

Rehumanizing the “Other”

*Talk prepared for the Board of Directors and the
Community Advisory Board of the Tredegar Civil War Museum,
Richmond, Virginia,
June 25, 2004*

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In 1987 I had a job editing a manuscript on nationalism in Yugoslavia. In the course of discussions with the author over subsequent months, he told me that Yugoslavia was going to have a civil war. And in those next years, as we watched Yugoslavia disintegrate, and I learned more about the country, its past and its current travails, I came to understand just how powerfully memories had served to harden group identifications, and had made resort to civil war an easier option.

This theme of historical memory and its role in conflict became the subject of my doctoral research, which I did in Northern Ireland in the 1990s. I am right now completing a book on school history teaching in Northern Ireland - its capacity to cause harm or to bring change. So I have learned about Tredegar, and all that you are attempting to do, with enormous admiration, interest and enthusiasm.

Contested memories in Northern Ireland

In 1688 Ireland became a battleground for two kings who both wanted to rule England. James II was Catholic and William III was Protestant. Initially James was winning. In the mainly Protestant northeast region of Ireland, the Protestant population fled and took refuge from James's army inside the town of Derry or Londonderry. It was

a truly medieval town, encircled by walls – an indeed remains so to this day. The gates were closed in 1688 by the young apprentices of the town, and the Protestant community remained under siege for some months. Eating rats, as well as resorting to cannibalism, were not just remote possibilities.

In looking out for the welfare of his people, the governor of the town, Colonel Lundy, suggested that they surrender to King James. The besieged people of Londonderry, or so the story goes, were so horrified at this suggestion of surrender that they threw Governor Lundy out of the town. Soon after Lundy was expelled, ships from England sailed up the river to Derry and directed cannon fire at James's army. The troops departed, and the siege was lifted.

This may seem a quaint and esoteric story. But the point is that the Siege of Derry is commemorated yearly to this day with Protestant parades in many towns of Northern Ireland. As part of the celebration, they construct a thirty foot effigy of Governor Lundy, complete with his 17th century white uniform, brass buttons and black hat. They hang the effigy in a prominent part of the town, and just as the sun goes down they burn it.

I have stood in Derry in the dusk with the ashes floating in the wind, watching the flames consume this giant figure. It is an event with primeval power.

The idea of “no surrender” has, through time, become central to the Protestant mindset. In 1985 at a key moment in the Northern Ireland negotiation process, when it was proposed that Dublin (i.e., the Catholic Republic of Ireland which lies to the south of Northern Ireland) should have some role in the deliberations, the Protestant-Unionist community hung a banner across the Belfast City Hall, saying “Belfast Says No.” The

word “No” reverberated over past centuries, recalling the stalwart refusal to give in at the Siege of Derry. In 1998, a reecho of the word “No” was heard as extreme Protestant parties voted against the Good Friday peace treaty, which was supported by the vast majority on the island. For Protestants, “No surrender” is an expression of strength of character and moral rectitude, etched more deeply into the Protestant-Unionist mindset every year through the reenactment of the Siege of Derry.

Another historical event with a similar hold on the minds and hearts of people is the Great Irish Potato Famine of 1845, which was followed by four years of further blight, famine, fever and break down of public works. Of a population of 8 million, 1 million died, and at least another 1.5 million emigrated out of Ireland. Today, 150 years later, the total Irish population still numbers only 5 million.

One of the leading British magazines of the mid-nineteenth century carried cartoons at the time of the Famine, depicting the Catholic Irish as animals, and suggesting they had brought this crisis upon themselves and deserved it. The bitterness of Catholic Irish towards the British for their failure to respond to the Famine is as alive today as if the events had taken place in the past decade.

This carries over to the Irish population in the U.S., where New York and New Jersey public schools teach about the Irish Famine as an example of genocide. In 1995 a famine memorial was placed in Cambridge Common in Massachusetts.

In 1998 Prime Minister Tony Blair did what no British Prime Minister had done before: he went to a Famine memorial in Ireland and expressed his sorrow at Britain’s inadequate response.

The grief, sorrow, anger and denial that is a residue of past tragedy lives with us all. We all know something about this in our own individual experience. But when it comes to groups, the power of history is multiplied, because groups coalesce around past events. Protecting the memory of past events becomes a way to protect the group.

Shared history brings people together – it helps create strong emotional bonds. In this world of globalized symbols and values, which creates a backfire of loneliness and emotional distance, the shared history of our own group is an appealing safe harbor, and one that we feel a deep impulse to protect.

So there is an ongoing question about how on the one hand we value particular groups and honor their history, while at the same time helping people become free of the emotional damage to others and themselves created by their history.

Exclusivist stories

As I explored the museums in Northern Ireland it quickly became clear just how hard it is for a deeply divided society to come up with ways to speak about its past. The principal museum in Belfast, the Ulster Museum, in 1995 had a permanent exhibition on the history of the region that came to an abrupt end in 1923, that is, at the time of the founding of the Northern Ireland state. Those who created the exhibition clearly did not want to engage with the contested nature of the state, the discriminatory treatment of Catholics, or the out and out violence of thirty years beginning in 1969. A few weeks ago I was back at the same museum to see an exhibition called “Conflict in Ireland through the Centuries.” It started with Stone Age axes, and ended with the latest technology in plastic bullets. It was not exclusively addressing The Conflict of the past

thirty years, but it demonstrated a first step in acknowledging the conflicted nature of the society. It presented ideas that could invite people to reflect on what has happened at whatever level they chose.

One of the challenges in creating dialogue in Northern Ireland is that the two groups' collective memories have a mutually exclusive quality. Victory for one group means defeat for the other group. Each group has created, internally, a coherent moral order, where the other is characterized as evil or unacceptable. When it comes to having a discussion about all this, we run into a built-in tension. Can a group's identity and internal morality command respect in the mind of the other group? Will conferring respect to the other diminish my group's standing? And will compassionate understanding of the worldview of the other open the way to relativistic morality, letting wrongdoers off the hook?

Falk Pingel, who has worked on reconciliation of history texts in Germany, argues that this need not be so. Citing as an example "Kristallnacht," the night of November 9th, 1938, when the Jewish synagogues were destroyed, Pingel argues that singling out the experience of the victims is "not enough to explain or make comprehensible why [the Nazis had] so many active supporters." Two different experiences of the event need to be accounted for. Pingel says:

The history teacher's task can no longer be just to present history 'the way it was.' His task is to incorporate the motivation and real-life experience of historical subjects and use the contradictions for discussion purposes. Controversy becomes the object of the lesson.

Historical experiences of the same historical event are different, says Pingel. This proposition goes beyond the idea that there can be multiple interpretations of an event. "Different interpretations" suggests that it is the *historians*, writing about past events,

who perceive them differently. “Different historical experiences” suggests that the people living through a particular time in history experienced that time differently.

In Pingel’s view, multi-perspectival history does not mean suspending moral censure. But it does mean accepting the humanity of all the players in the story, including the ones who may deserve censure. It means taking account of the complicated nature of all the players’ moral dilemmas. We can do this with compassion, even if we cannot condone actions that have harmed others.

Victimization and humanization

It is axiomatic that to fight a war, or to pursue violence of any kind, it is necessary first to objectify and dehumanize the other group. If I can think of the other as less than human, that permits me to kill or injure or ignore the other. This dehumanizing can last long after violence is over. It is a form of distancing and self protection for those on all sides who are uncertain how to build relationships for the future. All become victims of this ongoing dehumanization.

One of the contributions a museum can make is to offer ways to humanize the experience of the other. The process works in all directions. The victor, or oppressor, is far less likely than the defeated or oppressed person, to know much about the other. He has created mental constructs for himself where the other has no place, or has a diminished place. The one who has suffered oppression or defeat may feel she already knows all she wants to know about the oppressors, but even in this case, new knowledge can help to rehumanize.

Healing history

When I think about dealing with the painful and contentious aspects of history, I find it helpful to think of three aspects: *truth, justice, and healing*.

The first reason to address the history of a painful past is to tell what actually happened. Exposing the truth means acknowledgement of past injustices and obfuscations. It also helps to establish societal norms of truth telling that have relevance across the board. Historians can play an ongoing role in underlining these norms by holding each other accountable to processes of verification, corroboration of several sources, and use of primary data, and by encouraging critical thinking and debate.

But telling the story also has a powerful healing impact. As we hear ourselves tell our forgotten story, and as we hear others engage with our story, we know inwardly that we are mending a broken connection. Becoming one with our story creates inner stability, restores a sense of self, and gives new ways to have faith in the future. It also creates a new basis of relationships with others whose story is different from our own. It makes possible an acknowledgment of the other.

Societies must find their means of handling justice. As we all know, as far as matter of slavery is concerned, discussions about reparations and affirmative action keep this issue alive in public debate. But a key piece of justice is making sure the story is told with as much truth as is humanly possible. This forces all of us to search our hearts in a spirit of humility for ways in which we can open ourselves to the deeper truth of the events. That includes those from the North who can all too easily overlook their failure to support African Americans in the aftermath of the civil war, as well as their earlier failure to grapple with the 3/5s clause of the constitution, which inevitably later led the Confederacy to feel the North was “changing the rules.”

Tredeggar, in its mission to tell the whole story, will provide a place where a new kind of healing can start to happen. For some it will be a matter of seeing the exhibit and privately opening their minds to new information. For others it will be a matter of engaging in discussion and debate and research. I can imagine Tredeggar organizing story telling of many kinds that Richmonders and the wider public can participate in. I also believe Tredeggar will be an instrument inciting visitors to explore further their responsibility to reach out to the “other” and to embark on projects of their own that will mend the fabric of this country.

For the world at large, Tredeggar also has great importance. When I look at your plans through the lens of someone coming from Northern Ireland, I see this very clearly. Tredeggar will become a model for conflicted societies in finding a way to speak of the past in a multi-perspectival fashion that acknowledges all the stories as it seeks the deeper truth. People will want to come and see what you have done. I am not just saying this because it is a nice way to round out my remarks – I know Tredeggar will have a healing impact far beyond these shores.