

Meath Archaeological and Historical Society and the Meath Peace Group

Joint Seminar: “History in Modern Ireland/Northern Ireland”

September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014 at St Columban's College, Dalgan Park, Navan

**Interim report by Julitta Clancy**

Meath Archaeological and Historical Society and the Meath Peace Group joined together on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2014 to host a seminar in Dalgan Park on the theme “**History in Modern Ireland/Northern Ireland**”. The first session - “*The Socio-political importance of History in Modern Irish/NI Society particularly in this Decade of Centenaries*” - was addressed by Professor Mary Ann Lyons (Head of History, NUI Maynooth), Gordon Lucy (Belfast historian) and Senator Thomas Byrne (Fianna Fáil), and chaired by John Clancy (President of MAHS). Session II - “*The Place of History in Irish Education*” - was addressed by Damien English TD (Minister of State at the Dept of Education), Professor Fionnuala Waldron (Dean of Education, SPD/DCU) and Niamh Crowley (History Teachers Association), and chaired by Peter Connell (historian, and Editor of *Ríocht na Midhe*). Cllr. Jim Holloway (Cathaoirleach of Meath Co. Council) officially opened the seminar which was organised by Kevin Reilly and Julitta Clancy.

**Session I:** In a keynote presentation focusing on the “challenges and opportunities facing historians and commemorators alike”, Professor **Mary Ann Lyons** gave an overview of some of the major issues that leading historians working in the field have highlighted as worthy of reflection and debate. She reminded us that “we in Ireland are by no means alone in facing the challenge of interpreting the contentious events of 100 years ago” and outlined examples from other countries where historians are attempting to write ‘shared narratives’ of past events in an attempt to contribute to present-day conflict resolution. She listed some of the positive developments in recent decades in Ireland (as highlighted by historian Tom Dunne), and quoted from an *Irish Times* editorial of 2012 which urged that we all “go beyond grudging tolerant understanding of the other’s history” by developing a greater understanding of the “interconnectedness of our stories”, this being the best way of “celebrating our different narratives”, and from President Michael D. Higgins who has emphasized the need to commemorate “in a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect” making “historical accuracy a cornerstone of commemoration”.

Professor Lyons stressed the need to “broaden our horizon” and to dispense with “one of the most unhelpful divisions that has been set up in how we view the 1910s, namely the separation of the Irish experience in the 1910s from its European context”. She concluded that “there is consensus among most professional historians of the revolutionary period in Irish history today that in terms of the decade of commemoration, we should (in the words of historian David Fitzpatrick): ‘do our best to avoid the use of simplistic and exclusive dichotomies or facile attributions of motive; raise awkward issues, and above all, seek to broaden the terms of debate in this interminable round of national soul-searching that we now face’.

In relation to our Civil War, Professor Lyons left us with a quote from TCD historian Anne Dolan's 2003 publication *Commemorating the Irish Civil War*: 'After civil war can the winners honour their victory; can they commemorate it; can they raise their flags, cry from their well-guarded rooftops; can they hail their conquered heroes with the blood of their comrades still fresh on their boots? Or does civil war, by its very nature, demand silence? Should the winners cover themselves in shame, bow their heads and hope that the nation forgets 'our lamentable spasm of national madness'?

Belfast historian **Gordon Lucy** looked at experiences of commemoration and memory in France (Nazi occupation) and Spain (Civil War and 'the pact of forgetting'), quoting from a Spanish proverb - 'history is a common meadow in which everyone can make hay'. Stressing the importance of history, and giving an overview of history teaching in Northern Ireland, he went on to address the theme of commemoration on this island, concluding on a positive note: "we are in the midst of a decade of centenaries during which unionists and nationalists are celebrating, commemorating or marking centenaries of a wide variety of events. Some people have viewed these anniversaries with fear and trepidation, and they may still be proved right. However we could approach this decade of centenaries in a different spirit; we could embrace these anniversaries as opportunities to learn about the past, to reflect soberly on those events, and to evaluate their significance. Above all, these anniversaries afford us the opportunity to explore the complex relationship between the past and the present and to contemplate the challenging relationship between the past and the future." He commended the work of the Peace III Southern Partnership, based in Newry & Mourne, Craigavon, Banbridge and Armagh Council areas, which "has been conspicuously successful in enabling people on both sides of the border to move beyond 'the contemplation of ancient wrongs' and to consider the past more dispassionately and more objectively".

Senator **Thomas Byrne** (Fianna Fáil) said that "the commemorations are complicated, and we have to think carefully, we have to think of the sacrifices made by the people who died and the ideals and the visions and the values that they had, and the reality of what they did, and the good that they did, but also recognise that at the time there was another point of view which was oftentimes radically different.". It's important we commemorate "all the sacrifices, all of the events that went on including the terrible Civil War", but he argued that "we really should decide as an Irish nation what is the most important commemoration, and by that I mean what is the commemoration that celebrates the foundation of the State and the ideals of the State we are in, the ideals that we live for? In my view that must mean the **Easter 1916** commemoration, that must be the one thing that gives us common purpose." He welcomed the WWI commemorations in the county - "I was very pleased to see the Bellewstown Historical Society commemorating all the men who went to fight in the First World War, to see the names of the people commemorated there, they all have relations living around there, but that was hidden in this country for quite some time ... and if there is one thing that is hugely positive about the Decade of Commemorations it is that these things that were closed down in Irish society for a long time are now being remembered and commemorated."

Speaking in Session II – "the place of history in Irish education", Minister of State **Damien English TD** (Fine Gael) also addressed the theme of the Decade of Centenaries: "My Department is seeking to ensure that the education sector contributes to and benefits from the commemoration of these seminal events in Irish history." He outlined the success of the all-island schools' competition, a joint north-south venture which "stimulated a remarkable response from primary and post-primary schools across the island". The Department is also currently working with the RIA to develop history lesson plans for post-primary schools, and "hopes to be able to support a number of potential 'flagship' projects in the third level sector that are relevant to the period 1912-1922."

Professor **Fionnuala Waldron** (SPD/DCU) also referred to the Decade of Centenaries and the commemoration of 1916 in her detailed presentation, asking some key questions: "how do we manage the tensions between celebration and commemoration in the context of child education, between the expectation of many parents and some teachers that what children should experience is an uncomplicated, consensual national narrative and the recognition that 1916 cannot and should not be reduced to a single story? What kind of context does the Irish classroom provide for such engagement? How important is it for student teachers to interrogate their own assumptions and perceptions of past events? Is child education an appropriate space to engage with those tensions?"

The above attempts to give a flavour of the presentations. A full transcript of the proceedings – including Session II and the question and answer sessions – is in progress. Thanks are due from both the MAHS and the Meath Peace Group to all who took part, all who helped with the organisation of the seminar, to Dalgan Park for facilitating us on the day, and to the Dept of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund for financial assistance given through the Meath Peace Group.