'Voicing Commemoration'

The 4th Annual Conference of
the Oral History Network of Ireland

11 - 12 September 2015
Trinity College Dublin

Conference Abstracts

Friday, September 11:

Panel Session 1: Commemoration and Performance

Siobhán Browne – ‘Ballyseedy Cross: commemoration and legacy’

Siobhán Browne is a PhD candidate at the Department of Folklore and Ethnology and the Department of History, University College Cork.

From the beginning, the horror and the legacy of Ballyseedy Cross became an area of contest. In 1959 the Ballyseedy monument was unveiled to bear testimony to an atrocity that occurred there on the night of 6 March 1923 in the dying weeks of the Irish Civil War. This ‘lieu de mémoire’ combined the icons and images that had informed, inspired and populated the imaginations of the Irish nationalist ‘imagined community’.

Some members of the imagined community were to deal with this trauma by maintaining a silence, mourning privately and individually. Others however have commemorated it collectively and
repeatedly, year after year. The monument at Ballyseedy has become one of the symbols of Irish republicanism and its annual commemoration has become a fixture in the republican calendar.

In this decade of commemoration the question regarding commemoration and remembrance comes up again: Who guides the process of remembering and towards what end? In *Voices of collective remembering* James Wertsch argued that collective memory is not a thing in itself but many different acts of remembering shaped by overarching social forces and cognitive frameworks. With this in mind this paper will discuss the collective memory and commemoration of the Ballyseedy atrocity and will, through oral narratives, provide an account of some of those many different acts of remembering.

**Barry Sheppard – ‘Recycling history: language rights in 1930s and 21st century Ireland’**

*Barry Sheppard is a part-time Masters History student at Queen's University Belfast, studying an MA in Religion, Identity and Conflict in History. He was a recipient of the Robert Dudley Edwards History Prize 2012, from the Irish History Student's Association. He is the current recipient of the Giving Northern Ireland MA research bursary. He is a contributor to 'The Irish Story' Irish history website.*

Commemorating the past often proves to be problematic. Such problems were noticeable at the ‘Ireland 2016’ launch last November. Among the issues which came in for strong criticism was the use of the Irish language in the corporate video.

It can be argued that this in itself is symptomatic of official attitudes towards Irish, from paying mere lip service to it in the South, to at times, hostility in the North. This paper aims to tie in two important incidents which highlight issues relating to language rights on the island of Ireland. The first, an act in March 1934 by *Muintir na Gaeltachta*, led by Máirtín Ó Cadhain featured a number of men cycling from Connemara to Dublin to highlight issues facing Irish-speakers in Gaeltacht areas. This act indirectly resulted in the establishment of the Ráthcairn Gaeltacht in Meath.

Using Muintir na Gaeltacht as a focus for commemoration and inspiration, a West Belfast community organisation *Cumann Rothaíochta Loch Lao* organised a cycle ride from Belfast to the Ráthcairn site on the eightieth anniversary of the 1934 act to highlight language rights in the North. This paper will look at the two acts, tying them into the larger political environments of their time. It will consist of oral interviews with participants of the recent event to determine what they consider to be the similarities between their struggle and that of *Muintir na Gaeltachta*, and how this form of commemoration has a practical purpose as well as that of the usual political and ceremonial.

**Marina Ní Dhubháin – ‘Materialising trust: critical tensions in live representation’**

*Marina Ní Dhubháin is an IRC Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholar with the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance, School of Humanities in the National University of Ireland, Galway.*

The relationship of trust between historian and narrator is a distinct, vital attribute of oral history. It underpins the ethical responsibilities of the oral historian to the narrator, which last long after the interview is complete. The ongoing sense of shared endeavor inevitably informs the researcher’s treatment of the interview material, in all of its future manifestations. When this research is represented as a public performance, I suggest that particular challenges arise in relation to the
potential scope for critical analysis. In my paper I propose to consider some of the implications of this intersubjective relationship, as it relates to the potential for critique, in the specific area of performance.

I will explore the work of two theatre makers who produce innovative work with the raw materials of oral history, each using distinct and unique methodologies: Rib Davis is an oral historian and playwright, he has been producing large scale, community based, oral history performances in Britain since the 1970s; Louise Lowe is a prolific Irish theatre maker whose company Anu Productions is at the forefront of site-specific, immersive theatre in Ireland. Anu have pioneered the use of oral history testimonial as a key element amongst a bricolage of documentary material. As both Davis and Lowe work with and within communities, I will focus my analysis on those aspects of the process which relate to the building of trust within each community, with particular attention to the implications of that trust relationship in the choreography of tensions between populist celebration and critical commemoration in live performance.

Saturday, September 12:

Panel Session 3: Commemoration North and South

Tomás Mac Conmara – ‘Lieux de Silence: commemoration and the private mnemonic landscape’

Tomás Mac Conmara is the founder and project coordinator of Cuimhneamh an Chláir, the Clare Oral History and Folklore Group, and has been engaged in the preservation of Clare’s cultural heritage for many years. Tomás has served as Cathaoirleach of the Clare Heritage Circle, Fóram Gaeilge an Chláir, Clare Tourist Council and East Clare Heritage and has lectured on Clare history and folklore across Ireland and America. He has completed a PhD at the University of Limerick, based on the Irish War of Independence in County Clare, oral history, tradition and social memory. He is a founding member of the OHNI.

The distinction between what is public commemorated and privately remembered is a significant factor in understanding how the Anglo-Irish War of Independence retained a presence within local communities and families across Ireland.

This proposed paper will suggest that the personal mnemonic landscape which although not publicly visible, played a key role in both paradoxically preserving memory and silence. It will also contend that there are identifiable moments in the past nine decades that testify to the enduring presence of the War of Independence in social memory at a private level, which are not reflected in public commemoration. Certain physical sites while unmarked, can trigger strong emotional responses among local communities aware of associated history.

By focusing on silence within memory, the potential for oral history both as method and source to illuminate the selective nature of commemoration at international, national and local levels will be illustrated. Additionally, the way in which exploration of the past can be significantly deepened will be exampld through the use of material collected in county Clare as part of the applicant's doctoral research, completed at the University of Limerick in 2015. The latter explored the Anglo Irish War of Independence in county Clare, through the collection and interpretation of social memory and oral history. In doing so it established a new theoretical model for the use of memory relating to the revolutionary period.
Sean O’Connell – ‘Double trouble: social memory and Belfast’s Sailortown district’

Sean O’Connell is Professor of Modern British and Irish Social History at Queen’s University Belfast. His teaching interests include working class family and community, oral history, gender history, consumerism, and the social history of modern Britain and Ireland.

Like many other cities, post-war Belfast underwent extensive ‘slum clearances’ and redevelopment that dramatically re-shaped numerous inner city working class districts. Social historians have debated the nature of the impact of this traumatic experience on working class social memory in oral history testimonies and autobiographies.

This paper will set out to offer a new case study for this particular debate, whilst also offering a fresh twist to the discussion. It argues that inner city Belfast underwent two sets of ‘Troubles’ from the late 1960s to the 1980s. The first was the sectarian violence most associated with the term, which broke down the uneasy social relations established between Catholic and Protestant workmates and neighbours. The second was the process of urban redevelopment, which alongside accelerating deindustrialisation, features as traumatic memory in popular representations of Belfast’s working class past.

Examining oral testimony, short stories and novels, photographs, and street art, this paper explores how the former residents of Sailortown have attempted to come to terms with the impact of urban redevelopment and deindustrialisation on their lives. This dockside district was one of Belfast’s most cosmopolitan areas. The Sailortown area prided itself on being ‘mixed’: meaning that unlike most Belfast working class districts, Catholics and Protestants co-existed in large numbers. The fracturing of those relationships by sectarian violence adds – potentially – an interesting gloss to the urban pastoral dynamic. This paper will investigate that issue as well as identifying the themes that feature most prominently (or are omitted) in the social memory of Sailortown.

Feargal Mac Ionnrachtaigh – ‘Recasting research as resistance’: charting the insider’s challenge in giving voice to the ‘view from below’

Dr Feargal Mac Ionnrachtaigh completed a PhD at Queens University Belfast in 2009 on Republican Prisoners and the Revival of the Irish Language in the North of Ireland. Feargal works full-time in the Irish language community revival in Belfast and is chairperson of Upper Springfield Irish language organisation Glór na Móna and works full-time as Project Worker with Gaeltacht Quarter Irish Language Development Agency, Forbairt Feirste. He now also works for Queens University, Belfast’s Institute of Collaborative Humanities as Part-Time Post-Doctoral Researcher in the ‘Translating Cultures’- Féile an Phobail history project.

This paper will draw on the author’s research, Language, Resistance and Revival: Republican Prisoners and the Irish Language in the North of Ireland, (Pluto, 2013). Reflecting on his unique research, based on in-depth interviews with Republican former prisoners and language activists, his book analyses the politics of incarceration in Long Kesh throughout the Conflict in the North of Ireland; revealing the centrality of the Irish language to prisoners’ resistance in their bitter struggle against the British State and its policies of criminalisation. This explores the lasting legacy beyond the prison walls of the Irish language revival within the Nationalist community through the ‘insider’ accounts of its main protagonists.

This chapter will explore the challenges of undertaking ‘critical social research’ from a committed activist perspective, when the researcher is viewed as an ‘insider’, a ‘participant’ and a ‘product’ of the historical narrative s/he aims to analyse, critique and uncover. This involves an understanding of
the dual-developmental role of researcher and researched as a defining feature of critical social research which ‘moves beyond the resources of theory into praxis, recognising the self-as-academic as the self-as-participant’ (Scraton 2007: 240). It will be argued that activist commitment and political conviction to the process of ‘bearing witness, gathering testimonies, sharing experiences’ and ‘garnering the view from below’ (ibid), actually validates and strengthens research that can unequivocally position itself as a means of ‘speaking truth to great power’, thereby recasting research itself as a form of resistance.

Panel Session 4: Commemoration and the Wider World

Judith Garfield – ‘Commemoration: those that went before. The road to equality, LGBT+ community same sex marriage’

Judith Garfield, MBE is Executive Director of Eastside Community Heritage and is responsible for the organisations core work programme. Since its inception ECH has worked with over 900 community groups, worked with 10,000 individuals, produced 18 publications, over 80 exhibitions, as well as giving birth to East London Peoples Archive (currently holding in excess of 2500 oral histories and thousands of pictures). She is currently delivering a unique oral history “apprenticeship” training, the only sort of its kind in the UK, and this will result in an NVQ accredited qualification.

The Sexual Offences Act of 1967 decriminalised same sex acts between consenting adults over the age of 21 in England and Wales. Prior to this, thousands of men (in particular) were imprisoned for consensual same sex acts; figures from the 1950s show in excess of 1000 people a year serving prison terms because of their sexual preferences.

The dawn of a new millennium saw great strides in the LGBT+ journey for equality. The early part of the decade saw the equalisation of the age of consent (2001), the declassification of Transsexualism as an illness (2002), and the introduction of Civil Partnerships for same sex couples (2004). And finally same sex marriage (2013).

Civil Partnerships for same sex couples was seen as a big step forward in terms of equality for the LGBT+ community.

For many of our project participants, the 1950s and 1960s were periods of fear and confusion; they were unable to access information and support about their sexuality, and living in the shadow of potential prison sentences should they be caught engaging in same sex relationships.

Utilising archived oral histories from LGBT+ Community, this presentation explores how the policy changed over the past 50 years and tells the personal oral histories of the struggles, discrimination, and the campaign for equality, civil partnerships and finally same sex marriage act, along the road to equality.

David Convery – ‘From Cable Street to Spain: the antifascist narrative in the lives of Max and Maurice Levitas’

Dr David Convery is an Irish Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow at the Irish Centre for the
The Irish working class has a diversity to it that is often unacknowledged. Urban as well as rural, immigrant as well as emigrant, Jewish as well as Protestant and Catholic. It was never a monolithic culture. This paper is a study of two brothers who encapsulate this diversity within their lives.

Max and Maurice Levitas were born in Dublin at the beginning of the twentieth century to Jewish immigrant parents. Their father struggled to find secure employment so the family moved to East London in the 1930s. There Max and Maurice joined the Communist Party. They became active in the fight against fascism and played an important role in the Battle of Cable Street in October 1936 which prevented Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists from marching through the East End. Soon after, Maurice joined the International Brigades in Spain and was incarcerated in a Francoist concentration camp. He subsequently fought in Burma during the Second World War and later became a teacher in the German Democratic Republic, while Max was elected a councillor for the Communist Party in Stepney and continues to be active today at the age of 100 in housing campaigns and against racism.

Despite the longevity of their lives, their youthful battle against fascism is the central focus in their interviews. This paper will investigate their construction of this antifascist narrative and its negotiation with their multiple identities as Irish, Jewish, Communist Eastenders.

Sharon Kangisser Cohen – ‘Survivors of the Holocaust reflect on commemoration’

Dr. Sharon Kangisser Cohen is the Academic Director of the Oral History Division of the Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Sharon earned her PhD from the Hebrew University from the IJC. She has taught Holocaust studies at the Hebrew University, The University of New South Wales, Australia and at NYU in New York.

How is memory of the Holocaust to be kept alive and vibrant as survivors’ voices begin to recede and as the past passes from ‘living memory to history’? This article is based on group interviews conducted with Holocaust survivors living in Sydney, Australia and explores how these Holocaust survivors would like the Holocaust to be remembered in the future.

From the discussion groups it was clear that most of these survivors are unsure if the next generation possesses the inclination and ability not only to remember the Holocaust, but to remember it well. There was a clear sentiment amongst all the groups that one of the only ways the memory of the Holocaust can survive is by being cast as a religious act, duty and obligation, to be codified in the Jewish religious calendar.

Panel Session 5: Archives of Commemoration

Donal McAnallen – ‘Hearing confessions: Fr. Louis O’Kane’s recordings of Irish Volunteers and the pre-Truce IRA in Ulster’

Dónal McAnallen is the Outreach Officer with the Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Memorial Library &
The gathering of oral history about the Irish revolution was most problematic in Ulster. Embitterment about partition and abandonment by the Irish Free State, combined with close scrutiny from the unionist authorities, made northern nationalist residents very reluctant to record memories of the 1913-23 republican campaigns and beyond. A handful of northern-based veterans crafted written statements for the 1940s-50s military history and pensions projects, but very few voices were captured for posterity.

That was until Fr Louis O’Kane came along. Between 1964 and his death in 1973, while working as a Catholic parish priest, O’Kane taped interviews with dozens of witnesses and participants in republican activity in Ulster half a century earlier, plus outside figures such as Kathleen Clarke. The old reel-to-reel recordings, along with a miscellany of revolutionary documents, photographs and artefacts, lay in a trunk in a convent for two decades, then in Armagh for two more.

This paper will examine what the inspiration, approach and achievements of O’Kane’s huge project. It will explore how, as a priest and an observer of revolutionary incidents in his native south Derry, he won the trust of otherwise cautious contemporaries to confide their stories to him. Finally, the paper will outline how, since 2012, statutory funding has opened up this unique historical resource to a wider audience, and what we can learn from it about this pivotal period in modern Ireland.

Helen Fallon & Nicola Kelly – ‘Creating an oral archive: Maynooth University Library’s engagement with the Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive’

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at Maynooth University. Previously she worked at Dublin City University and the University of Sierra Leone. Her professional interests include academic writing, staff development and integrating archival collections into the university curriculum. She was one of three editors of the death-row correspondence of Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, published as “Silence Would be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa”.

Nicola Kelly is an Archivist at Maynooth University. Previously she has worked at Trócaire, All Hallows College, Dublin and the Holy Faith Sisters. Her professional interests include engaging students with archival and digital resources, sensory engagement with the physical archive, and palaeography of medieval manuscripts.

The Ken Saro Wiwa Archive, donated to Maynooth University Library in November 2011, comprises 28 letters, 27 poems and a number of artefacts sent to Sister Majella McCarron (OLA) by Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. The letters were sent from military detention in the two years leading up to the execution of Saro-Wiwa and eight others (the Ogoni Nine) for protesting about the destruction of their homeland, Ogoni, in the Niger Delta, by the international petrochemical industry.

The archive captures in rich detail the last two years of Saro-Wiwa’s life and documents his transition from political activist to political prisoner. To complement the printed archive Maynooth University and Kairos Communications developed an audio archive. This is a set of recordings of people connected to Ken Saro-Wiwa, including his brother Dr. Owens Wiwa and Sister Majella McCarron. The audio archive is freely accessible 24/7 from https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/library/collections/ken-saro-wiwa-audio-archive. It has been accessed over 1,000 times and parts of the archive have been broadcast on University of Ibadan radio and Irish national Radio. Initially established in Soundcloud, much of the archive is now
available in the newly launched Digital Repository of Ireland (DRI) http://repository.dri.ie/

November 10, 2015 is the 20\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Following some brief background information on the collection, the presentation will outline the rationale and processes in creating an audio archive relating to a major 20\textsuperscript{th} Century environmental activist.

\textbf{Christina Cassidy – ‘A small section of fanatics calling themselves Irishmen’: Loughrea’s reaction to Easter 1916 and its consequences’}

Christina Cassidy is a History and English graduate from UCG [now NUIG]. She has worked with Loughrea History Project, now a GRETB Local Training Initiative, since its inception in 1999. Co-editor, contributor to and researcher on the project’s critically acclaimed two-volume \textit{The District of Loughrea [Vol.1 History, Vol. II Folklore]} published in 2003. She is currently editing a folklore collection, due for publication later this year, detailing the lives and memories of residents and day centre clients of a local community hospital.

Loughrea Town Commissioners were swift in their condemnation of the leaders of the Easter Rising. A meeting held on the 8\textsuperscript{th} May 1916 deplored the fact that ‘at a time of sore trial to the course of civilization’ a small section of fanatics ‘exploited no doubt by agents of Germany’ had threatened the authority of the Irish nation and were responsible for the loss of innocent lives and the ruthless destruction of property. ‘Unsevering [sic] support’ was pledged to Mr John Redmond ‘for the pangs of grief this wanton outrage had brought upon him after his life’s work in the service of the nation’. Less than ten years later, this same august body would vote to have the by now largely unpopular and divisive reaction expunged from the minutes. ‘A terrible beauty’ had indeed been born and its consequences would be felt for decades to come.

This paper will discuss the impact of the rising on a small town, located in east Galway, and its rural district as well as its consequences in terms of attitudes to World War 1, the impact of the 1918 Sinn Fein victory, the War of Independence and beyond. It will incorporate some folklore memories recorded for Loughrea History Project’s two-volume history publication \textit{The District of Loughrea} (2003) as well as a yet to be published further folklore volume recording the memories of a group of attendees at a local community hospital day centre.