



MemWar

memorie e oblii delle guerre
e dei traumi del XX secolo

a cura di

Anna Giaufret e Laura Quercioli Mincer
con la collaborazione di Jean Cruz Holguin

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Remembering The Great War to Foster Reconciliation: A Multimodal Analysis of Three Exhibitions in Today's Dublin

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1. Irish Cultural Institutions as Critical Spheres of Debate

Scholars in the field of Museum Studies have often highlighted that the collections displayed in museums and similar institutions are shaped not only as a result of professional strivings, but also in relation to contemporary political agendas and the social, cultural needs of a community (Lindstrand & Insulander 2012: 30). This seems to be true when considering the Irish context, for, over the last two decades, quite a few cultural institutions in Ireland have positioned themselves as a critical sphere of debate to fuel and respond to wide public discourse on pressing social and political issues, such as questions related to the interconnected notions of national belonging, the narration of nationhood, and the practices of forgetting and remembering, which are of relevance to the historically divided and increasingly heterogenous Irish society (Barrett 2011: 11).

Irish museums and exhibitions have indeed been subject to renewed critical attention geared to delineating their position in, and ‘contributions’ to, the public sphere. Academics have explored the modalities in which they deal with timely concerns, devoting special attention to institutions that offer fresh insights into contested or traumatic periods and phenomena in Ireland’s history, such as the Great Famine (Kelly 2010), mass emigration (Lambkin 2018), or the Troubles (McDowell 2009; Croke & Maguire 2019), because their investigations through museal collections touch on the crucial themes of memory, identity, and/or reconciliation. The studies and scholarly comments devoted to the Cobh Heritage Centre and Dublin’s EPIC are exemplary in this regard. Both the Centre and EPIC, nowadays two major tourist attractions, are the expression of the Irish community remembering its dramatic history of mass migration, for they offer to visitors narratives of actual Irishwomen and men who have left Ireland from the seventeenth century up to the present time. Scholars also noted that the collective need to

remember combines with other socio-political interests: the focus on the Irish diaspora, recounted through migrant narratives and stories of the dispersal of the Irish over the last centuries, calls to various extents for a meditation on the ways in which Irish experiences of migration might shape the definition of ‘homeland’, of what constitutes ‘Irishness’, and who can claim to be ‘Irish’ (Lambkin 2018: 98-99). This thematic attention for emigrants’ experiences intersects with wider public discussions on the reframing of Ireland’s migration history and the recasting of the relationships between the nation and its diaspora on both the academic and political level, which were initially encouraged by Irish President Mary Robinson and her successor Mary McAleese (Salis 2019: 30-31). The examples of the Cobh Heritage Centre and EPIC thus corroborate the assertion that museums and analogous institutions may endeavour to respond to, or are conditioned by, interests and needs in the present society.

Bearing this in mind, my essay builds on the existing scientific literature on current trends in Irish collections design and aims to enrich it by focusing on three exhibitions that have received only passing remarks so far¹: I here refer to *Soldiers and Chiefs – The Irish at War at Home and Abroad from 1550 to the present day*, with its 2015 corollary *Recovered Voices; Stories of the Irish at War, 1914-1915* hosted by the Collins Barracks National Museum, and *World War Ireland: Exploring the Irish Experience*, inaugurated at the National Library of Ireland in November 2014. My contention is that the overlaps between institutions’ and communities’ interests, as well as the formers’ attempts to tackle issues relevant to today’s Irish society, are particularly evident in these cases.

The chosen exhibitions trace the contours of Ireland’s war efforts in the Great War between 1914 and 1918, through an interplay of primary sources and academic discourse which should spur, on the visitors’ part, empathetic reflections on questions of national identity, its relationship to practices of remembering and forgetting, and on the country’s recent past. To focus on the Irish participation in the First World War means shedding light on a long-forgotten collective experience in the nation’s history, because the lots of the Irish soldiers in the conflict were not a significant part of the narratives that the governments attempted to establish in the post-independence years (Link 2015: iv). In the early 1920s, growing political radicalisation led to the glorification of the minority of the 1916 Easter Rising to the detriment of the far larger numbers who had served for the cause of small nations. The Great War was increasingly associated with Britain – Irishmen had served in the British Army for what radical nationalist fringes called an «Empire’s war against Germany» – and thus came to represent a problematical addendum to the glorious narrative of Irish national devel-

¹ The *Irish at War* is mentioned in Winter (2014), Madigan (2014), and Link (2015: 121).



1. The layout of *Recovered Voices*, characterised by nooks and non-linearity. Equally evident is the importance given to personal stories, as the photographic portrayals and items here on display show.

opment, i.e., an event that could challenge the legitimacy of the recently accomplished separation from London (Myers 2010: 2; Johnson 1999: 36). For this reason, selective amnesia fell on the Irishmen who had fought in British uniform at both the academic and political level: historians tended to construct the 1916 revolt as an event of greater importance than the participation in the war, and governments had ambivalent attitudes towards the ex-Irish servicemen which included procedures of «active forgetting» (Assmann 2008: 97-98). As will be detailed, the situation has been reverted only in the last decades, thanks to major changes in the political context and the conjoined efforts of scholars, private people, and national institutions.

The Irish at War, *Recovered Voices*, and *World War Ireland* can be counted among the agents contributing to this re-assessment of Ireland's experience of the Great War and the re-integration of its narrative into the national one. The interest of the National Museum and Library in carrying out these projects may be ascribed to various reasons, but specifically in relation to present circumstances and, indeed, to a collective-institutional need for the re-assessment of the Irish participation in the conflict. Ireland is currently moving through the so-called «decade of centenaries», whereby it is intended the series of commemorations and events retracing the years between 1912 and 1923, which constituted the most transformative decade in modern Irish history. Beginning with the introduction of the 1912 Home Rule Bill, followed at short intervals by the 1913 Dublin Lockout, the Great War and the Easter Rising, and ending with civil strife in the newly founded Free State, this was a period of war and rapid socio-political changes that ultimately gave birth to contemporary Ireland, north and south (Pennell 2017: 256-257). Taking this into account, the three exhibitions are considered as part of the numerous initiatives devoted to exploring the war years and their immediate aftermath to re-examine what happened at the time and



2. The video opening the visit to *Recovered Voices*: it lists the names of the over 1200 Irish men and women who died between April 16th and May 12th in 1916. The panel says that «most were not heroes, but ordinary people in the midst of unimaginable conflict».

as a consequence of it. On the widespread interest in the First World War in Ireland, Nuala Johnson writes:

From fresh academic studies to popular and official acts of remembrance, this period has stimulated numerous re-examinations of the broader social, political and cultural impact of conflict in shaping European and extra-European identities, territories and geopolitical relationships. A new library of academic narratives is emerging providing enlivened insights into the causes of the war and the actions of different combatant states; a host of television documentaries on these events has been commissioned and broadcast; vast numbers of community-led peoples' history projects are being undertaken; and new museum exhibitions, dramas, movies and literary interpretations of the period are emerging (Johnson 2016: 146).

Incidentally, that the discussed exhibitions were originally temporary and then made permanent or extended thanks to the public's warm reception attests to the curiosity in the topic of the First World War and that this is, more and more, an accepted part of Irish history (Pennell 2012: 264). Nonetheless, it should be also observed that the interest in the Irish war experience was not sparked only by the anniversary recurrence, and besides the 'how many', what matters here are the modalities in which this historical period is retrieved from oblivion. Johnson points out that the current efforts to



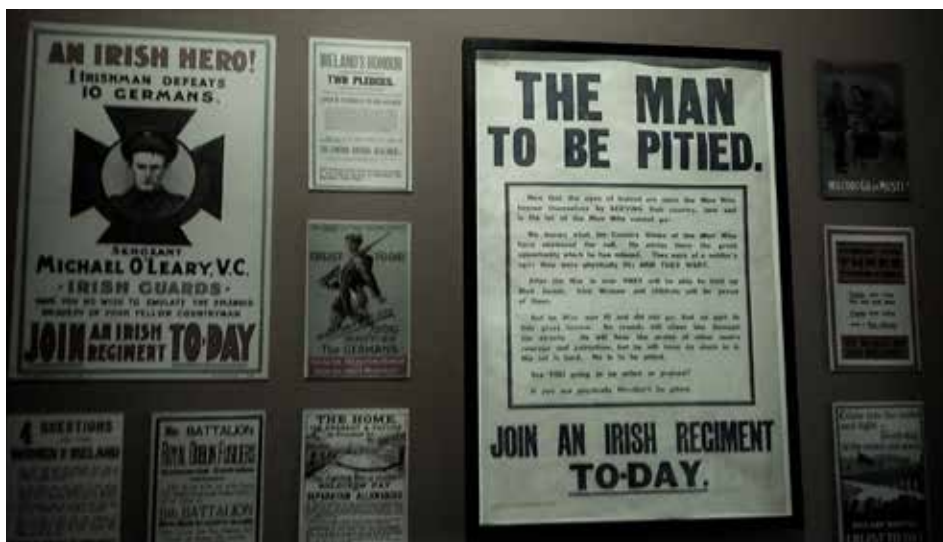
3. Sections devoted to trench warfare are often spectacularised: not so in the *Irish at War*, which presents to visitors the stories and personal belongings of some soldiers.

mark the centenary in Ireland are often part of the narrative of reconciliation that the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have been building since the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998 (2016: 146). In the same line, Jane Leonard states that since then institutional re-examinations and commemorations of the war have been «linked directly to the peace process in Northern Ireland» (1996: 110; Grayson 2010).

The 1998 crucial event transformed both the sectarian conflict in the north and the shape of First World War commemoration and reception in the south, for the Irish Peace Process has «acknowledged trauma» but tried to «redirect it into constructive channels». In seeking rapprochement, shared traumatic experiences started to be valued for the ‘common ground’ they may provide, where to foster mutual respect and peace. Particular attention has been directed to commemorative initiatives that promote common remembrance of the suffering and destruction on the battlefields of the Great War, where Protestant and Catholics, Irish and British, Nationalists and Loyalists, as well as people less inclined to be politically categorised, often fought side-by-side (Beiner 2007: 388; Winter 2014: 168).

Given that, the article argues that the representation of Ireland’s Great War in *The Irish at War*, *Recovered Voices*, and *World War Ireland* should be understood by considering the impact of the changing ideas, identities, and events on the relationships between the Republic and Northern Ireland, and within Eire itself, since the end of the twentieth century. After describing the «difficult journey the First World War has traversed in achieving recognition as part of Ireland’s national story» (Pennell 2017: 257), I seek to explore how the three exhibitions marked the centenary of the First World War, and respond to, or are conditioned by, the wider public discourse on reconciliation.

To do so, I opted for the methodology outlined by scholars Eva Insulander, Saphinaz-Amal Naguib, and Andrea Witcomb, in which field work is integrated with the critical instruments of multimodal analysis. First, I spent time in these exhibitions, pho-



4. Recruiting and anti-war posters covering up a wall of *Recovered Voices*.

tographing individual displays, taking video recordings of multimedia installations, and making notes of particular moments that arrested my attention, so that this documentary material would later assist me in accessing particular details of the exhibitions, such as the layout, use of language, and the interplay between several media (Witcomb 2016: 206). Second, I took recourse to the multimodal analytical approach for its strategic usefulness in helping me understand the exhibitions with regard to their cultural, historical, and social context: multimodal analysis is valuable when exploring how «complex combinations of modes» such as exhibitions «represent versions of the world in relation to interests and ideologies» (Insulander 2019: 117-118; Witcomb 2003, 11). This method enabled me to grasp how issues of remembering, narrating the nation, and national identity are dealt with through the interplay between verbal texts, images, and the choice and combination of artefacts (Lindstrand & Insulander 2012: 31; Insulander 2019: 117). It also drew my attention to the centrality attributed to an «intangible heritage» of life stories in conveying a more nuanced image of national belonging and what constitutes Irishness, which has been being redefined to transcend the dichotomies that commonly informed recent violence (Irish/Nationalist/Catholic vs Anglophile/Loyalist/Protestant) – a choice that may be interpreted in view of the recent peace efforts (Naguib 2013).

2. Practices of Forgetting and Remembering the Irish War Experience

Since the publication of Paul Fussell's classic *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), how the Great War came to be remembered has become a key scholarly concern, and academics have examined various facets of its commemoration, including

the relationship between politics, commemorative practices, and the construction of collective memory (for an exhaustive bibliography, see Malone 2019: 267 and Heathorn 2005: 1104). In this panorama, the case of the remembrance of the conflict in Ireland soon stood out as peculiar. McCarthy observes that «internationally, the events of 1914-1918 are etched into the world's collective consciousness», because ever since the ending of the conflict, «the memories of the soldiers of the victorious allies or entente powers who fought in it has been kept alive in various means such as memorials, remembrance ceremonies and television documentaries». Not quite so in Ireland, where, for several decades, oblivion or ambivalence surrounded the history of the thousands Irish troops who fought in the Great War (McCarthy 2005: 17-19).

In the Irish context, the focus has often been on explaining the reasons why, for almost eighty years, the country's war experience was subjected to selective amnesia by the governments of the Republic and a large section of Irish historiography. At the same time, scholars have explored how the Partition in 1922 meant that the sacrifices made by Irishmen and women during the war received different levels of recognition amongst nationalist and loyalist communities in the north and south (Pennell 2017: 258; Evershed 2018), thus directing their attention towards the episodes of hatred and resentment against who wished to commemorate the fallen soldiers in south Ireland from the 1920s to the 1980s (Leonard 1996). This even though the war deeply affected people from *both* sides of the border: between 1914 and 1918, about 210,000 Irish volunteered to fight in the British Army – 49,000 never returned home.

When Europe went to war in 1914, Ireland was automatically involved as part of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland, and thousands of Irishmen responded to the call in the first months of warfare. The motives of individual soldiers for enlisting varied: the volunteers signed up out of pure economic necessity, for love of King, for Empire, for the defence of small Catholic nations like Belgium, for fear that Ireland could be invaded by Germany, or to see a free, independent Ireland (McCarthy 2005: 19; *WWI «Challenging Choices»*)². From 1912 the Home Rule Bill that would have recognized Irish legislative autonomy was stuck in Westminster Parliament, and the Irish constitutionalist nationalists were convinced that England would repay their eventual war effort by finally granting self-government: this conviction pushed many young Irishmen to enlist in the British Army, which then included the Irish brigades.

² For the sake of brevity, in parenthetical quotations, the titles of the exhibitions will be abbreviated into the following acronyms: *The Irish at War* will be turned into *IaW*, *Recovered Voices* into *RV*, and *World War Ireland* into *WWI*. When available, the title of the specific panel will be provided between quotation marks. For instance, the quotation (*WWI «Challenging Choices»*) refers to the panel titled «Challenging Choices» of the exhibition set up at the National Library, that is *World War Ireland*.

Divisions from the Catholic, nationalist south served with distinction in all the major battle zones of the war, including Gallipoli, the Somme, and Messines: as a matter of fact, given the political and social circumstances in Ireland, these recruiting figures were impressive and the soldiers' commitment beyond expectations (Ellis 2000: 10). Nonetheless, the memory of their courage and sacrifice came to be eclipsed because of the temporal proximity with another event – the Easter Rising, which took place just a few months before the slaughter at the Somme: it was in the midst of the bloody Allied struggle on the Western Front in the spring of 1916 that a relatively small group of armed separatists occupied the GPO and other strategic buildings in central Dublin, proclaimed the birth of the Republic of Ireland, and waged a week-long confrontation with British troops that would end in their defeat (Pennell 2012). The rebellion was soon suppressed in blood, but the memory of the heroism of the insurgents as well as the brutality of the British reaction ended up radicalising Irish public opinion and spurring other young people to take up arms not in Europe, but in Ireland (English 2003: 19-21).

The events of April 1916 and the executions of the rebels changed not only Irish history but also «how Ireland remembered those who had fought in the trenches of World War One» (*RV* «1914») for, in separatist propaganda, the real nationalists were identified with the rebels fighting on Irish soil, whereas the military at the front in the British army were pigeonholed into the role of promoters of an imperialist, British cause. Irish interpretations of the war in general, and the image of the soldier in particular, were thus complicated by the competing narrative of republican martyrdom which had emerged in the aftermath of the Easter Rising, and the idea that the only 'just war' was the struggle for national self-determination (Madigan 2020: 99).

The climate of growing radicalisation was also embittered by the frustration over the mounting costs of a bloody conflict and intensified by the events of the years 1918-1923, which would further cloud Irish memory of the world war and its veterans. At the end of the First World War, the veterans returned to a country radically changed from the place they had left: from 1916 to 1923, Irish people endured eight years of intense military activity, including a vicious Civil War. As written in the first panel at the entrance of *Recovered Voices*: «The result was a new nation bearing both the hopes of many of its citizens, and the pain left by the wars that brought it into being» (*RV* «1914»).

The new Ireland that emerged from the intestine struggle required its official nation-building narrative, which the post-independence governments set out to write. In it, the experiences of Irish soldiers in the war did not come to play a significant part. The veterans of the Great War in Ireland were pushed to the periphery of public memory and national narrative (Farrell et al. 2015: 125) because the memory of Irish participation in the Great War was a source of embarrassment for the nationalist governments of the time which, to the fallen of the conflict preferred, and glorified,

the dead of the Easter Rising and the War of Independence. Amanda Link argues that this failure to incorporate war memory and commemoration into the national story was largely due to republican anti-imperial rhetoric and the efforts of both the Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil governments to increasingly separate Irish and British identities, which led to seeing the Great War as a problematic addendum to the national narrative: there was no adamant divide between Irish and British identities and interests in the war context (Link 2015: iv, 2).

The dead were accorded a degree of respect and reverence in post-1922 Ireland – the scale of Irish participation in the war made it imprudent for any government to deny commemoration altogether (Fitzpatrick 2001: 191; Madigan 2020: 99) – but, overall, “division rather than dignity surrounded the commemoration of the war” (Leonard 1996: 99). Since Partition, the memory of the Irish participation in the Great War became increasingly contested, and the sectarian divisions that characterised life in the country could not but exacerbate the contrasts in the exercise of memory. Evidence of this is provided by the numerous acts against the veterans and who wished to publicly commemorate the fallen, which ranged from poppy-snatching to the vandalization of memorials to squad killings. In the 1920s, veterans’ appeal funds and commemoration events were interpreted as challenges to republican orthodoxy and the foundation narrative of the state; at times this resulted in violence, as when parading veterans were beaten up or when, in 1925, reels of the British film *Ypres* were stolen at gunpoint from Dublin’s Majestic Theatre «in the name of the republic» (Myers 2010: 51). Though extremes of intimidation included bomb and arson attacks on Legion halls and poppy depots (Leonard 1996: 103), the baleful climax was reached in Enniskillen in 1987, when the IRA detonated a bomb during a funeral procession on Remembrance Day– they died in 11.

Nowadays, such episodes belong almost exclusively to the past³, because the narrative of the war effort has been reintegrated into the nation’s broader narrative and major changes have taken place on the political level. In 1998, the détente of relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, achieved thanks to the Belfast Agreement, meant that the Irish authorities and government forces recovered the memory of the war experience, and reassessed it in the light of a project of reconciliation: as Protestants and Catholics, Southern Irish and Northern Irish,

³ One of the most recent acts of vandalism took place a few years ago, in November 2018, when Dublin’s scrap metal sculpture *Hauntings Soldier* had red paint thrown on it. Two wreaths were also vandalised in the attack: they had been left by the New Zealand rugby team to honour its first captain, Donegal-born Dave Gallaher, who was killed at the Battle of Passchendaele in 1917 (McGreevy 2018).

nationalists and unionists loyal to London, Irish and British often fought in the same divisions or on the same battlefields of the Western Front and the Middle East, the narrative of the Irish participation in the Great War harks back to a shared experience that transcends the sectarian divisions that have strongly characterised Ireland's recent history. Since the 1990s, the nationalist and unionist communities of the two 'Irelands' have found common ground in this shared history, which, albeit characterized by unprecedented violence and destruction, has allowed them to go beyond the violence of the recent past (Madigan 2014: 4-5).

The memory of the war experience started to be recovered thanks to organisations like A Journey of Reconciliation Trust which, at the time of the Belfast Agreement, endeavoured to bring together people from both the 'orange' and 'green' traditions by raising funds for a commemorative monument to the fallen of both 'Irelands' in Flanders; significantly, its leaders were UDA paramilitary Glenn Barr and Fine Gael politician Paddy Harte, respectively from Northern Ireland and the Republic (Pennell 2017: 263). In the 2000s, this process of reintegration into the memory of the nation and its official narrative was continued by fruitful historiographical research activity, a lively artistic production, and numerous cultural initiatives, including the openings of the exhibitions discussed here: *Soldiers and Chiefs – The Irish at War at Home and Abroad from 1550 to the present day, Recovered Voices; Stories of the Irish at War, 1914-1915* and *World War Ireland: Exploring the Irish Experience*.

These are the result of many years of planning by dedicated teams of two national institutions, the National Museum of Ireland, and the National Library of Ireland: curators, designers, and planners drew on the respective collections of original artefacts made of letters, diaries, recruiting posters, newspaper reports, and personal effects of first-hand witnesses dating from 1914 to 1918. The implementation of the displays then benefitted from the intellectual contributions of historians such as John Horne and Catriona Pennell, who are engaged in that level of exercise of memory that Paul Ricoeur defined «ethnic-political» – the level linked to the social duty to remember, which lies on the need to fight the erosion of traces, foster forgiveness, and keep alive the memory of those who suffered in the face of the general tendency of history to celebrate the victors (Ricoeur 1999: 10; Johnson 2012: 240).

Common to these initiatives is the intention to reflect on the practices of commemoration and de-commemoration, to restore importance to the Irish war experience, and to rehabilitate the reputation of those who took part in it, as clearly emerges from the titles attributed to the exhibitions: if «recovered voices» explicitly refers to the idea of voices for a long time unheard, «experience» brings the subjectivity of the recruits to the fore, and the deliberately generic «the Irish at War» opens up to include all Irishmen engaged in armed combat, without hierarchizing or delegitimizing the causes for which they fought. In the words of the first director of Collins Barracks, Patrick Wallace, the project for *The*

Irish at War originated from the idea of creating an exhibition space that commemorated «all Irishmen and women whatever army they served» (Wallace 2000: v).

This is proof of how national institutions are receptive to the changing interpretations of Ireland's recent past, to the shifts in the popular reception of the Great War and in the needs of the community. Other aspects are instead revelatory about the curators' intentions to involve wide audiences in the discussions, not just to make them familiar with the details of the Irish war effort in 1914: both the Museum and the Library implemented various «participatory strategies» (Naguib 2013: 78), including the organisation of special lectures and conferences free of charge; equally important is that the exhibitions are easily reachable because they are located in Dublin's central area – not a trivial detail considering that, in Dublin, identity and national narratives are built also through the urban fabric (Whelan 2003: 3-8) – and the public may access online a wide selection of samples from the collections; the exhibitions are like forums where to investigate and discuss the war experience and the post-war period to understand the present and build the future.

3. Life Stories and the Irish Prismatic Identity

Drawing on Insulander's and Naguib's insights regarding multimodal analysis and museum design, it is possible to read the two exhibitions as if they were texts, whereby the panels, the setting, and the choice of materials on display contribute to articulate a discourse of recovery of memory, which can be inserted, in turn, into the broader one of reconciliation.

To begin with, the ways in which the contents on display were chosen and presented to the public can be ascribed to a desire to involve the public in the re-discovery of a long-forgotten part of Irish history and its protagonists. The three exhibitions' layout is characterised by a degree of non-linearity for there are no neat linear rows nor rigidly straight and restrained layouts: even though the 'narrative' is structured by «the relentless chronology of the war» (Witcomb 2016: 208), visitors may roam through the rooms forming the itinerary and stop by/inside the nooks – more intimate spaces – which pepper the displays and present the real stories of some Irish participants in the conflict.

In particular, *Recovered Voices* and *World War Ireland* are both staged in one large room with a vast number of display cases and panels along the walls, as well as nooks where visitors may listen to audio recordings, watch videos, or access digitised material showing that the outbreak of the war had an impact across all Irish life. In *The Irish at War*, design is likewise exploited to create a sense of empathy when regarding the experiences of Irish people in the conflict, but also a kind of 'hierarchy' between the two main events of the years 1914-1918: the war and the

Easter Rising with its aftermath of radicalisation. Even though the rebellion is presented as «the crucial event of Ireland’s ten-year ordeal from 1913 to 1922» (*IaW* «1916. The Easter Rising»), the panels and cases devoted to it are ‘embedded’ into the itinerary outlining the major events of the Great War to suggest, in line with contemporary historiography, that the Easter Rising should be contextualised in the climate of paramilitary violence and frustration of World War Ireland (Whelehan 2015: 5). Similarly, the visitors’ attention is drawn more to the stories of common recruits or chaplains in the trenches than to the lots of the 1916 leaders – of the signatories, only James Connelly is ‘bestowed’ with a case, displaying the undershirt he was wearing during the siege of the GPO. The most charismatic of those «legendary heroes», Patrick Pearse, only figures in the photograph of his surrender on April the 29th (*IaW* «1916. The Easter Rising»).

Concessions to spectacularisation are very rare – or almost absent in the case of *Recovered Voices* and *World War Ireland* – because the exhibitions aim to solicit empathetic reflections from visitors by playing on their emotions but without arousing, in them, ‘the thrill of combat’ (Winter 2013: 34) or mere pity: the goal is not to contribute to a glorifying and mythologizing narrative of the Great War as an occasion in which a noble but doomed youth showed off valour and heroism. The exhibitions appeal to the visitor’s understanding and empathy, through precise choices regarding the materials on display and their arrangement. For the most empirical part of the research, I spent many days inside the exhibition halls, observing other visitors moving across them and, importantly, stopping in the niches specially created to allow them to gather their thoughts in silence. Emblematic, albeit not exactly a niche, is the small, dimly lit room that preambles the exhibition itinerary of *Recovered Voices*: in it, the visitor watches a soundless video reproduced on a loop, which lists the names of the Irish fallen at the front day by day. The focus on their name suggests that individual subjectivity and questions of identity are central to the visiting experience offered by the exhibitions.

Visitors are offered not so much a physical experience – think of the replicas of trenches one might find in other museums – as the subjective experience of those who took part in the conflict (Arnold-de Simine 2013: 72). During the visits, dozens of testimonies, letters, and personal objects follow one another, accompanied, if available, by a photographic portrait of their owners: Nikki Ralston, curator of the exhibition at the National Library, stated that «we felt one of the best ways to illustrate how Ireland experienced the war was to explore a range of themes through real-life stories». Therefore, «with original artefacts, first-hand personal accounts and eyewitness testimony, *World War Ireland* brings visitors dramatically inside the lives of those who experienced WWI» with the stated goal to make visitors «empathise with the experience of Irish people» (*WWI* website; *WWI* «Front Line Lives»). This is also in line with the Library’s mission «to collect, preserve, promote and make accessible the documentary and intellectual record of the life

of Ireland» (About the Library, NLI website <https://www.nli.ie/wwi/>) and, arguably, it is indicative of the tacit institution's aim of not to offer authoritative, grand narratives of the period but to present diversified memories of it (Arnold-de Simine 2013: 2).

Recovered Voices likewise details «the stories of 21 Irishmen and women» using «original objects and interactive material to illustrate the human impact of the war on their lives», whereas at the beginning of *World War Ireland* the holograms of seven 'people' from different stations in life tell us about their war experiences. The museum's curators put human beings in the centre by presenting seven life stories as 'frozen moments' in history: in this way, the exhibition «represents different times, different places and different circumstances» to suggest to visitors the idea of a multitude of Irish experiences of the war and of a prismatic, rather than monolithic, Irish identity (Lindstrand & Insulander 2012: 33).

The choice to focus on the experiences of specific men and women is easily explained. For all of us, personal memories and family stories potentially possess a greater immediacy than historical treatises and most public commemorations, in which emphasis is usually placed on the collective rather than the individual (Madigan 2014: 1). First-hand accounts of the life in the trenches, featured in letters or diaries, may lead to mental visualisations of the horrible conditions on the Western Front and give the exhibitions a personal and emotional character (Insulander 2019: 124). In *Recovered Voices*, for example, the diaries of Captain Francis Clere Hitchcock are opened on the page where he describes «the sickening smell of decomposing human flesh»: these words immerse us in the reality of trench warfare experienced by the Leinster Regiment in France (*RV* «War of Nerves»). Of Andrew John Horne, «one of the last to leave Gallipoli» in January 1916, are reported the following words to the same end: «Nobody can believe we had such a time and came through it alive, but here we are» (*RV* «The Turkish Front»).

Such excerpts also help us to contextualize the «letters of sympathy» displayed in an adjacent display case: these were the letters sent to the next of kin when a soldier or officer died at the Front to provide further details about the circumstances of death. The tone of the messages on display ranges from dry to pathetic, while the content is always 'devised' to console the families of the fallen servicemen: for example, in June 1916, Lieutenant O'Connor of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers reassured the mother of Irish Volunteer Bernard Reid, killed in action at Loos, by stating that «he did not suffer at all» (*RV* «The War Carries On»). Equally harrowing is to listen to the audio recording of the letter that Mrs Senta McDonnell received from a Senior Chaplain of the Church of Ireland in September 1918: after providing information about the death of Senta's husband, it ends with the promise that we «shall meet again in the Great Beyond» (*WWI*). The original letters delineate in front of the visitors the dramatic experiences of ordinary people both on the Western and the Home Front, including the vicissitudes of separated couples and of families of the war dead (Walsh 2020).

Yet, in the Irish case, the recovery of a multitude of subjective experiences is above all functional to the path of reconciliation undertaken. As early as 1998, Mary McAleese observed that the memorabilia and artefacts preserved in museum collections constitute an important starting point in the process of discovering identities and, in this sense, play an essential role in reconciliation (Crooke 2000: 148). This is the assumption underlying the choice of the objects on display in the three exhibitions, whose owners were men and women of different backgrounds, religious denominations, and political beliefs, who took part in the conflict or were involved in it for multiple reasons. The Great War was a «War of the Professionals» for soldiers like Joseph Dowling, «a professional British Army soldier who had already fought in the Boer War» in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers: «the first clashes of World War I involved men like [him]», who believed that Ireland had to be defended from German aggression (*RV* «Veterans»). Then there were «the War of the First Volunteers», those who left immediately as volunteers in 1914 to defend Irish autonomy (*IaW*), and the war of those who did not want to be politicised and enlisted out of necessity or on religious grounds for the safeguard of other Catholic countries (*IaW* «The First World War» & «England's difficulty is Germany's opportunity»; *WWI* «Video: 1915 - The War Continues»).

The walls of the introductory sections of both *Recovered Voices* and *World War Ireland*, respectively a narrow corridor and a panel, are covered up with colourful, bold recruiting posters that urge Irishmen to join the war effort with slogans like «An appeal to gallant Irishmen: Join an Irish regiment today» or «Daddy, what did you do in the Great War?». Many solicited enlistments drawing on pre-political, moral values such as the duty to defend one own's families and women as in the posters asking to the viewer: «Have you any women-folk worth defending?» and «Is YOUR home worth fighting for? It will be too late to fight when the enemy is at your door so JOIN TO-DAY». Importantly, these are placed alongside the anti-war propaganda posters that targeted Irish sensitivities to promote the separatist cause⁴, and this very juxtaposition bears witness to the different loyalties of Irish people at the time.

Visitors are given an image of Irish participation in the First World War as a complex and articulated phenomenon: those who enlisted volunteers or who did not enlist did so on the basis of a variety of reasons (*WWI* «Interview to David Fitzpatrick» and «Challenging Choices»), and, as I will try to explain now, the plurality that

⁴ One of the latter was published by National Executive Irish Trades Union Congress and Labour Party in 1914 and reads: «IRISH-WOMEN [...] it is your fathers, husbands and brothers whose corpses will pave the way to glory for an Empire that despises you; it is you and your children who will starve at home if the produce of Irish soil is sent out of this country. [...] And you can prevent it. To the men of our class who are armed we say, Keep your arms and use them if necessary» (*WWI* «Challenging Choices»).

distinguished the demographic section involved in the war effort reflects the idea that there was not, and does not exist, a monolithic Irish identity or a 'true Irishness', but a plurality of Irish identities. The recognition of this plurality is a necessary condition for continuing on the path of reconciliation.

In recent Irish historiography, we notice the attempt – sometimes even stated in clear words – to offer an inclusive and pluralist version of the complex Irish history that goes from 1914 to 1922 (Madigan 2014: 2), since there used to be the tendency, at the governmental and media level, to label the actors of these crucial years on the basis of a series of binary oppositions: if, on the one hand, there were the Irish Catholics and nationalists who fought in the Easter Rising and War of Independence, on the other hand, there were the Ulster Protestants and the loyal 'West Britons' from the south, who sanctioned the Union with their sacrifice on fronts of the Great War. But as Keith Jeffery emphasises, between these polarised and maximalist narratives lies a more complex human reality (McCarthy 2005: 81). To avoid repeating and thus corroborating these identity distinctions, the exhibitions devote ample space to the experience of people who resist a simplistic categorization for they did not correspond to «an Anglo-Irish political paradigm» of «Gael versus Gall, Celt versus Sassanach, and rebel versus redcoat» (Beiner 2007: 368).

This is the case with Francis Ledwidge and Thomas Kettle. Although from different social backgrounds – from a poor family, Ledwidge was the eighth of nine children and at fourteen he had to work as a miner, while Kettle was a parliamentarian, poet, and lawyer – Ledwidge and Kettle shared patriotic ideals: Ledwidge was close to Sinn Féin and Kettle enlisted in the paramilitary organization of the Irish Volunteers. But if many of the Volunteers were the architects of an intense anti-recruitment campaign and protagonists of the Easter Rising before and the War of Independence later, Ledwidge and Kettle joined the British Army shortly after the outbreak of the conflict and died on the Western Front in combat. Neither harboured a sense of loyalty to Britain, and both found themselves questioning their status as British soldiers before being killed (Madigan 2014: 5). Ledwidge, a convinced nationalist, alludes in his writings to the depressive crisis he suffered after learning of the repression of the Easter Rising, because of which he wanted to return home: but after being welcomed as a traitor by the other nationalists he returned to the front and died in Passchendaele, on 31 July 1917. *World War Ireland* and *The Irish at War* both focus on the letter in which Ledwidge, serving in the King's uniform in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, regrets that «party politics should ever divide our tents» and hopes for a time when a new Ireland would

arise from her ashes in the ruins of Dublin, like the Phoenix, with one purpose, one aim and one ambition. I tell you this in order that you may know what it is to me to

be called a British soldier while my own country has no place amongst the nations but the place of Cinderella (Brown 2010: 75-79).

Another letter is at the centre of the panels devoted to Thomas Kettle. All three exhibitions report the poem «To My Daughter Betty, the Gift of God», written by Kettle during the preparations for the Battle of the Somme, in which the poet and politician imagines his daughter's questions – Betty's wondering why her father went to die in a war no longer felt to be their own by the Irish. Imagining that, in the future, political commentators will rewrite his own story, Kettle states that he died fighting «not for a flag, nor King, nor Emperor / But for a dream, born in a herdsmen's shed». The «dream» of the poem is a dream of reconciliation illuminated by the Christian faith – hence the reference to the birth of Jesus in a hut – in which Ireland is no longer bound in a dualistic relationship with Great Britain, but a part of a wider community, transnational and not exclusively Catholic or Protestant (*RV* «1915»; *WWI* audio recording of the poem read by Cian Siggins).

The references to Kettle and Ledwidge also enable to complicate certain simplistic images of reconciliation proposed by the same exhibitions – images that rely on the fact that Irish from Ulster and the south often fought side by side at the front. An example of this is the section «Orange and Green Flags at the Front», which has been recently added to *The Irish at War* and which opens on a testimony by war correspondent Philip Gribbs – «The Dublin men were going with the barrage, touching shoulders with their comrades of an Orange Lodge in North Ulster» – to tell the story of Father Willie Doyle, the chaplain of the Irish divisions on the Western Front who offered comfort and help to all Irish soldiers, irrespective of their religion. As a token to remember the chaplain's anti-sectarian altruism, the curators have chosen a shirt that he wore a few days before his death – Father Doyle was torn apart by a bomb at Passchendaele in August 1917 and his remains were never recovered.

Here, it is apparent the desire to make today's visitors aware of the traumatic experiences of the Irish at war, so that they may recognize the authenticity of this suffering, as well as the attempt to outline before their eyes a society where sectarian divisions were not so rigid, thus providing an image that can be projected into the future. In my view, however, the sections dedicated to the 'union of green and orange flags' acquire greater strength when compared with those that surround them: that is, the sections describing the (only nominally) post-war period in Ireland, when those who returned from the Front in good condition resumed their old jobs or enlisted in the police or in the opposed independentist para-military groups (*IaW* «The Irish Wars»). The various curators were all careful in bringing to attention documents and personal stories that reveal divergent choices, but also a common attachment to the

nation – the individuals whose stories are presented all identified themselves as Irish interested in the good of the nation. On the other hand, however, I cannot even deny the effect produced by displays such as «Orange and Green Flags» on visitors: I report here, by way of example, the comment of the Irish tourist N.B. who commented referring to the Father Doyle's story: «Heart-breaking! This is why I wear my poppy. Lest we forget them ALL» (National Museum of Ireland, Facebook page).

4. Exhibitions as Cultural Compasses

To conclude, I would like to focus on the fact that today the path of reconciliation through the recovery of these memories once repressed takes place in a transnational dimension. The connection between the United Kingdom and Ireland can be seen in the cooperation between the two states in the commemorative initiatives of the Great War: the National Museum of Ireland has in fact contributed to the impressive *Lives of the First World War* project at the Imperial War Museum in London, which aims at the creation of a digital memorial consisting of eight million stories of those who have experienced the war first-hand. The National Library has instead set up a study that deals with analysing how museums or national institutions remember and explain the conflict to the new generations.

Moreover, the recovery of the war memory and the reconciliation process receive new impetus thanks to an international corporation that transcends the borders of Ireland and the United Kingdom and projects itself into a European dimension. *Recovered Voices* is emblematic here, since it was created with the support of the French Embassy but above all because it ends with a section that broadens the geography of Dublin's memory beyond the city perimeter. The latter part acts as a «cultural compass» (Winter 2013: 24) that shows visitors the visible traces of Irish participation in the conflict beyond national borders. Visitors are invited to go to the main battlefields and cemeteries where the casualties of the Great War lie. As the curators of *Recovered Voices* underline, «one needs to experience the landscapes first hand» («Battlefields Today»); but this is also the way to fill a significant gap in the Dublin urban landscape: many of the fallen of the conflict are buried in Ireland (Cauvin & O'Neill 2017: 820), but many more on the Western Front and in Turkey. Visiting the cemeteries is the way to recover, albeit in a figurative sense, the bodies as well as the voices.

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