

Teaching Controversial History: A Symposium on the teaching of 1916 and the Battle of the Somme

Belvedere House, St Patrick's College,

29-30 March 2012

Organisers:

Dr Alan McCully, School of Education, University of Ulster

Dr Fionnuala Waldron, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra.

Dr Pauric Travers, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra

Subject:

The 1916 Rebellion and the Battle of the Somme represent significant and iconic events in modern Irish history, the meaning of which can be memorialised, celebrated and contested, depending on the context. The forthcoming centenaries will undoubtedly prompt renewed critical engagement with the events and their legacies. Rusen (2002) has noted the formative and dynamic relationship between identity, historical memory and historical consciousness. The teaching of 1916 and the Somme, and the cultural tools through which public, school and community engagement is mediated (films, textbooks, memorials, murals, television documentaries etc) have the potential to influence children's emerging identities in diverse ways in a north/south context.

This invitational symposium addressed three key questions: what issues are raised by the teaching of the 1916 and the Battle of the Somme in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland? How can we address these issues? What are the implications for teacher education?

Participants:

The participants were historians, history teacher educators, teachers (primary and secondary), curriculum planners, archivists and activists involved in community education. The symposium coincided with the inaugural meeting of the Irish government's advisory group on the decade of commemorations and the inaugural Carson lecture in Iveagh House, Dublin, delivered by First Minister, Peter Robinson. It was initially envisaged that the number of participants in the invitational symposium would be limited to 25-30. However because of the level of interest generated, this number was extended to forty.

Programme:

Opening the symposium on the afternoon of 29 March, Maurice Manning, Irish Human Rights Commission/Chancellor NUI, spoke of the challenges facing the Irish Government's advisory group on commemorations, of which he is chair, and the role of educators in shaping public attitudes. This was followed by two keynote addresses: the first, entitled **The Irish Revolution, 1912-22 and the politics of memory and commemoration**, was delivered by Professor Diarmaid Ferriter (UCD) and chaired by Professor James Kelly. The presentation looked at the issues involved in the decade of commemorations from the perspective of the historian, but also the questions it raises for society at large in terms of what is remembered, how it is remembered and communicated. Professor Ferriter examined issues that have arisen in the past in relation to commemorating key events like the First World War, the 1916 Rising, the first Dáil in 1919 and the difficulties and opportunities that have been created for politics, culture and public commentary. He also identified openings for new research and new perspectives arising from the forthcoming commemorations.

The second keynote was delivered by Professor Keith Barton (Indiana University) on the subject **Remembrance, Identity and Education: How Should Young People Learn about the Past?** Professor Barton suggested that educational institutions expose students to academic, evidence-based study of the past, but they cannot ignore students' historically-grounded social identities. When historical events are emotionally-loaded sites of remembrance, this tension between academic and societal purposes can be difficult to manage. Based on research with students in the United States, Northern Ireland, and New Zealand, he argued that students can better understand history's multiple purposes by studying the nature of historical interpretation itself: students need experience examining how and why historical identities and commemorations are constructed in the present, and how ideas about the past change over time. The session, chaired by Alan McCully, was followed by a reception and symposium supper, hosted by St Patrick's College.

On Friday 30 March, Alan McCully and Fionnuala Waldron presented the preliminary findings of a research project entitled **'Ireland at this time was a troublesome place': student teachers' views on teaching 1916, the Battle of the Somme and the First World War**. While, in general, student teachers, north and south demonstrated awareness and openness, the research indicated that levels of historical knowledge varied, with low levels of knowledge evident in relation to key events, particularly among primary student teachers. Most respondents displayed an openness to different perspectives; however there were also instances of prejudice and the assumption of consensus. The implications of this for teacher educators were explored in the subsequent discussion chaired by John Dredge (UCD).

Richard S Grayson (Goldsmiths, University of London) delivered the third keynote entitled **Commemorating the Great War: Myth, Memory and 'Military History from the Street'**. Beginning with an assessment of public memory of the First World War in Ireland, Professor Grayson examined how the war's 'myths' have been transformed over the past two decades and how community groups have contributed to new narratives of the war. He focused on the ways in which new sources and methods,

used for his book *Belfast Boys*, can be adapted for use in schools, arguing that this 'military history from the street' approach can encourage students to engage with the war in ways which have not previously been possible. The session was chaired Pauric Travers

This was followed by two short presentations on community initiatives, under the general heading, **Community, Commemoration and Education: a Volatile mix?** Sinead Murphy (St Michael's Estate Regeneration Board, Dublin) spoke about a project focused on Richmond Barrack while Sean Pettis (Corrymeela Community) spoke about the *Facing Our History* project. The presentations and the discussion which ensued highlighted both the vibrancy and power of such community initiatives and the challenges which they pose for formal education.

Over a working lunch, participants were invited to discuss in groups the central concern of the symposium: how should Education respond to the issues arising from the forthcoming commemorations. A series of specific questions were posed and considered: Is this an opportunity to have a whole-island approach? Is it appropriate to have a whole-island approach? Where does formal education contribute to the wider picture? Are there key principles for dealing with the decade of commemorations? How far should this be co-ordinated across teacher education, schooling, and community education? Do we need a structure/strategy for dealing with commemorations? These questions were subsequently addressed by an invited panel and considered plenary session. Chaired by Dr Daire Keogh, the panel comprised Paul Bracey (University of Northampton); Carmel Gallagher (UU/QUB); Mike Cronin (Boston College); and Brian Crowley (Pearse Museum).

Outcomes

The symposium was a resounding success. There was broad agreement that the approaching centenaries required a coherent response from the education sector. This would demand openness and sensitivity but also a willingness to tackle difficult and controversial issues head on. A recurrent theme was the need to avoid the assumption that there could or should ever be a consensus on difficult issues: history was as likely to divide as to unite. Students should be allowed to study the nature of historical interpretation and the multiple roles of commemoration.

The symposium was intended as the first phase of a longer-term project. It is hoped that it will inform theory and practice in history education in initial teacher education and, ultimately, in schools. The symposium has given a significant impetus to the development of a major north-south research project on teaching 1916 and the Battle of the Somme. This will an interdisciplinary project involving education and history. It is also planned to publish a collection of essays which will pick up the issues arising and explore them further.