



Bullet Points: Who, What, How we Commemorate

The centennial years offered a unique opportunity for exploring and learning the history, heritage and culture of our country. A committee was formed in 2015 and a strategy document designed to help direct the process, while active engagement with the public informed and gave guidance for a programme of commemorations to establish the most appropriate way in which to mark the centenaries within the county. The nature of the programme was expansive, delivering a series of commemorative events, school programmes, and publications, but with the unique intention of creating a legacy of research and/or cultural and artistic material for future generations. It was undertaken in partnership with local communities, and included seminars, publications, archival digitisation, talks, concerts, drama, sculpture, and music. The delivery of the programme was inclusive, appropriate and sensitive, to take account of all aspects of life in Co. Kildare in the period 1913-1923 – World War I, the 1916 Rising, First Dáil, War of Independence and Civil War and the formation of a new state.

Throughout the period there have been achievements and national awards, websites and social media campaigns, and yet the barometer of success was most obvious in the simplest of things. The Revolutionary period changed utterly the fabric of Irish life and launched the nation on its quest for independence and self-determination. In County Kildare we paid tribute to those who sacrificed so much on our behalf; we took pride in the events and how they impacted on the nation and our culture. We were moved as flags were unfurled, children sang the nation's anthem in their schoolyards and the 1916 Proclamation was re-discovered by the next generation.

We owed it to that generation of Irish men, women and children that we commemorated our history with pride and enthusiasm, and that we did justice, not only to their ideals and aspirations, but to their memory and sacrifice. It has been an eventful time, a period of great adventures and new discoveries. We engaged with all the people of the county to deliver the best possible programme.

County Kildare Decade of Commemorations Committee 2015-2023

ESSAY BY CAUVERY MADHAVAN

Turning around a corner, if you saw memory lurking in the shadows, you would be forgiven for stopping in your tracks to call out: 'Friend or foe?' It occupies most of our subconscious mind and yet, of this steadfast companion we know so little. For memory is a many-headed creature, often kind and forgiving, sometimes cruel and relentless. It can choose to flaunt and revel in things joyful, all the while keeping close to its chest traumas buried so deep we don't even realise they colour our everyday.

Memory is the unseen craftsman shaping and moulding, breaking and repairing our personal identities. It has immense power to ignite our souls into action or leave our hearts unfeeling and stone cold. We may not always know it, but we rely on our memories to inform our relationships with family and friends, the way we view our neighbourhoods and communities, our attitudes towards the cities we live in, and our love for this wonderful country we call home. And whether we confront it everyday or come across it unexpectedly, one thing is constant - it finds little nooks and crannies in our very being, surfacing when it decides it is time. Our versions of our personal histories are hammered out in this volatile forge of subjectivity.

Accepting that each of our perspectives is unique surely must allow us to be more understanding of the other, and what better way to interpret and showcase our individual histories and our particular memories, beloved or painful, than through the creative arts. Writers and poets invite us to read unexplored new narratives, artists and sculptors open our eyes to a different way of seeing. Knowing how others in our communities saw and felt all those years ago, just trying to understand sensibilities other than our own can only serve to give us a clearer picture of how best to live together now and in the future.

The creative arts can bring to life what history books just cannot - a contextual understanding of the motivations of the ordinary people caught up in nation-defining moments. A novelist uses fiction to insert background about the social mores, local circumstances that drove the events of the time. A poet will tell us about the fears and desires that might have influenced a family member caught up in the strife. A sculptor speaks in a language tactile and emotive, their three dimensional interpretations often eliciting long hidden sentiments from the viewer. A curated collection of photographs suddenly reveals young children, the overlooked bystanders to history. Brush strokes on a canvas record hope and despair, fear and joy, the artist urging us to empathise with their personal feelings on the subject. Spoken words on stage bring it all alive, jogging our memories while re-enactments force us to see what it was like, recalibrating or perhaps re-enforcing what we thought was the reality.

Nothing can quite match the arts for making us stop, stand still and look again with our attention undivided and most crucially - with our hearts and minds open, if only for a few moments.

To commemorate is to allow memories to rise to the surface without fear but even better still is to commemorate through the many languages of creative endeavour. For it is no doubt a greater achievement - encouraging us to collectively shake off the tyranny of memory, to embrace the idea that the events of the Decade of Commemorations can be told from multiple points of view and to acknowledge that memory is but a learning tool to shape our thoughts and in turn, our best selves.

Mahatma Gandhi said it perfectly: “Our thoughts become our words, our words become our actions, our actions become our character, our character becomes our destiny.”

Cauvery Madhavan is an Indian born novelist living in Co. Kildare who uses her experience of being a migrant in her writing. Her work relates Ireland and Europe with India. Cauvery also writes for the Irish Times and previously wrote for the Evening Herald and Travel Extra.

There is a human drive to understand events as they truly occurred. The word 'history' comes from the ancient Greek word 'historia', originally meaning inquiry, the act of seeking knowledge, as well as the knowledge that results from inquiry. Art does not serve to merely illustrate an idea, but it can create spaces for inquiry, allowing for a multiplicity of interpretations. A piece of art can be revisited and reinterpreted at various stages of a viewer's development, a process which draws attention to their own subjectivity. Historical interpretations are also inherently subjective and open to multiple readings, challenging the idea of a single, authentic representation of the past. The act of commemorating events one hundred years on allows us a new perspective.

The curatorial approach to this exhibition is one of inquiry, asking the questions of who, what, and how we commemorate. This exhibition is concerned with the role of embodied experience in that inquiry – how does the embodied experience of significant sites of action or re-enactment of events help inform our understanding? Why are we drawn to artifacts and how do we assign significance to them? Can connecting history to physical objects, places, and actions make the intangible tangible?

Artists Michael Rowley and Lorraine Walsh both visited significant sites of action in County Kildare and painted or sketched them. The absence of scars on these landscapes signifies an erasure of physical traces, yet the stories and memories connected to them persist. In placing themselves at the scene, the artists try to connect to these stories through embodied experience. The idea for Claire Halpin's print came to her on a walking tour of the mass burial site of the leaders of the Easter Rising at Arbour Hill. Angelina Foster's inquiry involved traveling to World War One sites in France. The poppies she made into ink serve as a tangible connection to these sites and the missing bodies of soldiers who were never returned to Kildare.

These artworks reveal an interest in places and objects that have borne witness. In Lia Laimbock's piece, we are presented with a still life of flowers in a teapot. The flowers, traditionally serving as a

memento mori, remind us of the brevity of life but also the fragility of a political idea discussed over a cup of tea. Mary McGrath's post box shows another everyday object holding a depth of historical significance, while Siobhan Hyde's bullets impress upon us the capacity for material objects to hold meaning beyond their material presence.

As we navigate the complexities of representing the past, we must remain critical of simplistic notions of authenticity and engage with the nuances of historical narratives. David Coonan's notebook composition based on *The Black Diaries of Roger Casement* questions what we choose to omit from historical narrative. In the colourised photograph, the replica uniform and the re-enactment event in Monasterevin, we see a urge to connect, to relate to the experiences of those in the past, through addition rather than omission. Patricia Hurl's community re-enactment of a painting by Richard Moynan draws attention to the constructed nature of historical interpretations with a layering of interpretation and artistic license. In these pieces, value is placed on the collective experience as a sort of cathartic or even celebratory experience.

Following a Decade of Commemoration, it is time to reflect on how we commemorate, how we connect to events of the past, and what value there is in representation and re-enactment. While we strive to understand events accurately and to separate fact from myth, as the generations pass there is, in our remembering, also a forgetting. Our pursuit of historical knowledge can go beyond the intellect - an ability to use our imaginations is often required to fill in the gaps. Any representation has the potential to obscure the past or sacrifice historical accuracy, but it can still hold value in developing empathy, while also drawing attention to our own subjectivity as a way of understanding ourselves and where we've come from. Art allows us to open up the spaces of inquiry so pertinent to the understanding of history.

Paula Barrett is a visual artist, graduate of NCAD, and Assistant Arts Officer for Kildare County Council.



The Road from Brabazon's to Lumville Cross,
2022, Oil on board, 12 x 17.5 cm.



Michael Rowley

Lumville Stables, the Curragh, 2022, Oil on board, 12 X 17.5 cm.

These paintings were from a series painted *plein air* on the Curragh in 2022. The inspiration for this series was a photograph (pictured on page 9) of an IRA column marching into the Curragh Camp to accept handover from the departing British Army in May 1922. This road has been the site of many historically significant journeys; Queen Victoria travelled it on a state visit, Michael Collins passed through on the way to Béal na Bláth and in more recent times the late Queen Elizabeth passed close by on a state visit.



Replica Uniform of an officer in the Irish Republican Army, 1916 - 23

This replica uniform is on loan from Joe Murphy of the Prosperous Heritage Group. The bright green embellishments show the rank markings of an officer in the Irish Republican Army from 1916-23.



Photograph of Free State troops, the Curragh

Colourised photograph, 2024, Kildare County Archive & Local Studies

Wearing a mixture of civilian and military uniforms, new recruits to the National Army march along the approach road to the Curragh Camp, in May 1922, following the withdrawal of the British garrison on 16 May.



'Monasterevin Rising' Athachtú ar fhorghabháil Aontais
Bhaile Átha Cliath Theas
Monasterevin Rising re-enactment of the storming of the South Dublin Union

Lord Edward's Own Living History Group footage produced by Kildare County Council

Monasterevin Rising, 2016, still from re-enactment footage

In 2016, this group re-enacted the storming of the South Dublin Union on the streets of Monasterevin. This event had seen some of the most brutal close quarter fighting in Easter week 1916.



Patricia Hurl

Still from *Military Manoeuvres, A Re-enactment*, 2016

The film, '*Military Manoeuvres, a Re-enactment*' was a participatory art project in collaboration with the community of Banagher, County Offaly who worked with Patricia Hurl to re-enact Richard Moynan's well-known theatrical painting *Military Manoeuvres* (1891). This was filmed by artist and photographer, Therry Rudin and costumes were created by designer, Mary McGuinness.

The original painting by the artist Richard Moynan is part of the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland. It depicts life in a midland garrison town in the years before Independence and is often thought to be based on the town of Leixlip though it was never credited by Moynan himself. Patricia believes it was a composite of many towns appearing in his working drawings and sketches. The children who are mostly barefoot, tease a passing soldier and march in their own pretend regimental band with home-made instruments comprised of buckets, tins, pots, saucepan lids and wooden flutes.

This re-enactment event was a Decade of Commemorations community project commissioned by Offaly County Council and took place on Culture Night 2016.



Lia Laimbock

Tricolour Flowers in Silver Teapot, 2022, Soft pastel on etching paper, 45.5 x 65.5cm

For artist Lia Laimbock, this work symbolises conversations people had about the new state while drinking tea. It was shown as part of the *Life Goes On* exhibition by SULT Artists Collective.

Life Goes On,

was a multimedia exhibition marking the centenary of the withdrawal of the British Army from Co. Kildare in 1922, by SULT Artists and Newbridge Local History Group. The aim of this collaboration was to produce a visual response to the historical, political and social events of 1922.

The exhibition was initially held during May 2022 in the only surviving barracks building in Newbridge, now part of Bord na Mona Headquarters. In November of that year, it opened at the Phoenix Park Visitor Centre, Dublin.



Mary McGrath

Letterbox, 2022, Oil on canvas, 40.6 x 29.2cm

When Ireland became a Free State the red post boxes of the United Kingdom were painted with a coat of green paint which is why a number today continue to bear the stamps "GR" (George Rex) or "VR" (Victoria Regina). This painting was part of the *Life Goes On* exhibition by SULT Artists Collective.

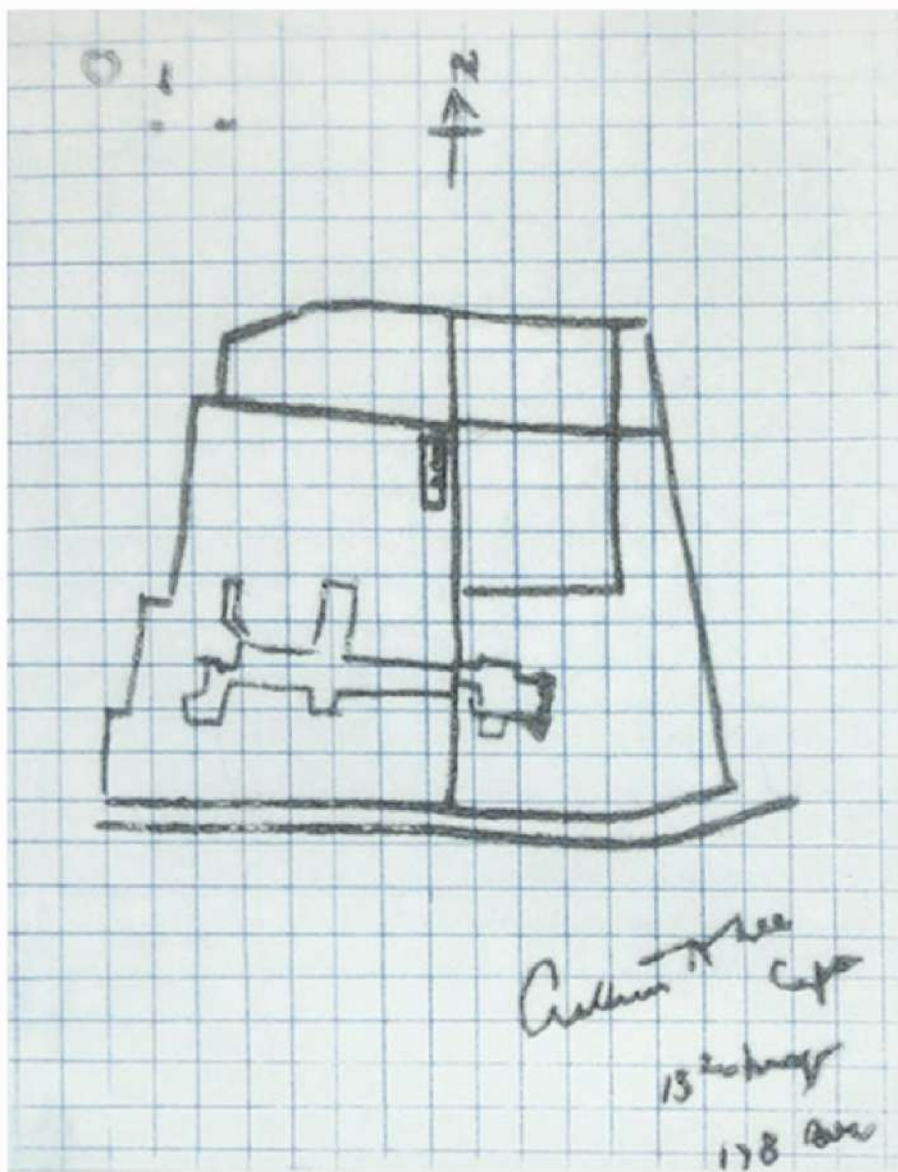


Lorraine Walsh

The Escape, The Watering Gates, Newbridge, 2022, Charcoal, Conte Pencil & printed text on paper, 100cm x 70cm

This drawing was from a series presenting landscapes of loss, trauma, disillusionment and exile. Over a period of a year the artist visited a number of sites of conflict and created a contemporary record of the landscapes that were witness to significant events from 100 years previous in County Kildare. Four of the drawings include printed and handwritten text that document both the official record of the time and the voices of the survivors and their families in the years after.

On the 14th of October 1922, 112 republican prisoners escaped from Newbridge Barracks internment camp by tunneling into the sewer leading to the river using rudimentary tools. This 'great escape' turned out to be the largest prison break in Irish history. Among the escapees was the artist's grandfather.



Claire Halpin

Arbour Hill Plot, 2016, Etching, 38 x 38cm

On loan from Kildare County Council's Municipal Art Collection
From 'Little Stories, Little Prints'

"On the orders of General Maxwell, 14 leaders of the Rising were executed from the 3rd to the 12th of May, 1916. The bodies of the executed men, certified dead, a name label pinned to their breast, were brought to Arbour Hill in a horse drawn vehicle where a mass burial plot had been dug in the prison yard. Maxwell was determined that the bodies of the executed men would not be released to their families - he feared that 'Irish sentimentality will turn those graves into martyrs' shrines to which annual processions etc. will be made. [Hence] the executed rebels are to be buried in quicklime, without coffins.' A British Army officer witnessing the burials made a sketch noting where the bodies were placed in the grave. This sketch is in the National Archives in London. I became aware of this sketch during a tour of Arbour Hill with historian Paul O'Brien. I was struck that a drawing of such significance and weight is unknown and has disappeared into the archives." Claire Halpin

Little Stories Little Prints

Project curator Pamela de Brí alongside Margaret Becker director and manager of the Leinster Printmaking Studio brought this 1916 commemorative printmaking project into being. Almost fifty printmakers from eight printmaking studios around Ireland participated in the project which aimed to create awareness of little known events or incidents during or around the time of the Easter Rising in 1916. Through a variety of organised events the artists were encouraged to research incidents and aspects of life at the time of the rising and to create prints in response to their research.

Supported by Kildare County Council Library and Arts Services and Dublin City Public Libraries a year long programme of exhibitions and workshops followed, including an exhibition in the Little Museum of Dublin, a tour of libraries in Kildare and Dublin city as well as venues around the country throughout 2016.



Siobhan Hyde

VII, 2016, Screenprint, 38 x 38cm

On loan from Kildare County Council's Municipal Art Collection
From 'Little Stories, Little Prints'

In 1914 Home Rule was granted to Ireland but was postponed due to the First World War. The IRB and the Irish Volunteers staged a rebellion on Easter Monday, 24th April, 1916. Irish forces mainly used German weapons and ammunition including the 1871 Mauser rifles, many of which were part of the arsenal brought to Howth by Erskine Childers in 1913. British forces used the Lee Enfield .303 rifle.

The seven bullets represent the seven executed leaders who signed the Proclamation of Independence in 1916; Patrick Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, Thomas Clarke, Joseph Plunkett, Éamonn Ceannt, James Connolly, and Seán MacDiarmada. Public opinion was originally against the Rising but their execution brought about a change in attitude leading eventually to the War of Independence and ultimately to the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1921.

Handwritten musical score on two pages. The left page is marked with a tempo of 12/16 and a dynamic of *norm.*. It features four staves: the top staff has a melodic line with *ppp* dynamics; the second staff has chords with *mf* dynamics; the third staff has a sustained chord with *pp* dynamics; and the bottom staff has a tremolo effect labeled *tr.*. The right page is marked with a tempo of 7/8 and a dynamic of *sp.*. It features four staves: the top staff has a melodic line with *pp* dynamics; the second staff has chords with *p* and *mf* dynamics; the third staff has a tremolo effect labeled *tr.* with *ppp* dynamics; and the bottom staff has chords with *pp* dynamics. Below the left page, the text "and he flew away uninjured..." is written in blue ink.

12/16 *norm.*

ppp

mf

pp

tr.

sp.

pp

p *mf*

tr. *ppp*

pp

and he flew away uninjured...

David Coonan

From A Black Diary, 2016, Notebook and musical composition on mp3 player, Commissioned by Kildare County Council's Library & Arts Service as part of the Kildare Notebook Project Centenary Commissions

The argument over the authenticity of *The Black Diaries of Roger Casement* divided historians for almost a century. They contain accounts of the real and imagined homosexual activities of one of the most important figures in Anglo-Irish history. Sir Roger Casement was an Irish nationalist, humanitarian activist, and poet, who was honoured and knighted in the early 20th Century for exposing human rights abuses in the Congo and Peru. Following his attempt to secure German support for the Easter Rising he was hanged for treason in August 1916. Before his execution, the British authorities selectively released diary excerpts to quash support for Casement, sparking debates among historians about the authenticity of the diaries. The results of forensic tests, published on 12 March 2002 have shown that the documents are authentic.

This short piece for string quartet draws inspiration from the diaries of Sir Roger Casement and the 'night music' style of Bela Bartok. Bartok's compositions, characterised by eerie dissonances, tranquil stillness, and haunting melodies reminiscent of nighttime nature sounds, provide a backdrop for Casement's own reflections on butterflies, as documented in his Patumayo Journal.

'...I stalked some glorious butterflies – green and black spotted, and a magnificent crimson or scarlet and black barred...but I let him go at once, and he flew away uninjured. I could not bring myself to crush the little palpitating body between my fingers.'

Roger Casement, *The Putumayo Journal*



Angelina Foster

Known unto God, 2023, Letterpress print on Awagami Shirakaba paper, Poppy ink

This piece is from the project *War Widows* by Angelina Foster which was inspired by the experiences – during and after the war – of the widows, mothers, and other loved ones Kildare soldiers who fought in WW1 left behind.

'Wars tear families apart, but the deaths of Irish soldiers in World War One were different. As the war in Europe raged on, and the battle for Irish independence built up momentum, men made different choices about when and where to fight, and those choices built a wall of cultural silence for many families of Irish soldiers in post-war New Ireland.' Angelina Foster

This concertina book was printed by letterpress on Awagami Shirakaba paper with Gill Sans Bold type, containing the names of the soldiers commemorated at the Thiepval memorial in France. Names of 59 soldiers from Co. Kildare, who never came home, with their next of kin written in ink made from poppies who were declared missing in the Somme between July 1915 and March 1918. The term 'Known unto God' is inscribed in place of a personal inscription on the headstones of soldiers who couldn't be identified before they were buried.

Associated Events & Outreach

Panel Discussion May 16th, 7pm, Mc Kenna Gallery, Riverbank Arts Centre,
with Curator Paula Barrett, Artist Patricia Hurl, Artist Dominic Thorpe,
Artist Michael Rowley and Barry Walsh, Lord Edward's Own Re-enactment Group.

Outreach Programme for schools with worksheet designed by Martina Mc Donald, Visual Arts Curator for Engagement, Learning & Participation at Riverbank Arts Centre.

Resource table at Newbridge Library supported by Kildare County Archives and Local Studies

About Riverbank Arts Centre

Riverbank Arts Centre is the county arts centre based in Newbridge, Co. Kildare, funded by The Arts Council and Kildare County Council. Riverbank Arts Centre works in partnership with international, national and local artists to deliver an accessible and consistently high quality arts programme in an intimate environment. Riverbank Arts Centre provides a multi-disciplinary programme which includes theatre, cinema, comedy, music, dance, workshops and visual arts. For more information, see www.riverbank.ie

McKenna Gallery, Riverbank Arts Centre,
Main Street, Newbridge, Co. Kildare
Saturday 13 April - Saturday 25 May, 2024

Cover Image:

Siobhan Hyde, *VII*, 2016,
Screenprint, 38 x 38cm.

Courtesy of Kildare County Council's
Municipal Art Collection, made as part of
the Leinster Printmaking Studio's 'Little
Stories, Little Prints' Project



Comhairle Contae Chill Dara
Kildare County Council

