**‘1916 As Spectacle’**

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***Ireland’s 1916 Rising: Explorations of History-Making, Commemoration & Heritage in Modern Times*, by Mark McCarthy, Ashgate, 532 pp, £65, ISBN: 978-1409436232**

In its incarnation as both a site of memory and myth-making mirage, the interpretation of the 1916 Rising is critical to understanding Ireland’s modern emergence. Many vectors converged to convert different social and political dynamics into a common cause. Opinion has been divided since then on the meaning and significance of this display of resistance to the British Empire at the height of the First World War. This book seeks to map the legacy of 1916 and capture its shifting meanings by considering the multifaceted varieties of commemoration. If the narrative is often dense with detail, the approach ultimately demonstrates the divide between heritage and history.

Once upon a time, heritage was about the preservation of old monuments and buildings. No more. Heritage, in its reinvented state, is part of the industrial complex of tourism and national identity politics. It is now largely about spectacle and selling the historic environment: packaging the past for the benefit and profit of the present. Preservation is frequently usurped by presentation and the efficient, commercial management of sites and memories as part of a nation’s cultural capital. History is something else.

Ireland’s route forward from April 1916 has few interludes of fulfilment. It was a road littered with compromise, intellectual treachery and cynical, political appropriation. Despite all the promises to defend “the spirit of 1916” it is hard to determine exactly what that spirit constitutes a century on.

Beyond the poetry of WB Yeats and the Gaelic League and the tortured politics of the language movement, 1916 has been regularly stripped of both its intellectual and historical contexts. If the Proclamation of the Republic encrypted the Fenian tradition of resistance, it also crystallised a radical and paradigmatic rethinking of a society that was pluralist, European and anti-imperial, advocating the local above the global. In the intellectual background to the Rising, there were dedicated and brilliant men and women: some of them were executed.

The Irish Volunteer movement was itself a product of historical revisionism, but a revisionist position that placed the people of Ireland at its core and not a history that defended centuries of invasive, iniquitous governance. Rewriting history became a requisite part of thinking independently. The histories of Alice Stopford Green and James Connolly’s *Labour in Irish History* were part of a movement to establish a narrative that could inspire, enable and justify independence. The first chief-of-staff of Óglaigh na hÉireann, Eoin MacNeill, was an Irish language scholar and medieval historian.

The scripting of a new history was part of a much wider experimentation in the reform of civil society. Patrick Pearse advanced a pedagogy that bears comparison with the work of more recent educators such as Ken Robinson or Paulo Freire. Roger Casement’s investigation of crimes against humanity is now claimed as critical to the transition from nineteenth century philanthropic humanitarianism to the rights-based international law of the twenty-first century. There are now modern studies of several of the key women who dedicated their lives to the cause, notably Alice Milligan, Eva Gore-Booth and Charlotte Despard. The decades of reluctance to bequeath the men and women of 1916 permission to narrate is drawing to a close.

It is not difficult to chart how the creative and experimental energy of those involved in 1916 has been contaminated, appropriated and silenced over the years. Interpretations have been conditioned and framed by political contingencies. To some, the defence of the ideals has turned it into an historical cult. For others, it was a crime. It is now as much a matter of spectacle as it is of dispassionate study. In an age when martyrdom is demonised and tagged with notions of fanaticism and fundamentalism and where politics is endlessly mediated and fragmented, it is hard enough to persuade people to protest for a cause let alone die for one. 1916 presents an easy target. And yet, it is inescapable that the Rising has played and always will play a vital part in the Irish citizen’s sense of both nation and self. Love it or loathe it, there is no denying its foundational relevance to the war for independence and to the collective heritage of the Irish state.

In this respect, this monograph makes a very valuable contribution to comprehending the anxieties and challenges of a century of commemorative practice. The author, Mark McCarthy, is a lecturer in Heritage Studies at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. His book reads as an exhaustive excursion through the cultural politics of commemoration of the Easter rebellion. At the outset, expectations are high; four hundred and fifty densely packed pages later, the narrative may leave you with a feeling of dissatisfaction. This is less a fault of the writing and argument than a problem with the subject.

Much of McCarthy’s research is based on a long trawl through local and national newspapers. He references a stream of annual ceremonies accompanied by outpourings of patriotic rhetoric, wreath-laying ceremonies, the occasional unveiling of a monument and countless memorial Masses. If Ireland could somehow retrospectively pool the contents of the collection tray for every memorial Mass held in honour of the men and women who fought for independence then surely the present financial woes of the state would be solved.

After situating the Rising within the wider struggle for home rule, the First World War, the radicalisation of Irish politics and reactions to the uprising in its immediate aftermath, McCarthy goes on to describe how events were initially remembered, disremembered and memorialised. In short, he explores how the legacy was fought over. The victory-themed 1941 silver jubilee commemoration, in the middle of the Second World War, and the golden jubilee, in 1966, receive most attention.

But 1966 precipitated changes that few could foresee. With the outbreak of the Troubles, the diffusion of an anti-nationalist historiography effected a reaction to the Rising and its contemporary relevance. The argument was made that the spirit of 1916 had fuelled the idealism of another generation of armed republicanism ‑ or at least that used to be the argument. From the 1970s through to the 1990s, the state distanced itself from the so-called men of violence and the memory became troublesome.

The gradual brokering of peace in Northern Ireland led to a further revival in public commemoration. In 2006, the ninetieth anniversary was celebrated with an impressive flexing of Ireland’s military hardware. What the men and women of 1916 would have thought of this is a question worth pondering. An argument can be made that the 1916 Rising was in truth a statement against war: a defiant stand against the slaughter on the Western Front. The packaging of the rebels as “men of violence” is one of many interpretative deceits that have been so internalised over the years that it is now challenging to make any counter-argument sound convincing.

Every politician, priest or public intellectual worth a dime is mentioned somewhere in this text. The story concludes with that most “historic” and spectacular of all recent state occasions: the four-day visit of the British monarch to Ireland in 2011. This is seen as the crowning moment in the current promotion of “shared history”, and the political agenda underpinning the so-called Decade of Commemoration. However, McCarthy provides no direct analysis as to what precisely is meant by “shared history” and retreats from directly engaging with the various theoretical studies on commemoration published over the last decade.

Copious footnotes reference almost every noteworthy work written about the Rising, and this book will be indispensible as a source for anyone seeking an introduction to the literature of the Rising. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the bibliography is confusingly compiled. Inevitably, in a study with so much devilish detail, there are mistakes and omissions. References to and analysis of Casement’s role in 1916 are at best sketchy and McCarthy’s omission of any reflection on the role of Antrim- and Belfast-based nationalists indicates a broader level of denial over this crucial dimension.

There are some other key aspects of the significance of the Rising deserving of consideration. How was 1916 received in the wider world? Recent work undertaken by historians equipped with the language skills to read between European state archives has demonstrated the strategic relevance of Ireland within larger configurations of power. How did Ireland’s brand of socialist republicanism shape similar anti-colonial movements elsewhere?

Various recent critical histories of commemoration have shown how acts of remembering may induce a course of forgetting. Similarly, commemoration necessitates a process of dishonouring and humiliation. In order to have legitimate republicans, you need criminal republicans too. Mainstream daily newspapers run regular columns by journalists and opinion-formers who take perverse pleasure in endlessly deprecating the Rising, pouring scorn on its leaders and ridiculing its remembrance. Fortunately, the radicalism of the men and women who made a stand against the First World War and a daring strike for independence has matured well. Temporal distance is allowing nuanced and sophisticated interpretations to emerge that challenge the existing paradigms.

A year into the Decade of Commemoration, McCarthy’s book is timely and provides a compelling overview of what came before. But in a post-violence Ireland, the challenge is to rethink and repackage the beliefs, ideas and values of the event for a twenty-first century environment. To that end we may hope that the most fitting chapter of this study is yet to be written.

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*Angus Mitchell’s biography of Roger Casement will be published by O’Brien Press in autumn 2013.*