

REMEMBERING 1916 AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

Thank you for the invitation to be here today, to share some reflections on one of the most pivotal years in the story of this island, and to be part of the launch of this significant exhibition. It is a privilege to be here and though I have not yet had the opportunity to view the exhibition, I have viewed the slides of the Impact and Legacy panels. They are hugely impressive in their artistic design and the comprehensive and carefully crafted content. I would like to congratulate all involved in their design, creation and display and to congratulate the Council for the vision and willingness to present such an exhibition. The centenary year 2016 is significant and important for every part of this island. There is a shared impact and legacy, and it is important that as many people as possible be given the opportunity to understand events like the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, and to reflect on their significance. And this is important whether one emotionally identifies with one or other of these events or does not identify with either. Whichever way we are drawn, we cannot pretend a Rising or a Somme did not happen or deny impact and legacy. We have all been shaped by 1916 and we live with the politics of conflict, but it is vital that we attempt to understand these huge moments in history and how they have impacted our lives since. It is important also that our reflection on 1916 be critical, that we be prepared to ask ourselves critical questions and ethical questions, and learn important lessons from history, so that history does not repeat itself. This is also about being committed to the building of a more just and peaceful future. This exhibition will help people to do these things, which is why it is so important to do what you are doing within your Council area.

In viewing the impact and legacy panels there are three important emphases that are striking. Perhaps most important of all is that from the outset you have placed 1916 in global context. One is met immediately by a global story. And then there is the question of legacy. Everything leaves a legacy. There are always consequences, ripples that reach out across the rest of the 20 century and still the ripples reach us in 2016. There are always legacy issues to deal with. The third striking thing is the local and human story. These panels feature real people from the Council area, very different and very complex people, just like ourselves. And then there is the overarching emphasis, the master theme, inescapable and unavoidable, identities in conflict. They were then, they are now and a just and peaceful community depends on how we manage identities in conflict and the politics of identity.

Let me briefly spend a little time with each of those.

THE GLOBAL STORY

There is always a larger story to the story. Stories don't make sense without a context and neither of the two events of 1916 make any sense unless we see them within the larger global story and larger narrative. The Great War was the framing event of the time. We are looking at a decade of significant events in Ireland 1912-1922, but all of the Irish events were framed by the global conflict. Had the Great War not happened Ireland in 1914 would have spiraled into a very bloody civil war. With almost a quarter of a million men between them the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Irish Volunteers, each significantly armed from Germany, would have engaged each other with catastrophic consequences. When a young Serb shot at point blank range the heir to the Austria - Hungarian throne in Sarajevo on 27 June 1914, he got the unionist and nationalist leadership in Ireland off the hook.

Without the Great War there would have been no Easter Rising, and to state the obvious, without the Great War there would have been no Battle of the Somme. There would, therefore, have been no foundational myths for either part of Ireland that emerged after 1921. If only? But history didn't happen that way and the Rising became the foundational myth of the Free State, after 1948, the Republic of Ireland. Likewise the Somme became the foundational myth of Northern Ireland. We have been left with the politics of identity. If we want a scapegoat for Ireland 's tragic story and our conflictual identity myths, let's blame the war, or if you want to personalise it, blame Garivil Princip in Sarajevo. He started it! Of course it was more complex than that, which is why it is right that the exhibition begins with the global story.

A large part of that global story is the dominant imperialism of the time. The war 1914-1918 was an imperial war, fought by six large empires, Prussia-Germany, Austria - Hungary and the Ottoman empires on one side and France, Great Britain and Russia on the other. This was the age of European powers, European imperialism, and at the beginning of the 20 century these European empires occupied 85%of the planet. This was the era of European hegemony, Europe's domination of the world, which is why 1914-1918 was a world war. Though most of the war was fought on the Western and Eastern fronts in Europe and further away in the Dardenelles and Gallipoli, soldiers from all over the territories dominated by these European empires, fought in foreign fields. The empires in Europe were dominated by three emperors, Kaiser Willhelm of Prussia-Germany, Tsar Nicholas of Russia and King George V of Great Britain and Emperor of India. And they were cousins. There grandmother,

Queen Victoria had such a large family with her German husband, that she colonised every royal house in Europe to marry them off. So you could say the Great War was a family feud. Or a European civil war. It was an imperial war and imperial powers go to war over territory, expansionism or defence of what you have got, issues of power, domination and control. Empires don't fight for freedom, they never have, but they always present their war efforts as righteous and they always, as all six did in 1914, claim to be fighting a holy war and to have God on their side. Nobody seemed to wonder how God could be on everybody's side in 1914-1918 or how God could be for God and Ulster and for God and Ireland all at the same time in 1912-1916. There is a serious religious dimension to this whole era which media coverage and exhibitions are not addressing, under the delusion that religion has gone away in a more secular age, or that it has been so much of the problem in Ireland that it's best left alone or ignored.

It is important to see these events in the larger context, within a global story, and that is also necessary when we come to critically view impact and legacy. Not only do we need to place the Rising in a larger picture, much of which is the Great War, but also the growing dynamic across Europe in particular, of the growth of aggressive, militarised nationalism, and the growing clamour to be free of imperialism and to have the right to self-determination of small nations.

The Somme also needs the larger story. It wasn't a battle fought on 1 July, a one day battle in which the 36th Ulster Division lost 2000 men, but a 141 day battle from 1 July- 18 November 1916, and it was one of many battles, the longest and bloodiest being Verdun, February - December 1916. The Somme was terrible, an unimaginable hell in which some 5000 Irish men died, almost equal numbers of unionist and nationalist, some of whom were remembered, others airbrushed from history until relatively recently. Whether Rising or Somme we need larger narratives to take us out of our introverted narratives into more truthful and inclusive remembering. There is freedom in the global context and the larger, global story.

IMPACT AND LEGACY

The Rising and the Somme have left legacies. We have already mentioned the respective foundational myths. It is important to recognise that both myths are based on interpretation, not necessarily on historical facts. All history is interpretation and over time we can edit and

change history, be dictated to by cultural and political forces as to what we remember and what we forget. We can also polish history and memory into a state of unreality. Memory, remembering and commemoration are all complex, more than we realise and open to manipulation and even delusion. Psychology recognises all of this. This is why remembering becomes a highly politically charged affair. Remembering and how we remember and the need we have for a sense of belonging and identity is why we construct creation or foundational myths. They are attempts to say this is who we are and how we see our collective selves. We belong to this story, this is our identity, what makes us who we are. Every country in the world constructs a foundational or identity myth. We are not unique or unusual in Ireland, north and south. The impact and legacy of 1916 is a politics of conflict, which is all the more acute in a contested society with a contested history. We may never resolve our politics of identity or our identities in conflict or our contested history. But we need to embrace a larger story, one which is about commitment to the developing, nurturing and sustaining of a pluralist democracy, rooted in law and order, human rights and the values of justice, compassion, mercy, truth, respect and tolerance in the sense of the Irish word for tolerance, listening well to each other. Or tolerance in the Turkish language which is to see the good in each other. The real clash of identities as legacy of 1916 is the clash within each of us, which is not really Protestant - Catholic, British - Irish, Unionist-Nationalist, loyalist-republican, but the clash between wanting to dominate and control and the desire for a more inclusive and pluralist citizenship. The latter would enable identity to be more fluid, more creatively complex, and maybe even more authentically human.

There is no doubt that 1916 left a legacy of violence and militarised mindsets. The Balkans gave us a word, *paradomania*, which means an unhealthy obsession with things military. We have that in Ireland and not exclusively in Ireland. The Balkans created the word which says something critical. And this unhealthy obsession and spirituality of violence, or mystique of violence lingers and afflicted us in the last third of the 20 century. It wasn't just the legacy of 1916, the legacy of violence, militarised politics and the gun in politics was the legacy of the entire decade 1912-1922. The impact and legacy of that whole decade needs to be robustly critiqued, acknowledged and radically transformed once and for all. Here we need a culture of life rather than a culture of death and that requires a different ethical worldview.

There are other impacts and legacies. The Rising was an early warning signal that the world of imperialism was on borrowed time and an early warning signal that European global

hegemony was coming to an end. By the end of the Great War four of the six empires had collapsed and gone. The remaining two, France and Great Britain, were so badly dented that they too had collapsed and gone by the late 1950's and early 60's. The war had brought about the collapse of a whole world order which is why the winners gathered in 1919 for the Paris Peace Conference to try and reconstruct a new world order. Empires had gone and Paris was about the right to self-determination of small nations. Up to 17 new republics appeared after Paris, and across Europe borders were redrawn. There was partition and repartition, many partitions, of which Ireland was only one. But Paris was no outstanding success. All these redrawn borders left up to 30 million people in Europe on the wrong side of borders and they suffered much in the next two decades. Perhaps the other tragic legacy of Paris was the giving of Mandates to the French and the British for the governance of the former provinces of the collapsed Ottoman empire, which was the Middle East region. The French and the British ignored the League of Nations and drew lines in the Middle East sand, imposing borders and artificial boundaries and countries. Together they carved up the entire Middle East region to suit their own imperial purposes, mainly about oil. The tragic and bitter legacy remains with Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel-Palastine, Yemen, a conflict zone that has had a century now of Western interference. And Europe, not surprisingly, is being swamped with a migrant crisis, the biggest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the Second World War. These are the global legacies of a century ago along with the more local legacies of the politics of identity and identities in conflict. Conflicts remain and Brussels is the latest casualty in a world still reaping the bitter harvest of imperialism and the myth of violence that continues to live with the delusion and lie that violence is redemptive, liberating or it brings peace.

We need to engage these legacies, robustly and critically and an exhibition such as you open here today can help people to do that. But it also needs educational programmes for schools and adults in community.

THE HUMAN IN THE LOCAL STORY

This exhibition features local people and that humanises the story. The people featured from across the Council area are diverse. They were all the products of the coast, glens, the towns and countryside. They embody the politics of identity and identities in conflict. They were passionate about different things, used different means to articulate their dreams, fears, visions and hopes. They would not have agreed with each other and in complex ways they crossed surprising barriers and broke out of traditional stereotypes. They were very complex

people, just as we are. We need stories about people, need to see them as people. We ourselves are storied people, we live out of stories and we each and together are and have stories. When we tell the local stories of people as this exhibition does, we meet real human beings. And when we go back to 1916, to Rising and Somme, there are many human stories to be told. We can recognise two important things through the many human stories.

In war and violence or revolution we see human loves and hates. We see the best and the worst of people. There were loves and hates in the GPO in Dublin and on the streets during Easter week. And there were loves and hates in the mud and blood of the Somme trenches, and at Verdun and all the other fronts in the west, east and beaches of Gallipoli. And only when we recognise the loves and hates and understand them, do we understand better the mystery of human life. And human life often is the complex mix of love and hate.

The other thing to recognise is that before we are anything else we are human. That is our primary identity. It is our primordial identity. In the politics of identity that seem to mean so much to us and about which and over which we fight, go to war, kill and maim, our foundational myths, our treasured cultural, political, ethnic, racial, religious and gendered identities are all constructed. They are constructed as a means to divide and rule, control and regulate and facilitate domination. They always include superior and inferior and they are fearful that there is not enough of whatever to share around. These constructs are based on the myth of scarcity. Before we are anything else we are human. That is the one given we have. Being human is our primary identity marker. And stories humanise and enable us to see each other as human. For too much of the time we see the other as an ideological other, labelled, boxed in and stereotyped. The logic of that is exclusion, demonising, dehumanising and in the extreme, killing. But we are not ideological others. We are humans with human stories and we are humans together who need a common good. So enjoy all the local stories in this exhibition.

Don't underestimate the the power of what you have put together, the potential impact and legacy of this exhibition. Those of you who conceived it, researched it, designed it and have now presented it, don't ever diminish or allow anyone else to diminish your creative and educational capacity. Museums are not just sites of memory, they are sites of truth telling, sites of education and sites where we can encounter our authentic humanness, and ultimately, for some at least, a site of liberation. Congratulations and I hope many will make the journey here and the greater journey within.

Dr Johnston McMaster
March 2019
BALLYMENA