

TELLING TALES FROM THE OTHER SIDE

For the local civilian population, Easter Week would have been a confusing time. Many must have been unclear as to what the Proclamation of the Republic meant, and been unsure as to the extent of related revolutionary acts across the city and the country. Whatever the civilian population did or did not understand about the unfolding events, it would have been clear that an armed group had occupied a strong defensive position in a heavily-populated, poor and working-class area. It would also have been clear that if there were to be any fighting many civilians were likely to die.

1916: Tales from The Other Side looks at the experience of the library and the local population during that fateful week. It also addresses broader questions of shifting identities during the turbulent years between 1916 and the creation of an independent Irish state. This exhibition deliberately foregrounds a non-heroic narrative which speaks to the ambiguities, nuances, complexities and contradictions of the period. 'The other side' is a phrase laden with historical, religious and cultural connotations in Ireland. This exhibition uses it in a deliberately ambiguous way: who constitutes the 'other side' in the Irish revolution? It invites visitors to think about the ways in which violence forced difficult and unwanted choices upon the populace.

The 1916 Proclamation is a gloriously stirring and eloquent document which explicitly promised full civil and religious liberty to all Irishmen and women. It also implicitly held out the tantalising prospect of gender and social equality in the new Ireland. Yet, it was indifferent to the grubby reality that one would have to wade through human blood, much of it civilian blood, to have any prospect of reaching this Promised Land. The personal bravery and heroism of the men and women of 1916 is unassailable, but one hundred years later we are aware of some of the difficulties in marking appropriately an insurrection which not only had no democratic mandate, but flew in the face of the democratically expressed will of the Irish people over the previous decades. Many countries have key historical moments of violence — England in 1688, America in 1775, and France in 1789 — which define their modern identity and are commemorated, and even celebrated, without any qualms. This can be done because they are purely historical events; in Ireland, the situation is necessarily different because within recent memory, thousands of people were killed in Northern Ireland by groups which claimed to be the legitimate descendants of the heroes of 1916. Stepping back from these broader questions, *1916: Tales from The Other Side* draws attention to the human experience of the vast majority: the non-combatants. The rebels of 1916 saw

themselves as fighting for, and being willing to die for, their ideals. They rarely, if ever, countenanced the fact that they were killing for the Republic. Talk of killing raises the question, then as now, as to the grounds on which it is legitimate to kill other human beings for one's beliefs. Some of the most striking exhibits are the 'bullet books' — inanimate, ancient texts which provide eloquent testimony to the physical dangers experienced by civilians during the Rising. These objects help to explain the severe antipathy of the local civilian population to the Jacob's garrison. The soldiers of the new Republic were bemused and angry at the ferocity of the verbal and physical attacks upon them by local women. These women were generally dismissed by the rebels as traitors or a politically unconscious group whose loyalty to the crown had been bought for the pittance provided for them while their menfolk were on active service in France with the British army. Yet, the 'bullet books' suggest that it is probably more accurate to view those women as 'salt of the earth' working-class Dubs who were unhappy — to put it mildly — that they and their children had been placed in mortal danger by the rebels.

Throughout 1916 the emotions we trace are overwhelmingly those of fear, anger, confusion and bemusement. In continuing the story through the difficult days of the War of Independence, the Civil War, and the early years of the newly independent state, we continue to encounter those emotions, but also begin to focus on the ways in which people were forced to make decisions as to who and what they were. One intriguing snapshot of the way in which one individual adapted to changing circumstances is afforded by the visitors' book signed by readers to the library. During the Civil War, a young man named William Burd paid numerous visits to the library. William was from the 'other side', in the sense that he lived on the north side of the river Liffey. During his first visits he signed himself as 'W. Burd' of 43 Lindsay Road, but from 29 November 1922 he entered his name in *cló Gaelach*, or Irish script, as 'W. MacBurd' of 'Bothar Linsai'. Over the next months, as the new state fought a civil war and tried to consolidate its authority, William experimented with various forms of his name and address in Irish, before finally settling on a formulation that he was happy with. It took him a while, but he eventually found both an identity and a place in the new Irish state.

The widespread sense of fear experienced by many people during the Irish revolution is also suggested by a curious incident on the front steps of Marsh's Library in 1923. When, during the Civil War, a young man named Patrick J. O'Connor came to read in the library, he found his way barred by the cleaner on the front steps. It was only after he took off his trench-coat and fedora hat (the unofficial uniform, he realised, of the gunman) and showed her that he

was not carrying a gun or anything which might set fire to the library, that the brave woman allowed him to cross the threshold. O'Connor recounted the story with fond regard for the cleaner after he learned of her death in 1949, but the incident speaks to the fear that an institution associated with a minority church could be subject to arson. This fear was in no way irrational in the light of the burnings across the country during the Civil War. *1916: Tales from The Other Side* moves beyond traditional tales of heroic derring-do to look at a range of experiences associated with the Irish revolution. If the stories it tells sometimes make for uncomfortable reading for citizens of modern Ireland, we can at least take pride in the fact that there is no longer anything about those traumatic years which is taboo, or off-limits for public discussion and debate. This is a testament to the vibrant nature of Irish democracy in 2016, and to our willingness to engage with the messy realities of history as it happened, not how one would like it to have happened. It also speaks to our ability to envisage a future which is neither imprisoned nor defined by the past.

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