
Comment - Moving Beyond the Pale

‘The Pale’ describes an area that is enclosed and safe. To go be 'beyond the pale' is to be outside the area accepted as 'home', a place of uncertainty and potential danger - Earl Storey writes

History on these islands seems like a safe well-trodden place. But can reflecting on it bring us ‘beyond the pale’, into uncertain and dangerous territory?

The years 1912 to 1922 saw historical events on these islands, the memory of which has burrowed deep into our sense of identity and psyche. Whether we are talking about the fault line of civil war politics, the resonances of the Easter Rising or the sacrifices of The Somme the effects are still felt today.

History has done so much to shape and pattern relationships on these islands. All the more so as we rarely agree on which story gets to be told. Events from 1912 to 1922 affected different communities in a variety of ways that impact up to this present day. But we all have this in common – that decade put something into the DNA of our psyches, sense of identity and how we relate to one another in the here and now.

In Ireland our sense of identity has been deeply shaped by the stories we get our history to tell us about ourselves. But the stories we tell about our neighbours – the other community – are just as important. The constant retelling of history generates a sense of meaning for any community.

But, history can be more than a way of telling a story of the past. It takes on the role of interpreting the present and shaping the future. In that case writing history is rarely as simple as isolating and collating bare facts! Especially in any situation of conflict, the way in which 'facts' are perceived and the values that are placed on them can make historical analysis a very subjective exercise.

When communities recount their past it is often not so much a case of an appropriately critical

retelling of objective historical 'truths' as interpreting events in a way that reinforces the story of their particular community. History is not just a record of what happened in the past. It also provides metaphors to describe the present and the future, shaping the psyche and providing patterns of reaction and looking at the world to the present day. In this Ireland is certainly no exception.

A generation on this island is growing up that has had no experience of violent conflict. This is something to celebrate, but also to be wary of. It leaves a generation open to the romantic myth of violence – myths that are easily reinforced by calling up the ghosts of a decade long past.

Like it or not we have begun to live through a decade of commemoration, when momentous events of one hundred years ago shaped our sense of self and relationships on these islands are remembered. Is it an opportunity for something good and constructive? It is if we choose it to be.

In the post-conflict atmosphere on this island there is a weariness and wariness about looking into our history. Whilst understandable it is also dangerous. Wounds have been inflicted and suffered by every community on these islands,

during our history. In the physical body if a wound is not treated there is the danger of it festering. The same potential lies within our collective psyche and relationships.

Historical commemoration is a minefield that some can exploit and many choose to ignore. *“... how passions are stirred by claims of exclusive loyalty to one’s own kin, one’s own clan, one’s own country, and one’s own church. These ties that bind are vital to our communities and our lives, but they can also be twisted into a noose.”*^[1]

The story that we on these islands tell about ourselves and the ‘other’ have gone to the very heart of our self-identity, our relationships with each other as well as any hopes for the future. Somehow we need to find a way of reflecting on our history that changes the dynamic both in ourselves but also in our relationships. That is the true challenge one hundred years on. We better rise to it because our futures depend on it.

Earl Storey for -

‘Silenced Stories: The Protestant Experience of 1916’ conference in Maynooth University.

<http://journeyinselfbelief.org/silencedstories>