

BELFAST AND THE WORLD 1918-1921: Marking a decade of centenaries

On Wednesday 3 October, 2018 Corrymeela formally launched 'Belfast and the World 1918–1921' at the Duncairn Centre for Culture and Arts. The Rev Dr Johnston McMaster provided a keynote address on the theme of 'The challenges of ethically remembering 1918-1921'.



Johnston has kindly provided the text of his speech below.

'Belfast and the World 1918-1921' is being delivered on behalf of Belfast City Council as part of their PEACE IV Plan, which is funded by the European Union and managed by the Special EU Programmes Body.

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BELFAST AND THE WORLD 1918-1922



It is fair to say that the first half of the crucial decade in Irish history was handled sensitively and events marking the centenaries of 1912-1916 were reflective and not celebratory, complicated and complex,

dignified and mature. Prior to 2012 any fears that these events could be marked by violence, and that even another generation of young people would be drawn into violence, did not happen. We are encouraged to believe and confident that we can approach the second half of this decade in an honest, open and inclusive way and not only enhancing greater understanding but also deeper and more trustful relationships. 2012-2016 provide a good platform to engage with four years that are sensitive, more violent than the first half, yet can be talked about, empathetically entered into and be understood in all their complexity and multiple layers of meaning.

We engage with Belfast and the World 1918-1922 under three headings. Engaging and Making History in Context, Being Local and Global Citizens and The Power of Words.

ENGAGING AND MAKING HISTORY IN CONTEXT

There are important events in the second half of the crucial decade in Irish history. Between 1918-1922 there was the end of WW1, though all that ended was trench warfare. From 1918-1923, hundreds of thousands continued to be slaughtered in Europe, millions more were displaced and there was unspeakable hunger, poverty and disease, not least the flu pandemic related to the war that killed more people than WW1 itself. Within this larger context the first Dail was in place by January 1919. On the same day as the Dail met the War of Independence began, continued its bloody way until July 1921 when a truce was called. On December 23rd 1920, the Government of Ireland Act partitioned Ireland, though N Ireland did not become a reality until May 1921. On the 5 December 1921 the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed and ratified by the Dail on 7 January 1922. On 28 June 1922 the Four

Courts were attacked by pro-Treaty forces and the Civil War began and ended after much bloodshed on 27 April 1923.

From 1920-1922 there were the vicious Belfast Troubles, not easy to deal with because they were vicious as partition took place. They include the loyalist mass murder of children in Weaver Street, the Republican bombing of a poor Protestant family and the ritualistic killing of the Catholic McMahon family by police in 1922.

These are the key events of the second half of the decade and they changed Ireland completely. Whether Catholic, Protestant or Dissenter, our futures and our community relationships were shaped by these events. This is recent history still needing to be understood by all of us.

In 2008 the Ethical and Shared Remembering programme began to develop ethical principles for remembering or commemoration. These principles have been widely used and still hold, especially narrative hospitality, narrative flexibility and narrative plurality. Remembering the future is an even stronger principle as we struggle in a contemporary and changing world. The future we want to shape is now more crucial than it's been for a long time. The world of now is unrecognisable from the world of then, it has changed beyond comprehension and is changing again in a way that is deeply challenging and disturbing. So much so that ordinary citizens and political leaders are desperately trying to get back to some imagined golden age. Fear increases and so too does intolerance, hate, prejudice and the creation of policies of division and exclusion. This is why when dealing with the events of 1918-1922, we need to push beyond historical remembering and develop a thematic approach to those crucial years. Large themes

emerge from these years and those themes remain part of our lives and experiences in our changed and changing world. We need to understand the difficult history of these years and we also need to engage the big themes that emerge from them, albeit in our very different context. Some of the themes that emerge from 1918-1922 are democracy, globalisation, sovereignty, war, violence and the perennial search for the common good. We will briefly mention some of those themes.

Then and now there is a larger world context. The world was never defined by Ireland. Irish history did not exist in isolation from wider global events and influences. We were never 'ourselves'. We cannot explore 1918-1922 without looking at a bigger picture, understanding dynamics and events going on in Ireland and beyond. History without the larger context will be introverted and distorted. We engage and make history in context. The context is both local and global. There are at least four contextual strands.

A) The Home Rule Crisis

From as far back as 1886 Ireland and Britain were embroiled in a Home Rule crisis. British Prime Minister, William Gladstone introduced a Home Rule Bill to give Ireland its own parliament within the empire. Nationalism and Unionism began to form, divided largely on religious lines. To be nationalist was to be Catholic and to be Protestant was to be unionist. Gladstone's Bill was defeated in the Commons. He introduced a second Bill in 1895 and this time the Lord's threw it out. Both the nationalist demand for Home Rule and unionist resistance to Home Rule intensified. A third Bill was introduced by Henry Asquith's Liberal government in 1912 when the Irish Parliamentary Party or

nationalists held the balance of power at Westminster. John Redmond's Irish Party had leverage. Unionist resistance intensified led by Edward Carson. The Ulster Covenant was signed on 28 September 1912, guns were being organised in 1910, the UVF was formed in 1913 and the largest shipment of guns and ammunition arrived from Germany in Larne, Donaghadee and Bangor. In response the Irish Volunteers were also formed in 1913 and they too shipped guns from Germany in 1914. On the cusp of a war Germany was only too happy to arm both sides in Ireland. Most of the weaponry was with the unionists. Ireland stood on the brink of a bloody civil war and that civil war would have happened had the Great War not broken out in August 1914. Now nationalists and unionists went off to the war together and died together in the mud and blood of the trenches on a number of war fronts.

Home Rule was passed and became law in 1914 but because of the war it was put into cold storage until the war was over, which everyone believed would be at Christmas. Millions of humans became bogged down in trenches for four years and industrial warfare on a scale not seen before killed unprecedented numbers of people. It was a major catastrophe. When, in Churchill's words *'the deluge had settled, the grey dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone were still there.'* The rest of Europe had changed and was changing but not here. There was still an Irish problem and it was a British problem. Many nationalists had gone to war believing that Ireland was promised Home Rule when the catastrophe had ended. Many unionists had fought and died believing that their supreme sacrifice would obligate Britain never to grant Home Rule to Ireland. But Home Rule returned to the agenda and a partitioned Ireland, nine counties or six counties, looked likely. On 23 December 1920 the Government of Ireland Act partitioned the

island and partitioned the nine county province of Ulster. In this context we try to understand the events of 1918-1922. Two confessional states were born in violence and we live with the legacies.

B) Labour Relations

Across Europe labour relations were a key issue at this time. Unions were being formed and workers were striking for better working conditions and wages. The industrialists and big business people were reluctant to give way. The big house was a feature of life and society was class riven. The aristocracy, mercantile, and big business people were reluctant to lose power and wealth. Belfast had industrial unrest in 1907 with the Belfast lock out. The dockers who had been agitating for better conditions found themselves locked out by their employers. Black-leg workers were imported and this led to pitched battles. Jim Larkin came from Liverpool to organise the dockers and tried to overcome the sectarian divide of Catholic and Protestant dockers. The strike spread and strikers were told at a Customs House steps meeting that it was *'now war to the knife'*. Even the police went on strike, refusing to sit beside black-leg carters. At one point nine naval warships arrived in Belfast Lough and 2,500 troops were rushed to the city. There were riots on the lower Falls, soldiers fired up the Falls Road, a mother looking for her child and a worker were killed. The remarkable thing about the lockout was that Catholics and Protestants stood in solidarity and campaigned side by side, but the powers knew how to operate divide and rule. The orange and green psyches and sectarian mind-sets ran deep and once a Home Rule Bill was proposed, workers rights and wellbeing became secondary to a constitutional issue. Poverty gave way to political allegiances.

A Dublin lockout followed in 1913 causing terrible suffering, exacerbated by so many workers living in overcrowded and appalling tenement buildings in the centre of Dublin, the worst housing in Europe. It was in the middle of such overcrowding and poverty that the Easter Rising was staged in 1916 and it was not surprising that so many civilians, non-combatants and children were killed. Labour relations were not to go away, the class system began to break down. Everyone experienced trauma and confusion. You may remember the Butler Carson in Downton Abbey, unable to cope with the breakdown of structures and roles in the early 1920s. His world was collapsing as was the world upstairs as well. The ordinary man who had largely been the cannon fodder in the trenches, were not prepared to accept the subservient role when they returned from war. When the first reason given in the Ulster Covenant for resistance to Home Rule was the economic wellbeing and prosperity of Ulster, it was not my grandfather's wealth or prosperity that was being defended, nor most of the Covenant signatories. It was the shipyard owners and the distillery owners, and the big business people. It was their wealth and prosperity that they believed to be at risk. Was it a Covenant based on self-interest?

C) Women, The Vote And Gender Equality

This was an era of suffrage, women campaigning for the right to vote and for welfare and educational rights. Nineteenth century Belfast Presbyterian, Isabella Tod had been involved in action for women's property rights, women's education, the repeal of the contagious diseases acts (she was responsible for the repeal of three acts which had forced inspection of prostitutes suspected of having venereal disease, locked them up, all to keep the men safe and who had no

responsibility for the transmission of the disease), and for women's right to vote. Tod was an activist, lobbying government for women's rights on all four fronts. The compassion and justice at the heart of her faith inspired and sustained her.

Suffrage societies were springing up in Ireland educating public opinion as to why women should be permitted to vote and stand for parliament. Leading activists were Anna and Thomas Haslam, Dublin Quakers. New leaders in this activism emerged, women like Hannah Sheehy Skeffington from a Catholic nationalist background, and Margaret Cousins from a Protestant, unionist background. Some of it became militant as women heckled and disrupted public meetings, eventually damaging public buildings. They raised awareness not only on the right to vote, but also the plight and condition of working class women, employment conditions, equal pay, domestic and sexual violence against women and children.

In January 1918 Lloyd George introduced a Representation Act giving limited voting rights to women. The vote was given to women over thirty who were householders, the wives of householders, had a five pound qualification or who were university graduates. It was by no means a universal franchise. Just to keep something of the male status quo, maintain patriarchy, the vote for men was lowered from thirty to twenty-one, so that there could not be a female majority in an election.

Neither John Redmond, the nationalist leader, nor Edward Carson, the unionist leader, were interested in women's rights or the vote. The political or national question was paramount. Redmond had died prematurely in 1918 but Eamon De Valera wasn't much interested in women's voting rights either. Irish women, nationalist and unionist,

were not to have a say in the future of Ireland. When the national question was settled, maybe then the vote. By 1919, a frustrated and angry Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was lamenting that the women's movement could only mark time in Ireland. Were women not to be trusted with the future of Ireland?

The largest women's political force in Ireland in the early twentieth century was the Ulster Women's Unionist Council, and it is the only one that has survived to the present. The members were upper class and middle-class women with economic freedom to be involved in political life. Some 228,999 women signed the 1912 Women's Declaration. They were not allowed to sign the Covenant and were not involved in the power centres of male dominated unionism. Early presidents were the 2nd and 3rd Duchesses of Abercorn and the 6th Marchioness of Londonderry. Of course they were titled and the leading Ulster aristocratic elite, and they could meet at times of the day when women from the narrow little streets of Belfast and whose children died young could not meet. But the UWUC was a large political organisation and did effective work, even if they were subservient to their men. It reflected the gender relations of the time.

In 1922 the Irish Free State Constitution gave women over twenty-one voting rights. Ireland now was partitioned and women in the new Northern Ireland had to wait until 1928 before those over twenty-one could vote.

D) World War I

On the 11 November WWI came to an end. There were winners and losers, or at least that is how the dominant narrative tells it. November

11 did mark the end of trench warfare and though there were proclaimed winners, it might be said that only the USA really gained anything. Even that is complex, but WWI resulted in the US becoming the world economic power, which has led to America's century as a dominating superpower. Some would say an American empire. The US certainly superseded the British empire which was on its way down after 1918. For millions of Europeans the war did not end on 11 November 1918. The hate-fest continued through to 1923. There was a devastating aftermath characterised by revolutions, pogroms, mass expulsions and major military clashes. Millions died between 1918 and 1923 in the imperial wreckage of Europe. Russia was already descending into the utter chaos of revolution, of cataclysmic proportions. Empires had collapsed and Europe needed to be reorganised. In the territories of the collapsed empires of Europe, violence and killing stretched from Finland and the Baltic states through Russia and Ukraine, Poland, Austria, Hungary and Germany, through the Balkans, Turkey and the Caucasus. For millions there was no peace, only continuous violence. Millions were displaced, wandering, homeless exiles, belonging nowhere. In many ways WWI continued. Between 1917 and 1922 Europe had twenty-seven violent transfers of power. This violence and killing in Europe had not been seen since the thirty years war of the seventeenth century. Some 'ending' came with the Treaty of Lusanne in 1923. But hundreds of thousands of people had died of starvation and well over four million died as a direct result of the continuous war and armed conflicts. And this is not counting the 50-100 million who died in the Spanish flu pandemic, which had its origins in WWI camps. The preoccupation with militarism has overlooked the tragic flu pandemic, but it needs to be part of the memory of this era of death. The War not only continued

after 1918. It was to continue in 1939-1945, and even that war did not end for millions of Central and Eastern Europeans until 1989.

Six imperial powers had gone to war in 1914. Europe was an imperialistic continent controlling 85% of the planet, the largest empire being the British. 1914-1918 brought four of the six empires crashing. Prussia-Germany was imperial wreckage, and the dominant region of Prussia was only able to survive until 1948 when at the stroke of a pen it was wiped from history and ceased to exist. Prussia was no more, is no more, though its classical architecture survives to this day in Berlin, its old capital. The Austria-Hungarian empire also collapsed. Old Emperor Franz-Josef died of old age but his successor had inherited wreckage. This was the imperial power which was really responsible for WWI when its conflict with Serbia led to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire, and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo in 1914.

Russia had a revolution in 1917, which brought down the large Russian empire of the Romanovs. Tsar Nicolas and his family were exiled nobodies, packed off to Siberia and even refused refuge by cousin George V. They were murdered and their bodies thrown down a mine-shaft. The fourth empire to collapse was the Ottoman empire, which had lasted from the 13th century and had stretched into the Balkans and twice had laid siege to Vienna, the last in 1529. The Ottoman empire was largely Muslim and towards the end Turkish. From the late 19th century it had been described as the sick old man of Europe. Gallipoli was the major WWI battle in which the Anzacs and British had lost heavily to the Ottomans. But by 1922 it had gone after centuries and Turkey became a Republic.

The remaining two empires were the French and the British and both were so weakened by the War that their days were numbered. They survived the War but only for three more decades. The French and British empires joined the wreckage of history by the late 1950s. The French empire came to an end in the colonial, French-Algerian war from 1954-1962 in which 30,000 French soldiers died as did hundreds of thousands of Algerians. The final nail in the British imperial coffin was the Suez crisis of 1956.

Nothing lasts forever and no imperial power, political system or ecclesial system is from everlasting to everlasting, all six of the great European imperial powers were destroyed by WWI. For people in Ireland, the nationalists wanted to leave the British empire and have independence. The unionists wanted to stay within the empire, and the unionist leaders of 1912-1922 were imperialists. By the 1950s there was no empire to leave and no empire to hold on to. The provisionality of everything, the impermanency of everything is a challenging and sobering thought.

The War not only destroyed European imperialism, it was also the War that killed imperial Christianity. Christendom was a European phenomenon, created by Roman emperor Constantine in 313CE. That was the point in history when church and state got into bed together, faith and politics and throne and altar were joined and we're inseparable for 1600 years. The Reformations of the 16th century failed to break that connection. The state funded the church and the church blessed the state's armies and legitimised the state's wars. All war was holy war and God was on the state's side. God was in the imperial or state image, a warrior God and Christ a warrior Messiah. Christendom was where everybody stood in 1914 which is why God

featured so much in the war effort of the imperial powers and churches were recruiting agents for the respective empires. But by 1918 imperial Christianity had crashed. Following 1918 European churches went into decline, practice of faith diminished and churches increasingly lost power and were less in the public square. After 1945 and the end of WW2, all of this accelerated. Europe became increasingly secular and secularisation and the cultural disestablishment of Churches has become a reality. If we look at the power and role of Churches, Protestant and Catholic in Ireland one hundred years ago, and where they are now, the death of Christendom is now a reality here. The god of the Ulster Covenant and the Easter Proclamation, the Christendom god writ large, is now dead. Secular does not mean that there is no place for religion and religious ethics in the public place. It means the separation of Church and State. Unionists were right in 1912 to insist that Home Rule was Rome Rule. It's not now and 2018 has made that clear. But as we try to understand a century ago, globally and in Ireland, we might want to insist in the present that Protestant evangelical or fundamentalist rule is no more acceptable now that Rome rule was a century ago.

BEING LOCAL AND GLOBAL CITIZENS

We need to avoid living in the past or being imprisoned by the past. We cannot remember 1918-1922 without remembering the future. This is why remembering, understanding and visioning the future belong together. We remember in context and we remember the future and this is ethical remembering. A past event from the second decade of the twentieth century leaves us challenged in the present and forces us to think about the world we want to live in. The other is a theme from

the past, from 1921 which never goes away and challenges us to evaluate, critique and think of the kind of country we want to live in.

A) The Paris Peace Conference 1919

I hope we will explore this centenary next year because it is hugely significant for our world because of the legacies it has left us. WWI resulted in the end of a world order. The map of Europe was redrawn as was much of the world. Much of the world came to Paris in 1919 to try and construct a new world order, and after the most destructive war in history, to perhaps grasp a second chance to end war. High hopes were to be disappointed as much of the promise of Paris was unfulfilled. The Paris Peace Conference met in the shadow of unspeakable loss and continuing war and violence in Europe. The Paris Peace Conference had a thankless task, trying to recreate the international order and build peace without a road map.

The Conference was dominated by the United States and the European Allies, and a major impact was the humiliation of Germany through a penal peace. Parisian hopes were unfulfilled because there was a failure to integrate losers in peace-building. Russia was excluded and it was not to anyone's benefit that Russia developed in isolation after the Peace Conference. The League of Nations was formed in Paris and Mandates were given to France and Great Britain to create under the direction of the League some form of governance for the former Ottoman empire provinces in the Middle East. France and Britain completely ignored the League and carved up the region between them, Shaping borders to their own purposes and imposing borders in the largely Arab region. Artificial states were created such as Syria, Lebanon, Trans-Jordan and Iraq. Later Saudi Arabia was

invented. Egypt was to be independent but the British stayed there until 1956. Palestine had the Balfour Declaration promising Jews and Arabs different things with no attempt made to resolve two competing nationalisms. With imperial borders, artificially created countries and double-think promises, it is not surprising that an explosive future is being played out in the Middle East. The conference at Paris was all about the spoils of war, not least because most of the world's petroleum lay under Muslim-inhabited soil. Paris was about mandatory empire! The Paris Peace Conference has left many legacies. Its most destructive legacy has been the Middle East and peace in today's world may largely depend on peace in the Middle East. The West is powerless to enable a resolution of its complex problems.

Paris has bequeathed European politics and the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, multiple and complex challenges and peace agendas. We need to remember Paris in 2019.

B) The Common Good

In 1921 Northern Ireland and the Free State set out on the experiment with democracy, the journey of state-building and the challenge to create a common good. As we mark the foundation of two states in 2021, we might want to ask how well have we performed with democracy, state-building and realising a common good? On a scale of 1-10 how would you score the now Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland?

The creation of the common good is a political imperative and a moral imperative. The common good is the purpose of governance. It is an ethical call to action and standard for human responsibility. It sets the

bar for political and civic responsibility. The common good, which was the responsibility of the two governments a century ago and remains the responsibility of present government with civil society, requires an overarching purpose. Central to the realisation of the common good is the doing of justice, public and social justice. This is giving to each their due, doing right by each person, it puts justice at the heart of social, economic and environmental policies. It is justice, which is inclusive and comprehensive. Politicians have been given authority, though never absolute authority, to legislate for public justice. Civil society has a responsibility to hold the representatives it elects to accountability. In the end governance for the common good is '*we the people*' activity.

At the heart of community, a community in which justice is core, there is the practice of neighbourliness. Recently there has been talk of the need for a new covenant between people. It was not from a religious leader but a political leader. Now covenant is a word with historical meaning in Northern Ireland. In 1912 there was the signing of the Ulster Covenant. But covenant goes back beyond 1912 and goes back beyond the seventeenth century Scottish covenants. The roots of covenant are in the Judeo-Christian traditions and the Islamic tradition. All three have covenant in the essence of their practice. It has also become a secular term. At heart it is about being neighbourly. The great political philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries realised this because they had read the Jewish-Christian Bible. Had they read the Qur'an they would have found the same. They found the values of justice, quality, dignity and compassion. Very often agreements in society and community are contractual, a social contract. It might be said that the Unionist mind a century ago in the Ulster Covenant was contractual. But Jewish, Christian and Muslim

idea of covenant is neighbourliness. It is about common identity, shared destiny, collective responsibility, moral reciprocity. It is built on being neighbours together, on an ethic of trust with strong ideals and values such as human dignity, freedom, and equality of worth. Covenant is human solidarity and inclusive, social responsibility.

We can summarize it thus:

- Practice of social solidarity and compassion
- The just and neighbourly ordering of public power, resources and life
- Right relations rooted in distributive and restorative justice
- Radical inclusivity, a society in which none are diminished or left out
- No appeal to, use of, or dependence on violence to control or change things
- Human and environmental wellbeing and flourishing.

All of that is public justice and being good neighbours. As we mark centenaries, remember events of 1918-1922, we do more than remember the past. We embrace the local and the global. We remember in large context. We remember the future and shape it differently. Together we create the common good. Is the common good possible in Northern Ireland? Are political, cultural and religious forces against it too strong? Or in our remembering of earlier days can we encounter one another in new ways, negotiate within civic society and between civic society and political society, engage in moral and ethical deliberation and create a vision and practice of neighbourliness, a common good? Can Belfast and the World remember, and begin to re-describing the world and reimagine the future?

THE POWER OF WORDS: SIGNIFICANT SPEECH

At the end of the decade there was a significant speech that stood out and is worthy of deep consideration in the context of Irish political history.

Edward Carson's Farewell Speech

On the 4 February 1921, after Ireland had been partitioned, Edward Carson, the Unionist leader, announced his retirement to the Ulster Unionist Council and proposed that James Craig should replace him. The outcome of resistance to Home Rule had left Carson embittered and disillusioned. The partition of Ireland was not what Carson had wanted. He was always an Irish Unionist and an Irish patriot. Now a state called Northern Ireland had come into being and the north east had home rule. Carson decided to take his leave of Unionism and Northern Ireland. He went to England, took his place in the House of Lords, bitterly criticised, even savaged the Conservatives or Tories for duping the Unionists and himself out of their own self-interest and to get back into power. But his most powerful speech was his farewell or valedictory speech to the Unionist Council. It has not been much quoted but deserves to be heard again and again, not least when we come to the centenary of the birth of Northern Ireland in 2021.

Forty members of the Unionist Standing Committee had gone over to London to beg Carson to stay. On 4 February 1921 in Belfast he made a truly statesman-like farewell speech:

You will be a parliament for the whole community. We used to say that we could not trust an Irish Parliament in Dublin to do justice to the Protestant minority. Let us take care that that reproach can no longer be made against your Parliament, and from the outset let them see that the Catholic minority have

nothing to fear from a Protestant majority...Let us take care that we win all that is best amongst those who have been opposed to us in the past in this community...And so I say: from the start be tolerant to all religions, and, while maintaining to the last your own traditions and your own citizenship, take care that similar rights are preserved for those who differ from us.¹

We should have the shared courage and honesty to reflect deeply on those words in 2021.

Dr Johnston McMaster

October 2018

For more information on 'Belfast and the World 1918-1921' please visit www.corrymeela.org/belfast

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