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War, Conflict and Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Experience, Memory and Representation

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Introduction

Since 2012, Ireland's ongoing 'Decade of Commemorations' has focused attention, not only on the political ramifications of the events of 1912-1924, but also on the wider repercussions of war, conflict and political violence within Irish society over the last century. This broadening of scholarly perspective beyond political and military history has, as recent commentators have noted, greatly enhanced understanding of how conflict and war is experienced and registered as a cultural, social and emotional phenomenon within Ireland's recent past (Corporaal et al, 2017: 2; Beiner, 2017: 1; Pine, 2017: 1-2). This special issue contributes to this growing body of scholarship via interdisciplinary engagement with perspectives drawn from cultural and social theory. Making use of diverse sources and methodologies, and focusing on a range of different social and historical contexts, it offers a variegated perspective from which to consider the complex and evolving legacies of Irish conflict as they pertain to different episodes, groups and individuals within Irish and Northern Irish society. Above all, it brings together scholars working on new topics and within different fields to illustrate the possibilities of oral history, literary criticism, material culture and memory studies for illuminating how differently-situated actors have experienced, made sense of, and shaped the societal meanings of war and political violence in the Irish twentieth century. In so doing, the articles in this special issue work collectively to further exploration of neglected and under-theorised dimensions of Ireland's experience of conflict whilst gesturing towards new lines of inquiry and thematic foci deserving of further investigation.

Narrating War & Conflict in Irish History and Memory

In addition to the Northern Ireland Troubles, a conflict which dominated Irish political life in the second half of the century, contemporary Irish society continues to register the legacies of the 1916 Easter Rising, Ireland's War of Independence, and the Irish Civil War, to mention nothing of Ireland's distinctive and contested involvement in the First and Second World Wars. Yet, despite the centrality of these conflicts to the making of modern Irish society, mainstream scholarship on the place of war and violence within Irish history has had comparatively little to say about their wider social and cultural implications. While historians and political scientists have long portrayed conflict as a chief determinant of Ireland's modern political development, to the extent this dominant tradition of writing considers its emotional, social and cultural consequences research questions are often formulated through the 'flattening rubric of identity', frequently in an effort to explain the evolution of historical events (Brubraker & Cooper, 2000: 9). In one powerful configuration, apparent in both unionist and nationalist 'memory scripts', conflict is framed as a necessary aspect of collective struggles for liberation and defence, self-determination and national identity (Frawley, 2010: 30). More pessimistically, war and identity have been conceived, within public discourse as well as mainstream historical scholarship, as mutually reinforcing dynamics, engendering a self-perpetuating 'cycle of violence' which periodically disrupts 'normal life', leaving unresolved 'wounds' (Dawson, 2007: 37; Frawley, 2014: 1-17). Within this pathological script, national 'trauma' generates *antagonistic* collectivities, the rigidity and pervasiveness of which motivate further eruptions of violence, producing a 'troubled' and tragic history. As exemplified by much of the 'storytelling' research initiated as part of efforts to 'deal with the past' in 'post-

conflict' Northern Ireland, such rhetorics of memory may define the future as well as the past, prescribing 'healing' and 'reconciliation' as overriding societal imperatives for Irish people at the end of the twentieth century and beyond (Kelly, 2015; Dawson, 2017)

The articles in this special issue build upon efforts to de-centre and pluralise generalising narratives portraying the nature, function and implications of conflict in the Irish past. Collectively, they develop a nuanced and varied treatment of the relationship between 'identity' and conflict within modern Irish society, drawing on different strands of cultural and literary theory to focus attention on a range of dynamics, processes and contexts often marginalised in dominant political and historical accounts. In this, they contribute to the recovery of submerged and occluded histories, frequently through a focus on the personal and the everyday, or what Laura Sjoberg (2013: 265) has called 'the understudied spaces…that are also sites of war'. In particular, the issue pays special attention to the work of gender in shaping Irish experiences of conflict in such spaces, focusing attention on the domestic and private as key loci for understanding the constitutive effects of conflict. More broadly, the issue furthers the deconstructive project of disaggregating and exploring the relations between multiple processes and dynamics frequently conflated within the dominant rhetorics of Irish memory.

Themes & Approaches

While 'memory' has become a prevalent theme within the field of Irish Studies over the last decade, the concept is often deployed to trace the evolution of Irish political metanarratives. In relation to war and conflict in particular, while considerable attention has been given to processes of public commemoration and their role in the production of political identities, lived experiences of conflict and their reconstruction through processes of personal 'memory work' remains an undeveloped theme within the literature. This is despite the growing popularity of oral history within the social sciences and humanities in general, and despite the recent proliferation of 'storytelling' work in the context the Northern Irish peace process in particular (Beiner, 2008; Prince, 2011: 952, 962). The first two contributions to this special issue address this concern via articles which make creative use of personal narratives of conflict to explore the interactions between personal subjectivity and conflict within the context of the Troubles.

In her article 'Troubled Generations? (De)constructing Narratives of Youth Experience in the Northern Irish Conflict', Lucy Newby exploits the deconstructive potential of personal accounts of conflict to interrogate the ways in which popular representations of childhood during the Troubles both limit understanding of the complexities of lived experience whilst conditioning the process of personal memory production. Drawing on oral history interviews with individuals who grew up in Belfast during the 1970s and 1980s, Newby makes sensitive use of formulations drawn from Popular Memory Theory to complicate culturally pervasive imaginaries of the 'troubled generations', showing how the occlusive effects of such narratives foster hierarchies of the 'speakable' and 'hearable' with respect to the evolving memory of the Troubles.

By contrast, in their article 'Nostalgia for 'HM Divis' and 'HM Rossville': Memories of the everyday in Northern Ireland's high-rise flats' Fearghus Roulston and Garikoitz Gómez Alfaro deploy oral history to consider the usefulness of materiality as a way of thinking about the histories and legacies of the Troubles. Drawing on residents' personal memories of everyday life in the Divis and Rossville flats, two high-rise developments notorious during the conflict as sites of state and non-state violence, Roulston and Alfaro explore the interactions between

nostalgia, materiality and space in residents' negotiation of the cultural memory of the developments. In so doing, they delineate the functions of a pervasive ambivalence in former residents' memories of the flats, demonstrating the utility of materiality and everyday life as lenses through which to investigate the often-paradoxical work of placial memory in contexts of violent conflict.

In his article 'The Vicissitudes of Forgetting: military intervention and the memory of the Troubles in England', Barry Hazley interrogates the memory of the Troubles from yet another perspective, namely that of British, or more precisely, English society. While scholarship in the field of Irish Memory Studies registers an enduring fascination with the politics of public memory and the shaping of collective identities within the Irish national context, the intercultural dynamics of memory remain comparatively under-researched, including how Irish conflict is inscribed within English cultural memory and the permutations of this for the development of British-Irish relations (Corporaal et al, 2017: 8-10; Beiner, 2017: 5). Hazley's article, based on analysis of newspaper reportage, popular cartoons, official reports, and the records of a public campaign for British military withdrawal, begins to address this deficit via examination of English popular reactions to Britain's controversial military experience in Northern Ireland during the early years of the conflict.

The next two articles in the special issue explore the nature of what Svetlana Alexievich describes as:

> "women's" war [with] its own colours, its own smells, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings. Its own words. There are no heroes and incredible feats, there are simply people who are busy doing inhumanly human things. (1985: xv)

Those 'inhumanly human things' are the focus of Eli Davies's article "At least we can lock the door": radical domesticity in the writing of Bernadette Devlin and Nell McCafferty', which concentrates on the home during conflict as a site of work and political struggle. Davies shows how feminist life-writing destabilises and calls into question gendered orthodoxies around the Northern Irish conflict. Davies argues that acts of domesticity and care are essentially radical, and demonstrates how the narrative strategies deployed by Devlin and McCafferty simultaneously recognise the material realities of women's lives while puncturing the gendered stereotypes of Northern Irish women during the Troubles.

Síobhra Aiken's exploration of the origins and affect of the hunger strike in her article 'The Women's Weapon': Reclaiming the Hunger Strike in the fiction of Dorothy Macardle, Máiréad Ní Ghráda and Máirín Cregan' also considers the gendered dynamics of participation and representation, in this instance during the revolutionary period. In outlining how Ní Ghráda, Macardle and Cregan reappropriate reductive female symbols of nationhood in order to challenge 'the hypermasculine cult of heroic martyrdom', Aiken's article highlights the aesthetic and fictive strategies used by female revolutionaries to present 'counter-memories' that undermine the official narratives of the period.

Finally, Ailbhe McDaid's article explores how the past registers in literary production, with specific reference to post-memory, 'the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before' (Hirsch, 2012: 5). McDaid's article 'Mourning and Memory: Intergenerational Legacies of Conflict in Elizabeth Bowen's *A World of Love*, *William Trevor's Fools of Fortune*, and Mary Leland's *The Killeen*' engages memory and literary theory to reflect the

social, political and individual consequences of conflict in mid-century fiction. McDaid demonstrates how literature registers the intergenerational legacies of the past through deviant or deficient inheritors, arguing that the processes of literary memory are not necessarily consolatory.

Taken as a whole, the articles in this special issue decouple and problematize the contingent relations between experience, memory and representation to interrogate linear and unidirectional understandings of the relationship between conflict and identity in recent Irish history. In so doing, they point to new avenues of interpretation and investigation in the evolving scholarly conversation on war, conflict and political violence in twentieth-century Ireland.

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