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Commemorating history, historicising commemoration: Easter Rising centenary in Ireland from editorial and typographical perspectives

Abstract. This essay offers a combination of historical, editorial and commemorative approaches to the process of historicising the practices of remembering the Easter Rising in Ireland. Considered one of the most defining historical moments that has shaped the present-day Ireland and its relationships with Great Britain, the Easter Rebellion of 1916 was remembered in a series of events comprised within the framework of the “Decade of Centenaries” programme of celebrations. The history of the Easter Rising, spoken and unspoken, was symbolically re-enacted in various commemorative forms and via multiple media: television, radio, theatre, internet and many more cultural institutions. The study deals with crucial interconnected problems concerning the ephemerality of commemoration treated as a historical moment whose aim is to remember the defining historical event and which, paradoxically, itself becomes history. The importance of editorial and typographical considerations, as studied on the basis of selected commemorative texts and media, are important in the way in which commemoration functions and seeks unity in terms of shaping the perceptions of historical events in Ireland. Yet, the editorial, typographic and graphic dimensions of such texts may also question the discourse of practices or, at least, signal inconsistencies. The methodology applied here is that of a case study and comparative examination. Following the temporal confrontative procedure employed in one of the previous coauthored articles (see Konecniak & Konecniak, 2022), the research cases involve two historical moments: the analysis conducted and described during the exact commemorative moment, that is, the precise one hundredth anniversary of the Easter Rising, and the state found almost

five years after the remembrance series, at the beginning of 2021. The comparative basis involves the same research materials, and it focuses on determining changes in the access to the original commemorative materials available in 2016 and linked to the celebration of the 1916 Rising.

Keywords: Easter Rising; commemoration; centenary; Decades of Centenaries; editing; typography.

The aim of this essay is to discuss selected aspects of the history of the Easter Rising Centenary from a perspective of a research editor who is interested in the graphic and typographical construction of centenary visual and textual materials, and the way in which these convey meanings on the levels extending historical approaches. The overriding assumption is to focus on the editorial dimension of Easter Rising visual cultural practices as existing in the centenary commemoration of the 1916 event and in the present-day aftermath. The materials available in 2016 as the official representation of the celebration will be re-approached to determine whether they can still serve as the evidence for the specificity of remembrance practices of 2016 and to investigate how their status has changed up to now (beginning of 2021; cf. Koneczniak & Koneczniak, 2022). An editorial perspective, in its various kinds, has already been applied to analyse and interpret remembrance practices and celebrations of historical events and periods in Ireland. By way of illustration, in her article “The spectacle of memory: Ireland’s remembrance of the Great War” (1999), Nuala C. Johnson devotes extensive analytical passages to the assessment of pre-Great War posters, their images, texts and impact upon Irish society at the time. As regards the Easter Rising Centenary commemorative events, they have also raised a considerable interest among scholars (see *The Royal Irish Academy*; Leary, 2018); however, the connection between commemoration, historical and editorial-typographical studies has not been investigated.

Johnson’s article is also an example of a text which has gradually come under the umbrella category of commemoration studies: a set of approaches, criticism, and body of theories whose aim is to describe and, to some extent, govern common practices of remembering and using crucial historical landmarks and watersheds for political or ideological aims. As one can read in *Theories of social remembering*, a book by Barbara Misztal published in 2003, “[c]ommemoration celebrations are studied within many paradigms”

(Misztal, 2003, p. 127). She gives examples and, to start with, refers to such works as *The invention of tradition* by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. The book was published in 1983, and it is one of the crucial milestones in the development of commemoration studies, highlighting war remembrance and its ideological significance (as reported in Misztal, 2003, p. 127). It “describes the constructed commemorative representations and rituals staged by the modern state” (Misztal, 2003, p. 127). What is more, in this sense, the authors relate commemoration studies to such concepts as social unity and power: “Within this paradigm researchers have been asking questions about the power of such commemorations to draw upon war sacrifices and loss as a means of re-establishing social cohesion and the legitimacy of authority” (as cited in Misztal, 2003, p. 127). Misztal realises the potential of such a perspective and she states that “it still captures the main objectives of commemorations, which always involve the construction of a unitary and coherent version of the past which still provides comforting collective scripts capable of replacing a lost sense of community” (2003, p. 127).

Misztal gives examples of other commemoration practices, too. In contrast to the “monolithic” kind, other remembrance practices discussed within commemoration studies focus on “a multiplicity of invented traditions or a plurality of memories” (2003, p. 127). Within this divergent paradigm, the concept of community is narrowed down in its scope: “groups and collectives of civil society, but not states,” are taken into consideration. She continues her argument with the statement that this kind of remembrance studies “sees commemoration as a struggle or negotiation between competing narratives, and stresses that the dynamic of commemorative rituals involves a constant tension between creating, preserving and destroying memories” (Misztal, 2003, p. 127).

Going further, Misztal notices the third level of commemoration studies which addresses individual experiences and their remembering – “a growing interest in the exploration of personal memories of war” (2003, p. 127). Such an approach is currently given much attention, and its focus is on rediscovering, preserving and restoring, usually by means of digital techniques, personal accounts, stories and anecdotes of eye-witnesses and participants of the historical events commemorated. In 2016, specific websites were created with authentic recordings of stories and materials from the time. In the context of the Easter Rising centenary and its aftermath, some of such archival materials are still available. RTÉ published authentic interviews of peo-

ple who had remembered the Easter Rising (see RTÉ, 2016). Although, by the beginning of 2021, the RTÉ 2016 main website has changed, the 1966 recordings of those who witnessed the Rising are still available. In one of the interviews found in 2016, and still accessible in 2021, we can learn the story of Kathleen Clarke, the wife of Tom Clarke. She recounts her farewell conversation with Tom Clarke before his execution, and the most thought-provoking memories are foregrounded on the introductory website, as in the following example: “the cell she recalls was only lit by a candle in a jam pot. In the hour they had together she remembers they did not talk about the present but the future” (RTÉ, 2016, interview with Kathleen Clarke).

Ireland has recently become a perfect battlefield to wage various commemoration wars: The Dublin lockout of 1913, Ireland’s ambiguous role and participation in the Great War, and finally the Easter Rising have been commonly used to commemorate one-hundredth anniversaries in accordance with Misztal’s perspectives on commemoration, and other historical events leading to the Irish War of Independence have been included in the Decade of Centenaries programme, which has inspired researches in various directions (see descriptions on the Royal Irish Academy website, 2016, 2021; Leary, 2018).

I would argue that its salient early representation, from an editorial perspective, is the volume titled *Towards commemoration: Ireland in war and revolution 1912–1923* (2013) edited by John Horne and Edward Madigan. The editors managed to collect essays which cover remembrance studies of crucial events and places relating to the period just before the outbreak of the Great War and key events and involvements. Those include the Irish presence at Gallipoli, or in the Battle of Somme. There are also articles which address the period after the war, the period from 1917 to 1923. However, the volume is worth mentioning predominantly because of the official political publicity it achieved during its editorial “launch.” In one of the articles on “Decade of Centenaries,” it can be read that “Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht [...] attended the launch by Mary McAleese of the book [...] at the Royal Irish Academy.” (Decade of Centenaries, 28 March 2013: launch of *Towards commemoration: Ireland in war and revolution 1921–1923*). Bearing in mind such governmental publicity given to the launch of the book, one can consider it within the first of the practices discussed by Misztal. In terms of the aftermath, the Taoiseach office has been changed twice following the promotional event and up to January 2021.

The title of the book, “towards commemoration,” indicates a movement, direction to a more significant commemorative destination. And this seems to have arrived in 2016. As the centenary commemoration of the Easter Rising is not possible to be described in its various forms and in its totality, I decided to focus on the “national” official dimension of such celebrations. These are comprised within the programme titled “Ireland 2016” (or “Ireland 1916/2016”), which can still be retrieved in 2021. The graphic composition of the design contains a combination of the beginnings 19 and 20 linked with the common ending 16 to include both 1916 and 2016. The remembrance mission is stated in the following words: “Ireland 2016 is an ambitious and wide-ranging national commemorative initiative, embracing seven distinct programme strands each with an extensive programme of events” (2016 Centenary programme). The number of “strands” is symbolic because it relates to the seven signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, as confirmed by the accompanying video frame showing them and detailed in one of the sections of the programme (see 2016 Centenary programme, the seven signatories). In this sense, it illustrates homage paid to the Easter Rising heroes. However, when we take into account another attempted yet failed homage paid to the seven signatories, the Ballymun Towers, blocks of flats, which turned out to be a catastrophe and gave rise to social degradation of Ballymun residents, the positive value of such symbolism is spoilt, especially when we take into account the fact that the last-standing Ballymun Tower, the Joseph Plunkett Tower, came last to be demolished.

“Remember, reflect, reimagine” are three concepts around which the centenary events are supposed to have revolved. As explained by the Ireland 2016 Programme organisers, “remember” and “reflect” imply conventional commemorative purposes: “Remembering our history and in particular the events of 1916” and “Reflecting on our achievements as a Republic in the intervening century” (2016 Centenary programme, “Remember, reflect, reimagine”). “Reimagine” suggests an invitation to take new stances upon the Rising and its significance for posterity: “Reimagining our future for coming generations” (2016 Centenary programme, “Remember, reflect, reimagine”). The aim of this essay is to analyse selected Ireland 2016 materials from an editorial perspective and to examine their ephemerality or fixity in 2021, thus referring to the conceptual originality of the official graphic logo used to promote the centenary programme: “Ireland 1916/2016.” The following questions have already been and still will be addressed: “How do the edi-

torial, typographical and visual features of selected centenary materials reflect the original ideas and explanations of ‘remember,’ ‘reflect’ and ‘reimagine,’” “How do they correspond with commemoration practices of historical events described by Misztal?” and “To what extent are they still present in 2021, becoming a kind of history themselves?” The questions posed have already led us to the Ireland 2016 programme design, but there will be also references to RTÉ, Ireland’s National Television and Radio Broadcaster, and the National Theatre of Ireland, Abbey Theatre.

The first visual aspect of commemoration is the official 2016 Ireland screen design which still in 2021 offers navigation to other interconnected events (2016 Centenary programme). Prepared in both English and Irish versions, the initial page is created in dark green with some degree of transparency, which makes it possible to display the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in its historical original typographical form written in the serif typeface. Bearing in mind common preference to use sans-serif typefaces for web publishing, the decision to leave the document in its original format conveys an idea of tradition and reflection of the 1916 Rising unique archival materials. The document is aligned in such a way so that the words “Irish Republic to the people of Ireland” become conspicuous. This gives such commemoration practices a “monolithic” national character, combined with commercial predictability caused by the omnipresence of the Irish green colour. Traditional forms are also visible in the hyperlinked layers in which the menu text is created by means of gold and white serif typefaces. The start page not only plays an informative role. It contains a direct invitation: “Get involved” – which bears an ambivalent meaning; in 2016, it was equated with the request directed to the audience to participate in the commemoration events, but back in history, in 1916, it was a call to get involved in the Rising. And yet, its availability in 2021 points to the possibility of exploring both. The viewers experiencing the initial programme design cannot admire the traditional approach to the Easter Rising for a long time because, after three minutes, the content is automatically navigated to the full-screen promotional video, which again, apparently, seems to support the monolithic pattern of commemoration, in Misztal’s understanding, offered by Ireland 2016, yet with elements of multiculturalism extensively highlighted (2016 Centenary programme).

As available in April 2016 (2016 Centenary programme), the initial scene is the Abbey Theatre’s stage and auditorium with a close-up on a woman accompanied by some vintage kettle, then suddenly the viewer is directed to

a completely different scene in which a young man is seen to be doing push-ups in the forest. What we see next is a black couple holding hands and set against the background of the sea. This scene is followed by yet another one in which a young girl is wearing a khaki uniform with a badge “Ireland” and the Irish miniature flag. Then a group of young people, again the scene in the theatre, next in the classroom, at the university and in some aristocratic house. What all the figures in the film have in common is their movement: they are seen as rising to admire something, to become attentive to something or to show respect. This movement conveys a sense of common expectation and unity notwithstanding the differences displayed in the film. The young and the old, the white and the black, the teachers and the students, the actors and the artists are supposed to rise in commemoration of the 1916 events.

As might be guessed, such a promotional pastiche video was prepared specifically as an introduction to the Easter Rising centenary. With the commemorative events being over, it has been changed, and in 2021, a different version is available with other moving images included. The convention of the film has been retained; yet, this time its message is more like enjoying the centenary than preparing for it. The viewer can see short clips of such commemorative events as the parade passing in front of the façade of the General Post Office, the plane show parade, concerts and other forms of celebration with the general stress placed on happiness shared by the Irish community, whose members can interpret the meaning and importance of the Rising in various ways. There are also images of posters related to the 1916 context of the rebellion, and they illustrate the formerly unspoken-of participants (2016 Centenary programme).

Returning to the original context of the centenary events in 2016, one may argue that the idea behind the first version of the film is congruent with other state commemorative practices – it corresponds with the Easter Rising commemoration events offered by the National Theatre of Ireland. The Abbey Theatre decided to use the following theme: “Waking the Nation 2016” (see Abbey Theatre, *Waking the nation*), which implies the original struggle to wake the nation from the British oppression in 1916. The project was prepared to launch the official celebrations in 2016 and cannot longer be found in its original location in 2021; the Abbey Theatre’s main website stores no links to it. This perhaps might suggest that the Easter Rising centenary programme was soon followed by other theatrical projects. Another justification is that between 2016 and 2021 the Abbey Theatre’s website was changed

completely in terms of its layout, visual and typographical aspects and the organisation of content, which might have resulted in the deletion of some of the previous links.

Referring to the main site of the official state programme, the typographical and graphic conventions of further pages of the Ireland 2016 project were apparently created with a view to facilitating users of mobile devices. The menu is constructed on the basis of colourful tiles, squares which contain an image and a text which both lead to particular commemoration events. Some of the titles of the events stress the idea of “Re-imagin[ing].” By way of illustration, one event is supposed to symbolically heal the wounds suffered in the Rising. “Irish culture in Britain: a centenary celebration” is described in the following way: “A concert featuring Irish classical musicians and singers will take place at the renowned London venue, the Wigmore Hall, in April 2016. Led by the Wigmore Hall’s Irish Director, John Gilhooly, a major concert on 21 April will showcase the Irish contribution to classical music as part of the 2016 commemorations” (www.ireland.ie/events). The description of the event, which in 2021 cannot be retrieved in its original location but can be found on the website of the Irish Embassy in Great Britain (Embassy of Ireland, Great Britain, Ireland 2016 – global programme), might imply the revisionary nature of the event with no political subjects which otherwise could lead to nationalist sentiments. However, in its graphic dimension, the design may arouse some controversy on account of the use of the orange colour, which, from a cultural and historical perspective, connotes the Orange Order, the Protestant organisation whose “name is a tribute to the Dutch-born Protestant king William of Orange, who defeated the army of Catholic king James II at the Battle of the Boyne (1690)” (*Wikipedia*, Orange Order). The order was involved in the conflict with Irish Catholic nationalists. In the context of the Easter Rising staged against the British control of Ireland, the use of orange background, even if we assume that there were no politically-motivated intentions on part of the designer, might generate some doubts.

Two commemorative strands of Ireland 2016 centenary programme are supposed to have reimagined the role of women in the Rising – as if responding to Sean O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars*, the play which in 1926 shed new light on the 1916 struggle. In the description of one of the Ireland 2016 events, in 2016 one was able to find information about “Elizabeth O’Farrell, nurse and member of Cumann na mBan, who carried the 1916 Rising surrender flag and who was subsequently airbrushed out of the pho-

tograph where she stood alongside Pádraig Pearse” (This is Ireland, Women present women’s stories). In the consecutive description of the now unavailable “performances” devoted to women of 1916, we could read that they “remember the experiences of women as revolutionaries and insurgents fighting on an equal basis with their male counterparts, as advocates for social justice, and as pacifists and advocates for peace” (This is Ireland, Women present women’s stories). In a similar convention, and in the manner resembling O’Casey’s female figures in his *Dublin trilogy*, in 2016 there was the event titled “Dramatising women’s lives: two monologues.” In the performance, two “fictional” characters, whose lives are set in the Easter Rising bloodshed, voice their predicaments: “Beth explores one woman’s life against the backdrop of the events of 1916. Beth takes in washing and mends frocks in order to support herself and her son, James” (Ireland 2016, Dramatising women’s lives: two monologues). An equally traumatic experience is shared by Katie: “Trapped in a house on the wrong side of the river at the height of the fighting Easter week, Katie waits for news: of her family, of her missing brother, and of a man she’s only just met but feels drawn towards. Tension drives her out onto the deserted streets, where the city waits for the imminent arrival of the British Army” (Ireland 2016, Dramatising women’s lives: two monologues).

The website advertising the event is still available at the beginning of 2021. In terms of its typographical features, the monologues are described in a frame against the red background, with a large image of a woman placed in the shadow of the sun setting in the distance, which gives the whole image a burn-like hue. The girl’s head is turned to the right side, yet no specific facial features are visible. The graphic combination implies a sense of loneliness and dislocation, on the one hand, but also contemplation and emotional detachment from the surrounding reality, on the other (Ireland 2016, Dramatising women’s lives: two monologues).

Yet another aspect of original Ireland 2016 was the inclusion of the Gaelic Athletic Association and its centenary events staged at Croke Park Stadium in Dublin (This is Ireland, Welcome to Ireland). Unlike the case of the evidence of the Abbey Theatre’s involvement in the centenary project in 2016, Croke Park’s information regarding the commemoration is still available online. In the first paragraph of the description, there is a kind of disclaimer: “While the GAA was not an official participant in the 1916 Rising, some of its members helped organise the rebellion, with many more GAA men

participating in the fighting” (2016 Centenary programme, Gaelic Athletic Association). With such a statement, in 2016 we were again invited to re-imagine our knowledge concerning the Irish insurgents, and such re-imagination ensues in the consecutive parts, some of which are worth being quoted: “During the Rising itself, some 300 members of the GAA took part in the fighting in Dublin, while in Galway the majority of the 500 men who carried out limited attacks on the local police barracks on Easter Monday were hurlers. In the aftermath of the Rising, hundreds of GAA members [...] were arrested with many sent to Frongoch internment camp, where Gaelic games were played as an expression of Irish identity” (2016 Centenary programme, Gaelic Athletic Association).

And then, we could learn that the Gaelic Athletic Association members, apparently uninvolved figures in the Anglo-Irish struggle, in fact formed the opposition against the British control: “Following the Rising, the GAA adopted a more republican outlook than before, which brought it into direct conflict with the British authorities on several occasions” (2016 Centenary programme, Gaelic Athletic Association). In terms of the editorial aspects of the event, in 2016 but not in 2021, the viewer was first faced with a film whose starting screen contains a mosaic of figures, events and materials – the Proclamation of the Irish Republic is quite conspicuous. In the film itself, first the viewer could see a large text “24 April 1916,” the date on which the Easter Rising started, then there are black and white images which depict the iconic seven signatories, the General Post Office and a hurling match. But then, leaving the past behind in a smooth camera movement, there was an image of modern Croke Park around 2016 seen from a bird’s-eye view perspective, the traditional commemorative plaque of the Gaelic Athletic Association with the year 1884 inscribed – the beginning of the association, football fans, players, members of the official parade, and all filled with the spirit of solidarity and community. However, in the last part of the film, the visual smoothness was spoilt by the cacophonous show elements as if these were taken from a circus event or Olympic Games opening ceremony. The aspect of nostalgic progression from the Easter Rising times to contemporary sports solidarity is definitely lost because of this final element. Nevertheless, the final design frame feature is the green background which is aligned to the show screen and which monolithically gives the whole design a sense of all-Ireland dimension. Such a visual contrast is a common graphic motif applied in the design of the official centenary programme. The video is no

longer available in 2021, and some might argue that the 2016 celebration has somehow symbolically disappeared from the spotlight.

The final example would be the case of RTÉ, whose Easter Rising commemorative events were included in the programme of Ireland 2016, and the evidence of their existence can still be found online (RTÉ reflecting the Rising). The RTÉ's celebration in its visual dimension, as displayed in the design of "RTÉ reflecting the Rising," is based on the visual contrast between the black-and-white image and the pink frame which is also used as the footer. The central image is, of course, the General Post Office building. However, instead of presenting the front façade, as is frequently seen in various images of the Rising, the background picture focuses on the left wall and the debris left after the fighting. A few people are trying to remove the debris and one person is seen on the ladder. The image is juxtaposed with the busy street, O'Connell Street. A crowd of people apparently not interested in the Rising and part of the monument, Nelson's Pillar, in the place now occupied by the Spire of Dublin, a major landmark in the city.

In general, the RTE's image belongs to the mainstream editorial features included within the Ireland 2016 centenary. In terms of the graphic and typographical aspects, the focus is on the first of the three key-words: "Reflect." The events form a rather monolithic structure of centenary thought; however, some elements, for example, the orange colour used as a background colour in the description of the remembrance concert in London, might have seemed provocative. In addition, the apparently re-imagining aspects do not open up but rather reflect more general discursive practices. The focus on the role of women in the Easter Rising bears traces of O'Casey's dramatic observations made in 1926. The graphic constitution contains some elements of multicultural diversity as well.

To conclude, one of the events of Ireland 2016 is titled "Celebrating multilingualism in Ireland 2016," which apparently does not relate to the 1916 events. "Apparently" is a crucial word, because the event, both in 2016 (2016 Centenary programme, Celebrating multiculturalism in Ireland 2016) and in 2021 (*A nation rising: commemoration of 1916 and beyond*, p. 14), is described in the following way: "Then as now, linguistic diversity was part of life in Ireland, even during the Rising." The last part of the statement in fact stems from an introductory contextual sentence and we learn that "Insurgents in the GPO on April 24, 1916 were joined by a Swede and a Finn who could speak no English" (*A nation rising: Commemoration of 1916 and be-*

yond, p. 4). A noteworthy detail, however, indicates that the history of the Easter Rising has also been appropriated to account for apparently incongruent modes of celebration.

As regards the general representation of the centenary events and the availability of original materials related to them, one can observe the following distinction: the 2016 state programme can still be found and many commemorative projects can be restored – and this also refers to RTE’s materials. However, two major institutions actively involved in 2016 no longer give full access to the information about and history of the event; Croke Park and the Abbey Theatre seem to have partly replaced the original materials from the period five years ago. However, the evidence of their dedication can be found in other traces, for example, on YouTube channels and other media, thus helping one to “reimagine” the celebrations of 2016. In terms of the possible application of Misztal’s perspective on commemoration, the analysis of the materials presented in this essay demonstrates both “monolithic” and “divergent” aspects conveyed through the selection of visual and typographic elements. Such aspects seek their “legitimacy” through referring to individual experiences set in the context of a community life. No tensions and struggles for “power” are noticeable: the history of the Easter Rising is supposed to be seen as a complete, even if made of fragments, or “strands,” whole, with only minor deficiencies or inconsistencies hinting otherwise. From an editorial-historical perspective, a more detailed analysis would be possible had the original materials not been deleted or changed by 2021.

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