



'People want their history told with truth and objectivity'

The next phase of the decade of centenaries presents major challenges, writes **Maurice Manning**, chairman of the Expert Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations

The first phase of the 2013-2023 decade of centenaries was built around the Easter Rising. The story captured the public imagination and the commemorations drew a level of appreciation and participation that we are unlikely to witness ever again. The moment captured the sense of a people at ease with their own history.

The next phase was always going to be more difficult. This is not because the events were any less epoch-changing; they include the creation of the Dáil, votes for women, the War of Independence, Civil War, partition and the establishment of the State. The problem is partly a result of commemoration fatigue, and partly because of the complex and sometimes painful issues some of the events raise. It is also, crucially, because they lack the dramatic immensity of 1916.

But the second phase is very different for a reason nobody could have anticipated: Covid-19. Already, many events have had to be held in virtual isolation. Organisers had to improvise and reimagine, which they have done on an impressive scale. Yet, hard as they try, it cannot match the real thing until Covid is under control.

Among the many difficult topics to be commemorated in this period is partition. This was not just a matter of high politics. It divided families, farms, parishes, dioceses and long-established business and social communities. It is important to commemorate the stories of groups on both sides of the border.

It is encouraging to note the amount of research being done, the emergence of young researchers and the volume of new publications with many more in the pipeline. The National Archive and the Military Pensions archive are central to this productivity. All of this is helping create an environment where historical events are seen as just that: part of our history, unvarnished, often sad, sometimes brutal, sometimes noble; but crucially not as part of current political conversation or a means of point-scoring, which characterised so much of this debate in the past.

The way we treat the Civil War will be a major test, but it is one that I am quietly confident it is one we will pass. One of the things that constantly encouraged me in the nervous early days of this decade was that, at public meeting after public meeting, I realised the people were way ahead of the politicians. They were looking at the events being commemorated as history – their history – and they wanted it with truth, objectivity, evidence and analysis. They wanted the space to make up their own minds and not what inherited prejudice might lead them to believe.

I believe it will be the same with the Civil War. In its advice to the government, the Expert Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations, which I chair, emphasised the importance of making all Civil War archives available and facilitating the publication of research. In our advice to government, we pointed out that Europe has experienced numerous civil wars in

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Looking back: Maurice Manning at the National Museum of Ireland earlier this year
PHOTO: MARK CONDREN

the past 100 years, so we are in no way unique. Our civil war was shorter, with far fewer casualties than most, even if its memory was bitter and divisive.

We said that reconciliation should be at the heart of the state ceremonies but that reconciliation requires the need, among other things, to confront the atrocities committed during the conflict.

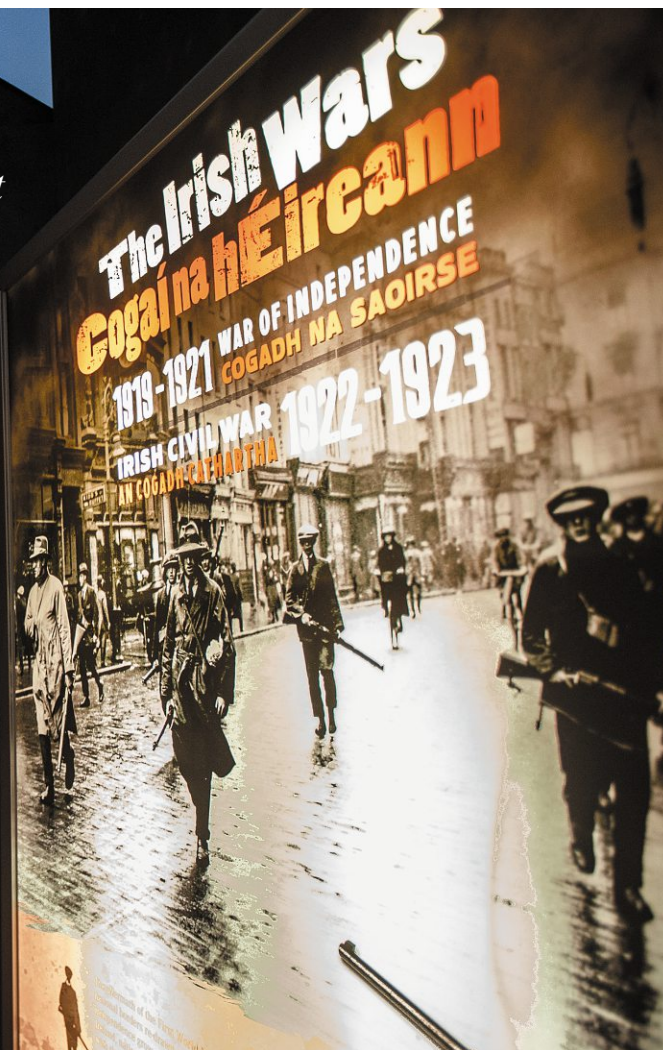
In line with a recommendation by the advisory group, plans are under way for a major historical conference at University College Cork to draw together all the new research and new thinking on the Civil War. Where local groups or local authorities wish to have their own commemorations, they should be encouraged to do so.

The people of Soloheadbeg have already provided an excellent template as to how such events should be organised. In its advice to the government in 2018, the group said that in dealing with the Civil War "the state's task is to encourage a reflective and a reconciliatory tone that recognises that neither side had the monopoly of either atrocity or virtue, and this was true of words as well as actions".

In line with this, the main emphasis in the state's approach to the Civil War will be on remembrance and reconciliation, with one major state ceremony to commemorate all who fell in that conflict, and perhaps one national monument to remember all.

The rest of the decade does have some "big ticket" events. We have already formally commemorated the foundation of Dáil Éireann and hopefully next year will be marked by a state commemoration of all who died in the War of Independence.

Then, of course, there is the foundation of the state. The Irish Free State formally came



into being on December 6, 1922 but perhaps the most dramatic and symbolic event was the handing over of Dublin Castle to Michael Collins on January 16, 1922. There will be ceremonies to commemorate both events. There will also be a great deal of attention on the actual founding of the state itself, how the new departments and agencies came into being, the establishment of the Garda and Army and all the other trappings and essentials of statehood.

This aspect of our history is important and somewhat neglected. It represents in concrete and real terms what the previous decade was all about: the struggle to achieve and make a reality of our own independence and statehood. It is important to remember that these institutions established in those days have withstood the test of time.

The decade of centenaries will end in September 2023, the centenary of Ireland's admission to the League of Nations: Ireland, in Robert Emmet's words, taking its place among the nations of the world.

There will be many worthwhile legacies from this decade of centenaries but the most spectacular will undoubtedly be Beyond 2022: Ireland's Virtual Record Treasury. This project will reimagine and recreate, through virtual reality, the Public Record Office of Ireland and the archival collections that were destroyed on June 30, 1922 in the opening engagement of the Civil War. This will be a lasting and meaningful legacy, democratising access to invaluable records and illuminating seven centuries of Irish history.

● *Dr Maurice Manning is chancellor of the National University of Ireland and chairman of the Expert Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations*

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