The active lives of the material culture of commemoration: a Chinese braid and the Irish Citizen Army flag

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ABSTRACT

When material culture is used for commemorative purposes objects become mnemonic devices through which we construct narratives of ourselves and other people. By exploring the “active lives” of an Irish Citizen Army flag, exhibited in Dublin, and a Chinese braid/queue included in Remembering 1916: Your Stories (Ulster Museum 25 March 2016–19 March 2017), this paper provides insights into how objects are positioned as part of dominant or peripheral narratives. How these objects are experienced is shaped by the social structures in which they are encountered. In the earliest phase the flag represented the campaign for Irish independence, and the braid was the symbol of the wearer’s community identity. Violent interventions by others changed the meaning of the flag and the braid, leading both to become trophy objects. Later, in the museum and a private home, the keeping of the objects suggests awareness of cultural significance, whilst their concealment suggests avoidance of the most difficult issues associated with those objects. This article explores the intentionality revealed by each phase providing new thinking about the agency of commemorative objects.

KEYWORDS

Material culture; Ireland; museums; memory; commemoration; decolonisation

Introduction

In 2012 a newly appointed curator at the Inniskillings Museum in County Fermanagh was clearing out a cupboard in his office and came across a piece of cloth that had been hidden. Concealed for decades, when it was later shared the item was described by the President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins as “a magnificent contribution to the 1916 commemorations.”¹ This paper explores the biography of that piece of cloth – it was later confirmed as an Irish Citizen Army flag – alongside a Chinese braid, displayed at the Ulster Museum in the exhibition Remembering 1916: Your Stories (25 March 2016–19 March 2017). The braid or queue was cut from the head of a First World War recruit to the Chinese Labour Corps, suggesting an attack on the wearer’s identity. For almost a century, very little was known of both objects and their decades of concealment was a means of side stepping the question of how we deal with material culture that challenge the dominant narratives in our national histories.

The Irish Citizen Army flag and the Chinese braid were both put on public display for the first time in March 2016 – the braid in Belfast and the flag in Dublin. Leading up to
the display of the flag, the Trustees of Inniskillings Museum both explored and challenged their own thinking about the contribution and purpose of remembrance in a British military museum in Northern Ireland. By doing so, this was a seminal moment in the museum’s history. In contrast, the display of the Chinese braid in the Ulster Museum was less consequential for the institution. In the larger exhibition, its potential contribution to asking new questions about how we remember in a multicultural society was lost amongst the dominant stories of the Easter Rising in Dublin and the First World War.

Considering these two very different objects together in one paper reveals the properties of objects displayed in museums, which arises from both the materiality of those objects and the cultural significance that has been assigned. What is shared by these two objects is the contribution they make to exploring a pivotal period in Irish history. One invites us to look inwards: the flag brings us to the well-trodden and dominant narratives of British and Irish identity, the campaign for Irish independence, and the opportunity provided by the First World War. If we engage fully with the second we must look outwards to narratives placed at the periphery in Ireland. The braid represents the connections between Ireland, Britain and global communities, questions which are essential in a multicultural society which must address the legacies of colonialism, violence and racism. Using the braid as the starting point, we can investigate the contribution and treatment of the Chinese Labour Corps, estimated at some 140,000 men who were recruited by the British government to support British troops in the First World War. Until recent years, their contribution as a military labour force in handling military supplies and ammunitions, building military facilities, as well as digging trenches, was largely forgotten. The braid raises questions about what we remember as well as why and who we include in the processes of interpretation in museums.

How these objects are experienced varied at different moments in their life histories, shaped by the social structures in which they are encountered. In the earliest phase the flag represented the campaign for Irish independence, and the braid was the symbol of the wearer’s community identity. Violent interventions by others changed the meaning of the flag and the braid, leading both to become trophy objects. Later, in the museum and a private home, the keeping of the objects suggests awareness of cultural significance, whilst their concealment suggests avoidance of the most difficult issues associated with those objects. When on public display, both became commemorative objects, used to forge a collective memory of significant historical moments. A community can rally around either object – the flag now displayed in Dublin is an object to be revered and celebrated. At this point, the story of the braid takes a different route to that of the flag. Displayed in Belfast for 12 months in the Ulster Museum, the braid is now back with the family who temporarily loaned it for display. The braid is taken from public view once again, reverting back to an earlier phase of its life history.

This trajectory of object history shared by the flag and braid tells of violent displacement from the original context, concealment, and problematic display. The issues raised by the two examples resonates with the current museum sector and public debates around collection histories, particularly those found in ethnographic and world cultures galleries. The debates focus upon “decolonising the museum” and addressing the ideologies and power dynamics embedded in museum collections, interpretation and display. The examples of the flag and braid, demonstrate that the international debates about the
impact of ideologies and uneven power dynamics are also embedded in the interpretation of objects associated with pivotal moments in Ireland’s history.

**Commemoration and material culture**

The handling of the newly discovered Irish Citizen Army flag and the Chinese braid provides commentary on commemorative practices and discourse in Ireland during the Decade of Centenaries. The examples can also be used to explore the role of museums in that process, as they navigate the material culture of commemoration. As identified by the editors of this special edition, the twentieth century can be read as moving between crisis, in the form of conflict, and the commemoration of those events. The periods in between, rather than being absent from conflict are times when traumatic pasts are negotiated. This may be through processes of what appears to be forgetting, or it might be a consequence of denial or deliberate silences.

Difficult pasts may also be negotiated through active practices of reconstruction and reapplication of historical memory through historical writing, cultural events or heritage activity. Assman suggests these processes can be separated out as examples of dialogic forgetting, to “seal off a traumatic past,”

"remembering in order to prevent forgetting; remembering in order to forget; and, dialogic remembering, which “links two nations through their common knowledge of a shared legacy of a traumatic past.”

In the case of Ireland, I would suggest therefore that the experience of crisis and commemoration is not a binary. Rather it is a movement between these points, within which both the crisis and the issue of how we acknowledge that crisis is always present – even in the moments of silence about the past. We can think about both the flag and the braid in relation to concealment and then revealing – and whether in displaying the objects if they were really seen for what they are.

Concealment is nothing new in museums. Objects in museums can easily become subsumed amongst larger collections, leading to them being easily overlooked, even while on display. Levenson gives the example of an 18th-century portrait of Sir Joshua Reynolds hanging in the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven. Included in the painting is a young black boy, yet the presence of that figure is not mentioned in the title of the painting nor in the archives. Another example of not seeing was addressed in the exhibition *Every Object Tells a Story* at Nottingham Castle Museum. Here museum staff reinterpreted four silver candlesticks that depicted slaves, acknowledging in the text panel that previously “this provocative subject was neither acknowledged nor interpreted by the museum.” Both of these examples demonstrate that Black and slave histories have been present in our museums, yet remained unseen.

The discussion in this paper contributes to our thinking on the ideas of crisis and commemoration in two interlinked areas. First, the treatment of both the flag and the braid is a consequence of how we approach and assign significance to the past and its material remains. The heritage landscape is a palimpsest of monuments, buildings, museum collections and archives, which generate layers of meaning. The values ascribed to these layers is determined by the interplay of memory and identity. As described by Godson and Brück, in their introduction to a collection of essays on the material and visual culture of the Easter Rising, responses to objects, images and practices of commemoration, whether “cherished and vilified, remembered and forgotten – have much to tell us
about contemporary concepts of nationhood and identity. How we remember with objects is a reflection not of what happened in the past, but the contemporary purpose of remembering. This has impacted on the choice of objects brought into our museum collections, if they are displayed, and how they are interpreted within the museum. For instance, museums in Northern Ireland have little to tell the story of the Easter Rising, no doubt a consequence of its association with Republicanism, a gap now being filled with recent collecting projects. As I have argued elsewhere, the inclusion of new objects in our museum collections, or other public spaces, have potential to become agents for change and more critical awareness of the past.

Second, the significance assigned to such objects is shaped by contemporary commemorative practices. Although appearing to be about acknowledging past events, commemoration is tied to the politics of the present and plays a crucial role in the negotiation of identity, power and place. Commemoration changes how we remember – it gives memory, or “post-memory” of past events an active role in the present that must be negotiated. In 2016 we were not just remembering the events of 1916; instead what we do today is a memory of the century since. Every moment in the tricky century that has just past comes together, piece by piece, to shape the character of our communities, places and people. At times of commemoration, seminal moments in our past have been reinterpreted, deconstructed and represented. Rigney reminds us that anniversaries are “non-natural,” by following a “calendar-dictated rhythm” anniversaries forge “moments of synchronised remembering against a background of everyday forgetting.” It was this “non-natural” moment that enabled both the flag and braid to be put on public display, both because of the progress of thinking around memory work and community interest in commemoration.

The commemorative work in museums isn’t only about the stories we can tell about that period and the objects we have. The interpretation in museums is the outcome of a century of selective remembering and assigning historical merit. Interpretation is a consequence of what story we think is pertinent for the time we live in and will influence it the way we desire. Remembering can be used to justify conflict and divide communities; or it can be used in a way that explores what we share, with potential to unify us. As the anticipation of the Decade of Centenaries intensified, the work of commemoration committees both sides of the border in Ireland gathered momentum. Both constituencies talked of ethical remembering and ethical commemoration – a reminder that commemoration of the Rising and First World War was to focus on what could unite the nationalist and unionist communities on the island. Although this approach may have been new territory for some groups, by engaging in externally funded commemorative activities this “ethical approach” became the underpinning dominant narrative of the Decade of Centenaries.

Dominant narratives: interpreting the Irish Citizen Army flag

When the new curator found the Irish Citizen Army flag it had been placed in a box with a note attached stating “Citizen Army flag captured Easter Rising 1916.” In 1935 the flag was presented to the museum by Colonel John McClintock, the Commanding Officer of a 1,000 strong Composite Battalion sent to Dublin April 1916. It is believed that this flag was taken from the ruins of Liberty Hall by Acting Corporal John McAlonen, a 21-year-old
The flag as evidence of their involvement in British defence during the Rising, very little is known about the Battalion and there is no writing about their contribution in Regimental histories. Regimental museums and institutional histories exist to form establish pride, loyalty and “espirit de corps,” which is reinforced through the display of objects; if those are seized items, they are a signification of victory.16

The Easter Rising was a pivotal moment in Ireland’s history and triggered a chain of events that led to the Anglo Irish Treaty, partition and the formation of the Irish Free State. From a military perspective, the insurrectionists chose an opportune moment when the British Army was engaged in battle in Europe – arguably the British defence was at its weakest. Although the Rising was suppressed, the shooting of the key figures with unjustified brutality altered the mood of the people of Ireland in favour of the independence movement.17 In relation to the Easter Rising and the Inniskillings, silence concerning the Rising flag could be regarded in two ways. First, as a reminder of the Dublin Rising and how poorly it was handled, the flag remained hidden because it was far from a moment of military pride. Second, given the importance of the Rising to the Republican movement of the twentieth century, the display of the flag in a British military museum in a border county could be interpreted as “war trophy” and would be antagonistic.

The flag was found in 2012 and its existence only became public when it was revealed in Dublin in March 2016 (Figure 1). Initially the conservator who confirmed the provenance of the flag was “not at all confident” the flag she was looking at could be the Liberty Hall flag. The National Museum of Ireland already had a flag, in fragments, from the period which could be used as a comparison to this new discovery. When she considered the quality of the cloth and craftsmanship, as well as the bullet hole damage, she confidently concluded this was an additional flag that was erected on Liberty Hall.18

Figure 1. The Irish Citizen Army flag, now conserved and in a specially made museum quality case. (Courtesy of Inniskillings Museum).
With the provenance established, the Inniskillings staff and Museum Trustees had to decide how to proceed. The Trustees were aware of how triggering flags are for communities in Northern Ireland. Their consideration coincided with the 2012 flag protests in Belfast when Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities objected to the removal of the Union flag from Belfast City Hall. These protests were a reminder to the Trustees of just how contentious flags are and, if badly handled, this Irish Citizen Army flag could have been damaging for the museum. Putting it briefly, the Museum Trustees considered several choices. The flag could be placed back in the box it had been in for the past 80 years; it could be sold and make a small fortune for the museum; an attempt could be made to display it in the museum; or a heritage institution in Dublin could be approached as a new fitting home. The first two options were anathema to the museum – the current museum curator knowing its historic value could not return the flag to hiding and likewise the notion to sell was dismissed. Instead, in a spirit that reflects the shift in cultural and political relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the Trustees made the bold move to approach a Dublin institution and so marks that seminal moment in the museum’s history.

The Trustees collaborated with the Services Industrial Professional Technical Union (SIPTU), an organisation that is a direct descendent of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, and still occupying a building on the site of the original Liberty Hall. Now on loan to SIPTU, the flag was unveiled in Dublin in a State event that marked the 102nd anniversary of the Irish Citizen Army. Both the Trustee decision to loan the flag to Dublin, and the responses from Dublin, can be framed in the shared history approach to good relations; an approach that informed commemorative processes in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In his address the President of Ireland acknowledged the Trustee decision to loan the flag for the 1916 commemoration. He described it as “a generous gesture” that is evidence of “the mutual respect, friendship, and the new hospitality to different versions of history that can now prevail between the citizens of these islands.” The President of Ireland positioned the flag in relation to fostering “mutual respect” for “different versions of history.”

In a year when such gestures could be controversial, it was a bold move for the museum and one that made the museum explore new ways of thinking about their collections and their wider civic role – beyond that of a museum established to celebrate army achievements and inspire future recruits. The then Inniskillings curator spoke of the museum being “honoured to loan this valuable artefact from its collection.” Using the flag as the means, the curator is concerned to “reach new audiences and motivate further learning of our past” as well as generating “fresh perspectives as history is full of contrasts.” He is mindful of the importance of this iconic object for people of Ireland and is using it to demonstrate that the museum has the appetite to reach out to new audiences.

The ambition to approach commemoration in a spirit of inclusivity was clearly demonstrated by an event held in September 2018 to mark the contribution of the Inniskillings Fusiliers and the Irish Defence Regiment to the Battle of the Somme. The event, held at the former Barracks site at Enniskillen Castle, brought together for the first time in Northern Ireland the Irish Defence Forces Army No.1 Band and the Band, Bugles, Pipes and Drums of the Royal Irish Regiment. The curator is certain that this event was only
possible because of the new relationship established with agencies in the Republic of Ireland resulting from the loan of the flag.25

Amidst the consideration of the symbolic gesture of returning the flag to Dublin, we can also think about its very materiality. The survival of the flag, and its near perfect condition, is remarkable. This added to the special character of the object. Speaking to the press, the conservator describes “it has never been exposed to the light” and as a result “the strength of the colours are as strong as 100 years ago” when the flag “would have been clearly visible along the [Dublin] quays.”26 SIPTU, now with the flag on loan from the Trustees, were moving in their articulation of what the return of the flag meant. In a Press Release they described “the weight of history guided the museum back to Liberty Hall,”27 the location from where the flag was taken in 1916. From their own resources SIPTU conserved and mounted the flag in a specially made museum-quality case. The Press Release continues “the present occupiers SIPTU soon revealed a common determination to conserve this irreplaceable treasure and return it to the building it was taken from exactly 100 years ago.”28 For SIPTU the flag has the quality of a talisman, they ascribe it with an agency they suggest caused the Inniskillings curators to go to Dublin. The flag was able to unite SIPTU in “common determination,” leading them to conserve the “treasure.” This narrative of realisation, return, and shared purpose, sits easily with the SIPTU members, aware of their historical links to the Rising era.

In contemporary Northern Ireland, the display of flags continues to be contentious. However, in this case the Irish Citizen Army flag became a means to navigate challenges that go beyond those of the historical events of 1916. The display of the flag in Dublin, and subsequent events, marks an attempt to establish a positive position for a British military museum in relation to the Irish story. This seems to have paid off: responses to the Museum posts on Facebook described the donation as “a brilliant gesture,” “a generous act” and acknowledges the museum for its job of preservation.29

Peripheral narratives: interpreting a Chinese braid

When Belfast man David Watters returned to Belfast from the First World War amongst his possessions was an unusual souvenir – a long braid of hair taken from a Chinese man. Watters had joined the 36th (Ulster) Division in 1914 and by 1916 he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant and had been transferred to the Chinese Labour Corps where he served as an officer. The braid now belongs to descendants of Watters and they brought it to a First World War workshop held in Belfast in 2015 and subsequently loaned the braid to the Ulster Museum exhibition Remembering 1916: Your Stories (25 March 2016–19 April 2017) (Figure 2 and Figure 3).30

For the most part Remembering 1916 documented the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme using the narrative themes developed through the Decade of Centenaries and also evident when the Irish Citizen Army flag was revealed in Dublin in the same month. On these occasions it was an opportunity to foster a new appreciation of the shared histories between those two communities traditionally seen as opposing. Remembering 1916 tells us of how histories on the island, so often thought to be at opposite ends of the political spectrum, should now be seen linked in the manner of a “complex weave.”31 In Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland the Battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising are cornerstones of memory for Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist
Figure 2. Display case in Remembering 1916 which includes the Chinese braid (Courtesy of National Museums NI).

Figure 3. Display case in Remembering 1916 which includes the Chinese braid (Courtesy of National Museums NI).
and Catholic/Nationalist/Republican communities. The focus of the Decade Centenaries has largely been a “shared history approach,” which disrupts these binaries by establishing connections between the communities. Although there are clearly positive outcomes from a shared approach, this perspective is largely limited to the “two traditions” model of understanding histories on this island.

The Remembering 1916 exhibition label accompanying the braid states that it was removed from a man serving in the Chinese Labour Corps. The label is titled “Chinese man’s queue” and reads “Private Watters witnessed the queue being cut from a man serving with the Chinese Labour Corps. Following an agreement between the Chinese and British governments in 1916, thousands of Chinese workers were recruited to fill the labour shortage.” The story of the Chinese braid, and the broader context of the Chinese Labour Corps, is absent in favour of the dominant local narrative. The braid is displayed in a large and packed case that included a German medick uniform, a German officer’s stick that had been used to kill an Irish man and then himself, Christmas postcards, and other ephemera. Although the Museum’s evaluation suggests the exhibition was well received, wider stories remained untold. The focus on the consequences of this period for the nationalist and unionist communities in the north of Ireland, overlooks the rich and diverse histories of other local communities, such as those people with connections to Poland, China, India or the African continent. The braid in Belfast is material evidence of how the histories of Ireland are intertwined with far off places. These broader stories have the potential to give us deeper insights into the experiences of other people, including migrant communities living locally, and encourage us to ask why such histories might be neglected for decades, and continue to be barely noticed.

The Chinese contributed by working for the British and French war effort, recruitment for which began in 1916: they worked in factories, railways, docks, clearing forests and removing ammunitions from battlefields. Sources vary in their account of the rationale for Chinese involvement. One cites a Chinese government official, Liang Shiyi (1869–1933) who promoted China’s participation “hoping for future political and financial advantages which might accrue providing further expansion of his own empire of bureaucratic and financial interests.” Wang writes that the motivating factor was the hope that China, with the defeat of Germany, would regain the Shandong peninsula, sometimes referred to as the “Holy Land,” which had come into German possession. The British War Office used British missionaries in China to recruit men convincing them of the “compatibility between religious and patriotic duty in assisting in the employment of the Chinese labourers.” In addition, men were motivated by the potential to earn for their families and for many of the poor Chinese “pledging themselves to three years of service in return for pay which was far better than they could hope for at home, seemed like a winner.”

The conditions for many Chinese, both in transit to the Front and whilst labouring, were very poor. Enroute men may have spent two months in the bowels of the ships, with little opportunity to get above board or even off the ship when it went into the various ports on its journey. Matthew Leonard, an archaeologist who works on First World War battlefield sites, reflects: “Many of the workers had never left their villages, let alone their country, and the experience of joining the apparatus of an industrial war must have been overwhelming.” Leonard writes of the drowning of some 543 Chinese when a French transport ship sank in 1917, without any record of the Chinese onboard. The sinking prompted the use of an alternative trans-Pacific route across Canada by train – one source
writes about the men spending days in sealed trains to avoid landing tax.\textsuperscript{41} Leonard describes that during the early years of the First World War, during Western occupation of Chinese territories, the local population worked with virtually no rights and as being "ruthlessly exploited by their European war lords."\textsuperscript{42} Leonard continues:

The labourers were expected to work up to ten hours a day for seven days every week, time off being allowed for Chinese holidays … They were employed in ports to unload/load cargoes, repair roads, lay railway lines, build huts and aerodromes. At the end of the War, they were used to level shell holes, search for and unearth unexploded bombs, roll up barbed wire and also to collect the remains of bodies and bury them in graves already dug by CLC labourers.\textsuperscript{43}

In his account of the British camps, Wang writes that the labourers were treated as if they were "part of the military organisation and were subjected to military discipline," which was resented by the Chinese. Their movements were limited and "kept in barbed wire enclosures, much like prisoners of war."\textsuperscript{44} He cites a YMCA worker who wrote "it was almost criminal to keep 500 strong healthy men in an enclosure week after week with nothing to do in leisure time but twiddle their thumbs. Of course they would get into mischief."\textsuperscript{45} Wang also cites a British Officer of the period who wrote "we vied with each other for the greatest number of canes broken on backs, legs, shins, and heads. Humiliation however, was found to be the most effective type of punishment, and it was used liberally."\textsuperscript{46}

Returning to the braid on display in the \textit{Remembering 1916} exhibition, the exact context of the scene that was witnessed by Watters is not known – and it is likely it was a means of controlling the individual it was taken from and as a threat to others amongst the Chinese Labour Corps. Peers describes hair as "an extension of the person" and its manipulation as "an intimate and powerful form of socialisation." When manipulated against a person’s will, hair becomes "an equally powerful symbol of external social control."\textsuperscript{47} In Ireland, for instance, testimonies from the unmarried pregnant women, who were brought into the Magdalene Laundries, include accounts of their hair being shaved as punishment.\textsuperscript{48} Bright, in her study of Chinese Labour in South Africa, writes that a braid was worn by peasant men in the Shantung region – one of the areas from which the Chinese Labour Corps were recruited.\textsuperscript{49} Her exploration of “trophy collecting” of Chinese scalps, complete with a braid, by Europeans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century places this practice in the context of the dominance of white colonials over the Chinese. Writing about the removal of braids in 1906 in South Africa, Bright suggests the violent removal of hair was “partly for trophy purposes, and partly because of the association with Chinese manhood” as a consequence the “cutting off a Chinese man’s hair could be a signifier of European dominance of China itself.”\textsuperscript{50} In \textit{Remembering 1916} the museum label read “Private Watters witnessed this queue being cut from a man servicing with the Chinese Labour Corps.” With this brief label as the only interpretation provided, little is told of this intimate and personal item most likely removed without consent. The brevity does little to encourage us to reflect on what it might have meant to have this removed, why it was kept and brought to Belfast and passed down through the generations, and what it then meant to have it displayed a century later in an exhibition.
In both Europe and China there have been silences in how the First World War is remembered. Paul Bailey describes the story of Chinese workers during the First World War as having “slipped into a historical black hole.” In post-war France Chinese workers faced considerable hostility from local communities, which he links to the racist fear of “the other.” Post-1949 Chinese Communist historiography perceived the allied recruitment of Chinese workers “as a minor and shameful episode of ‘passive and exploited’ Chinese victims in the longer history of imperialist exploitation of China” spanning from the mid-nineteenth century. With the rise of “contemporary memorialism,” this has begun to change with the period “increasingly utilised for political, commercial, and tourist purposes.” In Britain this memory work is being pursued by the “Ensuring we Remember” campaign coordinated by the Chinese in Britain Forum, which “works with and for the Chinese community to promote equality of opportunity, active citizenship and social cohesion.” Writing in 2014 Steve Lau, Chair of the Chinese in Britain Forum, expresses passionately why the Chinese Labour Corps should be remembered:

People say you can’t change history. I say they are wrong! A great injustice was done against the men of the Chinese Labour Corps. To all intents and purposes they were forgotten. No more so than herein the UK where not a single memorial exists to those men. With over 43000 memorials to the First World War in the UK it is hard to think why – even how – this is so. There is undoubtedly some uncomfortable history to face, but the campaign is not about finger pointing and blame, but about recognition and commemoration.

Lau’s declaration that we can change history, reminds us that what we know as “history” is a record that is generated subsequent to events. The creative process of the remembered past is not fixed, it is formed and reformed for social, cultural and political gain. As much as there can be moments of thoughtful commemoration, there are also occasions of manipulation, exploitation, and ill-informed celebration. Lau speaks of injustice to the men of the Chinese Labour Corps: the first are the injustices they experienced during the First World War and the second injustice is being forgotten in the period that followed.

In the case of the Chinese braid in the Belfast exhibition – it was not forgotten, it was displayed for a year in the glass case, amongst other items related to the First World War. It is impossible for a museum to do justice to every object on display, and decisions have to be made on where the focus should be placed in an exhibition, so to not overwhelm a visitor with content. Nevertheless, opportunities were missed to reduce the peripherally of histories during the First World War that can transform how we think about the period. We can engage with multicultural communities and their stories to provide new routes into remembering iconic moments in Northern Ireland history. Beginning with the braid we can consider conditions and treatment on the Front for the Chinese as well as other minority communities who contributed to the war effort. We can ask about the nature of commemoration in the century since, and the variations and omissions when we remember. We can also look more closely at the material culture in museums, asking questions about provenance, keeping, and the ethics of display.

Material culture and the construction of memory narratives

Laura Peers, writing about museum collections, describes them as having “oddly layered existences,” which she expresses as the tension between the physical and the social.
Objects she says are “obviously physical and in this layer of their existence are often seen as passive: being placed on shelves for display, being gazed at.” Peers’ attention, however, is drawn to their “active lives,” which she describes as “their ability to link makers and collectors, researchers, curators, visitors and the descendants of those who made the artefacts, and thus to function as bridges across time and across cultures.” The example of the Irish Citizen Army flag and the Chinese braid touches to the heart of material culture studies. By exploring the “active lives” of two very different objects, this paper provides insights into how objects are positioned as part of dominant or peripheral narratives.

The life story of these objects is all about memory – on the one hand both the flag and the braid were hidden to “seal off a traumatic past;” on the other hand, their value was recognised and they were kept safe, and this prevented forgetting. Since it fell into the hands of that 21-year-old Fusilier, standing in the ruins of Liberty Hall in Dublin, external matters shaped the significant moments in the history of the flag. Its survival post 1916 is an indication that its significance was not in doubt and its donation to the Museum in 1935 is further evidence of that. Its concealment during the violent twentieth century suggests the museum was aware of how difficult it would be to display the flag. Today the flag has entered Assman’s phase of dialogic remembering when people in Ireland, north and south, are exploring “their common knowledge of a shared legacy of a traumatic past.” In 2012, once found again, it was four years before the museum went public and only when the story that could be told was one that could resonate well. The Inniskillings Museum needed to cross the border from Northern Ireland into the Republic of Ireland, to find a setting in which they could confidently display the Irish Citizen Army flag. The journey south meant the museum did not need to engage with what the flag might mean in Northern Ireland and it minimised any potential backlash from Republican communities locally.

The braid is yet to enter a dialogic remembering. Its year-long display in the Ulster Museum is now at an end and it is back in the private space of Watters’ descendants. Even while displayed the braid did not become part of a process of dialogic remembering and exploration of its legacies for the Chinese communities in Ireland and Britain. In the museum case its traumatic past remained sealed, with any further opportunity for engagement largely lost now that it is back with its private owners. As the histories of commemoration show, remembering is a process that varies amongst communities and will still be contested. With regard the wider historical context of the braid, the continuing calls for recognition of the Chinese Labour Force suggests this dialogue has barely begun.

One might speculate about the purpose of the braid in the Belfast display – it seems the fascination with bodily remains in museum cases has not waned. In the first public display of the braid, taken a century ago from a member of the Chinese Labour Corps, little is told of the wider context of the Chinese story. Instead amongst the dominant two traditions narrative of the period, this alternative story is secondary. This is a consequence of the active role of commemoration. Commemoration is about telling the story we think is useful for what we want to achieve today. In Ireland, the newly inclusive two traditions approach to the First World War is intrinsic to the ongoing peace process. With that, we are telling the story of ordinary men joining the war for adventure, the uniform, and an opportunity to earn. During the centenary events, there is little motivation to pursue
a multicultural story of the war. Although the value of a multicultural story should go beyond the lens of the peace process, unless a link can be found to the dominant narrative there is little recognition of the potential of a multicultural story of the period.63

**Conclusion**

Simon Knell observed that we can construct many meanings from an object, but “the act of curating invariably directs the viewer to see only one.”64 There is an intentionality in this curatorial process in which objects are consciously used to weave the narrative we feel at ease with, and suits the context we operate within. Knell describes this as a process within which “the object and the idea become welded” forming an illusion that “the object is unmediated evidence.”65

In *Remembering 1916: Your Stories* the interpretation of the Chinese braid was concerned only with the person that returned the piece to Belfast. The viewer was directed to only see the object in the context of a local narrative. The visitor was not drawn into the wider narrative of remembering, that would have been relevant in the Northern Ireland context. This “displaced thing”66 separated during the First World War from the member of the Chinese Labour Corps who wore it. That person had migrated from China with intent and hope for a better future, and instead found the woeful working conditions and racism in war-torn France. In the time since *Remembering 1916* was opened in the Ulster Museum, public and museum awareness has amplified in relation to the narratives of colonialism embedded in collections and interpretation. Increasingly, in the move to decolonise, museums are addressing both the origins of their collections as well as who is leading the interpretation. National Museums NI have presented this as a pursuit to address “issues relating to culture, identity and the legacy of the past within our own communities and experiences” with the ultimate purpose to, “address racism and exclusionary practices.”67 The example of the braid, discussed in this paper, predates this statement and, in the years since its display, National Museum NI staff have worked with minority communities in curating a new exhibition *Inclusive Global Histories*, which opened April 2022. More inclusive practices bring opportunity for new engagement, that would perhaps enable a more fruitful interpretation of the braid, should it ever come back onto display.

The intentionality of the curatorial process is also exposed in relation to the Irish Citizen Army flag. How it would be received was carefully co-ordinated and choreographed by the Inniskillings Trustees and curator. This is evident in the four years of public silence between its finding in 2012 and display in 2016, which enabled discussions to take place that would alter the potential public impact of the flag. The change of setting was significant – bringing the flag from Northern Ireland to Dublin allowed for it to be read in the spirit of collegiality between north and south. Its continued display in the SIPTU buildings Dublin, enables this iconic item to become central to a narrative that shows the Inniskillings Museum in a progressive light. This Trustee response to the flag may bode well for how the museum will engage with the recent debates concerning decolonising the museum. Sector leadership is coming from the Museums Association UK, with its decolonising the museum campaign, launched in 2019.68 For now, however, there is little to suggest the Inniskillings Museum, and other museums in the regimental network, have begun
to face that challenge. Arguably, the question of decolonisation is one of the most significant crises currently facing the museum sector. However, with good practice and engagement, there is opportunity to use such challenges for improving relations between communities, thus demonstrating the creativity of the sector.

This paper demonstrates that the material culture connected to commemoration are mnemonic devices through which memories are exercised. Although very different objects, the biography of the flag and braid have commonalities. Both were taken at a time of violence and both could be thought of as a war trophy. Both remained concealed for generations, one in a museum cupboard and the other at a private home. The survival of both objects is remarkable – both were stowed in potentially hostile environments. An alternative way of looking at both might explain why they survived. The material remains of a clumsy suppression of a Republican rising is hardly a trophy object. Likewise, the grim remains of human hair a century old is something that would cause many to recoil. Despite this context, the museum and the family kept the objects safe. Crucially they both survived in excellent condition. Never displayed, the colours of the Army flag are bright and the braid is intact suggesting it was rarely disturbed in the past century. Although hidden, the care taken with respect to both suggests deliberate thinking and action in relation to the objects. The flag and braid were not forgotten, nor were they lost. Rather, they were carefully concealed and their remarkable survival adds to their agency.

Notes

1. Michael D. Higgins, cited by Creative Centenaries 2016.
2. “Personal Communication,” Curator History, National Museums Northern Ireland 2022.
3. Hicks, The Brutish Museums; Van Beurden, “Decolonisation and Colonial Collections”; and Wajid and Minott “Detoxing and Decolonising Museums.”
4. Assman, “From Collective Violence to a Common Feature,” 28.
5. Ibid., 43.
6. Levenson, “Re-Presenting Slavery.”
7. Cited by Wallace, “Collections Management and Inclusion,” 84.
8. Brück and Godson, Making 1916, 2.
9. Crooke, “A Story of Absence and Recovery.”
10. Crooke, “Artefacts as Agents for Change”; and Crooke, “Memory, Politics and material Culture.”
11. McDowell, “Heritage, Memory and Identity.”
12. Hirsch, The Generation of Postmemory.
13. Higgins, Transforming 1916.
14. Rigney, “Roundtable: Moving Memory,” 170.
15. Mullan, “Decade of Centenaries.”
16. Jones “Making Histories of Wars.”
17. Bartlett and Jeffery, A Military History of Ireland; Jeffery, Ireland and the Great War.
18. Phelan, “James Connolly’s ‘Green Flag of Ireland’.”
19. Halliday and Ferguson, “When Peace is not Enough.”
20. Mullan, “The Decade of Centenaries.”
21. See note 13 above.
22. Ibid.
23. Armstrong, “Personal Communication with the Author.”
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. See note 18 above.
27. SIPTU (2016).
28. Ibid.
29. Responses collected from https://en-gb.facebook.com/inniskillingsmuseum/.
30. Exhibition developed as a partnership between the AHRC-funded First World War Engagement Centre “Living Legacies 1914-18” and National Museums Northern Ireland. Find out more here http://www.livinglegacies1914–18.ac.uk/.
31. Blair, cited by Culture Northern Ireland.
32. Graham and Shirlow, “The Battle of the Somme in Ulster Memory and Identity”; and Rigney, “Divided Pasts.”
33. See note 20 above.
34. National Museums Northern Ireland, Exhibition.
35. National Museums Northern Ireland, Evaluation.
36. Fawcett, “The Chinese labour corps in France,” 34.
37. Wang, “Caring beyond National Borders.”
38. Ibid., 330.
39. Beckett, “Ayette Indian and Chinese Cemetery.”
40. Leonard, “Eastern Culture on the Western Front.”
41. Calvo and Qiaoni, “Forgotten Voices from the Great War.”
42. See note 40 above.
43. Ibid.
44. Wang, “Caring beyond National Borders,” 333.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Peers, “Strands which Refuse to be Braided,” 76.
48. McGettrick et.al, Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries.
49. Bright, “Migration, Masculinity, and Mastering the Queue.”
50. Ibid., Bailey, “From Shandong to the Somme,” 19.
51. Bailey, “Chinese Labour in World War I France,” 372; see also Hacker, “White Man’s War, Coloured Man’s Labour.”
52. Bailey, “Chinese Labour in World War I France,” 373.
53. Ibid., 364.
54. Lau, “Speech delivered at ‘Ensuring We Remember Strategic Partnership Board’.”
55. Ibid.
56. McDermott, “Migrants and the Heritage Sector.”
57. Peers, “Strands which Refuse to be Braided.”
58. Peers, “Strands which Refuse to be Braided,” 91.
59. Ibid.
60. Assman, “From Collective Violence to a Common Future,” 28.
61. Ibid., 43.
62. White and Marnane, “The Politics of Remembrance.”
63. See note 56 above
64. Knell, The Museum’s Borders, 130.
65. Ibid., 131.
66. Dudley, Displaced Things in Museums and Beyond.
67. National Museums Northern Ireland 2022, “Inclusive Global Histories at National Museums.”
68. Read more about the Museums Association “Decolonising Museums” campaign here https://www.museumassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/ [Last accessed 20 September 2022].
69. Other crises facing the museum sector are the cost of living crisis and the impacts of climate change, these are also addressed by the Museums Association, see https://www.museumassociation.org/campaigns/ [Last accessed 20 September 2022].
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