
**Preface: Forgetful Remembrance**

I prefer to see historians as the guardians of the skeletons in the cupboard of the social memory.

Peter Burke, 'History as Social Memory'¹

This book pursues a modest task with dogged ambition. The scope is limited to an exploration of how an episode in provincial history, in a peripheral corner of Europe, was paradoxically both forgotten and remembered locally. The investigation naively aspires to comprehensiveness, yet accepts that the realization of such a goal is ultimately unattainable. In choosing to focus on what seemed to be a classic example of collective amnesia, a shorter and tighter book was originally envisaged, one that would have amounted to a meditative, albeit speculative, reflection on gaps of silence. However, meticulous research uncovered thousands of sources that offer access to voices that have been muffled and cloaked behind a perceived veil of silence. Reticence is shown to be quite verbal, even multivocal. These supposedly hidden sources were found by poring through manuscripts, close reading of partially obscure publications, combing of provincial newspapers, and undertaking ethnographic oral history fieldwork. Each and every account was carefully transcribed, catalogued, contextualized, and analysed, and the results of this pedantic examination yielded a self-constructed archive of vernacular historiography. Additional research would, no doubt, have yielded even more sources.

Making sense of a puzzle of thousands of fragmented pieces in order to put together a coherent picture proved to be no mean task. Among the voluminous publications on history and memory that have come out in the last three decades, I am not aware of another study that has charted the vicissitudes of memory over more than two hundred years in such high resolution. In writing up the findings, the intention has been to accommodate a range of readerships, from researchers coming from the diverse disciplines that are broadly interested in how societies deal with problematic episodes in their past, through to amateur aficionados of local history, while also appealing to a gamut of more specialist scholars in various fields of European, British, and Irish studies. Juggling the demands of such a varied clientele is a devilishly tricky task and I can only hope that the particular curiosities of various readers will be rewarded as they peruse the pages of this book.

For those perplexed by the sheer amount of local minutiae through which the arguments are demonstrated, it is worth pointing out that studies of cultural and social memory have too often made sweeping claims that have not been fully substantiated. It is therefore necessary to lay out the nuts and bolts of remembrance in order to closely examine the mechanics of how social forgetting actually works. The same can be said

for studies of history that tend to overlook provincial discourses. Once folklore and other vernacular accounts are treated with the same respect normally given to more conventional historical sources, the past begins to look very different indeed. Admittedly, the analysis could have patterned the materials otherwise, leading to different results. Unsatisfied readers are therefore invited to take the book apart and rewrite it anew.

At its most ambitious goal, the book aspires to offer a new model for the study of memory, as well as an alternative way of approaching history. With so many sources, including a substantial volume of published literary works, the inevitable question arises as to whether it is at all possible to speak of forgetting? The answer depends on what we mean by forgetting and its relationship to history. Accordingly, this book proposes a rethinking of the relationship between remembering and forgetting, in terms of social forgetting, and of the study of history, in terms of vernacular historiography. This seems to work well for the northern Irish province of Ulster and, I am convinced, should be equally applicable to places elsewhere.

Over the course of this exploration, I have become keenly aware of some of the pitfalls that await those who dare to venture into the Borgesian labyrinths of Mneme and to navigate the river Lethe. Something strange seems to happen to the poor wayfarers who spend many years in pursuit of memory. Oftentimes, they go slightly mad and begin to imagine that the recollections of others, with which they have intimately familiarized themselves, are their own. Even doctors are not immune to this psychosis. Richard Robert Madden, a physician by training, who was born in 1798, devoted himself to documenting the memories of United Irishmen. He became so engrossed in this task that he ended up writing poetry as if he had been one of them. Twenty years earlier, something similar happened to another physician, John Gamble, who toured the Ulster countryside collecting recollections of those that had witnessed the recent United Irish rebellion. He then wrote a novel in which the protagonist is a younger version of himself, traversing the very same landscape at the time of the rebellion, as if this had been his own personal experience. Twenty years after Madden, another physician, T. C. S. Corry, wrote a long poetic reminiscence of 1798, though he was born much later. The journalist W. G. Lyttle and the antiquarian Francis Joseph Bigger, among many others, were similarly affected. Their writings demonstrate the irresistibly fixating power of memory, which can possess, like a dybbuk, even the scholarly mind.

As an outsider, I would like to believe that I am inoculated to this peculiar syndrome, though somehow, I doubt that this is truly the case. Over the course of repeated visits to Northern Ireland, I could not help myself from viewing present-day surroundings through the prism of stories that were told and retold over two centuries in muted forms, oftentimes behind closed doors. Visits to places like Ballynahinch, Saintfield, Antrim, Templepatrick, Randalstown, Ballymena, Toome, Coleraine, Greyabbey, and even the very modern city of Belfast seemed to bring back disturbing memories of events that I had not personally experienced. Is it normal to be troubled by recollections of people that one has never known? Some memories are probably best forgotten. But what does that mean?