Troubles with Remembering; or, The Seven Sins of Memory Studies

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Remembering the Troubles: Contesting the Recent Past in Northern Ireland, by Jim Smyth (ed),

Memory, unlike history, works best when looking backwards. Let us therefore begin at the end. The bottom line for an assessment of the collected essays on Remembering the Troubles, edited by Jim Smyth, is conveniently summed up by Thomas Bartlett in a blurb on the book’s cover: “the volume is a highly significant addition to the slim corpus of essential works on the Northern Ireland Troubles”. Now that we have the routine business of book reviewing out of the way, let us proceed to consider some of the underlying complications in the study of historical memory. These problems can be illustrated with reference to how they are tackled by the contributors to this “sparkling collection of essays” (to quote Brendan O’Leary in another of the blurbs on the cover). The psychologist Daniel Schacter, addressing the conundrum of “how the mind forgets and remembers”, famously diagnosed seven “sins of memory”.1 Keeping in line with this Catholic-inspired tradition, I will identify seven sins that weigh down the interdisciplinary field of Memory Studies, but it should be admitted that the choice to frame the critique around a typological number is arbitrary. There are many additional malpractices out there. I am even tempted to suggest that disputes over these transgressions are part of what keeps this particular field of intellectual inquiry alive, making it so interesting for our times.

A preliminary caveat is needed in order to acknowledge what this book is not about. Curiously, for a collection on remembering issued in 2017, the publication is steeped in obliviousness. The so-called “cultural turn”, which to a large degree has shaped the scholarship of the “memory boom” of the last three decades, seems to have somehow passed over the contributors. In the chapters, historical remembering is mostly seen in political terms, avoiding the all-encompassing prism of “cultural memory” that has come to dominate Memory Studies. This is essentially a volume of studies by historians (with a notable exception in the eminent broadcaster Cathal Goan), who have unwittingly, and rather ironically - considering the editor’s scathing criticism of Irish revisionism, played to the stereotypical image of Irish historians as primarily concerned with political history. That said, the approaches to political history are broadly conceived, so that consideration of society and, to a lesser degree, popular culture is also present. Those interested in how the Troubles have been remembered with reference to artistic productions, in poetry, prose, drama, film, painting, sculpture, photography, etc will be left unsatisfied. Fortunately, such representations have been adequately addressed elsewhere and a good starting point for the pursuit of such a direction can be found in volume three of Oona Frawley's indispensable Memory Ireland, half of which has essays on the cultural memory of the Troubles.2

Laxity (not to be confused with sloth) is the first sin of Memory Studies. Memory, by nature, is elusive, even deceptive. The pedantry required to pin down such a slippery subject poses a formidable challenge and yet, for some reason, the evasiveness of memory is sometimes seen as a justification for taking a less rigorous approach. The disconcerting marks of laxity can be found in the carelessness of inadequately checked citations - a malaise that, while not unique to Memory Studies, is seldom tolerated in more traditional academic scholarship. Jim Smyth, normally a methodical historian, quotes in his introduction the brilliant Northern historian ATQ Stewart, who, with characteristic shrewdness, quipped that “to the Irish all history is applied history”. Smyth regrets that he was unable to locate the source of this
tantalising quotation, making it appear to be apocryphal. James McAuley, who also refers to it in his contribution to the volume, more conscientiously traced it to Stewart’s *The Narrow Ground*, but inexplicably stopped short of providing the footnote with a page number, a lacuna which might leave a meticulous reader with a niggling doubt as to whether the aphorism was considered in its original context. It is actually well worth considering the continuation of the sentence, in which Stewart contemplated the perception of the past as “a convenient quarry which provides ammunition to use against enemies in the present”\(^3\). The conceptualisation of remembrance as applied history could have been interrogated in order to critically discuss the wider implications of efforts to instrumentalise the past. Yet such reflexivity is apparently deemed superfluous and readers are somehow expected to intuitively surmise the range of interpretations that “applied history”, a loaded term which has been widely debated in North American writings on “public history”, can take.

Elsewhere, in a chapter on republican memorial rituals at Milltown cemetery in West Belfast, Smyth quotes Margaret Thatcher describing Northern Ireland as as ‘British as Finchley’ (p 175), a depiction he found incongruous when recalling the republican funeral of his uncle Peter Burns, a veteran of the 1940s IRA. Yet, in a footnote, he concedes that “in fact, Thatcher did not say that” (at least not in those precise words). An effort to tease out this discrepancy could have probed the dissonance between popular memory and factual history and opened a valuable discussion on manipulation of historical consciousness. But why bother? Try getting away with such a slip when writing “history proper” and fastidious critics will soon be on your trail, yet when it comes to memory there appears to be a sense that anything goes. I have deliberately chosen to demonstrate the pitfalls of laxity through petty, seemingly inconsequential, examples that do not detract from the worthy arguments presented by the authors in their essays, but could have benefited nonetheless from more care.

Laxity, in this case, is less indicative of a lack of diligence than a shortfall of imagination. Ruan O’Donnell sketches a provisional history of the Provisional IRA, while regretting that this sensitive topic suffers from a dearth of accessible primary sources. O’Donnell’s dogged pursuit of his clandestine subject results in an essay that reveals much unknown history but only barely touches on memory. The study of remembrance demands moving beyond familiar archival documentation and developing new methodologies that can make more imaginative use of ephemeral vernacular sources. O’Donnell’s brief concluding section on “Archives and Museums” overlooks the many unofficial collections which are devotedly maintained by local communities throughout Northern Ireland. To give but one example: visitors to the premises of the Roddy McCorley Society club at Moyard House in West Belfast are treated to a tour of a veritable treasure trove of militant republican memorabilia, which has much to offer the researcher of memory. Above all, oral history clearly has a crucial role to play in the uncovering of lesser-known memories. In a brief discussion of the “Boston imbroglio”, that is the ill-fated Boston College oral history project that led to the subpoena of tapes with interviews of former Provisional IRA members, O’Donnell identifies the difficulties in trying to put on record unspoken recollections of the Troubles. Clearly this cannot be the final word. Despite daunting setbacks, new oral history projects will have to be creatively (and more carefully) designed in order to access what the anthropologist James C Scott referred to as the “hidden transcripts” of a society.

The second sin of Memory Studies can be labelled dualism. Remembering, as the pioneering experimental and social psychologist FC Bartlett argued in a landmark study written in 1932, is essentially “an effort after meaning”. Bartlett demonstrated how recollections of events are constructed with the help of familiar schemata (making use of a pre-existing cultural repertoire of narratives that recall previous events) so as to relate a story about the past that has significance in the present.\(^4\) It follows that memory is both the recall of an historical experience and the accrual of layers of meaning through which the events have been repeatedly reconstructed. Ye scholars, according to their intellectual preferences, tend to confine themselves to one of its two dimensions: a handful of positivist-minded historians are devoted to stripping away layers of fabrication in order to uncover reliable recollections of
lesser-known kernels of historical facts, while most others prefer to interpret later usages of the past, treating historical traditions as if they were conjured-up *ex nihilo* exclusively for present purposes.

These two approaches have more in common than meets the eye. “Authenticity”, instead of offering a litmus test that can distinguish between genuine and fictitious versions of the past, is in itself a constructed category designed to bestow a stamp of authority on certain narratives. “Truth” is another misleading label that seems to vouch for objectivity but is impregnated with subjective values. Rather than being mutually exclusive, excavation and reconstruction of the past play on each other and can best be understood when considered in tandem. This should really not be all that confusing for historians, who surely realise that the study of history relies on historiography, through which the past is repeatedly interpreted and rewritten. Similarly, memory has a “mnemohistory”, to use a term coined by the Egyptologist Jan Assmann and recently reintroduced into historical studies of memory by Marek Tamm.5

In a chapter that searches for “The Truth About the Troubles”, Ian McBride observes that there is an unresolved “conflict about the conflict” and so there is no agreement on what the Troubles actually were, let alone how they should be publicly remembered. In line with current memory recovery work, McBride maintains that “the truth”, in its deeper subjective sense, can best be found in the autobiographical storytelling of witnesses. The collecting and documenting of such testimonies is currently in vogue. An audit of “personal story, narrative and testimony initiatives related to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland”, undertaken in 2005 by the Storytelling Sub-Group of the non-governmental organisation Healing Through Remembering, identified thirty-one storytelling projects that involve “a broad range of individuals and organisations, who work for a variety of reasons and with a diverse set of outputs”.6 Politicians have come to realise the importance of such personal testimonies and the Stormont House Agreement of December 2014 stipulated the need to establish a central Oral History Archive, to be hosted in the Public Records Office in Belfast. As of yet, this initiative (which was supposed to have been completed by the end of 2016) remains unfulfilled. Deep-rooted mistrust thwarts what can be perceived as an official attempt to air in public non-compliant private memories that would normally fly below the radar.

To illustrate “the range of human responses to physical injury and emotional pain” that are recalled in personal accounts, McBride reproduces three harrowing women’s testimonies from a House of Commons report compiled in 2005 on Ways of Dealing with Northern Ireland’s Past. He concludes that the accumulation of such testimonies will ultimately “help us understand that the inhabitants of Northern Ireland do not come all neatly stacked in two opposing piles labelled ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ but that many played more than one role in the conflict still widely known as the Troubles” (p 36). Cathal Goan compellingly demonstrates this point by reproducing a memoir written by his father of a disturbing ordeal he underwent in 1974, which is framed within his son’s reflections on his own childhood memories of the time. In this account, the father - one of the “forties men”, who (like Smyth’s uncle) had previously been interned for his involvement in the IRA - recalls how he was coerced at gunpoint to drive a bomb for republican paramilitaries and leave it to explode in a public place. Even though it did not result in casualties, this incident caused considerable psychological distress and took its toll on the welfare of a family that had been enthusiastic nationalist sympathisers. A full appreciation of such candid reminiscences demands recognition of what memory can tell us about undocumented experiences in the past and about how they were subsequently perceived in an ever-changing present.

The combination of laxity and dualism paves the way for yet another sin of Memory Studies - crudity. Failure to apply sufficient intellectual rigour typically results in conceptual vagueness. The fundamentals of memory can never be considered self-explanatory. Commentators who do not take the time to familiarise themselves with the substantial volume of theoretical literature on individual and social memory cannot appreciate its subtleties and are ill-equipped to elucidate the points they are trying to make. For historians this can mean talking about memory, while actually writing in looser terms about
history. Moreover, there is a prevalent tendency among historians to confuse memory with historiography, which bolsters a delusional self-image of the professional historian as the primary custodian of communal memory. In practice, the production of scholarly history is but one - relatively minor - form through which the past is remembered. Even then, memory is found less in what the historian writes than in what diffuses into popular historical consciousness, though few researchers of historiography make an effort to trace readership reception of historical works.

Crudity is at its worst when it comes to constructivist notions of collective memory. Having read through most of the vast literature in the field, I would go so far to suggest that in practice there is no such thing as “collective memory”. I suspect that this contention will not go down well with the editors of the Collective Memory Reader and a host of other pundits who have staked their reputation on defending this catch-all term, even though most of them are aware of its problematic usages. By this, I do not mean that we need return to the misguided essentialist debates that plagued the early stages of avant la lettre Memory Studies, in which obtuse commentators denied the validity of collective forms of remembrance. Taking their cue from the seminal work on collective memory written in the interwar period by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, numerous studies have persuasively demonstrated that remembrance is inherently a social practice. The problem is with crude concepts of collectivity, which assume a homogeneity that is rarely, if ever, present, and maintain that, since memory is constructed, it is entirely subject to the manipulations of those invested in its maintenance, denying that there can be limits to the malleability of memory or to the extent to which artificial constructions of memory can be inculcated. In practice, the construction of a completely collective memory is at best an aspiration of politicians, which is never entirely fulfilled and is always subject to contestations (even, I would argue, in the extreme conditions of totalitarian states). Closer inspection invariably reveals the intricate and fluid dynamics of social remembrance, which constitute a multi-layered battleground of power struggles that undermine the possibility of achieving the kind of uniformity implied by the adjective “collective”.

The chimera of collective memory appears to assume more concrete form when referring to specific, narrowly defined, collectivities. In this volume, Aaron Edwards makes a plausible case for a British army collective memory, shared by soldiers who served in Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, the narratives disseminated by the veterans are far from monolithic. Whereas studies of memory typically recognise rivalries between the collective memories of different social groups, heterogeneity of social memory is also evident within the groups themselves. James McAuley, the most theoretically informed of the contributors to Remembering the Troubles, homes in on Ulster loyalists, a constituency known for the crudity of its memorial practices. In my experience, Northern Protestants have cultivated multiple, often contradictory, forms of remembrance. McAuley’s observation that “social memory flattens out acts of remembering to select those that are seen as most relevant and unambiguous in meaning” (p 110) may seem to ring true, but it is questionable. In-depth examination often reveals the ambiguities and ambivalence that thrive under a deceptive facade of “collective memory”.

For all the veneer of sophistication, the more fashionable discussions of Memory Studies are often riddled with schematic crudity. Currently in vogue is the ubiquitous celebration of “postmemory” - a half-baked concept that purportedly signifies memories of a second generation that is removed from the personal experience of the recalled events. Champions of postmemory have yet to make a convincing case for separating between multi-generational historical traditions, which from the outset are mediated and remediated in social memories that are shared by those who directly witnessed the events and by those who acquired their recollections at second-hand. Another case in point is the obligatory footnote with a crudely dogmatic reference to the “invention of tradition”, which generally fails to take on board the fine-tuning and reservations that have been placed on the validity of this thesis since it was first floated by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger at a Past and Present conference forty years ago. As these peccadillos are mercifully not manifested in this volume, their critique—like the proverbial diehards of Northern Ireland—will have to wait for its day to come.
Though it may seem inappropriate to label it a sin, the writings of Memory Studies frequently suffer from a tendency to moralism. Readers are repeatedly told how a society should remember, without sufficient pause for consideration of the attainability, if not the dubious desirability, of imposed attempts to socially engineer memory. Such patronising use of the modal “should” is particularly noticeable in the emerging sub-field of “transitional justice”, which is clamouring for pride of place within Memory Studies and has already achieved a notable status in debates on “dealing with the past” in “post-conflict” Northern Ireland. The unnerving confidence displayed when instructing communities on the supposed correct way to remember, relies on a rhetoric of ethics, which under scrutiny can turn out to be little more than a cover-up for political opinionating.

Historians, and perhaps even more so historians of Ireland who have been hardened by the controversies of the “revisionist debate”, prove to be somewhat inoculated to the fervour of moralist convictions. Historical analyses of constructions of memory tend to be less prescriptive and more descriptive. Accordingly, Remembering the Troubles has spared its readers tiresome pontification. In an essay on commemorations of the Easter Rising, Margaret O’Callaghan recognises that “drawing upon narrow sectional versions of the past to galvanize present political positions can indeed be dangerous, rebarbative and lethal” and ruefully confesses that “it would be good to live in a society in which such practices were abandoned”. Yet she takes a pragmatic approach in acknowledging that “we actually live in a society in which versions of the past, often distorted … constituted in the present are constantly used to marshal group identities in deeply divided societies” and offers sober advice for scholars of memory: “while we may disapprove of such reconstituted versions of the past, it is nevertheless essential that we analyse how they function and demonstrate how they have worked and continue to work in varying political landscapes” (p 117).

Historians, however, are susceptible to other weaknesses, not least the sin of insularity. Pierre Nora, in his paradigmatic collaborative project Les Lieux de mémoire, set the standard for the exploration of memory within a national framework, which inadvertently emits a misleading impression of isolation and exceptionalism. Similar collaborative studies of national memory were subsequently undertaken in all five of the other founding member states of the EEC, as Nora’s concept was adapted to Italy (Luoghi della memoria edited by Mario Isnenghi), Germany (Erinnerungsorte edited by Hagen Schulze and Étienne François), the Netherlands (Lieux de mémoire et identités nationales edited by Pim den Boer and Willem Frijhoff, and Plaatsen van herinnering edited by HL Wesseling et al), Belgium (Belgie, een parcours van herinnering edited by Johan Tollebeek et al.), and Luxemburg (Lieux de mémoire au Luxembourg edited by Kmec et al.). The Lieux de mémoire model has been emulated elsewhere, but when it came to Central Europe it became apparent that it would work best at a transnational-regional, rather than a strictly national, level. The transmission of memory doesn’t stop at borders.

The editor of Remembering the Troubles has done his best to produce a well-rounded volume. Another of the blurbs on the cover - written by the author of this review - praises the collection for “taking on board the politics of memory among republicans, loyalists and the British army, and also giving consideration to the implications of commemoration policies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland”. But the ambition to cover the subject from all possible angles is inevitably limited. The legacy of the civil rights movement, which provided an essential background to the outbreak of the Troubles, is a glaring omission. In fact, both constitutional nationalism and moderate unionism are neglected. In historical terms, this is an anachronism. The disparities of esteem in the composition of the volume seem to reflect the disgruntled extremism of current politics in Northern Ireland (in which the SDLP and UUP have been sidelined by Sinn Féin and the DUP) rather than the less belligerent memories of what is believed to have been the “silent” majority throughout the years of the Troubles. Factoring memories from south of the border and from across the Irish Sea into this complex mnemoscape is essential. Ulster has always been a liminal zone and the competing influences of Ireland, England and Scotland, as well as the Irish-American diaspora, are reflected in its composite traditions of remembrance. However, the range of mnemonic
fluidity is not limited to what the historian Norman Davies evasively named “These Isles”.

Local cultures of memory are inherently transnational in today’s global age. Brian Conway’s sociological study of commemoration of Bloody Sunday, suggestively subtitled Pathways of Memory, demonstrated how republican memorialisation in Derry was increasingly augmented by the championing of international causes. Similarly, the murals along the Falls Road in West Belfast place the plight of Catholic nationalists alongside the struggles of Palestinians, Iraqis, Basques, Cubans, Mexicans, African-Americans, and South African blacks, among others. On a more fundamental level, the pervasive culture of victimhood, to which both nationalists and unionists subscribe, has been shaped by contemporary conventions for marking the traumatic memory of the Holocaust, which, as argued by Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, have been adopted in the West as the dominant paradigm for commemoration. Studies of remembrance in a regional setting must therefore pay heed to the wider global influences through which local memories are shaped and expressed.

Insularity can be considered an outcome of near-sightedness and as such it is related to a more general sin of myopia, which cloud the source criticism of a surprising number of devotees of cultural memory. Mesmerised by the discovery of unfamiliar portrayals of the past, unwary scholars often mistakenly assume that they have found memory. Nevertheless, not every representation of the past bears testimony to active remembrance. An unread book, an unproduced play or an obscure work of art can offer intriguing insight into the imaginations of their creators, but whether they are indicative of social memory is an entirely different question. As in the case of derelict monuments, which blend into the landscape and are practically unnoticeable to passers-by, intended memorials that fail to provoke commemorative responses do not necessarily fulfil a mnemonic function. The fetishisation of texts and artefacts, which in academic writing seem to take on a life of their own, conceals the simple fact that inanimate objects lack cognitive abilities to remember. Social memory is to be found in the interactions between audiences and aides de mémoire. Applying this rule to the burgeoning corpus of Memory Studies can serve to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Curiously, it is the neglect of certain constructions of the past which may be most revealing. Overlooking forgetting, in this enumeration, is the seventh sin of Memory Studies. It is commonplace to proclaim that forgetting is integral to remembering. Disappointingly, the evocation of this cliché, more often than not, results in mindless lip service. The titles of countless studies dutifully couple remembering with forgetting, but fail to deliver on the promise of addressing forgetting with equal intellectual respect, treating it either as a mnemonic defect or as the self-explanatory “other” of memory. Although Halbwachs did not give much thought to forgetting, this lacuna has been redressed in more recent theoretical treatises by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (Memory, History, Forgetting), the anthropologist Marc Augé (Oblivion) and the sociologist Paul Connerton (How Modernity Forgets). And yet, within the voluminous literature on history and memory, there are no major historical studies of forgetting. John Mulqueen’s chapter in Remembering the Troubles on the rather neglected Official Republican Movement - the so-called “Stickies” (a nickname that derived from the sale of stick-on lilies to commemorate the Easter Rising) - reductively considers forgetting as an all-too-obvious form of selective remembering. It is far more than just that. The anthropologist Mary Douglas once astutely pointed out that forgetting “includes different kinds of selective remembering, misremembering and disremembering”.7

Casual references to cases of “collective amnesia”, whereby it is assumed that specific historical episodes have been simply airbrushed out of the collective memory of an entire society, often prove to be inaccurate. In any case, total oblivion is ultimately of limited interest to historians of memory, who can at best note the gaps and comment on the absences. Conversely, there is much to be learned from the study of “social forgetting”, which is the outcome of what happens when communities try, or profess to try, to forget discomfiting historical episodes, but actually retain muted recollections. Social forgetting, by this definition, pivots on tensions between maintaining a facade of public forgetting and the persistence
behind the scenes of private remembrance. Ireland, with its rich vernacular traditions of folk memory, which have been mostly veiled from official scrutiny and have seldom been recognised by historians, offers fertile ground for explorations of social forgetting. Even more so, instances of social forgetting can be found lurking behind Northern Ireland’s secretive culture of reticence, epitomised by the aphorism “whatever you say, say nothing” (which was memorably put to use both by the poet Seamus Heaney and the balladeer Colum Sands). Of the seven sins listed above – laxity, dualism, crudity, moralism, insularity, myopia and overlooking forgetting – it is the last which marks the frontiers of Memory Studies. Unravelling the dynamics of social forgetting is a challenge that future studies of remembering the Troubles have yet to face.

Notes

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Guy Beiner teaches history at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel. His next book, *Forgetful Remembrance, a study of social forgetting and vernacular historiography in Ulster*, will be published by Oxford University Press.

http://www.drb.ie/essays/troubles-with-remembering-or-the-seven-sins-of-memory-studies