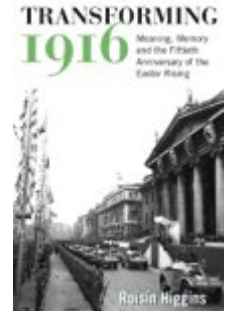


Roisin Higgins. *Transforming 1916: Meaning, Memory and the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Easter Rising.* Cork: Cork University Press, 2012. 288 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-85918-486-8.



Reviewed by Jason Myers

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Commissioned by Nicholas M. Wolf (New York University)

Roisín Higgins takes on a monumental task (excuse the pun) in the pages of *Transforming 1916*. The Easter Rising has received a lot of scholarly attention among Irish historians, and for good reason. At the same time, it can be difficult to find new veins to mine on the subject. The book does not trace the changes to the meaning and the memory of the Rising over the fifty years prior to 1966, however, but instead treats the anniversary commemorations of that year as a snapshot of where things stood in Ireland. According to Higgins the two driving forces of the commemoration from the state's perspective in 1966 were to "demonstrate the success of the modern Republic and to sideline the republican movement" (p. 3). By 1966, as Higgins points out, the modernization of Irish society over the course of the twentieth century and the concomitant idea of modernity that accompanied it served as a catalyst for changes to both meaning and memory. Higgins thus mixes cultural history with the occasional strand of political history to help provide context for understanding the status quo at the time of

the fiftieth anniversary. Because the book covers a very small window of time the thematic approach fits quite well, and this is one of its strengths too.

In assessing the changes to commemoration in place by 1966, Higgins begins by highlighting more generally the ways in which the Rising was linked to broader historical themes. No longer did the Rising sit exclusively atop the pedestal of Irish history; instead the manner in which the memory of the Rising was presented in 1966 occupied a richer context that included more acute awareness of its relationship to the First World War and the decade of change in Ireland from 1913 to 1923. The martyrs of the Rising also experienced an altered status by 1966 whereby their pseudo-deification as the cornerstones of the modern state gave way to a longer view of the struggle for independence. While Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmett, and Thomas Davis have always been in the Irish republican pantheon, these forebears enjoyed a more equal status during the fiftieth anniversary

in an effort to downplay the physical force and antagonistic aspects associated with the Rising.

Individual chapters subsequently focus on the commemorations from a variety of viewpoints. The first chapter examines the official commemoration of the Rising. Several different areas of Irish society and culture appear in this chapter, including religion, education, memorials, youth, and sports; Higgins also examines how the state extended its reach into each of these areas. In practice the state commissioned a number of projects but then retreated into a *laissez-faire* stance. While there was certainly reason for concern about how to package and represent the Rising on the part of the state this dynamic comes across as something other than “official.” The fact that the state commissioned many of these commemorative projects, but did little else confuses the meaning of “official” commemoration of the Rising and it is unclear where pageants and performances, monuments, and film fall on the official/unofficial divide. This is one area where a clearer definition of what Higgins considers “official” commemoration would be useful.

The second chapter looks at various unofficial Rising commemorations. These are posited as “alternatives to the official commemoration,” but as with the first chapter, a definition of what constitutes “alternative” is also elusive. It seems as though any commemoration that did not involve the state is simply lumped into a category of unofficial or “alternative” without any real examination of what that meant. For example, republicans continued to commemorate the Rising in 1966 as they had done for the previous forty-plus years. Higgins even goes so far as to state, “The republican movement had reasonable claims on the Rising; but they had an even better claim of ownership over its commemoration” (pp. 57–58). This statement undermines the first chapter because it calls into question which group is the legitimate custodian of official Rising memory and reiterates the need for more explicit definitions of memory.

In general, the groups examined in chapter 2 challenged the orthodox view of the Rising, i.e., republicans, labor, hunger strikers, and women. For these groups the focus is less on how each one engaged the memory of the Rising through commemoration, and more on how their perception of the current state of the Irish nation clashed with each group’s idealized version of Ireland and in many ways their collective push back was a stance against the state’s attempt to sanitize the memory and meaning of the Rising.

Reactions among different sections of the population of Northern Ireland take center stage in chapter 3. Higgins reveals the existence of a surprising degree of toleration in the north during the Rising commemorations, especially when one considers the fact that she also suggests the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising was one of many factors that contributed to the outbreak of the Troubles just a few years later. In that sense this chapter is primarily focused on setting the scene in anticipation of the Troubles and less on the actual memory and commemoration of the Rising. Higgins mentions the importance of the Battle of Somme to northerners in comparison with the importance of the Rising in the south, but a more extended line of inquiry and analysis comparing and contrasting the memory of these seminal events might have been justified here.

Again, modernization is a central theme in understanding how the memory of the Rising changed by 1966. Higgins does a good job of demonstrating how the desire to represent Ireland as a modern nation was a concern for the southern government. At the same time, it is interesting that the cultural media used to convey this message were not always a product of modernization. For example, the fourth chapter examines pageants and performance, which seem to fit more comfortably into the category of traditional culture. Higgins shows that content was updated to reflect a more neutral reading of the Rising, but the framework for presenting that message re-

mained decidedly traditional. A similar finding emerges in chapter 5, which looks at monuments. Although not a modern idea—in fact, a number of projects dedicated during the anniversary celebrations were not commissioned specifically for that event, and were dedicated at the time only because of delays, happenstance, or both—monuments nevertheless redefined the spaces they occupied in Dublin. By re-encoding areas of the city important to the Rising, these memorials altered both the physical landscape of the city and the memory of Easter 1916. The most modern medium Higgins discusses is film. The southern state commissioned a number of films and television programs to present the Rising to modern audiences. This section is among the most compelling in the book, and the one that best supports Higgins's thesis. These films were able to blur the lines between the past and the present and produced a more intimate and personal experience of the Rising for those who were not alive when it took place.

The final chapter looks at Rising commemorations abroad, and although Higgins suggests that this was an area where the state wanted to emphasize the modernization trope, it appears that in reality the southern state had very little control over foreign commemorations. In fact, the response abroad was very diverse and ranged from apathy and reinforcement of Irish stereotypes, to celebrating ideals that the state tried to mute domestically.

Although the evidence mined by Higgins is appropriate for the areas covered, this reviewer could not help but wonder if there were other sources available that may have enhanced the work. Materials relating to the various groups and institutions that took part in both official and unofficial commemorations would certainly be welcome if they exist. Higgins returns again and again to the idea that the state wanted to control the Rising commemoration. This is especially true of the state's desire to cast the modern Irish state

as successful and viable. However there is very little to indicate whether this was a successful strategy. Ostensibly missing is the public response to the state's commemorative efforts: examining public feedback on the 1966 events would be very helpful for gauging their success. Letters to the editor of local and national newspapers and other periodicals, for example, would have been a possible way to access that information.

Nevertheless, while these additions may enhance the book, they are quibbles at most. At the end of the day, Higgins's study of Rising meaning and memory in 1966 provides a useful midpoint evaluation as we quickly approach the centennial anniversary of the Easter Rising. Although it may seem at times that the mythology of the Rising has remained static over the past century, especially in the realm of politics, Higgins demonstrates that politics and culture do not always share the same narrative. By focusing on cultural elements of commemoration she provides a useful window into understanding the changes that Rising memory encountered, even if they were not necessarily retained in the collective memory of Irish society. For those interested in the intersection of culture and memory this book is one of several recent publications to explore that dynamic in Ireland. Perhaps most useful in this sense is the types of cultural media that Higgins elected to examine. Moving beyond the now standard touch points of memory, e.g., monuments and rituals, to more modern media forms, e.g., film and television, opens up new avenues for research and considering how different media forms influence memory, remembering, and forgetting. Some readers may be frustrated by the lack of definition when it comes to identifying and categorizing different types of memory, but even with that caveat, Higgins provides a useful entry point for studying the cultural aspects of the Rising and how that resonated in Irish collective memory.

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