

**INITIAL STATEMENT  
BY ADVISORY GROUP  
ON CENTENARY  
COMMEMORATIONS**

The announcement of the establishment of this Group stated that the first objective would be the preparation of “An overview statement to inform the development and delivery of the commemorative programme for the period 2012–2016”.

The advisory group is, first and foremost, a collection of individual professional historians with individual research interests, interpretations and institutional affiliations. What unites us is a desire to make a contribution to meaningful and informed commemoration in the form of advice to the government on official commemorative events.

We do this in a spirit of public service and completely independently of any political views, agendas or influence. While serving on this advisory group, we will all be involved individually in historical research and in the dissemination of our findings, and making individual contributions to debates around commemoration. Any ideas or views that we express in that personal professional capacity should not be taken as representing the views of the Advisory Group. We see our advice as being particularly relevant under the following headings:

#### Context

The coming years see the centenary anniversaries of some of the most significant events in the history of modern Ireland and of the United Kingdom, and equally importantly in the history of the modern world. The decade saw the emergence both of an independent Irish State and of Northern Ireland with a devolved government within the UK. The commemorative programme should illustrate how events in Ireland were rooted in continuing traditions and also were part of the wider international story. A comprehensive commemorative programme should not only address the key events in Ireland but also enhance the understanding of the wider United Kingdom, European and world context in which they took place.

The commemoration will be measured and reflective, and will be informed by a full acknowledgement of the complexity of historical events and their legacy, of the multiple readings of history, and of the multiple identities and traditions which are part of the Irish historical experience. There must be full acknowledgement of the multiple identities and traditions which are part of the overall story and of the different ideals and sacrifices associated with them. Official events must within reason be inclusive and non-partisan, but the State should not be expected to be neutral about its own existence. The aim should be to broaden sympathies, without having to abandon loyalties, and in particular recognising the value of ideals and sacrifices, including their cost.

The decade of commemorations recalls some of the most significant events in the history of modern Ireland and the modern world: a decade of unprecedented violence, death, destruction and forced resettlement, but also the exercise of national self-determination resulting in major changes in government and political boundaries.

Throughout the coming decade it is important not to forget the bloodshed and the deep antagonisms of these years. While few eyewitnesses survive, the memories remain vivid in some communities and families, and commemorations may revive painful memories of loss or dispossession.

We must also acknowledge that events such as the formation of the Ulster and later the Irish Volunteers and the gunrunning in Larne and Howth, culminating in the Easter Rising, represented a direct challenge to constitutionalism and the rule of law, even though all have received, arguably, retrospective democratic validation; the foundation of the Government of Northern Ireland and of the Irish Free State took place against the background not only of a major electoral shift and new models of self-government but also of armed actions, both official and unofficial, and involuntary migrations of minority groups.

During the coming commemorations we should reflect on all these issues, and use the occasion to extend our understanding of the historical context. We should also be conscious that on this island we have a common history but not a common memory of these shaping events. Some of the landmark events of the years 1912–22 have a strong appeal to one community or place, not to another. Heritages are complex, multiple, sometimes overlapping, sometimes very much at variance — these differences cannot be ignored. It is important to acknowledge and understand these differences, and to respect divergent traditions.

Commemoration should not ignore differences and divisions. The goal of inclusiveness is best achieved, not by trying for an enforced common interest or universal participation in commemorations for events such as the 1916 Rising or the opening of the parliament in Northern Ireland, but by encouraging multiple and plural commemorations which remember the past while ensuring, as far as possible, that the commemoration does not re-ignite old tensions.

It is important to bear in mind that Ireland is not alone in having to come to terms with bitter memories and deep divisions resulting from the wars and revolutions of the years 1912–22; many parts of Europe — especially on the eastern and southern peripheries — will have to confront the legacies of even more traumatic events.

While avoiding any sense of triumphalism, we should also recall the significant achievements of these years: an independent and democratic Irish state; universal suffrage for women and men; the transfer of land to those who farmed it; a judiciary and senior public service that was representative of the majority population; and the creation of international organisations such as the League of Nations and the International Labour Organisation, which sought to extend the rights of citizens and workers and promote international peace and understanding, organisations in which the new Irish state played its part.

### Authenticity and proportionality

As the national commemorative programme will be comprised of official events and the complementary initiatives of state and local authorities, institutions, national associations and community groups in Ireland and abroad, the Group will provide advice to ensure that the general development of the programme and the provision of official support are directed towards commemorations which are historically authentic, relating to events, issues and processes of significance.

While the professional, sectoral and particular interests of diverse groups will give rise to an intense pattern of commemorative events in the coming years, it is recognised that official initiatives should be restricted in number and relate to the key events or developments in any year.

### Shared heritage

The Advisory Group is mindful that the Centenary anniversary programme relates to a time of division in Ireland on issues of identity and allegiance and ultimately of state formation. With confidence in the increasing public interest and the greater capacity today to explore and address the history of the period, the Group will liaise with appropriate groups of all traditions in formulating its advice to government on possible events.

Whatever the challenges that may arise in developing commemorative arrangements, there should be no attempt to contrive a historical or retrospective consensus about the contemporary impact and legacy of divisive events. Commemorative events should reflect or explore history with a true integrity, and the particular arrangements for each event should enable the acknowledgement by different traditions, without recrimination, of a shared history. Reflecting the shared heritage of Great Britain and Ireland, the commemorative programme should include events throughout Ireland, in Britain and at the principal centres of the Irish abroad.

### Thematic issues

The Group is conscious that any event-based approach might not address major thematic issues. The AG will advise on appropriate themes and suggest ways in which they may best be approached. This will provide an opportunity to highlight new and ongoing research and perspectives, and act as a reminder of the huge broadening of the frameworks for interpreting the events of 1912–22 that has occurred in recent decades, with a focus no longer exclusively on political but also on social, cultural, labour and women's history.

### Research, scholarship and accessibility

The AG is of the strong view that the opportunity to encourage scholarship and its dissemination at national and local level must be used as fully as possible, with particular emphasis on archival development, the involvement of national cultural institutions, institutions of learning and the Department of Education. There needs to be an emphasis on accessibility and digitisation of source material, both in Ireland and in Britain, both during the commemoration period and as a legacy of it.

A key element of the commemorative programme will be provided by the national cultural institutions that hold the records, artefacts and material most relevant to the decade under consideration — principally the National Archives, the National Library and the National Museum in Ireland, the National Museums of Northern Ireland and the Public Record Office in Northern Ireland, as well as other British museums. The particular consideration of Government is necessary to ensure that their tremendous potential is achieved in the coming years, and intergovernmental cooperation will be needed to ensure that all relevant historical records held by archival and other institutions throughout Ireland and the United Kingdom are made available for historical research. The Group will seek to encourage original research at local and national level, at all times acknowledging the multiple identities and traditions which are part of the history of the island of Ireland and Irish people worldwide. We are also conscious that we have a responsibility towards ensuring that a younger generation of students are familiar with the events of this decade and believe that history at all levels of education needs to be a core part of the curricula.

### Consultation

The Advisory Group will consult widely with scholars, universities, educational and cultural bodies, local historical associations and committees, and are happy to receive suggestions and ideas from these as well as from individuals. The role of the group should be to advise on and, where possible, anticipate issues likely to arise, to identify gaps in programmes that may need to be filled, and to be alert to any serious distortions that may be taking place, beyond reasonable differences in historical interpretation.

#### Appendix 1 — The Group's goals in relation to archives:

1. The Group will encourage all repositories in Ireland to identify collections containing material that is relevant to key events in this decade of commemorations. While many collections are already widely known, and their relevance is easily identified, there are collections of letters, diaries, photographs etc. that may add significantly to our knowledge of the Great War or the 1916 Rising, which are only known to the responsible librarian or archivist.
2. Although resources are limited, repositories in Ireland are encouraged to give priority to those that are relevant to the decade of commemoration in the listing of collections or digitisation.
3. Many libraries and archives outside Ireland also hold material that is relevant, and it is vital to connect with these and to create digital links to these holdings. This should be done by creating a commemoration portal, which can be accessed and searched.
4. The Group will seek to make the on-line Dictionary of Irish Biography — an essential source for this decade of commemorations and for all aspects of Ireland's history and culture — available to all secondary schools. This can be done for a modest sum.
5. In order to make this campaign a success it will be essential to make contact with librarians and archivists, especially the county librarians, and the group may set up a subcommittee to oversee this.
6. Long-established local newspapers should be contacted with a view to accessing archives. While some are available on-line, others should be encouraged to revisit their archive and to reproduce editions published at key dates. To make this archives exercise a reality, the Committee shall endeavour to secure funding for the creation of an archives portal, and to recruit a researcher whose job would be to contact repositories and identify relevant collections that they might hold.

#### Appendix 2 — Events with which the state may be associated in terms of public commemoration:

The items below constitute only a very limited selection of events, organisations and processes which may take turns on the centennial roundabout between now and 2023, and are put forward purely to aid discussion.

##### Legal and constitutional:

- 1912 Home Rule Bill.
- 1919 January, Constitution of Dáil Éireann .
- 1920 Government of Ireland Act.
- 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty.
- 1922 Establishment of the National Army.
- 1922 Free State Constitution.
- 1922 Foundation of An Garda Síochána.
- 1924 Courts Act.

##### Social:

- 1923 Land Act

##### Economic and communications:

- 1919 June, initiation of transatlantic air travel.

##### Political and military:

- 1913 Foundation of Ulster Volunteer Force.
- 1913 Dublin Lockout.
- 1913 Irish Volunteers founded.
- 1913 Irish Citizen Army founded.
- 1914 Larne gunrunning.
- 1914 Howth gunrunning.
- 1914 August, First World War.
- 1915 Casement brigade formed, Germany.
- 1915 Gallipoli campaign and Irish losses.
- 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin.
- 1916 First Battle of the Somme.
- 1917 Sinn Féin ard fheis.
- 1918 Sinking of the Leinster — potential capstone to Ireland and the First World War reflections.
- 1918 General election with new franchise including women.
- 1919 First meeting of Dáil Éireann.
- 1919 Soloheadbeg ambush.
- 1919 Ireland and Versailles.
- 1920 Death of Terence MacSwiney.
- 1920 Execution of Kevin Barry.
- 1920 Burning of Cork.
- 1920 Informal Irish/Soviet recognition.
- 1921 Northern Ireland government and parliament.
- 1921 Truce.
- 1921 Treaty.
- 1922 June, destruction of the Public Record Office and outbreak of Civil War.
- 1922 Free State Constitution, including equal voting rights for women.
- 1923 IRA 'Dump arms' order, effectively ending Civil War.
- 1923 Ireland joins the League of Nations



# MEMBERSHIP OF THE ADVISORY GROUP ON CENTENARY COMMEMORATIONS

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