some stories get listened to in different kinds of ways. What makes one generation's enemy another's scapegoat, another's victim? What types of violence are being uncovered or recovered? What kinds of violence are still not being sought? Some violence still offends or calls for retribution or recrimination, when other kinds of violence, other victims, cause no outrage at all. We are left with what can be known, what should be known, and what is to be done when there is no will to know at all?

These questions are demanding enough without trying to find the answers in a divided polity, whether in the context of the civil war which followed the war of independence or in the wake of the Northern Troubles, or even under the pressure of maintaining Northern Ireland's peace. It seems that a detailed history of violence within a bitterly divided history was just too volatile, too dangerous, when all sorts of contemporary political traditions traced their origins and their methods back to 1912–21. Violence was to be avoided, not least in case it reaffirmed any sense of an Irish proclivity to fight, not interrogated in the past in case it encouraged or vindicated its use in the present, whether in the 1920s or any of the decades after, whether it undermined peace in the 1990s or beyond. In 1986 Ronan Fanning remarked 'how high a proportion of the best work on the revolutionary period has been produced by non-Irish-born historians attached to universities outside Ireland'. He cited Joseph Curran, David Fitzpatrick, David Miller and Charles Townshend.¹³ The 1990s might have permitted him to add Peter Hart and Joost Augusteijn to his list. While Fanning's view is far too reductive, far too sweeping, in its dismissal of the ability of the Irish-born historian to rise above nature and nurture to produce anything more than propaganda for either side, most Irish historians had not been encouraged to even try. *Irish Historical Studies (IHS)*, founded in 1938 to reflect a new scientific approach to the study and writing of Irish history, initially refused to engage with any aspect of twentieth-century Irish history; this decision was overturned only gradually, with material on the years up to 1910 entering in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and material dealing with the 1912–23 period only coming slowly in the 1970s. The civil war which came so soon after the war of independence meant that the new Irish state, in which *IHS* was founded, took its foundation myth where it could, and the nature of past violence,

and certainly the nature of the civil war's violence, was silenced for the greater good of the new fragile state. For its part, to avoid the perpetuation of divisions, the Irish historical profession agreed to avoid the occasion of sin. A wider public embraced a simpler narrative of brave men doing brave deeds for a noble cause, no better or no worse than any other public or any other nation which accepts the shaping and reshaping and reinvention of its past, which trades harsh realities and blunt accuracies for pride and mythology and a sense of something that rises above the making do and getting by.

The *Irish Press* told its readers in 1946 that 'There is no period in our history more romantic or exciting, or one in which the nation takes more pride, than the War of Independence, and it is a matter of the greatest importance that its annals should be made the subject of the fullest and most scientific research by trained and impartial historians.'¹⁴ It was fine for the *Press* as long as the impartiality was deemed to be of the right kind. In January 1951, Sir Alfred Cope, former assistant undersecretary for Ireland, made his feelings clear. He refused to submit a statement to the Bureau of Military History, the body formed by the Department of Defence to record the testimony of veterans of the 1913–21 period, the testimony which was to be the basis of the *Irish Press's* 'scientific research by trained and impartial historians'. Cope gave the following reasons for his refusal:

I am sorry I cannot see my way to help. Over the years, I have had offers from various sources for my views and experiences but have turned all of them down because I regard the period (and also that following the Treaty) to be the most discreditable of your country's history – it is preferable to forget it; to let sleeping dogs lie. It is not possible for this history to be truthful ... the job is beyond human skill. The IRA must be shown as national heroes and the British Forces as brutal oppressors. Accordingly, the Truce and Treaty will have been brought about by the defeat of the British by the valour of small and ill-equipped groups of irregulars. And so on. What a travesty it will be and must be.¹⁵

Of course, it could be easily argued that a senior figure in the British administration in Ireland was never going to be content with an Irish retelling of the last days of Dublin Castle. It could only ever be a myth perpetuated at Britain's expense, and memoirs of Ireland's fight for freedom had by then already been too popular in India and Burma and elsewhere within the Empire to discuss it more. There

was no need to add further fuel to fires that needed little excuse to burn.

The questioning of nationalist myths in the wake of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising were brought into sharp relief as Northern Ireland was convulsed by the Troubles from 1968. 'The idea that false images of Ireland's past were undermining its present and mortgaging its future' lay at the heart of what was to become the 'revisionist' debate, what was to become Ireland's 'history wars'.¹⁶ With the Provisional IRA and other republican groups tracing their lineage back to 1916 and 1919–21, many within the historical profession in Ireland preferred to avoid the period, or to at least avoid the period's violence, in case discussion of past violence could encourage or condone the conflict that played itself uncomfortably out on television screens night after night throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. This concern for what could and could not be said, what myths could and could not be undone, became the basis of a rancorous public debate where 'revisionism', for its opponents, became a shorthand for some sort of weak, unpatriotic retelling of Ireland's once proud past, one which undermined the heroism of the revolution and put in its place an anodyne and salutary tale. The 'revisionist' label was foolishly and loosely applied, grouping together a quite disparate collection of historians under a label that made little sense when revision is an inherent and integral part of the historical process. Debates as to what was or was not fit subject matter could be reduced to actual or imagined slights. Sympathy or enmity, antagonism or complicity, were found in the choice or accident of 'adjectives and adverbs'.¹⁷

In the agonies of academic argument, in the public and private squabbles between historians, columnists, journalists and commentators, the myths were debated but arguably the nettle was never really grasped. Debates and developments in historiographies elsewhere largely passed on by, as the urgency to fathom the national question, the Anglo-Irish relationship – to find it and fit it into the fabric of rising or rebellion, of land or famine – seemed paramount. For all the contortions and convulsions of argument and language, for all the myths that were challenged and questioned and defended, it seemed few stopped to see if anyone outside the immediate bluster of the debate was even listening to the din. Generation after generation continued to learn more of their history from Dan Breen's or Tom Barry's memoirs, from Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* or Ken Loach's *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, than they ever did from F.X.

Martin or David Fitzpatrick or Peter Hart. For many, all the rancorous talk of revision and revisions was as the Walrus's talk 'of shoes – and ships – and sealing wax – of cabbages and kings': the past was a proud and untouchable certainty, and historians still perhaps underestimate the surety of that: that it will take more than facts and figures and footnotes to undermine such faith.

There is a certain nostalgia about the old war stories, about the memoirs of this period that continue to sell so well, about the comfortable invention and reinvention of certain individuals, not least Michael Collins, as the 'man who won the war', the man who brought the British Empire to its knees.¹⁸ The question might be asked: who needs or wants to know the details of violence if it undermines these tales, if it questions an agreed narrative, if it upsets the myth that keeps a nation and a people and a state together, if they choose to cherish the myth regardless? Who, or what, is the historian of violence writing for? Is it for notoriety, for sensationalism, out of a kind of contrariness that revises and revises for revision's own sake? Is it driven by politics or personal grievance, or is it just because the source material is so rich, so emotive, that it begs for a crusade on its behalf? The late Peter Hart bore the brunt of many of these questions in his lamentably short life. Although winning academic acclaim for his 1998 work, *The IRA and its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork*, Peter Hart's investigation of sectarianism during the war of independence and civil war, of what he later called 'ethnic cleansing', his questioning of the myth of Tom Barry and 'the boys of Kilmichael', met with the wider resistance and resilience of that faith.¹⁹ Though his terminology was perhaps too closely and uncomfortably redolent of the recent Balkan wars, the public debate focused more on the infamous ambush at Kilmichael in November 1920, on 'what really happened', on whether Barry's men had shot Auxiliaries after they surrendered.²⁰ Eighteen Auxiliaries were attacked that day by the IRA and one survived, paralysed.²¹ The stirring account of a great IRA victory, where three IRA men perished because of the Auxiliaries' perfidious tactics, had always been a contested one. British reports at the time stated that the IRA had mutilated the bodies, had used axes and rifle butts, had disfigured the dead. From this very first attack, Tom Barry's account of Kilmichael has had its protectors from all kinds of pernicious assault. Peter Hart's work was too scholarly, simply too methodical, to go unchallenged. Hart's methods, his motives, even his family background, were allegedly analysed to try and uncover his motives

for this latest anti-national assault on Tom Barry and all his works. In an RTÉ documentary on the events at Kilmichael, one contributor simply refuted Hart's questioning of Tom Barry's version of events with his own plain truth: 'Tom Barry was not capable of lying.'²² Footage from this RTÉ programme has been posted on You Tube for the wider world to comment on. 'Dadsarmy 77', with perhaps little sense of irony at the chosen moniker, posted the following in response to the Kilmichael piece: 'And I say to Peter Hart, They deserved everything they got and then some, dirty, murderous savages. If you cant protect your own country what are ya then? Its a pity Tom Barry didnt get more of them especially in Cork where they were at their worst, he can shove his book, in the same hole as the auxies are in.'²³ There were a number of other more colourful responses, not least 'piss off back to Canada you bollocks', but whether this can be considered comment or just plain abuse, it is still suggestive of how raw the nerve still seems to be.²⁴ There are some certainties that remain difficult to question.

The fear of upsetting the hard-held opinions and beliefs of the armchair observer is not a good enough reason to veer away from the difficult issues and questions, from the details of violence and how it is considered and even portrayed. In the kinds of detail that can be found, the challenge comes from the nature of the evidence itself. At points the evidence moves and questions individual certainties, never mind national certainties. In knowing what a young man did or refused to do, in knowing the nature of violence, of how it may change a life or a reputation, a sense of who a person may have been may change perspectives on what they may have become. When characterization of violence moves from generation to generation, when some violence is virtuous and some savage, when those definitions slip and change and fall into each other, there is an ethical question as to what does or does not need to be revealed: whose privacy and which silences should and should not be respected, and why. Do we reveal because we can or because we should? And what dictates the difference in between? The detail, the wounds, the blood, the shouts and screams, are needed to understand the war of independence of those four or six or eight young men who went bravely or nervously into the Mayfair Hotel in June 1921, who shot out of fear or hatred or spite or vengeance, or for no other reason than that they were ordered and went to do what they were told, who went and shot because they wanted a war of their own to boast of or recall, just as it is necessary to understand the war

of William or Alice or Doris Hunt. The right or the wrong of it was – and is, and should be – between those four or six or eight men and their Maker. Whether an invented or a reinvented past is called into question is as naught when it is a matter of whose secrets and whose lies we choose to tell.

If the Northern Troubles muted the discussion or investigation of past violence, if there was a sense that violence should not or could not be dealt with, then arguably the continued tortuous process of making the Northern peace has possibly meant little more than exchanging a muzzle for a straightjacket. If writing about violence was considered the means to encourage violence, then studying shared traditions and experiences is now prescribed as the best method to cajole along the peace. In 1998, the 1798 rebellion found itself remodelled in certain quarters for its bicentenary outing.²⁵ To a greater or lesser extent, historians engaged with a highly political agenda that found it convenient to stress how European that rebellion was, how it represented the combined will of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter, that its sectarian elements were marginal, unimportant, almost irrelevant. There was no need to dwell too long or too hard on something that looked, sounded and acted like sectarianism, when Northern Ireland was trying to sort out the matter of an Orange Order parade at Drumcree. In April 2006, at the opening of an exhibition to mark the ninetieth anniversary of the Easter Rising, then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, announced that ‘just as nobody should seek to own Irish history – nobody should seek to disown it either. Our history is a shared legacy and a continuous thread.’ He then went on to identify what he called the ‘four cornerstones of independent Ireland’: the proclamation of 1916, the constitution of 1937, Ireland’s ratification of the Treaty of Rome in 1972, and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.²⁶ On this basis no one should seek to own Irish history because clearly it already belongs to Fianna Fáil.

President Mary McAleese’s musings on the ninetieth anniversary of 1916, which received extensive coverage when she made the opening remarks at a conference to mark the Rising, in University College Cork in January 2006, did not quite carry it off with the then Taoiseach’s own unique aplomb. Her view that promoting the spirit of the European Union ‘dovetails with the ideals of the men and women of 1916’ is something of a stretch of the historical imagination.²⁷ Beyond their attempts to increase our trade in arms with Germany, the men and women of 1916 leave us few other real examples of a

burgeoning spirit of a common European market. In May 2010, Taoiseach Brian Cowen expressed his delight at the prospect of discussing 'the important theme of commemorating our shared history'. The first point his speech made, however, was to reaffirm his commitment to continuing the work of the peace process, 'that shared endeavour', with the newly appointed British Prime Minister, David Cameron. He went on to lament the failure to recognize

that even though we have different traditions and perspectives, what we share is much more important than what separates us ... For too long we have concentrated on our differences ... A space has now been opened for a new and inclusive discussion of our foundation stories. This coming decade of commemorations, if well prepared and carefully considered, should enable all of us on this island to complete the journey we have started towards lasting peace and reconciliation ... while respectful of the past, and honouring the dead, we should not allow ourselves to be history's slaves. We must strive instead to take the opportunity commemorations afford us to reflect on and better understand our shared identities ... We believe that mutual respect should be central to all commemorative events and that historical accuracy should be paramount.

He issued a warning to those who 'will seek to hijack history, to fight again the old battles, to re-establish hostilities and to perpetuate division'. Those who 'will look to use the memory of the dead to bring suffering to the living' were told in no uncertain terms that 'we are united now in moving forward together to a peaceful future'. Apparently it is time to 'banish that "giant albatross" of history from around our necks and replace it with a garland of hope for our better future'. The forthcoming anniversaries will 'deepen the process of reconciliation and help us to write another proud chapter in our history'.²⁸

There are countless other examples from other political parties from other political traditions of this enthusiastic use of the past. And, in this, Ireland is no different from any other country. In many respects it is too easy and too lazy to pick out the hypocrisies and the platitudes that politicians' speech-writers think no one can see. Politicians using the past to justify their present actions are probably just good politicians. Their job is to get re-elected, and if the past works just as well as promises on the economy, on education, on the

environment, on anything and everything else, then so be it. It is not their job to be accurate or ethical about the past. It is their choice to use it to crusade for change, to make or sustain peace, to bring recompense where recompense is due. It is their option to use it to fight dirty as well as fair. And it is not necessarily their job to apologize for the past, either. In the latest case, in David Cameron's apology for Bloody Sunday, on 16 June 2010, an event that took place when he was not yet 6 years old, it might be easy to call it gesture politics, no better or no worse than Tony Blair's apology for the famine, or Kevin Rudd's apology to the indigenous peoples of Australia in 2008, but these are gestures on political, not necessarily historical, terms. It is their choice to make. It is part of the political processes they are engaged in, another instrument, another trick, another play, another way to broker the requisite outcomes from their own political point of view. The day before the publication of the Saville inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday of 1972, Bertie Ahern admitted that the promise of an inquiry into the events in Derry was crucial to the advancement of peace in Northern Ireland. The past was not to be investigated for the past's own sake, it was to maintain nationalist confidence in the goodwill of the British government at the cost of twelve years of investigation and 191.2 million pounds.²⁹ Among Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams's first responses to the inquiry report was to call for similar justice for the eleven people killed by the Parachute Regiment in Ballymurphy in August 1971.³⁰ Whether that ever happens will be due, in many respects, to the political will created by the Saville inquiry, or whether or not political attention will flit as the need arises to other issues, to other areas, to the grievances or complaints of another tradition. It would be unusual, maybe unnatural, to have it any other way.

Yet in the way in which the past needs to fulfil a purpose for politics, in the way in which it is never undertaken on its own terms, is the very point at which it is easiest to see that politicians and political processes are not answerable to the past in the same way that historians are. In an article published in 2003, quite at odds with all the talk of shared traditions, Roy Foster insisted on the importance of admitting hatred back into the study of the past: that without question, hatred was the one thing we are certain of finding there. More importantly, perhaps, he admitted that he was 'not sure whether reconciliation is the historian's business'.³¹ In many respects there was no need to be so tentative. Indeed, Ian Paisley Jr's response to President McAleese's speech in 2006 is just one proof of that:

Whilst Mary McAleese and others in the Republic have attempted to revise and modernise history there is no escaping the fact that those involved in the terror rising were motivated by causing as much damage to the British nation and as much opportunity to Germany during the Great War period ... Many Unionists will not be surprised at this latest glorification and triumphalism by the President of the Irish Republic of those whose descendants spent thirty years murdering and maiming law abiding citizens in Northern Ireland.³²

It raises the question of how to deal with past hatreds when hatred simply does not fit the wider political agenda. While historians are not obliged to take some cultural equivalent of the Hippocratic oath, while it is not their function to sugar-coat the past and make the present better, it would also be foolish to ascribe to them more importance, more powers, than they actually have. If a peace process cannot survive the revelations of some of the past's discontents and hatreds then it is a rather nervous, hollow peace. Political pressure may be there to find the things that unite us all, but the challenge has to be to write as honestly and openly as possible about our disconnections, to understand them as much if not more so than our obvious connections, to write about our violence, our shared wars, our wars amongst ourselves without feeling an obligation to do our bit for peace. Historians have neither the training nor the temperament to make, let alone keep, peace. The concern has to be with the ethical and moral obligation to the past and not necessarily the present; it has to be to the integrity of what the admittedly fragmented and problematic records reveal, not to any political party or agenda or public sensitivity, not to the pursuit of any campaign of recompense or reconciliation.

Of course, that is easy to say at some remove. If peace can be bought by a careful retelling of a contentious past, if cutting corners somehow comes to save lives, then the loyalty to the dead past, to the integrity of the documents, might be as naught; the moral responsibility to the present might easily outweigh any debt to the past. Historians will continue to allow, and to have, their work unknowingly used to support particular outlooks and agendas. They have the choice to enter the political world, the political debate of their work, but ultimately the evidence has to speak in its own language, whether that happens to be the language of hatred, racism, sexism or sectarianism. It might be worth considering or admitting what is actually moving research agendas: whether

research simply chases anniversaries, chases bursaries or political agendas, whether it simply follows fashion, whether for global or transnational histories because they are the latest economic models that make sense for the twenty-first century but not for too many centuries before. Is the work coming from a fear of what can and cannot be said about a past that is certain and cherished for its certainty, that is part of a political and cultural fabric that has no desire to be queried or revised or questioned? Is it not sometimes easier to be dishonest or, perhaps to dissemble about the past, than to attempt to recount it on its own disquieting, even destructive, terms?

One of the most obvious examples of this pointed use of the past within both Irish and Australian consciousness is the case of the history of the Great War and the clear purposes it has come to serve. On the one hand, it could be argued that this prominence is part of a wider interest and sensitivity about the Great War that has marked the development of a more nuanced and complex military and cultural history throughout Europe and beyond over the last twenty or thirty years. On the other, the selectivity of the approaches, from a huge spectrum of perspectives, suggests something else at work in both countries. Anzac Day and its recent rise are dealt with elsewhere in this volume (see the chapters by Dominic Bryan and Stuart Ward, and Roisín Higgins), and the manner in which it has been used by the Howard government to push a particular agenda is clear. The agenda in the Irish context in recent years is not quite so questioned yet. It was a huge part of Taoiseach Cowen's vision of a shared tradition, a means to consolidate the links between North and South, evident from the beginning of the peace process when a monument was erected to the Irish who died at Messines, with the occasion marked by Queen Elizabeth and President McAleese on Armistice Day 1998. The Great War and Ireland's experience of it has returned very firmly to the Irish historical agenda, not least by initiatives like the 2008 Thomas Davis lectures, with the publication of *Our War* by the Royal Irish Academy in 2009.³³ This interest has provoked wonderfully rich work, which reflects the experiences of the vast majority of men who took arms during the 1914–18 period.³⁴ It has redressed that old political assumption that the Great War had no part to play in Ireland's past because it had no part in the foundation myth of an independent Irish state. That imbalance has been redressed, not least because the evidence was too overwhelming; there were too many 11 November retreats to ceremonies and Masses and prayer for this to have been quite the forgotten experience

that many assumed it was in Catholic, nationalist Ireland. At the same time there are still certain areas that remain untouched. The Irish experience of the Great War itself is openly analysed and discussed, and the dead of the Great War are commemorated and frequently written about, yet the majority of men, those who came back from that war – the wounded, the shell-shocked, the men who just came home to get on with life – are somewhat slighted still. It is a little bit more difficult to fit them into a narrative about shared traditions when their experience might suggest something more complicated, when their experience might suggest the manner in which that new Irish state could be aggressive and intolerant and demanded a docile adherence to the right national creed. At the same time, those men who came back from war also do not quite fit the vision of Ireland that its staunchest critics require. They are found in every tradition, in every state of adherence and allegiance, of dominance and distress. They do not fit any simple reading of the past, and perhaps that explains the greater reluctance to find them there.

If the revisionist debate in Ireland and the history wars in Australia have revealed anything, it is something of the depth of the 'disjunction between the historians' perception of their practices and non-historians' understanding of history's role': something that makes their history wars no different to the history wars of any other nation or state.³⁵ The kind of history the public want is not necessarily the kind of history the historian can or should be writing. Sometimes the traditions cannot be joined; the common ground is just not there. Sometimes the national myth is found to be built on all that is destructive and disquieting, on all that might seem unacceptable to the retelling of a simple tale. Sometimes the records reveal more than we might like or want to hear. In the context of the 1912–23 period in Ireland, and clearly in the context of Australia's history wars, we are far more reticent than any of the participants, in what we are prepared to examine and analyse and discuss. In the Irish case there has been clear selectivity in terms of what we have chosen to hear in combatants' testimonies on all sides. The more details one discovers about violence, the more difficult it becomes to fit individual cases into neat patterns, to call them casualties and to draw conclusions about one type of war or another. There is a certain comfort, perhaps convenience, in keeping the bodies at arm's length, in keeping the thoughts and the methods and the motivations of those who killed under careful control. To whose

benefit is it to know that when he is shot, a Black and Tan bleeds as much as an IRA man; that a British soldier can wet himself when faced with death; that an IRA man may have held that soldier's hand as he died, and may have been moved by last words about a wife and child in Liverpool left behind.³⁶ It is not the stuff of a tidy national narrative. It makes it impossible to classify anyone as hero or villain, to answer the implicit questions as to who won or lost, of who was guilty, or who to blame. It demands empathy rather than sympathy with one tradition or another, then as well as now. It requires a different set of questions that take no account of what might be considered right or wrong or inappropriate according to current agendas or tastes. Seeking out shared traditions only makes sense in the context of examining the hatreds and the bigotries, the silences and the disconnections that countered them. Looking at them in isolation is like admiring the stitching but never admitting there was once a tear.

It is not a case of provocation for provocation's sake, of prodding Sir Alfred Cope's sleeping dogs because of some contrary unwillingness to let them lie, but it is not the historian's job to keep the peace, or to make sure that the right things are remembered and written about at the most convenient or opportune times. National myths, foundation myths, will remain, to an extent, regardless of monographs and archives and footnotes and new primary sources found because they are needed and cherished and accepted as such. We can aggravate and challenge them, prick and prod and scratch the surface and make them incorporate more and more of what might become the complicated tapestry of new national stories. But the obligation and the responsibility remains to the records and not to each generation's scramblings for a sense of who they are or who they think they would like to have been. How do we write a history of violence in the middle of peace, in the midst of reconciliation? How does it fit with drawing a line under the past, with coming to terms with history, with all the other glib excuses for ignoring the many elephants in the many rooms? What do we do with Doris Hunt, with the many Doris Hunts? Take sides, argue right or wrong, peddle the old familiar grievances and guilts? We might ask the many questions without being so quick to answer; we might begin to let Doris Hunt speak in her own disjointed and discomfiting voice instead.