

Foreword

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“History is the enactment of ritual on a permanent and universal stage; and its perpetual commemoration”.

Norman O. Brown (1966, 116)

“Commemoration marks out the special from the ordinary, or the extraordinary, from the everyday, and acts of commemoration are about retaining in the memory, or committing to the memory, events, developments and people from the past. When we mark anniversaries or other important historical or cultural movements [...], we assign meaning to an event, occurrence, or lives of individuals or groups that we deem to be important to who we are as a society”¹. This statement, with its blend of brevity and wit, perfectly summarizes what Commemoration means and implies: the present depends on our knowledge of the past, and the past is at the core of our cultural, social and individual memory; Commemoration is therefore a ritual cohesive act, an experience that helps to transform historical knowledge into “collective memory” (Halbwachs 1992; Olick 1999).

Since 2012 Ireland has been celebrating a series of events that took place in the decade 1912 to 1922, the so-called Decade of Centenaries (and Commemorations)², which impacted on the foundation of the Irish State and on Irish collective memory, and is now experiencing a pivotal historical moment, having made choices which could lead to the construction of a truly socially-just Nation and which will be part of the collective memory of the future. This section of *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies* includes six contributions which explore the idea of remembrance, investigating and reconsidering the notions of Commemoration and/or Memory as major discourses in contemporary Ireland, in the wake of the Decade of Centenaries and beyond it, reflecting their multiple means of transmission and the different levels of engagement with the past.

Carla de Petris's essay deals with the Irish participation in World War I – “a strange story of amnesia and recollection”, and the memory of that event in Irish poetry, theatre and fiction – showing that there has always been a “strong link” between that traumatic episode in history and the Irish present. Richard Allen Cave reviews *Signatories*, a brilliant, subversive Commemoration project

¹ <<http://www.creativecentenaries.org/toolkit/what-commemoration>>.

² <<http://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/>>.

dealing with the dramatization of the experiences of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence awaiting execution at the hands of the British, underlining the novelty of the dramatic approach devoid of rhetoric, sensationalism and melodramatic strategies. Oscillating between personal and collective memory, in his contribution – an evocative combination of autobiography and socio-political commentary – William Wall explores how the memory and resonance of 1916 has functioned in different ways and times in Ireland. Patricia Hughes’s recollection of a dramatic event in her own family history challenges the “collective memory” of Yeats, clarifying controversial and conflictual events in the poet’s life: remembering the tragic death of her grandmother Honor Bright, Hughes provides new insights into Yeats’s biography. Andrea Binelli’s essay investigates how the futurology inherent in today’s collective memory of 1916 was revisited by “Yes and No” campaigners in the mainstream debate preceding the same-sex marriage referendum in 2015: the results of the referendum show how the call to equality and democracy advocated in 1916, and constantly forgotten over the last hundred years, has finally found a response (powerfully confirmed by the recent Repeal of the 8th Amendment to the Irish Constitution and its near-total abortion ban). Inspired by two recent exhibitions – the *Queer British Art 1861-1967* at Tate Britain in London, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the decriminalization of consensual sex between men, and *Oscar Wilde: l’impertinent absolu* held in Paris at the Petit Palais, Richard Allen Cave’s “Three Icons” proposes some reflections on how an Irish icon – Oscar Wilde – functions in cultural memory, highlighting “the importance of sites of memorialisation” and the role of visual “objects of remembrance” in the social construction of organisational memory (Bell 2012, 4).

These six contributions show how processes of remembrance and the practice of Commemoration are deeply rooted in Irish society; they are a ritualistic vehicle of collective memory creating socially, politically and culturally shared meanings. To conclude, a note from the Creative Centenaries website: “Being sensitive to this relationship between culture, society and commemoration creates space for thinking about the ways we can commemorate in a positive way. Marking the importance of certain events, movements, or people [...] giv[es] us the opportunity to imagine ways to consider the past and shape society for a better future”³: I am certain that an Ireland of “potent possibilities” (Laird 2018, 30-38) lies ahead.

Works Cited

- Bell Emma (2012), “Ways of Seeing Organisational Death: a Critical Semiotic Analysis of Organisational Memorialisation”, *Visual Studies* 27, 1, 4-17.
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³ <<http://www.creativecentenaries.org/toolkit/what-commemoration#pid-17>>.