

Memory and periphery in Ireland

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Capitals often tend to dominate national histories. The island of Ireland has been mostly studied from the point of view of documents compiled and archived by a central administration based in Dublin, or by higher echelons in London. This metropolitan perspective, which has dominated modern Irish history, has lent itself to a center-based conceptualization of Irish memory. Remembrance outside of the greater Dublin area has been relegated to a peripheral status, commonly considered to be derivative of the constructions of memory generated in the capital. Hence, memory in the periphery is perceived as subordinate to memory in the center.

In some cases this approach may, with qualifications, seem to make sense, as in the memory of the Easter Rising of 1916. This cornerstone of Irish national memory was essentially a Dublin affair. The headquarters of the attempted insurrection were located in the General Post Office in Dublin city center, nearly all the engagements took place in the streets and in key buildings around the city, and the executions of the leaders, who would be elevated into the pantheon of national martyrs, were held in Dublin's Kilmainham jail. The Easter Rising was subsequently construed as the inaugural event of an Irish Revolution that resulted in partition and independence. Whereas memory of 1916—soon to be marked by centennial celebrations—is grounded in Dublin, a better understanding of the complex relationships between periphery and memory could benefit from an examination of another landmark in Irish history: the Great Irish Rebellion of 1798. Far exceeding the limited scale of action in 1916, the 1798 rebellion stands out as the largest outburst of violence in late-modern Irish history. Significantly, it featured a number of provincial insurrections, but had no substantial presence in the capital.

Influenced by the American Revolution and inspired by the French Revolution, the secret society of the United Irishmen devised, in the 1790s, a three-part plan for a republican insurrection in Ireland. The rebellion was supposed to hinge on a takeover of key points in Dublin city. This was to be followed by mobilization of rebels in the surrounding areas, who were to march on the capital. Finally, the uprising was to conclude with the ignition of risings around the country (Graham, 1996). Within the wider context of the Revolutionary Wars, the Irish rebellion was to be backed by French military aid that would bring about the establishment of an independent republic (Elliott, 1982). The arrival of a French expedition to Bantry Bay

in December 1796 and its dispersal by storms alerted the British authorities to the danger of invasion. The implementation of rigorous counter-revolutionary actions in 1797 thwarted the original preparations and resulted in the arrest of the United Irish leadership in early 1798.

When rebellion finally broke out in May 1798, the attempt to take Dublin resulted in utter failure, and the stirrings in the cordon area around the city met with limited success. Major rebellions subsequently erupted in three provincial arenas: the southeast (principally in county Wexford and spilling out into neighboring areas, in particular Wicklow), the west (from county Mayo, through Sligo and Leitrim, to county Longford in the north-midlands) and the northeast (counties Antrim and Down). In each of these theaters, the rebellion assumed a different character (Pakenham, 1997). This variance generated distinct forms of provincial memory, which interacted in very different ways with the hegemonic historical discourses that emanated from the center. The diversity in the dynamics of memory and periphery can be illustrated by briefly looking at the centennial celebrations of the rebellion, a time when memory of 1798 came to the fore of public life.

In 1898, the United Irish Rebellion was commemorated extensively throughout Ireland and the Irish diaspora. All shades and hues of Irish nationalism were involved in the commemorations, and a number of organizations and factions competed over the management of the celebrations. By late spring, a central committee had been formed in Dublin to coordinate the centenary and a massive demonstration in Dublin was scheduled as the centerpiece of the anniversary (August 15, 1898). As part of the build-up to this national event, the committee appealed to local communities to organize provincial events and '98 Clubs were formed across the country. It would therefore seem that commemoration assumed a top-down model, through which a nationalist elite in Dublin dictated to the periphery how it should remember 1798 (Foster, 2001; O'Keefe, 1988, 1992). In practice, centennial manifestations of commemoration were multi-layered, as local communities had initiated preparations several years in advance of the anniversary. The influences of ingrained regional traditions of remembrance, which had developed over the century, conditioned the ways in which the rebellion was commemorated in the periphery.

County Wexford in the eastern province of Leinster, where the rebels had enjoyed a series of victories from May to mid-June before being defeated, had been the most prominent arena of the rebellion in 1798. It was also notorious for the memory of sectarian atrocities, in particular the massacre of Protestant captives by Catholic rebels at Wexford town and Scullabogue, as well as indiscriminate killing of Catholic populations by unrestrained loyalist forces. Contested interpretations of the rebellion in Wexford were debated in political polemics throughout the nineteenth century. The identification of the rebellion primarily with Wexford placed this location at

the core of 1798 memory (Whelan, 1996: 133-175; cf. Dunne, 2004). Accordingly, the representation of this arena prevailed in the centennial program and the many commemorative events held there were widely attended by nationalist dignitaries arriving from Dublin and London. In the southeast, periphery functioned as center and, to a large extent, dominated collective memory.

The western province of Connacht had seen a belated rebellion following the arrival of a small French expeditionary force in the late summer of 1798. In mainstream historiography, this arena of the rebellion was regarded as marginal in comparison to Wexford. However, provincial communities sustained vivid folk memories through transmission of oral traditions, which recalled “The Year of the French”—known in Irish as *Bliain na bhFrancach*—as a central component of grass-roots historical consciousness. Delegates from Dublin, who in 1898 visited county Mayo (where the French had landed in August 1798) or county Longford (where the Franco-Irish forces were defeated in September 1798), were obliged to adapt their commemorative agenda to match local expectations. In the west, periphery challenged its neglect by the center with a vibrant provincial social memory that demanded recognition in national collective memory (Beiner, 2006).

In counties Antrim and Down in the northern province of Ulster, where the United Irish rebels were predominantly—though not exclusively—Presbyterians, the insurrection had been quickly quelled in June 1798. Following its brutal suppression and the passing of the Act of Union, which created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1800, Presbyterian communities that had been heavily implicated in republican rebellion seemed to realign their politics and were seen to publicly embrace loyalism. By the end of the nineteenth century, these counties were known as strongholds of unionism and militant Orangeism. Consequently, the northern Presbyterian experience of the 1798 rebellion was largely written out of historiography. Nevertheless, social forgetting in Ulster did not result in total amnesia but in the persistence of local and more private forms of remembrance concealed behind a veil of public silence. Efforts by nationalists in Belfast to organize commemorations in 1898 provoked a violent frenzy of “de-commemoration,” as riots broke out and martial law was proclaimed. The northern periphery claimed its right to be excluded from the center. Iconoclastic rituals of forgetting were enforced in public, while discreet traditions of remembrance were accommodated in private, leaving the periphery outside of collective memory (Beiner, 2013; McBride, 2003).

From this case study, it is possible to identify three modes of memory through which the periphery can assert itself: collective memory (in which periphery is at the center of memory), social memory (in which a marginalized periphery negotiates with the center for recognition) and social forgetting (in which periphery purposely remains outside of the center). Although these categories may prove to be useful for the study

of memory and periphery in general, the distinctions should not be overly schematic, as aspects of these three modes of memory can often be identified alongside each other (for further discussion, see Beiner, 2010).

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