Introduction

Hélène Lecossois and Fabrice Mourlon
Introduction

This thematic issue of *Études irlandaises* is written as Ireland is embarking on the final phase of its centenary celebrations of the revolutionary decade. A plaque marking the hundredth anniversary of the transfer of Dublin Castle has just been unveiled as we are writing. Still to come are other, more complicated anniversaries: those of some of the most divisive moments in Irish history, prominent amongst which the outbreak of the Civil War. The Irish government’s Decade of Centenaries (2012-2022) has so far celebrated key historical events and actors, alongside everyday narratives of these events. According to the Irish government’s website, the aim of commemorating the events marked by the fight for independence, the creation of the Irish Free State and the partition is

[...] to ensure that this complex period in [Ireland’s] history [...] is remembered appropriately, proportionately, respectfully and with sensitivity. A specific key objective of the initiative is to promote a deeper understanding of the significant events that took place during this period and recognise that the shared historical experience of those years gave rise to very different narratives and memories.¹

President Michael D. Higgins has further developed the idea of an inclusive narrative through the concept of “ethical remembrance”, in other words a form of remembrance accommodating marginal or disenfranchised voices. President Higgins has also advocated for the adoption of “a disposition of ‘narrative hospitality’ – a willingness to be open to the perspectives, stories, memories and pains of the stranger”.² The aim of these initiatives is in effect to try and propose a varied, multiple-perspective, and, most importantly, pacified version of the nation’s conflictual past. However, one cannot help but wonder about the impartiality of the recommended criteria of “appropriateness”, “proportionality”, “respect” or “sensitivity” for assessing and remembering this most complex period in Irish history.

Even though the importance of oral traditions has been duly acknowledged in the government-led celebrations, the emphasis has overwhelmingly been laid on material cultural heritage. Much has been invested in the development of that heritage, through museums or the revamping of cultural sites, for example. This special issue of *Études irlandaises*, dedicated to Ireland’s intangible cultural heritage, seeks to complement and complicate this important work by turning its attention to less immediately visible or palpable processes linking the present to the past, and

---

1. https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/about
2. https://president.ie/en/news/article/ethical-remembrance
by investigating non-material social and cultural practices of the island of Ireland and of the Irish diaspora. The focus has deliberately not been put on any specific period of Irish history since immaterial cultural practices eschew any neat form of chronologising. Indeed, the origins of some practices are all but impossible to date precisely, but more importantly, most of these practices challenge any clear-cut division between the past and the present. The nature of intangible cultural heritage differs in that respect from that of calendar-based commemorations, which paradoxically can result in the sealing off of the past from the present. Not all commemorative art treats the past as a distant period or foreign country, but a lot does – especially that commissioned by the state. One can think of statuary or memorial plaques such as the one evoked at the beginning of this introduction, for example. Individual visual and performance artists interested in probing the complex relation of the present to the past, on the other hand, often choose to address the “presentness” of the past and to engage with its living legacies. The work of visual artist Alanna O’Kelly is interesting in that respect. Her trilogy, The Country Blooms, a Garden and a Grave (1992-1995), deliberately emphasised the on-going legacies of the Great Famine: loss, emigration, or contemporary famines in other parts of the world. As art historian Catherine Marshall points out, the work was considered radical in the 1990s because it was “neither synthetic nor object-based but inspired by nature and the human body”. The work partook of performance, installation and video art, and drew on the cultural practice of keening. Keening was not just a way to acknowledge loss, but also a way to propose a model for grieving and to open up possibilities for healing. Interestingly, The Country Blooms, a Garden and a Grave was partly prompted by O’Kelly’s dissatisfaction with the then pending government or tourism-led series of commemorations of the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Famine, which ironically took place “in the flush of Celtic Tiger prosperity” and were keen to put the Irish Famine at a distance. O’Kelly’s interest in the immaterial, in embodiment and in “the continuity of tradition” perfectly illustrates what intangible cultural heritage is all about.

The phrase “intangible cultural heritage” is considered to be an approximate English translation of the Japanese expression mukei bunkazai and broadly refers to “the underlying ‘spirit’ of a cultural group”. As cultural anthropologist Richard Kurin reminds us, it intersects with terms such as folklore, oral traditions, or community-based culture. UNESCO defined “intangible cultural heritage” in

3. Catherine Marshall, “The Country Blooms, a Garden and a Grave, by Alanna O’Kelly”, in Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks Irish, Fintan O’Toole, Catherine Marshall, Eibhear Walshe (eds.), Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 2016, p. 237.
4. Ibid., p. 235.
5. https://imma.ie/artists/alanna-okelly
6. Richard Kurin quoted in Federico Lenzerini, “Intangible Cultural Heritage: The Living Culture of Peoples”, European Journal of International Law, vol. 22, no. 1, 2011, p. 104.
7. Richard Kurin, “Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in the 2003 UNESCO Convention: A Critical Appraisal”, Museum International, vol. 56, no. 1-2, 2004, p. 67.
8. Ibid.
its Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention – ICHC) signed in 2003 and enforced in 2006. ICHC acknowledges and sets out to safeguard fluid objects such as “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills”. Differing from other forms of cultural heritage which focus on their materiality such as defined by the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention – WHC), intangible cultural heritage concentrates on processes, interactions and adaptations of traditions. It not only indicates practices that are inherited from the past and passed on from generation to generation, but also includes contemporary urban and rural cultural practices which play a vitally important role in forging varied cultural identities. This new definition of cultural heritage was originally pushed forward to complement and challenge the WHC which was perceived as legitimising a Western-oriented outlook. Indeed, although the WHC advocated a “shared heritage” of humanity based on supposedly universal values, it primarily focused on the preservation of monuments and sites with its World Heritage List. In the mid-1980s, French historian Pierre Nora developed this conception of heritage in his Lieux de mémoire (1984-1992). In the anglophone world, David Lowenthal took a similar stance in The Past Is a Foreign Country (1985) and initiated the interdisciplinary field of heritage studies. In the 1990s, the conception of heritage gradually evolved from being “fixed”, immutable and focused on “the past” underpinned by the dominant Western Authorised Heritage Discourse to “a mutable heritage centred very much on the present”. This evolution owes much to non-Western countries who advocated for their manifestations and practices of heritage to finally be taken into account. The ICHC then spurred future debates on the “nature and value of intangible heritage, but also the meaning and character of heritage more generally” by questioning the role of the state and of communities in sponsoring and developing immaterial practices.

The ICHC also set up two new lists to promote those immaterial practices: the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding and the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Since Ireland ratified the Convention in 2015, four Irish cultural practices have been included in the list: uilleann piping (2017), hurling (2018), Irish harping (2019), falconry, a living human heritage (2021). Most of these practices, celebrating Irish music and sports, have long been supported by Irish institutions such as the Arts Council or the Gaelic Athletic Association. Culture has played a central political and social role in the founding of the Irish nation since the Celtic Revival. Today, community
arts in Northern Ireland and the Arts and Communities initiative in the Republic of Ireland also promote the social implications of artistic practices known as participatory arts. In an age of globalisation, including the globalisation of culture, intangible cultural heritage helps shed light on the singularity of Irish culture.

Thinking of immaterial cultural practices also provides an opportunity to reflect on the relation of the “live” to the archive. The first three articles are all interested in problematising the issue of the archive. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Caitriona Nic Philibín look at the archive that was constituted thanks to the 1937-1938 Schools’ Collection Folklore Project under the aegis of the Irish Folklore Commission. While highlighting the crucial importance of food in Irish oral culture, Mac Con Iomaire and Nic Philibín offer a reflection on the necessity to make archives more widely accessible to researchers; digitalisation is seen here as a welcome possibility. Catherine Morris also engages in a reflection on archives (digital and other), focusing on their “rebelliousness”. As she investigates the complex relation of performance, memory and archive, she looks at the role archives can play in artistic creation, especially in the works of Louise Bourgeois and those of visual artist Jaki Irvine. The artworks of Burren-based visual artist Deirdre O’Mahony, which Valérie Morisson analyses, highlight the vernacular heritage and autochthonous technical knowledge of her region. They also invite thinking of the power-structures inherent in the constitution of archives and calls for alternative forms of archiving instead: ones that would be participative, collaborative, and plural.

In keeping with our theme of intangible cultural heritage, this issue of Études irlandaises features interviews of visual artist Alison Lowry, theatre and performance artist Olwen Fouéré, and with theatre director and performer Sara Jane Scaife.

Alison Lowry is a Belfast artist who is interested in passing on the Northern Irish textile tradition inherited from her family by transforming dresses and christening robes that bear the essence of the maker and the wearer through the strong yet fragile medium of glass. Textile and glass techniques are contextualised historically and aesthetically to explain her use of both media in exhibited works that excavate and expose such contemporary institutional abuses as the Magdalene Laundries or the Mother and Baby Homes.

Working in French and in English, Fouéré must rank as the most distinguished and thoughtful of Ireland’s contemporary actors and performance artists. Her career from the mid-1970s shows an abiding preoccupation with the possibilities of performance for experimenting with alternative conceptions of theatre and performance, as well as expanding the socio-political imaginary. In her interview with Lionel Pilkington, Fouéré here recounts her friendship with the moving statue street performer from the 1980s Thom McGinty (“The Diceman”), her work with the composer Roger Doyle in Operating Theatre (1980-2008), as well as Fouéré’s extensive collaborative work with artists such as Marina Carr, James Coleman, Laurent Gaudé, and Jesse Jones. The interview also includes extensive reflections by Fouéré on her ideas and experience of performance, as well as the experience of growing up in the West of Ireland as the daughter of Breton parents Yann Fouéré and Marie-Madeleine Mauger.
Sarah Jane Scaife, artistic director of Company SJ, discusses the beginnings of the *Beckett in the City* project, which aimed at reinserting Beckett’s writings into “the social and architectural spaces of the city of Dublin” and explains the ideas behind her latest piece: *Beckett Sa Creig: Laethanta Sona (Happy Days)*. Company SJ favours non-institutional places of performance, such as for example carparks or the derelict buildings of Ireland’s modernity and is interested in telling Ireland’s history from below. It seeks to fuse theatre with other art forms (dance, performance, installation) and collaborates closely with Ireland’s leading physical actors, in particular Raymond Keane (Barabas Theatre Company).

The last three articles consider the intangible aspects of another form of performative art: Irish traditional and popular music. Erick Falc’her-Poyroux underlines the lack of research on Irish traditional music within academia as if the subject could not or would not be “touched”, while according to him it is a “gateway to the understanding of Irish history”. Indeed, Irish traditional music should be analysed not only by musicologists but through a multidisciplinary approach as it is a “deeply rooted process that […] adapts to the context that generates it” and is significant not only in Ireland or within its diaspora. Irish traditional music is played and developed in various places in the world by mostly non-Irish citizens. Tensions exist between the deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of the music both in its cultural aspect and its practice. Marion Sarrouy also insists on the cultural and historical significance of traditional music in Ireland but concentrates on the specific nature and practice of pipe bands in Northern Ireland. Although rooted in a Protestant cultural heritage, pipe bands are connected to Scotland and the Republic of Ireland and involve members of the Catholic community. Beyond those territorial and community markers, pipe bands develop particular styles and codes, and their music insist on the property and quality of the sound itself, and on the uniqueness of the musical experience which also includes a social dimension. Marion Sarrouy’s ethnological study of pipe bands in Northern Ireland also considers the experience of the listener, insisting on the dialogic nature of music performances. Michael Lydon further develops the intangible aspect of traditional music by studying the use of acoustic noises during the performance of the musicians especially in digital and post-digital recordings. He demonstrates that parallel noises, such as the click of a glass during a live session, or hushes, for example, are distinctive features of the experience of Irish traditional music both for the musician and for the listener and should be considered as an “intangible signifier of Irish cultural heritage”.

Hélène Lecossois
*Université de Lille*

Fabrice Mourlon
*Université Sorbonne Nouvelle*

---

14. https://www.company-sj.com/about-us