

National Archives and National Memory

Facing the Archival Silence

by

Dr. Barry Houlihan

Archivist, NUI Galway

By facing the gaps in our histories, and intervening in the transparency of the archival record, we can acknowledge divergent experiences within difficult and often traumatic memory and records.



In the 'Telemachus' chapter in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Haines, an English medical student, is talking with Stephen Dedalus at the Martello Tower in Sandycove. In discussing the different opinions on English memory versus Irish memory of Anglo-Irish relations, Haines laments: "We feel in England that we have treated you rather unfairly. It seems history is to blame." If memory is affected (or dictated) by history, then is how one country or society remembers, or misremembers, as Haines claims - is history really to blame? When we consider today what history is, or what its function can be, is it also important to reflect on what makes National History as opposed to National Memory? How can we define both, or look to find the

differences, and indeed overlaps, between national memory and national history within the records that support our histories and memory.

In seeking to explore these questions, it is necessary to reflect on how a country, a society, and its people form their history, and consider what sources are used to create a national history, so that we may also create a more complete national memory. When looking at what sources we seek out in our archives and records, or those records that are made available to us, we must also ask what voices are listened to? - who's accounts are documented? (and believed?), so as to enable future generations to reflect on the past and in so doing affect policy, legislation and social conditions to enable a fairer society.

There is precedent in recent years of some countries that have worked to actively revise and reconfigure their respective recent pasts and contemporary history. In January 2020, Poland's President Andrzej Duda chose not to attend a Holocaust Memorial event at Israel's Yad Vashem, marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The incident was not the first by a Polish politician in distancing themselves from any active participation or collaboration in the Nazi genocide which took place on Polish soil.



Holocaust Survivor and author, Tomi Reichenthal

In January 2019, a team of researchers from Yale University and Grinnell College, published a report as part of the Holocaust Remembrance Project¹ which set out to investigate how countries today remember the Holocaust, and how they

¹ <https://www.holocaustremembranceproject.com/>

respond to and recognise their respective national Holocaust histories. Among the key findings of the report was that “Many European Union governments are rehabilitating World War II collaborators and war criminals while minimising their own guilt in the attempted extermination of Jews.”² Tomi Reichenthal, speaking at the Holocaust Memorial Lecture at NUI Galway in January 2020, outlined his direct experiences as a Holocaust survivor and his time spent detained within the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen, which was liberated on 5 April 1945:

It happened suddenly, we weren't expecting it. It wasn't a cheerful welcome as 90% of the inmates were sick, 14,000 died after the liberation owing to illness, injury and sustained physical and mental abuse within the Bergen-Belsen camp. Could it happen again? It could. It's a very dangerous time today when you see the racism and antisemitism across Eastern Europe and America on the rise, therefore, when we talk about usefulness of commemorating the Holocaust, it is very very important. We have to learn from the past, from the history. Because if we don't learn it will happen again.³

In the current moment of protest that we currently find ourselves in, where we watch live and in real time through the screens of our smartphones and devices, we are part of an ongoing engagement with history. Protests, for example, across the United States, in response to the killing of black man George Floyd by white police officers in Minneapolis in May 2020, have resulted in a global outpouring of grief and frustration at the experience of racism in society. Statues have been toppled from Bristol to Virginia. When we examine transnational histories of the experience of racism, we can trace patterns of similarities in archival sources, citing discrepancies between official and private sources.

The academic, lawyer and human rights advocate, Kevin Boyle, spoke at a lecture in Wayne State University, Michigan, in 1973. In his manuscript diary accounts of the visit (and of his other speaking and research engagements across his visit to the U.S., including at University of California, Berkeley), Boyle described the scenes of

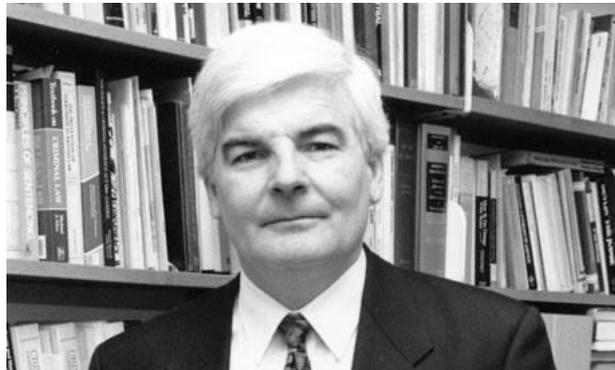
² https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/c1aa54_d6fdacf05b6845a3a2cacbf80ed6720c.pdf

³ Interview with Tomi Reichenthal by Ben Barkow, Holocaust Memorial Lecture, Irish Centre for Human Rights, NUI Galway, introduced by Professor Ray Murphy. 29 January 2020
<https://digital.library.nuigalway.ie/islandora/object/nuigalway%3A31207>

police action against young black men on the streets of Detroit that he witnessed. Reflecting on his own experience as a Catholic and Civil Rights activist in Northern Ireland through the 1960s, Boyle recognised much of what was happening in Detroit as similar to the experience of Catholics in Northern Ireland. Boyle wrote:

I was impressed deeply with the parallels between Detroit and Belfast: the tension in the air, the student publications and conversations, all had the black and white issue to the fore. Just prior to my arrival the Detroit police had killed a black man arising out of the activities of a new surveillance police squad . . . The very streets reminded me of the ghettos in Belfast. Businesses were few, shops were boarded up, advertisements were for soft drinks and cigarettes and knots of men stood on street corners.⁴

Boyle's account, written some five years after protests and riots flared up in Detroit in 1968, also creates the synergies between transnational archival memory within national records and histories.



Kevin Boyle, Human Rights academic, lawyer and activist
© Kevin Boyle Archive, Hardiman Library, NUI Galway⁵

In the inauguration speech made by Donald Trump on 20 January 2017, the language of 'American carnage' was rhetorically bleak and laid the foundations for the administration that would follow, intent on creating division wrapped in a language of hate and division. On 21 January 2017, the day following Trump's

⁴ A44/5/4/4, Diary account of experiences in America, 1973. Kevin Boyle Archive, Hardiman Library, NUI Galway.

⁵ **Image:** Kevin Boyle, Human Rights academic, lawyer and activist © Kevin Boyle Archive, Hardiman Library, NUI Galway

inauguration, the 'Women's March' saw millions of women take to the streets of Washington D.C., and to streets across the United States, protesting against Trump's election. In January 2020, an exhibition was installed in the gallery of the National Archives in Washington D.C., marking the centenary of women's suffrage in the U.S.

The exhibition featured an image of the 2017 Women's March, which was displayed in an enlarged reproduction alongside a similarly reproduced shot of suffrage marchers of the National Women's Party, also taken on Pennsylvania Avenue a century earlier, in January 1917. The image of the anti-Trump marchers, was, however, altered by exhibition curators. In the image, placards held by marchers which bore anti-Trump slogans were blurred out, effectively silencing the protest, and silencing the effect of the now-archived image to convey the authentic message of the protesters from only three-years previously.

As reported by the *Washington Post*, 'a placard that proclaims "God Hates Trump" has "Trump" blotted out so that it reads "God Hates." A sign that reads "Trump & GOP — Hands Off Women" has the word Trump blurred out.'⁶ In an official press release, the National Archives apologised for "the mistake", stating that the image was not part of National Archives collections, but rather a licensed image.⁷ The incident was an unfortunate reminder of how prominent moments of protest, even within the present, are at risk from archival alteration. Given that such protests are live, physical, emotive events, the language of protest is a residual and powerful tool of both memory and action that is captured once the liveness of protests dissipates.

The blurring of the protest signs and the censoring of the language of protest in the exhibition, which largely acted to censor women's voices and women's bodies,

⁶ National Archives exhibit blurs images critical of President Trump, *Washington Post*, 17 January 2020 https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/national-archives-exhibit-blurs-images-critical-of-president-trump/2020/01/17/71d8e80c-37e3-11ea-9541-9107303481a4_story.html Accessed 16 June 2020

⁷ National Archives Apologizes for Alteration of Women's March Image, 18 January 2020 <https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2020> accessed 16 June 2020

(though President Trump's infamous 'Grab Them' audio recording resulted in no damage to his campaign despite its self-implication in sexual assault against women) by the National Archives of the United States, created a precedent of intervention against memory on the part of a major national archival institution.

Language around archives and inclusion needed to be tempered and assessed for what it encompasses. Phrases which stipulate that 'national archives' reflect the citizens of a country, work to negate the memory and experience of those who lack official citizenship. Those confined within the current Direct Provision system in Ireland are without legal status and citizenship. The *Asylum Archive* project led by Vukasin Nedeljkovic is an urgent example of interventionist archiving, documenting the conditions which people living in Direct Provision are experiencing.⁸

Journalist Ed Vulliamy, whose reportage on the Bosnian war in 1995 and on the acts of genocide witness in Srebrenica, outlines the concepts of 'reckoned' and 'unreckoned histories' in the context of post-conflict societies and in instances where national traumas lie unchallenged with a lack of access to, or visibility of, sources, archives, museums or publicly transparent histories.

Reckoned-with history can proceed through time, and enables both the victims and those in whose names the atrocities were committed to position themselves with regard to the violence itself and each other. . . . Conversely, unreckoned history is a dangerous history. A narrative where the perpetrator of atrocities refuses - and their successors refuse - to reckon with what was done not only risks their reputation, but condemns those on whom the suffering was inflicted to historical limbo.⁹

The work of archivists on such collections also carries the responsibility of judgement around vocabularies. In records that document the death of an individual, be it as part of a revolution, civil war, domestic conflict or otherwise - the terms used control the narratives. Was the individual 'killed' or 'murdered'? The descriptive terms that

⁸ The Asylum Archive project can be viewed online: <http://www.asylumarchive.com/> Accessed 18 July 2020

⁹ Ed Vulliamy, *The War is Dead, Long Live the War. Bosnia: The Reckoning* (London: Bodley Head Press, 2012) xl-xli.

are used carry fine margins, but they linger through time and across communities and nations. Later, this affects the search terms used by those searching the archive who may be complicit, victimised, traumatised or implicated in the source. To each person, their association (or not) is valid. How the source is marked and authenticated by an archivist's language can perpetuate the silence of the perpetrator or give voice to the victim.¹⁰

The Open Heart City Collective is a collaborative and inter-disciplinary research team led by professors Katherine O'Donnell and Hugh Campbell. The stated aim of the group is "How do we act in this space?"¹¹ One project undertaken by the group is to investigate the reimagining of the remaining Magdalene Laundry site on Sean McDermott Street, Dublin, which closed its doors in 1996. The group are working on ways to appropriately, and in consultation with survivors, realign plans for the building with the need for the public and the State to pro-actively interrogate the history of the building.

Such initiatives, including the oral history project recording testimonies of survivors of the Tuam Mother and Baby Home, led by Dr Sarah-Anne Buckley and Dr John Cunningham at NUI Galway, and advocacy from a grouping which includes Justice for Magdalenes, among others, calling for an independent survivor-led process to establish a National Archive of historical institutional and care-related records, are further examples of enabling national memory to be part of a national archive.¹² Elizabeth Coppin, a survivor of the Mother and Baby Home and Magdalene Laundry systems, is having her case brought before the United Nations

¹⁰ For more on the evolution of archival description within finding aids and catalogues see: Gregory Wiedeman (2019) "The Historical Hazards of Finding Aids". *The American Archivist*. Fall/Winter 2019, Vol. 82, No. 2, pp. 381-420. <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc-82-02-20> Accessed 20 July 2020

¹¹ Open Heart City Collective, <http://openheartcitydublin.ie/about/about-open-heart-city-collective/> Accessed 20 July 2020

¹² Statement regarding the establishment of an independent national archive for historical abuse and care related records: http://jfmresearch.com/retention-of-records-bill-2019/archive_election2020/ Accessed 20 July 2020

Committee Against Torture, led by Dr Maeve O'Rourke of the Irish Centre for Human Rights.¹³

The results of these undertakings serve to document the experiences of those women who were forcibly detained and will enable the public to reflect on what happened and create a space to learn, remember and make present the absent history of the women whose records and personal archives have been withheld from them.

Director of the Bodleian Library at University of Oxford, Dr Richard Ovenden, points out how "the Truth is under attack. This is not anything new, but attacks on truth are becoming the 'go to' tool for populist politicians who see opportunities to subvert democratic institutions all around the world."¹⁴ Ovenden continues to reiterate the ideal that libraries and archives help societies cling to the truth, in an act of Orwellian-inspired activism, in defence of those who are victims of suppressed information, endangering the society in which we all live. "Archives", Ovenden adds, "are at the heart of the rights of citizens and at the heart of contentious debates". The historian Tony Judt outlines a startling warning against the downfall of informed debate within informed societies. If the twentieth century can be defined as an age of the public intellectual, within a globalising and increasingly mediatised society, as Judt states, then the converse decline in accurate and transparent debate, information and social openness is now what may prove to define the twenty-first century, as we are only entering its third decade. Judt warns:

Of all our contemporary illusions, the most dangerous is the one that underpins and accounts for all others. And that is the idea that we live in a

¹³ For an interview with Elizabeth Coppin recounting her experiences, see interview with Elizabeth Coppin, NUI Galway, 2018, introduced by Dr. Maeve O'Rourke and conducted by Anna Carroll. <https://digital.library.nuigalway.ie/islandora/object/islandora%3A6892> Accessed 20 July 2020

¹⁴ Richard Ovenden, Keynote address, Liber International Conference, Trinity College Dublin, June 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wH5ISfDKWPI> For more on this topic by Ovenden see the forthcoming book, *Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2020).

time without precedent: that what is happening to us is new and irreversible and that the past has nothing to teach us.¹⁵

The wilful destruction of records of totalitarian regimes and colonial era governments, which provided evidence of acts of systemic State control, surveillance, collusion, and killings, are often the last acts of a declining system of control, a fighting retreat working against the grain of memory, to suppress the knowledge of generations as well as to preserve legacies of the past. Research by Shohei Sato outlines the extent of the corrupted practice of archive file suppression from African colonies by the British foreign office:

In 2011, in the course of negotiations with former Kenyan detainees, the British government announced that it had in its possession some secret files outside the regular classification system. Thus started the disclosure of previously non-existent documents, and by November 2013 some 20,000 files had been declassified. They came from 37 colonies worldwide, from Malta, Nigeria and Kenya to Aden, Malaya and the Bahamas. . . . In addition, a large number of papers are believed to have been totally destroyed, either burnt or sunk at sea.¹⁶

Earlier reports dating back to 2012, by *The Guardian* newspaper, show how those originally trusted with record keeping of the colonial files were selected for their allegiance to the British government. These individuals could not be Africans, rather they selected those who could be trusted to 'keep secrets', albeit with threats of imprisonment for any officer who removed files. Concerns for the ethical and practical management of the files, for any future historical study or public transparency or accountability, were ignored. As *The Guardian* report stated, "In Uganda, the process was codenamed Operation Legacy. In Kenya, a vetting process, described as "a thorough purge", was overseen by colonial Special Branch officers.¹⁷

¹⁵ Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, London: William Heinemann, 2008, p. 19.

¹⁶ Shohei Sato (2017) 'Operation Legacy': Britain's Destruction and Concealment of Colonial Records Worldwide, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 45:4, 697-719, DOI: 10.1080/03086534.2017.1294256, p. 698.

¹⁷ Britain destroyed records of colonial crimes <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/apr/18/britain-destroyed-records-colonial-crimes> 18 April 2012. Accessed 20 July 2020

Writing in May 2019, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the publication of the Commission to Enquire into Child Abuse in Ireland (The Ryan Report) academic and writer Dr Emile Pine reminded us that “It is time to recognise that we [in Ireland] don’t have a culture of silence, we have a culture of not listening.” Going back to Haines’ contention in *Ulysses* that “history is to blame” for diverging views on the past, depending on which side of history your nationality, place of birth or economic standing happens to place you, simply ‘blaming history’ is a complicit inaction. By facing the gaps in our histories, and intervening in the transparency of the archival record, we can acknowledge divergent experiences within difficult and often traumatic memories and records. By advocating for archival activism, it is possible to delegitimise the imposed custodial power of states and their agents who sought to impose an authority of complicit silence. These acts can serve to reverse, and change, the culture of ‘not listening’.

As a country facing into the latter, and arguably the most contentious, period of its Decade of Commemorations, Ireland will face further ‘archival silences’, of experiences and histories which protagonists, participants or communities might prefer were left untold. The politicisation of memory, the ‘ownership’ of historical remembrance, will always be a divisive presence when facing history. Projects such as *Beyond 2022*, will serve to fill in the historical gaps and give voice to the archival silence within the national memory as well as the national archive. Digital open-access online to records beyond the physical boundaries of a singular institution will offer the country and its people a space to consider the past in its documented context. For our national memory and our national archive, the risk lies in remembering things as they weren’t, and that is a greater loss.

Dr Barry Houlihan is an Archivist in NUI Galway and teaches Digital Culture, and Theatre History and Archives. Barry is the editor of [“Navigating Ireland Theatre Archive: Theory, Practice, Performance \(Peter Lang Press\)](#). His monograph *Theatre and Archival Memory* is forthcoming from Palgrave MacMillan.