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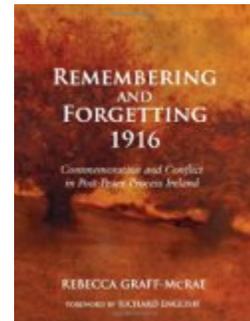
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rebecca Graff-McRae. *Remembering and Forgetting 1916: Commemoration and Conflict in Post-Peace Process Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010. 240 pp. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7165-3067-1.

Reviewed by Jason Knirck

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Rebecca Graff-McRae's *Remembering and Forgetting 1916* is an ambitious attempt to analyze the commemoration of four critical events in Irish history: the Easter Rising, the Battle of the Somme, the 1798 rebellion, and the 1981 hunger strikes. The book examines the ways in which each of these events are remembered, commemorated, or invoked in the context of the peace process that ultimately led to the 1998 Good Friday accords. Graff-McRae's key assertion is that memory should be read as a discourse, and she cites the work of Duncan Greenlaw and Jenny Edkins as particularly useful, as they "enable and encourage polysemic and multi-faceted readings of memory as discourse—that is, as an inherently political interaction between socially constructed relations of power which reflect and reproduce contested positions and meanings" (p. 11). Thus, she argues that commemoration is not merely a series of discrete events, but instead involves a collection of discourses, each of which attempt to place their subjects outside the bounds of the political and to establish their own hegemony, but actually themselves contribute to the exclusion, disharmony, disunity, and instability of meaning that they seek to prevent.

In analyzing these critical readings of memory as discourse, Graff-McRae has "primarily deployed and adapted the theories of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek," and "strongly argue[s] that the topic of commemoration demands a deconstructive approach. The ambiguities, complexities and paradoxes of commemoration require a flexible theoretical and methodological framework that does not attempt to resolve contradictions, to draw black-and-white lines of distinction" (pp. 15-16). Many themes crucial to deconstructionist analysis are prevalent in this work, including the

notion that texts inherently undermine and destabilize themselves, as well as a recognition of constructed binaries, the most important of which identified by Graff-McRae are public/private, memory/forgetting, us/them, past/present, and unity/division. These binaries are always unstable, and discourses that attempt to resolve them always fail to do so.

Through the use of deconstructionism, this book proposes to demonstrate that commemoration is always political and always reproduces unequal power relations. Previous approaches to the subject, according to Graff-McRae, have placed too much emphasis on reinstating marginalized groups and discourses, or have blithely asserted that a focus on "shared history" can overcome these divisions. For example, Anne Dolan's *Commemorating the Irish Civil War: History and Memory, 1923-2000* (2006), in unfavorably contrasting the rather formal and hollow state commemorations of the civil war with more "genuine" private grief, failed to recognize that discourses of private grief are also themselves constructed, and thus furthered an artificial public/private separation. Graff-McRae is less concerned about the "truth" of any particular commemorative discourse, than in how it attempts (and fails) to make itself hegemonic, universal, or unassailable.

As Peter Hart and others repeatedly have asserted, Irish history could benefit from more theoretically sophisticated approaches, and Graff-McRae's book is a step in the right direction as far as the blending of theory and Irish history. Armed with her theoretical approach, Graff-McRae raises a series of key questions about these four events, most notably, "how have the commemora-

tions of these events become incorporated into present politics in the wake of the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement? ” (p. xv). She also lists some “critical questions” about the process of commemoration: “What is being commemorated, where, and how? By whom is it commemorated, and by whom forgotten? Who is excluded or marginalized and whose interests does this serve? ... How does this legitimate, (re)produce or contest unequal power relations and particular understandings of political dynamics? What then is *political* about memory and commemoration? ” (p. 6). The four case studies are well chosen, and Graff-McRae skillfully demonstrates the interrelation between her cases, in particular how the “ghosts” of 1916 hang heavily over all of the other commemorations. Unlike many other historical works, which posit theoretical approaches in the introduction and then largely abandon them in the subsequent chapters, Graff-McRae is consistent in her theoretical deployment.

The methodology works best in the chapter on the 1798 bicentennial. Here, Graff-McRae identifies four discursive strategies (borrowed from the Slovenian political scientist Žižek) by which political actors attempted to confine and shape debate. These strategies include the definition of what is to be commemorated and how, the use of commemoration for the benefit of political parties, the connection of commemoration to wider economic forces or “universal” values (such as liberalism, pluralism, etc.), and the turning of commemoration into “a weapon of war, a battleground” by tactics of exclusion (p. 120). Graff-McRae then gives examples of how various politicians, historians, and self-proclaimed revolutionaries used some of these strategies in attempts to both derive advantage from and close off debate over the commemoration of 1798. For example, language used during the 1798 bicentennial emphasized “the desirability of such ‘universal’ political values as liberty, liberalism, equality, inclusivity, pluralism and tolerance. Within this consensus, these goods were held to be unproblematic, even though their meaning and significance were contested on a myriad of levels” (pp. 156-157).

While the chapter on 1798 is solid, the book does have some significant flaws that reduce its effectiveness. To start, it is hamstrung by an odd introduction. Few of the major works on memory or commemoration in Ireland—works by Dolan, James S. Donnelly Jr., Michael Silvestri, and David Fitzpatrick, to name a few—are engaged in the introduction, which gives the erroneous impression that there has been little historical work done on memory in Ireland.[1] The theoretical perspective is explained well

in the introduction, but the historiographical perspective is not. In addition, the introduction spends a lot of time developing ideas that are widely accepted in the discipline now. For example, most historians would agree that commemoration is not merely an event, but a series of discourses, or that commemoration needs to be seen as problematic and contestable. Similarly, attempts to disrupt the use of 1916 as a unifying foundational myth were initiated by revisionists in the 1930s, and seem less surprising now. These ideas are certainly useful for the book, but there is a sense in the introduction that the author is pushing rather strenuously at open doors. Finally, the introduction curiously never justifies or explains the choice of the 1998 peace process as a focus for the study. No literature on the peace process, or on Ulster in general, is mentioned. Some discussion of this topic would have placed the book on much more solid footing.

A larger problem has to do with the relationship between theory and evidence. The questions identified as central by Graff-McRae—those mentioned above, as well as others spread throughout the text—are not answerable or accessible solely through deconstructionism. For example, the question “how does the memory of the Easter Rising serve to solidify and disrupt attempts at a stable, consensual and linear narrative of both the Irish state(s) and the Irish nation?” is not a new question (pp. 17-18). Thus *Remembering and Forgetting 1916* stands or falls not based on the questions asked—which I think most historians would accept as crucial—but on the usefulness of deconstructionism in answering those questions. And this is where the book could have used some greater evidentiary support. In some chapters, the theoretical discussion overwhelms the subject purportedly at hand, so much so that the discussion and analysis of Irish political rhetoric in the 1990s seems almost an afterthought. This is particularly true of the chapters on 1916 and on the 1981 hunger strikes, both of which spend more time with secondary sources—the hunger strike chapter relies heavily on Greenlaw—than with material from the 1990s. This is not to reject the use of theory in history, or to say that the particular theoretical approach proposed here is wrongheaded or useless, but instead to say that the case for the utility of deconstructionism could have been more convincingly established. This is due, in part, to the balance between theory and primary source evidence being too heavily tipped toward the former. The book would have been better served by more discussion of the commemorations themselves, rather than by somewhat repetitive explanations of the theoretical perspective. Such evidence is crucial in getting the reader to

accept the utility of the theories invoked, and a much stronger and clearer case could have been made.

However, *Remembering and Forgetting 1916* does have a lot to offer the study of Irish history. Its subject is an interesting one, and the author's use of theory as well as her consistent deployment of that theory throughout are both praiseworthy. Greater use of evidence from the 1990s and a stronger introduction would have made for a better book, but even so this is an audacious and intelligent work that deserves careful attention from Irish historians and scholars of memory.

Note

[1]. Anne Dolan, *Commemorating the Irish Civil War: History and Memory, 1923-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); James S. Donnelly Jr., "The Construction of the Memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora, 1850-1900," *Eire-Ireland* 31, nos. 1-2 (1996): 26-61; Michael Silvestri, *Ireland and India: Nationalism, Empire and Memory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and David Fitzpatrick, "Commemoration in the Irish Free State: a Chronicle of Embarrassment," in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed. Ian MacBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 184-203.

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