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'The Place of the First World War in Contemporary Irish Republicanism'

Abstract

This paper assesses the role of remembrance of the First World War in contemporary Irish republicanism, both Official and Provisional, while placing republican remembrance in the context of changes in wider nationalism. The paper explores the nature of broad nationalist engagement in the British army in 1914-18 and how that has been remembered. Placing republican views within board nationalist and all-Ireland contexts, the paper focuses on developments within Sinn Féin which led to Alex Maskey's involvement (as Lord Mayor of Belfast) in Somme commemoration in 2002, and Tom Hartley's repetition of that in 2008. It examines republicans' 'discovery' of ancestors with a past in the British military, focusing on the work of members of the Official Republican Movement and its ex-prisoners group, *An Eochair*, within the Messines Project. The paper concludes with an examination of how changes in attitudes to remembrance are part of republicanism's 'historic compromise' (Martin McGuinness) with unionism. The paper argues that despite a significant shift, republicans have engaged with remembrance on their own terms, and that the gap between them and unionists remains large, with possibility of genuinely shared remembrance remote.

Author's note: interviews with SDLP members are being conducted on 31st March and an oral update will be provided.

Despite Irish republicanism's deep historical consciousness, and its propensity to reference history, surprisingly little has been written about the way in which it has approached history.¹ That is unsurprising in one sense. Republican history has focused on a few key dates, principally 1798, 1916 and the War of Independence, as key moments in a narrative which both defines and justifies the movement. Little analysis is required to establish the essence of how these dates and their events have been used by republicans. Nor has the addition of more recent events, such as the introduction of internment in 1971, and the hunger strikes of 1981, complicated the story or the way it is told. The story of

¹ An exception is Agnès Maillot, *New Sinn Féin: Irish Republicanism in the Twenty-First Century* (London, 2005), pp. 166-174.

the past told by republicans is one of oppression, resistance, solidarity, and sacrifice.

However, since the mid-1990s, a central aspect of the republican story has been steadily reassessed by both Provisional and Official Republicanism: 1916 – not the events of the Easter Rising, but the context in which they took place, the First World War. This paper examines how and why that has happened, and the implications it has for politics today. It also considers the effects of such a reassessment of 1914-18 on community relations in Northern Ireland, and briefly assesses how far this issue relates to what Martin McGuinness described as ‘an historic compromise’ between nationalism and unionism’.²

Any analysis of the republican relationship with memory of the war should be rooted in an understanding of who from Ireland actually served in the British army in 1914-18. While the unionist community engaged with enthusiasm in the war effort, there was a split among nationalists. The majority backed John Redmond who told the Irish Volunteers that they had a ‘two-fold duty’ to defend Ireland’s shores and to fight ‘wherever the firing line extends in defence of the right of freedom and religion in this war’.³ Consequently, a more militant section of the IV led by Eoin MacNeill expelled Redmond and his supporters from the IV’s formal structures, even though across Ireland, approximately 93% of the Volunteers backed Redmond.⁴ By mid-October 1914, Redmond had re-affirmed his control of the Irish Volunteers, renamed as the Irish National Volunteers (INV).⁵

So as early as September 1914, there was a rigorous debate within nationalism about whether or not to take part in the war, and there was a vocal minority which wanted no part. Arguably, that represented a crucial stage in the emergence of republicanism as a movement which had a clearly different political strategy to constitutional nationalism. From this point on, opposition to membership of the British army became a strand of republican thought. To this day, the idea that republicans fought for neither King nor Kaiser persists (even if the Proclamation

² Kevin Bean, *The New Politics of Sinn Féin* (Liverpool, 2007), p. 217. For assessment of Sinn Féin’s changing attitude to unionism see, for example, Bean, pp. 134-248, plus Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London, 2003), pp. 312-313; Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (London, 2006), pp. 381-2; Gerard Murray and Jonathan Tonge, *Sinn Féin and the SDLP: From Alienation to Participation* (Dublin, 2005), p. 233.

³ Charles Hannon, ‘The Irish Volunteers and the Concepts of Military Service and defence 1913-1924’, (University College Dublin, unpublished PhD thesis, 1989), pp. 82-101; *Irish News* 21-9-1914 p. 5.

⁴ Hannon, p. 105.

⁵ National Library of Ireland, Redmond MS 15,258 Irish National Volunteers Strength on 31st Oct 1914; *Irish News* 28-9-1914 p. 6, 30-9-1914 p. 6, 1-10-1914 p. 5, 9-10-1914 p. 6, 10-10-1914 p. 6.

of the Republic hailed 'gallant allies' in Europe). This mural in the Upper Falls communicates the point.



None of this is to say that there was no involvement in the British army in 1914-18 from men who were at the time supporters of Sinn Féin rather than the Irish Parliamentary Party. One example was Seán Cusack, of Corporation Street in Belfast. Though a serving sergeant in a reserve battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles, he was a member of the Irish Volunteers (and did not join the INV), and at the outbreak of the Rising, was ordered to take over command of an IV unit in County Cavan. Having managed to obtain a pass to go on leave, he returned home and swapped his British army uniform for that of the Volunteers, and began his journey to Cavan with a British army great coat concealing his IV uniform. His orders were later altered and he was turned back before reaching his destination.⁶

Examples of being in the British army while being a republican were very rare, and probably reflected some involvement in the British army prior to becoming a republican. Indeed, a much stronger tradition in republicanism is of men who had become radicalised after entering the British army. They did not join as republicans, but became so either during the war or after. The military expertise of these men was much prized by the IRA of the post-war era. Of course, the

⁶ Jim McDermott, *Northern Divisions: The Old IRA and the Belfast Pogroms 1920-22* (Belfast, 2001), p. 11.

best known example of this is Tom Barry, who served as a Sergeant in Mesopotamia. On his decision to enlist he later wrote,

I cannot plead I went on the advice of John Redmond or any other politician, that if we fought for the British we would secure Home Rule for Ireland, nor can I say I understood what Home Rule meant. I was not influenced by the lurid appeal to fight to save Belgium or small nations. I knew nothing about nations, large or small. I went to the war for no other reason than that I wanted to see what war was like, to get a gun, to see new countries and to feel a grown man. Above all I went because I knew no Irish history and had no national consciousness.⁷

Only after the war did Barry become involved in republicanism.

Other men did have political reasons for joining the British army at the time – the reasons mentioned by Barry. Among the first batch of Irish Volunteers to respond to John Redmond's call in Belfast were brothers Robert and Michael Brennan. Both staunch nationalists, Michael would say in later years that he had joined up to fight for the freedom of small nations such as Belgium. Robert was radicalised either during or after the war, and in 1921, he was in command of an IRA unit in Carrick Hill in West Belfast.⁸ There were other examples of prominent IRA men having been in the British army in 1914-18, from Belfast alone, leading figures such as Seán Cunningham and Patrick Barnes.⁹ Jane Leonard has cited the experiences of a number of others.¹⁰

So republicans have always been aware of the British military past of some of their leading lights. Yet it almost goes without saying that they have not celebrated that. Indeed, there was not just an absence of commemoration but an active hostility to former service. Despite the British military background of some of their members, the IRA waged 'a campaign of intimidation' against ex-servicemen in 1919-21. Some cases were linked to post-war membership of the police, or alleged spying, but there was no doubt that particular abuse was reserved for such men if they had previously served in the British army.¹¹

⁷ Tom Barry, *Guerilla Days in Ireland* (The Irish Press, 1949), p. 2.

⁸ E-mail to author from Michael Brennan's granddaughter, Siobhán Deane, 16-9-2007.

⁹ Richard S. Grayson, *Belfast Boys: How Unionists and Nationalists Fought and Died Together in the First World War*, (London, forthcoming 2009).

¹⁰ Jane Leonard, Jane, 'Facing the "Finger of Scorn": Veterans' Memories of Ireland after the Great War, in Eoin Magennis and Cronan O'Doibhlin, *World War One and its Impacts* (Armagh, 2005), pp. 96-97.

¹¹ Jane Leonard, 'Getting them at last: the IRA and ex-servicemen', in David Fitzpatrick, ed., *Revolution? Ireland 1917-1923*, (Dublin, 1990), pp. 118-29.

Perhaps the most succinct summary of the republican view of the war is a piece written in 2006, by former prisoner Jim Gibney. It should be stated that Gibney was writing in the context of Sinn Féin having revised its attitude, as we shall later, and Gibney himself was calling for 'new thinking'. However, he stated the long-term republican case very clearly. He said, 'The First World War was an imperialist conflagration which claimed the lives of more than five million soldiers with 23 million casualties. The scale of the human loss is incomprehensible. It was a pointless and futile war.' What was uniquely problematic for republicans was that, in Gibney's words, 'It was after all a British-sponsored war at a time when all of Ireland was occupied and that occupation in part continues today.' He added, 'Unionists used the Somme sacrifice as a badge of loyalty to their new state and still do. Wrapping their ceremonies in the union flag and British military regalia, intentionally or otherwise, diminishes the memory of nationalists who fought and died there.'¹²

As early as 1919, nationalists as a whole were distancing themselves from formal commemoration of the war. Their reaction to 'Peace Day' in Belfast, held on Saturday 9 August 1919 to mark the signing of the Treaty of Versailles is a clear sign of this. At least 20,000 took part in a parade through the city, but many nationalists kept their distance. The *Irish News* argued that the Peace Day events across the UK celebrated militarism and that 'there is absolutely no difference between the manner and temper of a Red Indian victory carnival and the gorgeous processions arranged to celebrate the triumph over Germany.'¹³ Instead, nationalists were holding their own commemorations. On 29 July 1919, an event was held at Celtic Park for veterans of the 16th Division, including sports and the St Peter's Brass Band.¹⁴ The Irish Nationalist Veterans Association organised a parade of Belfast's nationalist ex-soldiers at 7.30am on Sunday 12 October 1919. They marched to St Peter's in the Falls where a Requiem Mass was said for Catholics who died in the war.¹⁵

In an all-Ireland context, work on a memorial at Islandbridge in Dublin illustrates how far the non-unionist population of Ireland had little appetite for war commemoration. Work on the memorial was begun in 1931, and was effectively complete in 1938. From 1940 to 1970, the British Legion held ceremonies at Islandbridge, but unease among the leadership of first the Irish Free State and then the Republic of Ireland meant that it was not formally opened until 1994 when Bertie Ahern, then Finance Minister, led for his government. At this time, Islandbridge had in fact only been open for six years after closure between 1971 and 1988 due to fears over Troubles-related action against ceremonies. It had only reopened as part of a process of responding to criticism of the Republic's

¹² Jim Gibney, 'Fresh eyes revisit Battle of the Somme', *Irish News* 6-7-2006 p. 2.

¹³ *Irish News* 19 July 1919 p. 4.

¹⁴ *Belfast Telegraph* 30-7-1919 p. 3; *Irish News* 30-7-1915 p. 5.

¹⁵ *Belfast Telegraph* 13-10-1919, p. 8; *Irish News* 13-10-1919 p. 6.

government's attitude to remembrance in the face of the Enniskillen bombing in 1987.¹⁶

That is not to say that there has been complete denial in the broad Catholic community, but as Tom Hartley has said, the history went 'underground'.¹⁷ Interviews I carried out showed how private remembrance continued.¹⁸ However, most republicans took a different view. Seán O'Hare was associated with the Official IRA, and was interned in Long Kesh in 1972. His grandfather, Patrick O'Hare served in the British army in 1914-18 and remained in it after the war. Patrick O'Hare was home on leave from the Connaught Rangers in June 1921 when he was evicted from his home in Belfast's Urney Street, a case that was widely reported.¹⁹ References to Patrick O'Hare's British military record were not a popular subject in the O'Hare family in later years. According to Seán, the general view would have been that 'The grandfather was mistaken in joining the British army and he was kind of written out of family history.'²⁰

Nuanced views are put by other republicans as to how they relate to their own family who served. Máirtín Ó Muilleoir is a former Sinn Féin councillor in Belfast. His great-grandfather was John McManus, a Boer War veteran, who died in 1916 aged 64 while training the 18th RIRifles. Ó Muilleoir also had relatives in the IRA in the 1920s and he is clear that while he feels 'pride' for their past, as regards John McManus, 'we are not proud of him. We do respect him though.'²¹ Ed McCann describes himself as coming from 'a strong Republican background'. His grandfather Francis McCann was gassed at Langemarck, and Ed has spent much time researching men from the Falls. He puts it in a similar way to Ó Muilleoir saying that while he has no love whatsoever for the British army, he holds the individuals who served 'in the highest regard. They were the cream of that generation without a doubt.'²²

¹⁶ Jane Leonard, "Lest we forget", in David Fitzpatrick, ed., *Ireland and the First World War*, (Dublin, 1988), pp. 64-67; Jane Leonard, 'The Twinge of Memory: Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday in Dublin since 1919', in Richard English and Graham Walker, eds., *Unionism in Modern Ireland: New Perspectives on Politics and Culture* (London, 1996), pp. 109-111; Nuala C. Johnson, *Ireland, the Great War and the Geography of Remembrance* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 108-111; Ann Rigney, 'Divided Pasts: A Premature Memorial and the Dynamics of Collective Remembrance', *Memory Studies*, 1 (2008), pp. 89-97.

¹⁷ www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/community-telegraph/west-belfast/news/book-pays-tribute-to-hidden-history-of-a-lost-generation-14079862.html (accessed 26-2-2008).

¹⁸ Grayson, *Belfast Boys*, interviews with Marie Toner Moore and Harry Donaghy.

¹⁹ *Irish News* 21-6-1921 p. 5.

²⁰ Author's interview with Seán O'Hare, 15-11-2007.

²¹ E-mail from Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, 12-7-2008.

²² E-mail from Ed McCann, 10-7-2008.

The fact that nationalists in general, and some notable examples of republicans, are now willing to discuss their personal feelings is part of a change since the mid-1990s regarding remembrance. At that point, any engagement in public acts of remembrance was alien to republicans. But a new space has been created since then.

One root of that can be found well outside republicanism. A significant development at a grassroots level was the Farset Youth and Community Development Project. This was launched in 1982, primarily to tackle unemployment in West Belfast, but since the mid 1980s, has been taking cross-community groups of young people to visit sites associated with the war. The first visit was unplanned, in 1983, when travelling back from a trip to Paris that had no connection with the war. The group detoured to Thiepval and found the Ulster Tower in a bad state of repair, and a range of initiatives followed involving Farset and many others.²³ Underpinning this work has been a mission to tell a new story of the war, encouraging a cross-community approach to the past. A key statement of Farset's approach was a short but important publication produced in 1993, which told the story of the Somme as a battle involving both the 36th and 16th divisions, and also placed it in the context of later collaboration at Messines in June 1917.²⁴ It was not the first time this had been done. A booklet produced in 1919 by Belfast City Council had covered both divisions and the 10th, but this approach had been lost in time and the Troubles.

One must be careful about overstating Farset's impact on republicanism. It is not a project which is led by republicans in any way. However, by putting forward a new narrative, which informed the unionist community of a story they had forgotten, and in organising cross-community visits, Farset has made a contribution to altering the mood music which accompanies remembrance. They were probably the first to open up the First World War as a narrative that was capable of being shared across the community.

This played into a shift in nationalism in a broad sense, within which context changes among republicans should be seen. Pressures for change came after the Enniskillen bombing in 1987. On the ground, there were signs of Catholic attitudes altering: in the aftermath of the bombing, boys from Enniskillen's Catholic grammar school, St Michael's, attended a Remembrance Day service at the town's predominantly Protestant Portora Royal School.²⁵ A year on, there were some unionist calls for the SDLP to attend Belfast's Remembrance Sunday service. Dr Joe Hendron, the party's leader on Belfast city council, said that he

²³ Interviews with: Ian Adamson 23-6-2008; Michael Hall and Jackie Hewitt 25-6-2008. Farset Minute Book and Papers in possession of Ian Adamson. Michael Hall, *A Shared Sacrifice for Peace* (Belfast, 2007), pp. 14-15.

²⁴ Michael Hall, *Sacrifice on the Somme* (Belfast, 1993).

²⁵ *Irish News* 14-11-1987 p, 4.

had visited the Belfast Cenotaph after both the Enniskillen bombing and the deaths of Corporals David Howes and Derek Wood in Andersonstown in March 1988. However, of the formal Remembrance event, he said, 'While we have nothing but respect for the dead of the two World Wars, Poppy Day over the years has been associated with the Unionist-British tradition.'²⁶ There was no formal SDLP presence at a Remembrance Sunday event in Northern Ireland until 1992, when the leader of Omagh District Council, Paddy McGowan, laid a wreath at his town's ceremony. He did so again in 1993, in which year Mary Robinson, became the first Irish President to attend the Remembrance service in Dublin's Protestant cathedral, St Patrick's.²⁷

In Belfast, the first SDLP engagement came in 1994 from Alex Attwood, then an Upper Falls councillor, and the party's leader on the city council. In that year, the SDLP also took part in ceremonies in Armagh, Enniskillen and Omagh.²⁸ In 1995, Attwood attended again, with two other SDLP councillors, and laid a wreath. Meanwhile, in the same year, the SDLP mayor of Derry, John Kerr, was his city's first nationalist mayor to lay a wreath at a service, at a time when there was a live public debate about the role of the poppy.²⁹ This had been provoked by BBC Northern Ireland presenter Donna Traynor refusing to wear a poppy on air, having earlier in the year refused to wear a shamrock on St Patrick's Day. In 1997, Belfast gained its first nationalist Mayor, Alban Maginness, who took a full role in the city's remembrance events. That involved laying a wreath during the Somme commemoration on 1 July. The Lord Mayor of Dublin also attended, and Maginness said afterwards that he hoped unionists would see his attendance as 'a genuine act of reconciliation.' He added, 'There has recently been a discovery of the history of the Great War, in terms of how it affected Ireland and the Irish people and how there should be a recognition of the fact that people from both political traditions died in the battle of the Somme.'³⁰ Later in the year, on Remembrance Sunday, Maginness wore a poppy as he became the first nationalist to lead the ceremony. His comments later focused on the symbolism of the poppy. He said that, 'Under the history of division the poppy has been seen as a unionist symbol and nationalists have difficulty embracing it because of what they see it standing for.' However, he hoped that it could now become 'a symbol of reconciliation rather than recrimination' while recognising that this would take time.³¹

Developments in nationalism's attitudes to remembrance were clearly led in the first instance by the Dublin government and by the SDLP. They had both moved

²⁶ *Belfast Telegraph* 14-11-1988 p. 4.

²⁷ *Belfast Telegraph* 9-11-1992 p. 3 & 15-11-1993 p. 3.

²⁸ *Belfast Telegraph* 14-11-1994 pp. 3 & 4.

²⁹ *Belfast Telegraph* (North West Edition) 13-11-1995 p. 1; *News Letter* 13-11-1995 p. 14; *Irish News* 10-11-1995 p. 8.

³⁰ *Irish News* 2-7-1997, p. 4.

³¹ *Irish News* 10-11-1997 p. 1.

a long way. By 1997, Dublin had announced funding for a memorial at Messines in Belgium. It was opened in 1998 as the Island of Ireland Peace Park by the UK, Republic of Ireland and Belgian heads of state. It had been initiated by Glen Barr, a leading figure within loyalism, and Paddy Harte, a Fine Gael politician in the Republic. The site is close to the 16th and 36th divisions' collaboration at Messines in June 1917, and is a manifestation of the idea of shared sacrifice, which was part of Farset's narrative.

So by 1997, members of the SDLP were taking a full part in remembrance ceremonies, although its party leader (by this time, Mark Durkan) did not take part in an event until 2002. In the same year, there were also big shifts by Sinn Féin, but they had their origins as far back as 1995.³²

Republicanism's changing attitudes to remembrance should to some extent be seen in the context of Sinn Féin's reassessment of a number of historic positions from the early 1980s, including taking seats in the Dáil in Dublin, and contesting elections for the Westminster Parliament. Addressing remembrance in a fresh way has been part of a broader process of 'historic compromise'. The first person to signify a shift in attitudes to remembrance was Tom Hartley, a Sinn Féin councillor for the Lower Falls since 1993, and a former Chairman and General Secretary of the party. In 1995, with the approval of his party's *Ard Chomhairle* (executive) he attended a Second World War commemoration at Islandbridge which included both war veterans and Holocaust survivors.³³ It was not a First World War event in any way, but Hartley's presence at Islandbridge opened a door by engaging with a place and process Sinn Féin had once boycotted, a place that was still widely seen as 'British'.

For several years, Sinn Féin did nothing more, while changes took place elsewhere. But Tom Hartley's attendance at Islandbridge in 1995 had opened a door. He continued to engage with Protestants and unionists through his interest in local history. He has, since the 1970s, been organising tours of West Belfast, and in 1998, he established an historical walk of the Milltown and Belfast City cemeteries. The latter is a predominantly Protestant space, though within the heart of the Falls, and Hartley has subsequently written a book about those who are remembered there, including many First World War British soldiers.³⁴ However, aside from this informal historical work, the next official step from Sinn Féin did not come until November 2001. As Mayor of Dungannon, Francie Molloy held a reception for the local British Legion on Remembrance Sunday, seeing an opportunity for people of different sides to reach an understanding of each other.³⁵ One year on, in 2002, Belfast had gained its first Sinn Féin Lord

³² *News Letter* 11-11-2002 p. 27.

³³ Author's interview with Tom Hartley, 26-6-2008

³⁴ Tom Hartley, *Written in Stone: The History of Belfast City Cemetery* (Belfast, 2006).

³⁵ Maillot, p. 168.

Mayor, Alex Maskey, a month before the annual Somme commemoration. Like some other leading republicans, Maskey had a relative who had served in the British army in 1914-18, in this case his maternal grandfather, Patrick McClory who had been in the Army Service Corps.³⁶

The Lord Mayor is an integral part of the Somme commemoration in Belfast as the city's chief representative and ceremonial figure, and Maskey had pledged to work with all on becoming Mayor. However, republicans remained of the view that it was impossible for Maskey to take part in a ceremony which had so many British military connotations. Meanwhile, some unionists told Maskey that if he attended the commemoration at the Belfast Cenotaph many people would walk away. Maskey came to the conclusion 'that the bolder the step I chose to take, the more damaging it could have been for everyone'. So he decided to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph at 9am on 1 July 2002, two hours before the main ceremony. Instead of a wreath of poppies, which Maskey said were 'too closely identified with the symbolism of British militarism', he laid a wreath of laurels. Meanwhile, he agreed to chair a special meeting of the city council, which was an integral part of the day's events. This involved him reading out a tribute to the British monarchy and commonwealth, in addition to British soldiers who died at the Somme. Although he felt it ignored the Irish nationalists who died there, he read out the motion out of fear of being accused 'of being disrespectful to the war dead. That was something which I could not allow to happen.' So, in a short ceremony joined by a dozen other Sinn Féin councillors, Maskey laid the wreath, bowed his head at the Cenotaph and took part in a minute's silence. In so doing, as his biographer says, 'he had rewritten one of the unspoken tenets of Irish republicanism.' The move was far from universally supported within Sinn Féin, and there were some unionists who found Maskey's actions offensive. But Maskey had avoided any counter-demonstrations from either side, and had taken a step which the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, John Reid, described as 'a sign of encouragement and hope for the future'.³⁷

In engaging with Somme remembrance in this way, Maskey was acutely aware that he was dealing with the role that history plays in identities and politics. His thoughts on his actions were set out in a speech he made at Belfast City Hall on 26 June 2002, explaining what he would be doing on 1 July, and why. He located his actions in 'the issue of memory and the role personal memory has played in the shaping of Ireland's history.' Maskey argued that 'We inherit history. It is then up to us to make sense out of it for the times that we live in. The history of the people of this island is complex, layered, has many strands and indeed, many versions of those strands.' He went on to acknowledge that a central narrative of Irish history was that of rebellion, but that, 'Parallel with that

³⁶ Medal Roll.

³⁷ Barry McCaffrey, *Alex Maskey: Man and Mayor* (Belfast, 2003), pp. 159-164; 'Maskey marks Somme with wreath', BBC News Online, 1 July 2002: news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/2076528.stm (accessed 16 April 2008)

history there is another history; the history of those in Ireland who joined the British Army' and he recognised that 'For many nationalists those who joined the British Army are dismissed as not warranting esteem.' He alluded to why nationalists did join up when he said that:

The parliamentary leaders of the time - on the one hand Redmond and on the other Carson and Craig - sent out a call to arms to their supporters. A call to British arms; to fight variously "for the freedom of small nations" or "For God and Ulster". Irishmen responded in tens of thousands.

However, Maskey's approach suggested that he was trying to take the memory of the individual soldier out of politics. He argued,

... the challenge for me, indeed for all political leaders, is to recognise the worth and the integrity of the individual soldier as perceived, honoured and commemorated by those he or she left behind; to identify with the sorrow, the hurt, the suffering as something we all share; even if we are not always prepared to acknowledge it. That is, the common humanity at the centre of all this.

Finally, Maskey argued that forms of commemoration should change and urged that there be a debate on a how this could happen.³⁸

Following Maskey's actions, Sinn Féin took part in local ceremonies outside Belfast.³⁹ With the post of Lord Mayor only held for one year, Sinn Féin had to think about what to do for Remembrance Sunday (which the Lord Mayor traditionally just attends), but not the Somme commemoration in 2003. During the Remembrance Sunday event in November 2002, Maskey was on a trade delegation to China, but did host a reception for the British Legion on his return.⁴⁰ Sinn Féin did not have to return to the issue until 2008 when Tom Hartley became mayor. He took a similar approach to Maskey, and renewed calls for a debate on the shape of the official commemorations in the city. Hartley argued that, 'We should not shy away from the reality that the formal Somme commemoration here in this city will primarily appeal to only that section of the people of our city, who are from a unionist and Protestant background'. He added that for the future, 'We need to have an open and rational debate about

³⁸ Speech by Alex Maskey, 'The Memory of the Dead: Seeking Common Ground' 26 June 2002: www.info-nordirland.de/new_234_e.htm (accessed 16 April 2008).

³⁹ Jim Gibney, 'Fresh eyes revisit Battle of the Somme'.

⁴⁰ 'Maskey to Honour War Dead', 1 Nov 2002 at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/2386611.stm (accessed 27-20009).

how we commemorate these events in our shared past in an inclusive and non-threatening fashion.’⁴¹

So by 2002, a clear Provisional Republican position had emerged on how to relate to the war, which had four themes. First, the war should be re-examined as part of a multi-layered narrative of Irish history. Second, that the individual soldiers should be respected on their own terms. Third, the existing public commemorations cannot be inclusive if they remain in their current form. Finally, though less explicitly, that there was a need to understand the political pressures which resulted in nationalists enlisting, for example, to fight for the ‘freedom of small nations’.

This does not mean that republicans are about to engage in British ‘military’ parades. Indeed, at Sinn Féin’s 2004 *Ard Fheis*, a motion was passed saying that the party should not take part in ‘British military commemorations’.⁴² However, the new analysis has opened up new space for republicans to engage with the war on their own terms. Since Maskey’s actions in 2002, Catholics generally, and republicans in particular, appear to feel more able to show an interest in the war service of their ancestors in a way that simply was not possible when British soldiers were on the streets of Belfast. That interest has made it possible for remembrance of the war to play some role in cross-community reconciliation in a way that would have been difficult to imagine even a decade ago.

Martin Meehan has been an interesting case in point. Meehan, who had been a leading figure in the Provisional IRA in North Belfast visited his grandfather’s WWI grave in France with significant media coverage in 2002. This had been done in conjunction with the senior loyalist, Gusty Spence, and was a sign of how far remembrance could begin to play a role in cross-community reconciliation.⁴³

One outcome of this has been the R-PAST project which brings together young people from across Ireland in the study of the military history of the island. They have particularly focused on individual stories on the basis of a stated aim ‘to learn about the hidden history of the Irish Regiments and combatants throughout the ages’ and to ‘cover all those who fought for freedom regardless of uniform’.⁴⁴ So the story of Elizabeth O’Farrell of Cumann na mBan during the Easter Rising is told alongside that of Ambrose Sterling, an under-age enlistee in the British army and then RAF in during the First World War, who is buried in the Shankill

⁴¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/74647th95.stm (accessed 18 June 2008) and http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/7483338.stm (accessed 1 July 2008).

⁴² *Belfast Telegraph*, 17-11-2005 p. 1; www.sinnfein.ie/pdf/SFArdFheis04Clar.pdf (accessed 18-3-09).

⁴³ *News Letter* 29-10-2002 p. 13; *News of the World* 3-11-02 p. 33.

⁴⁴ www.irishregiments.com/r-past/ (accessed 26 February 2009)

Graveyard. When R-Past was launched in May 2007, it was attended by republicans such as Meehan, and loyalists such as Winston 'Winkie' Rea. A central part of the project seems to be an effort to understand the past in a new way avoiding some of the simplifications of the past. At the launch, Meehan said, 'People fought for all sorts of reasons, from political beliefs through to economic survival.'⁴⁵

Such projects involve examining hidden histories, and activities which reach into these are now commonplace. In June 2007, the Falls Community Council, which among other activities, runs an oral history project, organised a public meeting in Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich in the Falls Road. This is an Irish cultural centre, once a Presbyterian Church for which there is no longer any demand in the movements of population since the 1960s. The meeting came out of a conversation this author had had with Tom Hartley earlier in the year. I had contacted him and others about research for my book on West Belfast in 1914-18, seeking contacts with anyone who would talk to me about their forebears. Tom told me that it was increasingly common for people in the Falls to show him memorabilia and medals from the First World War and to ask him to put them into context. In the Shankill, such material and stories are readily available and has been included in several publications, but for the Falls, this has all been part of a hidden history, and Tom felt that local people might be willing to attend a meeting held in the Falls. At the meeting, which was publicised in *Anderstonstown News*, myself, Tom Hartley, and Sinn Féin's Upper Falls councillor, Paul Maskey (brother of Alex and now a Member of the Legislative Assembly at Stormont) spoke. The aim was to provide a forum in which it was possible for people to discuss this lost history. Around twenty people attended, including three loyalists from east Belfast who are involved in cross-community work. Those who came brought with them stories, medals, photographs, and records of internment from the 1920s.

Among those who attended were those involved in the work of *An Eochair*, a group which supports former Official Republican prisoners. Working with others through the Clondara Historical and Cultural Group, they had already launched through the *Irish News* the Belfast-based Connaught Rangers Research Project (CRRP) which focused specifically on the regiment's 6th battalion.⁴⁶ The interest in the 6th Connaught Rangers is because this battalion was the highest profile of those which recruited from nationalists in Belfast. It should also be noted that those involved in the project are clear that the absence of the word 'Royal' from the Connaughts' name makes this regiment particularly accessible to nationalists and republicans. They invited people whose relatives had served in the Connaught Rangers to meet to discuss the past and it has drawn in people from

⁴⁵ www.connaughtangersassoc.com/r_past.htm and [//www.irishregiments.com/r-past/](http://www.irishregiments.com/r-past/) (both accessed 16 April 2008)

⁴⁶ *Irish News* 26 April 2006 p. 9. www.connaughtangers.blogspot.com (accessed 1-7-2008).

across the nationalist community, including those who would certainly not support republicanism. Academic writing has already suggested that the story of the Connaught Rangers is part of a nuanced definition of Irishness,⁴⁷ and in discussing this aspect of their past they are helping to inform definitions of Irishness in 1916 that go beyond the Easter Rising allowing some recognition of the diversity of experiences among Irishmen at that time.

In part, the project should be seen simply as an act of local and family history, on the part of people who have a connection with the area and the individuals concerned. Seán O'Hare described the genesis of the project in these terms. He said that he and his colleagues often met people who said their relatives had served in the Connaught Rangers, and wondered if their stories would ever be told. He said, 'We decided it was time something was done to help record that part of our history. If it hadn't been written down there was a danger that after this current generation it would have either been lost altogether, or someone else would have written it, and it's better if the history of our community comes from the community itself.'⁴⁸

However, a particular theme of the project has been to understand a history that has been, in many senses, forbidden. This is not like other local history projects which seek to discover a past which has not been written about because nobody considered it significant enough. In fact, the opposite is true: this past was *too* significant to write about because it told a side of a story that placed nationalists in the service of the enemy. So a key part of the project's main output, a booklet funded by the Community Relations Council,⁴⁹ has been an analysis of why men joined up, and the publication includes chapters on the pre-war history of the Connaught Rangers, and motivations for joining the British army in general. As with Alex Maskey's speech in June 2002, but even more explicitly, a fundamental part of the analysis of the CRRP has been that the men who joined up did so at the behest of their political leaders. As Harry Donaghy said following the launch of the booklet, "People might think they joined from some kind of love of Britain, but this was not the case either. They were proud to be Irish, and were actually fighting for Home Rule."⁵⁰ Moreover, Jimmy McDermott, some of whose ancestors were active in the IRA in the 1920s and who has written a book about the Belfast IRA of that time,⁵¹ stressed the limited nature of nationalist demands at the time. He wrote, 'In the period up to the Great War, the Irish Nationalist

⁴⁷ John Morrissey, 'A Lost Heritage: The Connaught Rangers and Multivocal Irishness', in Mark McCarthy, ed., *Ireland's Heritage: Critical Perspectives on Memory and Identity* (Aldershot, 2005), pp. 71-87.

⁴⁸ www.belfastmedia.com/features_article.php?ID=748 (accessed 26-2-2008).

⁴⁹ 6th Connaught Rangers Research Project, *The 6th Connaught Rangers: Belfast Nationalists and the Great War* (Belfast, 2008).

⁵⁰ www.belfastmedia.com/features_article.php?ID=748 (accessed 26-2-2008).

⁵¹ Jim McDermott, *Northern Divisions: the Old IRA and the Belfast Pogroms 1920-22*, (Belfast, 2001).

demand was for Home Rule not a republic.’ He also noted more practical reasons for joining up, saying that for regular soldiers, the British army offered ‘a steady wage, a pension, a uniform, travel, adventure, prestige and the prospect of promotion.’⁵²

The project has been part of some fundamental re-evaluations of the past and the way it should be viewed today. Seán O’Hare was quoted earlier as having said that in his family the general view would have been that ‘The grandfather was mistaken in joining the British army and he was kind of written out of family history.’ But more recently, Seán’s attitude has changed. He said,

It’s only when you get more mature that you realise that things aren’t that black and white. We would have thought that anybody in the British army then would have been a traitor to Irish nationalism/republicanism. But you realise later that that’s not the case, it’s just that they were as much for Home Rule as anybody else.⁵³

Such analyses have been brought to another project in which republicans (both Provisional and Official⁵⁴) have been involved: the Messines Association. Close to the Island of Ireland memorial, a Peace School has provided a venue for the activities of the Messines Association which was formed in 2002 to bring together former combatants of the post-1969 Troubles. During visits to Messines, former paramilitaries and members of the security forces have explored issues around the First World War to try to reach some shared understanding of them. After completing the course at the Peace School, they become members of the Fellowship of Messines.

It was, initially, difficult for republicans to become involved in the Messines Association. One said, ‘When I first got involved in the Messines project I faced open hostility from people within the republican movement – I was called a traitor, an apologist for imperialism’. He added that he felt that ‘The greatest indictment on our generation would be if we were to pass on our own inherited sectarian attitudes to another generation.’⁵⁵

To some extent, this new narrative has enabled republicans to see a shared history through Messines. Harry Donaghy says, ‘If there was one thing that our Loyalist colleagues, now friends, would have in common was that identity or

⁵² Jimmy McDermott, ‘Belfast and the British Army Before 1916’, in 6th Connaught Rangers Research Project, 6th *Connaught Rangers*, p. 14.

⁵³ Author’s interview with Seán O’Hare, 15-11-2007.

⁵⁴ Other than, for example, Harry Donaghy from an Official background, see, Messines Association, *Training Towards Reconciliation & Employability Project Evaluation* (July 2008), p. 23, which cites Martin Meehan as being involved.

⁵⁵ Michael Hall, *A Shared Sacrifice for Peace* (Belfast, 2007), p. 28.

experience of relatives ... who actually fought there.⁵⁶ This understanding of shared history has been built on not only through visits to Messines including former combatants on all sides, but also in a training scheme funded by the EU's Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. One of those employed on the scheme which provides training to improve, for example, employability, from the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre, is Harry Donaghy, for whom the legacy of Messines now consequently has a daily role in cross-community work.

What conclusions should be drawn from the republican engagements with commemoration and remembrance? First of all, it is worth stating again that republican attitudes should be assessed within a broad nationalist context. While Tom Hartley undoubtedly showed leadership and took great risks in 1995, at a time when very few nationalists, let alone republicans had engaged with remembrance, the biggest changes until 2002 were led by the Dublin government and the SDLP. It was always going to be difficult for Sinn Féin to shift its position, but it is likely that it would have been even more difficult with actions from elsewhere within nationalism. Of course, we must also recognise that had the factors which allowed Dublin and the SDLP to engage not existed, then Sinn Féin would have been very unlikely to even want to engage. So changes within Sinn Féin were allowed by the same factors which allowed change in Dublin and the SDLP, but they may also have been made easier by the fact that others had moved first. Indeed, it was probably inevitable that those nationalists who would first cease to abstain from remembrance would be those without Sinn Féin's tradition of abstention from the British state in general.

What can we learn about the nature of republicanism from its engagement with remembrance? It is worth repeating here the earlier summary of the case put by Alex Maskey in 2002 as having four dimensions: the concept of Irish history being multi-layered; respect for individual soldiers; the need to change public commemoration to be more inclusive; and an understanding of the politics of the time. This Provisional Republican case contains a number of similarities with the Official Republican approach, but there are subtle differences in emphasis. The Officials are far more focused on the actual history of the period, and in putting forward an argument which explains 'why' men enlisted', and also describes 'what' they did. It is less of a priority for them to engage with debates about the nature of contemporary remembrance, which were a priority for both Alex Maskey and Tom Hartley in their mayoral roles. This must partly be because Sinn Féin politicians have been in a position which has made it essential for them to address contemporary events. That has not been an issue for members of the Official Republican Movement because they have not been in, for example, mayoral positions which carry civic ceremonial responsibilities. However, this difference in approach to history could also be seen to flow from differences within the republican family over approaches to history. A core part of the Official Republican Movement's approach has been historically informed, and they have

⁵⁶ Author's interview with Harry Donaghy, 12-9-2007.

actively embraced revisionism, both in terms of their view of history and the way they view contemporary politics.

Perhaps the most important point to emerge from the republican analysis is about its relationship with unionism and loyalism. Although embracing any effort to remember the war is a significant shift for republicans, and although this has led to some shared cross-community approaches, the ground shared by republicans and unionists/loyalists is actually quite limited. Sinn Féin's policy remains against formal participation in 'British military commemorations', so what do republicans and unionists actually share? First, they share a story about a specific part of the war: Messines. This has given them an understanding of the two political volunteer divisions serving side-by-side. That has also given them a shared space in Belgium, in the area around the Island of Ireland memorial. Second, there is a more general shared story that emphasises the physical hardship shared by all soldiers in the trenches, and a sense that the war was pointless. However, they do not share a number of key features of their respective stories. In particular, while unionists/loyalists remain committed to the 'For King and Country' aspect of service, republicans emphasise the importance of fighting for Home Rule and/or the freedoms of small nations. Meanwhile, and most importantly for the years ahead there is no symbol or event of commemoration which they share: the wearing of poppies, the annual Somme commemoration and Remembrance Sunday remain deeply associated with 'British militarism' for republicans.

So while engagement with formal remembrance in any way marks a significant shift for republicans, and can be seen as part of the process of 'historic compromise' with unionism, it has been done very much on republican terms. Especially among Provisional Republicans, there is very little actual engagement with the aspects of remembrance which are so important to many unionists. For the future, it may be very difficult for republicans to engage any further with remembrance than they have done, although they may do so in larger numbers. For example, there can be no question of republicans wearing poppies, and it is difficult to imagine them engaging further in Somme commemorations without changes to those events. Is this a problem? Perhaps not. In the absence of one story of the First World War for Ireland as a whole, there are multi-layered stories. This may mean multi-layered commemorations are the only way forward. Anything that becomes so bland as to offend nobody, when such strong emotions are at stake, and does not allow people to commemorate on their own terms, may not be worthy of the memory of the men who fought, after all, for very different reasons. So, perhaps, we have to retain one set of commemorations in which 'King and Country' are everything, and another set in which they are nothing. Remembrance in parallel may be the future.