

Response to D Litt conferring

I'd like to thank President Higgins and Sabina Coyne Higgins for their presence here this evening and for their work in promoting Irish history, not only as an intrinsic part of our culture but in challenging us to examine it more critically as a creative force in our society; not something frozen at a convenient moment in time.

I always loved history but never went to university. I can't blame anyone else for that. I was fortunate enough to grow up in a welfare state with free education. It was just one of many bad decisions I've made in my life. One of the better ones was to write a book Fergal Tobin commissioned for Gill and Macmillan on the 1913 Lockout. That made me curious to know what happened afterwards, not so much to the major historical figures involved but those whom Tom Kettle described as the 'second class' leaders, and people who weren't leaders at all, or never even bothered to become followers. However, I would never have received any academic recognition for that work without this innovative measure by the National University of Ireland and I have to thank two of its initiators, Maurice Manning and Diarmaid Ferriter, for making me aware of the opportunity to apply. I always knew those Number Two votes for Maurice in Dublin North East would pay off one day, even if it did take 30 years.

I also have to thank Attracta Halpin for her help in making my application a relatively painless exercise, advising me on how to organise and submit my work, to Ann Milner for putting up with all my emails and wrong addresses, to Catriona Crowe for her wise advice and not so much encouragement as championship over the years, to Katherine O'Donnell for her judicious reading of the text, every draft, despite her other commitments. She didn't say whether it was any good, just that it was amazing and then went on a two week Buddhist retreat to Wales. And, finally, I have to thank my family, Simon, Erika and Geraldine for their love and support and, not least my appearance, which I know may have startled some people, but I was 72 last week, and they insisted on my addressing you in my birthday suit. I had hoped to get away with wearing my wedding suit but, unfortunately the fashion cycle failed to coincide with our 29th anniversary.

I owe my interest in history to my parents, who, like countless generations before them, passed on stories of the past to their children. Their lives reflected not just the Irish but the European experience of the last century. Born within a couple of stone throws of Liberty Hall and the GPO, they were too young to remember the Lockout or the Rising, but they had vivid memories of the War of Independence, the crowds outside Mountjoy reciting the Rosary for the men about to die, and the fear the Auxiliaries instilled as they patrolled the streets.

Before that, both my maternal grandparents had died in the flu pandemic so Mom was reared by her oldest sister Mary, whom she always called 'Nana'. But Mary was a dealer and the only way she could look after her youngest sister was by bringing her out with her to sell fruit and vegetables. As a result, Mom never learnt to read and write, although she did become very good at mental arithmetic.

My other Granny reared my Dad and his two older brothers on a war widow's pension. A minor episode of the Civil War was played out in their flat on Parnell Street and when they moved around the corner to Granby Lane Matt Talbot dropped dead on the doorstep, a story Granny told with great relish as an unrepentant alcoholic.

Dad took such an interest in current affairs that he ended up in Industrial School for mitching. Fortunately, he was sent to Little Denmark Street. That great churchman Dr William Walsh, Archbishop of Dublin had a low opinion of residential industrial schools and believed children should only be removed from the family home as a last resort. He felt strongly enough about the issue to build the state's only industrial day school, for the children of Dublin's working poor.

Even with restricted access to their pupils, the Christian Brothers still managed to inculcate a deep hatred of religion in Dad that lasted a lifetime. There was nothing sectarian about this. He regarded all religions as organised superstitions for the better exploitation of the masses. He was probably one of the oldest 'No' voters on the Eighth Amendment in 1983. Mom of course voted 'Yes'.

As a dealer and casual labourer they found life tough in the Dublin of the 1920s and 1930s and impossible after the outbreak of the Second World War. Emigration was the usual escape route but the IRA bombing campaign in England meant that only citizens of the Free State able to contribute to the war effort were allowed to enter Britain in 1940.

Mom found a job making bombs for the RAF. When the air raid sirens sounded the salaried male managers fled to the bomb shelters because they would be aid regardless of whether the factory was there afterwards, but the women were on piece work and stayed on the assembly line, singing at the top of their voices to drown out the roar of the German bombers on their way to the Liverpool docks.

Dad used to joke that he joined the British army to see the world and they sent him to Omagh. On March 17th, 1941, he was deployed on the street for the first time with a loaded rifle to act in aid of the civil power, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, to enforce a ban on St Patrick's Day parades. He was deployed again at Easter, the 25th anniversary of the 1916 Rising, to help ensure there were no republican demonstrations, while the National Army was commemorating the same event just over 100 miles down the road, here in Dublin by marching through O'Connell Street in full military regalia. Dad was deployed a third time on July 12th in Omagh to make sure no one interfered with the local Orange festivities.

It says something about the complexities of the War that he subsequently found himself in action on his first day in North Africa against the Vichy French after the troop ship he was on was sunk by the Luftwaffe. Here was a citizen of a neutral state fighting on behalf of a major belligerent against the soldiers of another state which was not actually at war with anyone, except of course its Free French opponents. I should add that the last time Dad was deployed in aid of the civil power was in 1944 when the Brussels garrison was mobilised to protect a collaborationist government from the fury of a left wing mob.

Mom suffered significant lung damage in the munitions factory, as did many production workers. Inhaling nitric and sulphuric acid fumes can be more harmful to your health than cigarettes. However, she also earned enough money to put down a deposit on a house, something undreamt of for working class people in pre-war Dublin then (or today for that matter). Dad came home with a trade, he became a welder, something that could not have happened in Dublin, where admission to apprenticeships was based on nepotism. He also won boxing trophies, was decorated for gallantry and promoted.

To hear Dad, or other veterans talk about the war, you would think they had spent it fighting the British army, rather than the Germans. He hated the army's institutional stupidity, its' racism, the snobbery and, more importantly, the incompetence, of its' officer corps; as well as the vulgarity and ignorance of its barrack room culture. Yet, at the same time the war probably provided him with the most memorable experiences of his life.

Having grown up in the recession that followed the Great War, he wanted to stay in the army for the security it offered. He also loved foreign travel and, in 1946, Britain still had an empire. But Mom put her foot down. She was expecting me and they returned to Dublin, thinking, naively, that the Free State would have been transformed by the war as much as Britain. They were mistaken and we soon returned on the mail boat to Holyhead to enjoy the long post-war boom, like hundreds of thousands of other Irish people.

I imbibed my socialist principles from Dad, who had in turn absorbed them hanging around left wing groups in Dublin before the war, given structure by Army Bureau of Current Affairs classes during it and confirmed by his experiences overseas. If you met a man with a good knowledge of classical music, especially Italian opera, and strong left wing opinions when I was growing up, you knew he had served in Italy. These men were the backbone of the British labour movement for a generation.

The war may have mobilised and killed millions, but it also politicised a lot of the survivors.

In that context I should mention Dad's encounter with George VI, who appears to have been a very decent man. It was when Dad was sent to Buckingham Palace to receive his medal. He had not asked for a medal, did not want a medal and, as a socialist, certainly did not want one from royalty, but as he was told he would be put on a charge if he didn't go and as he had already been court martialled and served 24 days in military prison in Glasgow for insubordination, he went under protest.

I think anti-Irish prejudice in Britain at the time is a bit over stated but during more than five years in the British army where soldiers were always called by their surname Dad, like most Irish recruits was never called anything except 'Paddy'. As his name was Patrick, he could hardly object.

When the King presented him with his medal he shook Dad's hand and said, 'Congratulations, Paddy'; to which Dad replied, 'Thanks, Kingy'. Mom never forgave him, but it was his way of saying that whatever he did in the war, it wasn't for King and Country.

When I joined the republican movement as a teenager Dad was quite supportive and if Mom was worried she kept her fears to herself. The socialist ideals I had imbibed meant that when the split came in 1969 and 1970 there was no question of my joining the Provos. Although I dropped out of what became the Official movement in the 1980s I only really began to reconsider those experiences while I was writing *Lockout*. It was a process that accelerated as I finished the succeeding volumes and has continued through my involvement in the series of centenaries since.

I enjoyed the Lockout Centenary, which I think was worthwhile as it addressed issues of deep relevance to everyone living in advanced capitalist societies. But by 2016 I was finding it increasingly difficult to reconcile my life experience with the communal consensus that comprises the bulk of commemorative activities, whether they have Unionist, Redmondite or Republican connotations.

People love their comfort blankets. In *The Long Hangover* a book about Putin's Russia, Shaun Walker asked the Donetsk separatist, Alexander Khodakovsky, why Russians have such an affection for their Soviet past, given its poisonous legacy. Khodakovsky told him,

'Soviet ideology has served as a kind of magic wand, because we don't have anything else. You need a foundation, so that in your own consciousness you don't have an internal crisis... people use what their historical memory has given them... It's more psychotherapy than ideology. They have adopted it, and they feel better'.

I think that for most people history is primarily a form of psychotherapy, part of their belief system, which tells them who they are. Facts are secondary, which historians

should never forget because, if you change the past, you can change who people think they are. Paradoxically, it can also lead to some of those with a closer familiarity with that past, dissociating themselves from it; a bit like saying goodbye to a dysfunctional relative you no longer want to know. The past can therefore not only be a different, but a very difficult country to navigate, as the current controversy over adoption records is demonstrating. The people affected have found their past and with it their sense of identity changed utterly.

In 2016 I met a couple of Provos at a commemoration in Newry, men of about my own age and, to avoid awkward topics of conversation, we chatted about mutual friends no longer with us. On the train home I started making a list of people I knew who died as a result of their involvement in the Troubles. Some were friends, some were passing acquaintances. By the following day the list had over 30 names on it.

One was killed by the UVF, one by the LVF, one died on hunger strike, one accidentally blew himself up, one died of a heart attack while serving a life sentence, seven were killed by the British security forces and 19 were republicans killed by other republicans in paramilitary feuds. Whatever about psychotherapy, there wasn't much to idealise or celebrate there.

Today, like Dad, I have an ambivalent relationship with the past. A love of history provided few insights and no protection from the sort of things that draw young men and women into relearning historical lessons the hard way. Perhaps there is no way of making people immune from repeating the mistakes of the past, not just in times of austerity or repression, but when the world is a relatively prosperous if boring and even meaningless place. Dissent and revolt can be a lot more exciting than subscribing to the prevailing consensus, particularly if that consensus is patently unfair, and may be failing.

I think that most people who find themselves involved in violent events divide into two groups over the long term. One group, seeks to legitimise that past by glorifying it; the other prefers not to talk about it. By default, this gives ownership of the past to the glorifiers. I see that recently some Sinn Fein members, many of them not born at the time, have begun claiming credit for founding the Civil Rights movement, amongst other things. I must admit my initial reaction was more emotional than rational because they were rewriting part of my history. This is of course one of the core problems with historical debate. One person's blog, or even learned academic paper, can expropriate someone else's life; and that seems to be happening at an accelerating rate as conflicts and platforms to debate them proliferate.

When I was growing up in England, in the decade after the war ended, one paradox that struck me was the way civilians, such as Mom, felt far more bitterly about the Germans than people like Dad, who fought them. When she gave out about the blitz, I would tell

her, with all the confidence of a more knowledgeable nine year old, that the Germans had been bombed too; to which her response was, 'Well they started it'.

When I was a few years older I remember watching a TV documentary on war crimes committed by the Waffen SS and Wehrmacht. When I asked Dad about it he said bluntly, 'If we had been in the German army we would have been war criminals.' Unlike civilians, whose experience of the Germans was the blitz and the suffering it inflicted, Dad had seen the allied aircraft passing overhead to pound the German lines and met German prisoners, many of them little more than schoolboys coming forward with their hands in the air shouting 'Hitler kaput'. He saw them as human beings and, like a lot of veterans, had a grudging respect for them as soldiers, trapped in the same nightmare as themselves. His recognition that their different roles were largely a matter of chance and his reluctance to join the consensus in judging others has stood me in good stead.

The Northern troubles barely register in comparison but they had a disproportionate effect within their own communities. This is not just because of the longevity of the conflict, and the fact that it was fought with no rules and constantly changing agendas. Above all it is because it was intensely localised and the enemy did not go home afterwards. They were already home.

The Northern Ireland Consultative Group on the Past, co-chaired by Denis Bradley and Robin Eames, looked at the conflict's effects on the wider community and identified four main groups with 'Legacy' issues:

- Those who want justice 'with somebody in the dock'
- Those who 'simply want to know what happened'
- Those who also wish to acknowledge people who died and suffered in the Republic, Britain and elsewhere and
- Those who 'don't really know what they want'.

But there is another constituency: the perpetrators, the former combatants. They are also members of 'Legacy' communities, be they Catholic, Protestant, Irish, British, policemen, soldiers or paramilitaries. The Troubles were not one conflict but a whole series of conflicts, sometimes overlapping, sometimes running in parallel, fought across mutually contested territory. Often the only thing the organisations involved had in common was the assertion of their own legitimacy while denying that of the enemy, whoever the enemy happened to be.

Eames has acknowledged this particularly toxic legacy implicitly since by posing the question, 'do you simply say, "this is part of our history, and there is nothing we can do about it?"'. But he didn't give an answer. Instead he left the door slightly ajar. When the Northern Ireland Attorney General John F Larkin tried to open it further by suggesting an amnesty, as happened in the Free State in 1924, he received short shrift.

Of course, an amnesty in 1924 suited the victors as much as the vanquished, whereas today it is unclear who the victors are? Or will be.

Our 'Legacy' issues may be relatively simple compared with those of Eastern Europe but the reason for their persistence is the same. They provide the weapons by which some interests, on all sides, can continue the war by other means. The problem with that, to adapt an old Soviet joke, is that it is hard to plan the future when the past keeps changing. What we do know from experience, here and elsewhere, is that you cannot decommission memory or inherited grievances. They may even be re-imagined and intensified in the future by political leaders who continue to trade on communal wounds.

While some tribal leaders obsess about the past, rapidly changing historical processes we barely understand are carrying us on a rip tide to an unknown destination. I find it increasingly difficult as someone who grew up in the sort of democracies born out of two world wars to make sense of societies where oligarchs and advocates of authoritarian neo-liberal ideologies can use technology to subvert the democratic process in order to consolidate the hegemony of the market place.

Capitalism is well named because its' sole purpose is the accumulation of capital. Until recently it had to rely on people to do this and human beings are not particularly good at making rational decisions based on market imperatives. Computers are much better and, as some social scientists predict, economic enterprises of the future may only employ dogs, to make sure humans don't touch anything.

People's roles are being reduced to coping, hoping, shopping and doping. We need to cope to survive, we need to hope - that things will get better - in order to cope and above all we need to shop in order to ensure the system doesn't collapse. Doping is an optional extra. I think it's what Marx called the immiseration of the masses.

Returning to the words of the Donetsk separatist, Khodakovsky, I have to ask is it any more irrational for former citizens of a failed state to put their faith in its discredited ideology than it is to ask the rest of us to put our faith in 'the invisible finger of the market'? Unlike the mysteries of the Rosary recited by the crowds outside Mountjoy almost a century ago, which at least promised the faithful salvation in the next life, the only certainty offered by the market is that it will crash repeatedly, while destroying the environment on its road to hell.

If historians do nothing else, they can at least question more profoundly the course on which we are set and the ideological strait jackets that prevent us from confronting our fate, whether these strait jackets sanctify economic dogmas, celebrate tribal victories or sustain unjust social hierarchies.

We don't need to love it, and we certainly don't need to be owned by it, but we do need to use history more intelligently.