Foreword
Gina O’Kelly

In Museums, Culture should be Ordinary
David Anderson

African at the National Museum of Ireland
Olusegun Morakinyo

‘Toraig on the Tobar’ (Travelling the Road):
A model of the decolonised exhibition at Cork Public Museum.
Ann Scroope

A Disquieting Presence or an entangled history? My Parents and the Museum
Madeline O’Neill

Exhibiting Pandemics During COVID-19:
The value of co-production and co-creation in community engagement
David Farrell-Banks & Lisa Rea Currie

Opening Up PRONI’s Archives Through Creative Engagement During the Covid-19 Pandemic
Lynsey Gillespie & Laura Aguiar

A COVID Dance of Hokey-Cokey:
keeping Lisburn Museum’s service relevant in a time of crisis
Paul Allison, Collette Brownlee & Ciaran Toal

Thinking differently and developing new working practices.
Niamh Baker

Uncomfortable Revelations: can citizen curation widen access to museums?
Adam Stoneman, Jason Carvallo, Enrico Daga, Mark Maguire & Paul Mulholland

Collecting Memory: 14 Henrietta Street and Oral History
Donal Fallon

Does Ireland need a women’s museum?
Polina Shikina

Reviews
86 Exhibitions
94 Books
Foreword from Gina O’Kelly, Irish Museums Association

The fallout and impact of the pandemic has undoubtedly brought losses to museums across Ireland: income generation, jobs, and the erosion of on-site audience and community engagement. Yet it has also proved a catalyst for change.

Our museums rose to the challenges once again presented, continuing to provide services and engage with audiences while needing to restrict physical access (2021 seeing the longest period of lockdowns to date; in the case of many site-specific museums, until September 2021). They took time to re-examine their practices and embed their research, exploring new approaches and collaborative practices.

Long-term investments in our sector continued to materialise in 2021, following on from Butler Gallery’s move to a new permanent home and the opening of Ballinglen Art Museum in 2020. Waterford Museum of Treasures saw the opening of the Irish Silver Museum and the Irish Museum of Time, Wexford saw the launch of Johnstown Castle and Irish Agricultural Museum, and a number of museums – such as Clare Museum and Cavan County Museum – reopened with revitalised and refurbished exhibitions and galleries.

This was reflected in government investment, which not only directly provided new and re-focused funding initiatives aimed at strengthening the sector, but also saw record funding being allocated to the Arts Council and Heritage Council of Ireland and the reopening of National Lottery Heritage Fund grants for 2021-22 after nearly a
year of focusing on emergency support in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Programming across our museums was recognised internationally when in November 2021 the European Museum Forum’s European Museum of the Year Awards announced the winner of the Council of Europe Museum Prize 2022 as Nano Nagle Place in Cork (14 Henrietta Street, Dublin won the Silletto Prize in 2021). EPIC – The Irish Emigration Museum and National Gallery of Ireland were shortlisted for the Hands On! Children in Museums Awards 2021, while the Nerve Centre, Northern Ireland Museums Council and National Museums NI received the UK Museums Association’s Best Museums Change Lives Project award for Reimagine Remake Replay.

The work of Irish museums was also recognised outside of the sector, exemplifying their cross-cutting value: The Glucksman won Best Arts and Cultural Centre at the Irish Enterprise Awards 2021 and the National Gallery of Ireland was a Digital Media Awards 2021 finalist in the Best in Government & Not for Profit and Best Podcast categories. Cork Public Museum, Crawford Art Gallery, and The Glucksman were recipients of inaugural Traveller Ally Awards, and Cavan County Museum was recognised under the best ‘Centenaries and Commemoration’ category by Chambers Ireland’s ‘Excellence in Local Government Awards’.

While our focus at the IMA is to continue to look towards the long-term development of our sector, we are absolutely committed to supporting our community as it continues to recover, ensuring connectivity, supporting leadership at all levels, and acting as a conduit between stakeholders. Our programming throughout 2021 tackled both global issues and those particular to our island, with renewed emphasis on professional and audience development and our advocacy activity: on raising awareness of the work of our museums to both government and public.

This strengthening of the IMA was enabled by an increase in our core funding of over 100% for 2021 that has been re-secured for 2022. This is a reflection both of our clarity of purpose and our place as the representative voice for the sector; of a strengthened membership that consistently informs us; and of democratic, open and transparent leadership within the Association.

As we now look towards the IMA’s new strategic plan, building on the success of that for 2018–2022, there is no doubt that our membership and their representatives on the IMA’s governance body will play a key role in shaping our vision over the coming years. However, it is vital that this also be informed by wider conversations and debates around the role of the association and the landscape in which we operate.

While this edition of Museum Ireland focuses on the experiences and developments of 2021, it is impossible to ignore current major political events, including, apprehension on our shores over the potential unravelling of the Northern Ireland protocol, along with the steep escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War. As an all-island organisation holding humanitarian values at its heart, we advocate the roles that all members of our sector play in supporting peace and reconciliation; the protection of humanity’s cultural heritage; and in upholding our membership of a supportive global community. We urge you to continue to extend assistance across borders where possible and ensure that the protection of people seeking refuge on our island is upheld across all areas of our museums.
Museums come from society and are in constant dialogue with that society. To know museums, one must reflect on what is happening in the society around them.

In his seminal 1958 article ‘Culture is Ordinary’, Raymond Williams wrote:

*All people have culture and culture is not elitist . . . Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact . . . We use the word culture in two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort . . . Culture is ordinary, in every society and every mind.*

This democratic definition of culture is at odds with that implied in the words and practices of many museums. I have compiled the following catechism from (admittedly particularly shocking, but real) conversations I have had with living, breathing senior professionals working in large museums over the last 15 years:

**Q. Who is our new gallery development for?**
A. [From curators of a Celtic national museum] It is for the curators of the British Museum.

**Q. Our public funding will be severely reduced next year. How should we make savings?**
A. We should close front of house [the galleries] so that we can continue to research the collections.

**Q. What do the public want?**
A. The public do not want to be educated.

**Q. What kind of museum are we?**
A. We are the last true museum in the United Kingdom.

**Q. Why did you decide to work in a museum?**
A. I did not work in museums to become a social worker.

Nearly six years after the Brexit Referendum in the United Kingdom, which marked a key stage in the UK’s death march towards total separation from the European Union, we can see that the negative impact of the Brexit campaign on the quality of political discourse across the four nations of the United Kingdom has been profound.

The Brexit bus that was driven from town to town carried the slogan ‘We send the EU £350 million a week. Let’s fund our NHS instead. Vote leave. Let’s take back control’. However, the bus failed to mention how much money was returned to the United Kingdom each week as well. International visitors arriving at Heathrow Airport at around this time were met by huge posters with the improbable image of a smiling police officer greeting people arriving in the United Kingdom with open arms and the word ‘Welcome’.

Far more representative of everyday reality in London in the second decade of the 21st Century was the message on the van that toured the streets of London at this time, with the slogan ‘In the UK
illegally? 106 ARRESTS LAST WEEK IN YOUR AREA
GO HOME OR FACE ARREST Text HOME to 78070
for free advice and help with travel documents.
020 7978 6399’ [their capitals]. This campaign
was part of the strategy of UK Home Secretary,
and later Prime Minister, Theresa May, to create a
‘hostile environment’ for those immigrants who
were perceived by the UK Government to have
arrived illegally.

In 2016, homelessness and addiction were an
everyday reality on the streets of many cities
across Europe. In Dublin, Kevin Barry wrote:

Not long ago, one of the young drug addicts who
hangs around on the (River) Liffey boardwalks near
O’Connell Bridge told me that he had seen an angel
above the river, and that she spoke to him, but he
could not make out any words . . . His eyes were very
far away and he had not many teeth and he was
chewing on pills he popped from a card . . .

Another likely shelter is beneath the portico of the
GPO, where the Proclamation of a Republic was
beautifully proclaimed, and some days it is nice to
dream that it is possible that we might get to live in
one yet, where in fact we are all cherished equally,
that we might be housed and treated, and not left
to the streets, where the only salvation for body and
soul lies in a deep narcotic psychosis, where the city
thrums its thousand colours, and there’s an angel in
the sky above the river.²

An irony of the last decade was that our liberation
might be offered to us not by governments but by
free-market capitalism. As Angela Nagle wrote in
the Irish Times in 2018, ‘Today the most rapacious
global corporate giants love nothing more than
to celebrate female empowerment, gay pride,
individual self–expression and freedom from the
past.’ And, as she observed, ‘A country [Ireland]
whose economy was entirely restructured to
facilitate the upward transition of vast public
wealth to bail out elite [banking] gambling debts
has seamlessly transitioned to a country in which
banks preach egalitarianism to the public.’³

Too often, capitalist celebrations of equality
are meaningless. When in 2018, for example,
McDonald’s flipped its Golden Arches to a ‘W’ in
purported celebration of International Women’s
Day, it was widely criticised by activist groups
including, in Britain, Momentum, which retorted,
“If they actually cared about women, they’d
pay their workers a living wage and stop forcing
them onto zero hours contracts. It’s completely
unacceptable that zero hours contracts at
McDonald’s have left women workers without
enough money to feed their children – and have
even made some of them homeless”.⁴

Neo–liberalism is not our protector. Neo–
liberalism is a dystopian ideology, masquerading
as liberation. It is everywhere, and nowhere.
It makes no commitment to person, place or
community. It cares not for the past, nor for
the future. It consumes, not creates, culture.
Like Saturn, it devours its children. As never
before, people, places and communities need
cultural agencies at their best – located in their
communities, committed to equalities and social
change – to counter the neo–liberal ideologies.

Nor is the United Kingdom state our protector.
Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland remain
in a complex shadow land of semi–colonialism

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Fig. 1. ‘Refugee House’
workshop in progress.
Credit: Amgueddfa Cymru –
National Museum Wales.
– both colonised as nations, and among the former colonisers in the broader historical sweep of British Imperial expansion. The Union Jack – called the ‘Butchers’ Apron’ by some people in Wales – unavoidably remains as a symbol of brutal suppression for many within and beyond the nations on these islands. Yet it is this flag that the British Council – funded and controlled by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office – uses to represent contemporary society in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, as well as internationally, for cultural programmes in the ‘Britain is Great’ campaign.

As President Michael D. Higgins said at a symposium entitled ‘Remembering 2016’ at the Mansion House in Dublin on 28 March 2016:

*There has been a great deal of critical assessment... of the myths of redemptive violence that were at the heart, not just of Irish nationalism, but also of Imperial nationalism.*

*My view is that the latter has not, perhaps, been revisited with the same fault-finding edge as the former. Indeed, while the long shadow of “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland has led to a scrutiny of the Irish Republican tradition of ‘physical violence’, a similar review of supremacist and military imperialism remains to be fully achieved.*

Several key projects led by curatorial and education staff at Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales have been developed with the conscious ambition to change how the public can become active agents in the interpretation of the past and the present. St Fagans National Museum of History, which is one of the seven museums that form Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, was founded in 1948 on two radical principles: that the life of every person matters; and that people, not institutions, are the carriers of culture from one generation to the next. These principles, reinterpreted by every generation in response to a changing society, have informed the work of St Fagans over the last seventy-four years.

One landmark project, in 2012, was Refugee House which developed out of long-standing partnerships between curatorial staff at St Fagans and the refugee and asylum seeker communities in South Wales. Wanting to show the realities of their lives, representatives of the communities decided to recreate a typical living room, kitchen and bedroom, loaning their own furniture and possessions to the Museum to ensure authenticity. They also took turns to be present in the galleries to answer the questions of visitors about why they had left their homeland to come to Wales.

Visitors were invited to complete the Home Office’s test for immigrants on life in Britain – copies of which were available in the exhibition. This was a test that most people who were visiting the exhibition, including those who had been born and brought up in Wales, did not pass. The aim of the refugees and asylum seekers involved was to dispel myths – for example, that they got a lot of money from the UK state and that they lived very well at the expense of current citizens. Their courage in exposing their lives to the wider public was remarkable and almost all visitors treated them with reciprocal respect. *Refugee House* was the last temporary exhibition at St Fagans before the Main Building (which welcomed visitors, before they went on to the open-air site, with galleries related to farm machinery, sport and

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*Fig. 2. The ‘Refugee House’ at St Fagans National Museum of History in 2012.*

other perspectives on the history of Wales) was closed. The Main Building was a key element of plans to create a very different and more radical interpretation of the past in Wales at St Fagans. At the heart of this change were the two hundred or so community organisations, located all over Wales, who regularly and actively collaborated with over seventy Museum staff in the decision-making process on which stories should be told and which collections should be used to support these interpretations. These community organisations were, and remain, at the heart of ongoing change at the Museum. They include street-level charities, such as the Wallich (which supports people who have experienced homelessness in Wales), Drugaid Wales (which supports people who have drug dependencies) and Save the Children. The profile of the many hundreds of volunteers at St Fagans has been transformed through the inclusion in their number of many clients of these organisations, working at the site with the support of these charities as well as of our staff.

Everywhere there is need. During one primary school visit, the headteacher told a member of the education team at St Fagans that a number of children in the school, aged around 10 years, were at risk of exclusion. From this, came a project in which these children came to St Fagans every Friday and worked alongside the Historic Buildings team, who relocate, reconstruct and maintain traditional buildings. The project was highly successful but had an unforeseen consequence: many more children at the school began to misbehave in the hope of getting this experience at St Fagans as well. This raises a significant question – why should every child not get learning opportunities like these? And what does this tell us about the way many children want – and need – to learn?
The most significant new building at St Fagans, created as part of the redevelopment, is ‘Gweithdy’ (‘Workshop’ in English). Here, the distinctions between spaces for making, and spaces for engagement with collections, are blurred, and these activities are often integrated. The purpose of Gweithdy is to assert that humans evolved as makers, and the hand is as integral to human intelligence in the 21st century, as is the head and the heart. Global economic systems have outsourced much mechanized production and craft making to poorer countries where wages are lower, but that is not a decision based on what makes us human; it has had the consequence of subsuming creative manual fulfilment to business interests.

A very wide range of traditional crafts are practiced in Gweithdy, either as casual drop-in gallery activities or through structured, organised programmes in a dedicated space. These include silversmithing and blacksmithing, ceramics and object conservation, basketwork and textile-making. In the galleries, the making activities are deliberately accessible to anyone. The main purpose of Gweithdy is to ignite the innate potential for creativity that is in every human being and to inspire an interest in developing further skills.

No complete buildings survive from the era of the Welsh princes (up to the 13th century), but their palaces live on in popular imagination, particularly in Welsh-speaking Wales. The development of traditional building skills, based so far as possible on evidence, was then a core purpose of the creation of Llys Llewelyn, a 13th
century great hall from a prince’s court, in Ynys Môn (Anglesey). The reconstruction of Llys Llewelyn has been based on the archaeological excavation of its foundations, as well as on the advice of a wide range of specialist medieval scholars on, for example, Welsh history, literature, architecture, interior design, and tapestry work. This gave the Museum an opportunity to create and fund apprenticeships in traditional building construction. At the same time, Llys Llewelyn (which has very un-medieval underfloor heating to enable school classes to have sleepovers there in winter) has been also used by the Museum to inspire children in North Wales to design tapestries which have then been made by skilled seamstresses from their region of Wales.

The much-admired Welsh rugby coach, Carwyn James, reputedly said, ‘Rugby is a thinking game’. Museums would do well to ensure that the engagement of visitors with the past in our galleries emulates Carwyn James’ demanding intellectual standards, and that making history in galleries is also a thinking game. Sadly (contrary to our public claims), we too often fail this complex intellectual test and many museum staff across the northern hemisphere continue to ensure that history in their galleries is merely an information game. In a post-trust world, we all, as citizens, need more than ever the historical skills of critical thinking and creativity.

For this reason, the Wales Is Gallery at St Fagans has many exhibits that are designed to encourage visitors to think and question for themselves. One exhibit, ‘Wales is…not always welcoming’, displays the skeletons of two adult males whose remains were found in the excavated ditch of a 10th century fortified village. The men seem to have had their hands tied behind their backs at death and then were thrown into the ditch, one on top of the other. Also buried there were an adult female and a girl and a boy.

The Museum’s archaeologists, who discovered the skeletons, at first speculated that the village was a Viking settlement and that the five people in the ditch were local to the area and had been murdered by these invaders. More recently, analysis of their teeth has indicated that the two men were originally from Scandinavia or the Scottish Islands and the adult woman from modern Lancashire. It seems, then, that – contrary to the initial assumptions of the archaeologists – it was the immigrants, not the local inhabitants, who were the victims of these killings. The exhibit encourages us to reflect on our own instinctive assumptions, and even prejudices.

The exhibition *Who Decides?*, which opened at National Museum Cardiff in 2017 and was displayed for a year, tested a different model for creating galleries. Twelve clients of The Wallich (a charity which supports people who have experienced homelessness) took the lead in developing this exhibition. They decided which works should be exhibited and how they should be interpreted. These curators from civic society were assisted by two members of staff (one an educator, the other a contemporary art curator). Some of the twelve citizen curators chose to explore personal experiences of homelessness through the works they selected, while others made no reference to this.

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Fig. 7. 'Who Decides' exhibition at National Museum Cardiff in 2017. This exhibition was curated by service users from The Wallich.
The process of creating the exhibition seems to have been very positive for the participants, and to have encouraged many visitors to the exhibition to reflect on their assumptions about people who experience homelessness. What the exhibition did not do, to any significant extent, was to reduce levels of homelessness in Cardiff. Every night, five years later, homeless people still shelter on the steps of National Museum Cardiff.

The exercise of cultural rights by individuals and communities depends to a significant degree on the quality of the public cultural environment – which the state and local authority creates and manages. The state, in turn, depends upon the actions and behaviours of cultural intermediaries – including the staff of museums, arts venues, parks, and libraries – to create such an environment. Some twenty years ago, a European Union funded project, Museums, Keyworkers and Lifelong Learning explored the role of the wider society in this process. It concluded:

A museum is not only a building with collections, exhibitions, archives and staff... This is just the shell. A museum is something else, something much more important. A museum has been described as a way of looking and a way of thinking, a place of stories and ideas. It is a natural and cultural history; a world of objects, memories and the art of living; and a place for debate of all the issues connected with the society we actually live in.

The museum in this sense may exist to some small extent in the building we call a museum, but most of its resources, its nourishment, is to be found outside its walls, mostly in the people in the communities of which it is part.  

This defines the need for cultural democracy in museums, as well as its deep and abiding value.

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David Anderson was born in Belfast, emigrated with his family to England, and then studied Irish History at Edinburgh University. After teaching history in a state school, he worked as a museum educator in museums in England, and wrote a report, A Common Wealth: Museums in the Learning Age in 1999. He has been Director General at Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales since 2010.

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Notes


What do the African collections at the National Museum of Ireland reveal about African heritage in Ireland and Irish heritage in Africa and what is their contemporary socio-cultural and political significance? Through an exploration of the provenance and curatorial history of the African collections at the National Museum of Ireland and a review of debates on the decolonisation of museums and the restitution of artefacts of African cultural heritage, this article attempts to answer these questions. It calls for improved access and collaborative curatorial engagement with Africans on collections at the National Museum of Ireland and is framed by the need for museums to not only develop a proactive policy of restitution but also, because of the benefits of the museum as a site for renewal, healing, and historical justice, to engage more with affected communities.

Introduction
With the exception of the ‘Roger Casement Voice of the Voiceless’ exhibition and the word ‘Africa’ shown in mosaic on the floor of what was once the ethnographic section at Kildare Street, little can currently be seen of Africa at National Museum of Ireland (NMI) sites. To conclude that there is no African representation at the NMI would however be a mistake. In the Proclaiming a Republic: The 1916 Rising exhibition (2016–2020) at the NMI, Collins Barracks, a display dedicated to Roger Casement consisted of five artefacts: his jacket, hat, gun, a hollowed book, and a ‘battle axe’ from Congo pinned to the wall and imposed on a background map of Africa with the Democratic Republic of Congo map highlighted. This inclusion raises questions, which bring to the fore concern with the study of African presence in Ireland through the museum’s African collection.

How does an axe from Congo find its way into an exhibition on the foundational history of the Irish republic; what is its heritage significance for African Irish history and what message does it aim to convey to exhibition visitors? Apart from perhaps confirming that the NMI does indeed have artefacts of African heritage in its collections, what does this inclusion of the axe, outwardly unconnected to Ireland, reveal about how the NMI African collections are connected with the intersecting and ambiguous colonial histories of Ireland and of Africa? What is the historical, geopolitical and heritage significance, to Africa and to Ireland, of this inclusion of a Congo axe in such a monument to Irish national history?

As I will now argue, the inclusion of the ‘battle axe’ in the exhibition offers an example of the opportunity the NMI’s African collections provide for appreciation and interrogation of these intersecting histories within the context of current calls for the restitution of African artefacts from European museums.

Africa in the National Museum of Ireland
I feel it is fully useless to think of their [the collections] staying in this unhappy country where nothing but politics seem to count in public affairs.
Alluding to this statement – made in a 1922 letter to the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology from Rachel Mahaffy, sister of the Pacific collector Arthur Mahaffy – Rachel Hand suggests that political turmoil in Ireland in the early twentieth century impacted on the recognition of the ethnographic collection in the National Museum of Ireland. 3

Incarceration is the concept invoked by the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, when he declared that ‘African cultural heritage can no longer remain a prisoner of European Museums,’ 4 and the idea of imprisonment calls attention to the epistemic injustice of keeping from sight and locking away artefacts of African heritage in inaccessible storage in European museums. African heritage remains ‘imprisoned’ at the National Museum of Ireland. The collections were one of the Museum’s best kept secrets, 5 even before the little that was on display in Kildare Street was taken down in 1979, and as they still do not feature in any museum publication or open database, are difficult to access. Therefore, while the inclusion of the axe from Congo in the Proclaiming a Republic: The 1916 Rising exhibition might be applauded as a recognition of the contributions of Africans to that uprising, 6 and while it might also be a curatorial acknowledgement of the current multicultural configuration of Irish society, it is also possible that the presence of this axe, alone, indicates a general attitude by the National Museum of Ireland towards its African collections.

Like the collections reviewed in France by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, 7 these were mostly war trophies and booty, ‘collected’ in the battlefield during the war of pacification and colonisation of Africa and gained through theft, plunder, pillage, despoiling or other forms of unequal exchange. This observation is readily confirmed by the work of William Hart, who gives insights into the provenance of the material contained in the collections. For instance, he mentions, and NMI records confirm, 8 that they include material from British wars of conquest. Prominent among them are a ‘decorated staff of the Xhosa Chief Maqoma’ and ‘kilt dresses’ of the Zulu King, Cetshwayo, and Pedi King, Sekhukhune. In addition, there are objects from wars in Sudan, and numerous pieces of Benin material from looting by British troops. The collection also includes material from the sacking of Asantehene Prempeh’s palace in Kumasi. 9  The NMI therefore contains significant numbers of artefacts from regions that experienced the atrocities of the British colonial conquest involving Irish participants and the crimes of colonial methods of ‘collecting’ stain the provenance of the African collections.

As Rachel Hand evidences, nationalist agitation against the British empire in Ireland affected the museum’s curatorial orientation to its African collections. She identifies four stages of the curatorial history of the ethnographic – including African – collection. Of these, the first and second were at the height of the British colonisation of Ireland in the late 18th and early 19th centuries; while the third stage began with the Irish Free State in 1922 and ended in 1979 when the collection was moved to its current storage, marking the start of its current, fourth, phase. During the first stage, when the Irish were tied to the British empire as a colonised people and also as active colonial operatives, the African collections were regarded both as curiosities and as a testament of the heroism of exploration and conquest of the British Empire. 10 But even in that early period, there was growing Irish nationalist clamour for the museum to be more reflective of Irish nationalist sentiments. 11

In 1927 the Irish Free State commissioned the ‘Lithberg report’ to review the NMI and align it to Irish nationalist politics. In so doing, it radically transformed the ideological importance of African collections in Ireland, from regarding them as a testament to the triumph of British imperialism to considering them instead as embarrassing, unwanted relics and a reminder of Ireland’s attachment to the British empire. 12 This, however, was only a change in curatorial attention and not in curatorial attitudes, because, despite the anti-imperialist nationalist sentiments prevailing at the NMI during this period, the Museum’s approach to the African collections post-1927 continued to betray an attachment to – and alignment to – a dominant European museum ethnographic ethos. As revealed by Pat Cooke, a ‘Eurocentric perspective’ in the Lithberg report relegated the collections, along with others from outside Europe, to ‘the exotic subaltern role’ they had served before the Lithberg report. This ensured that a ‘putatively post-colonial nation found itself reaffirming an essentially colonial perspective on the material culture of ‘primitive’
people with whom it had in some respect shared the experience of being the colonial subject.' As he concludes, ‘central to the 1927 report reformulated mission for the NMI is the assertion of an outward-looking Irish identity, reaching for comparative (or cognate) ethnological purposes, to the edge of Europe’.13

Given the nationalistic mandate that prioritised Irish material, and the fact that they provided uncomfortable evidence of Irish participation in British colonial wars in Africa, they were gradually subjected to what Cooke describes, in relation to NMI’s colonial holdings in general, as ‘wilful forgetfulness … immovable presences around which the national history is made to flow in the corner like the mute relation to whom guests of the imagined community are never formally introduced’.14 The collection was therefore eventually parked in storage along with the whole ethnographic collection in 1979, and is now entombed in a renovated storage facility at Collins Barracks, closed to the public. The reasons given are those pertaining to the limitations of every museum, including lack of exhibition spaces, inadequate staff, and issues of funding. But other reasons might be the rejection of Irish history within the Empire, and embarrassment surrounding participation in its atrocities, which have manifested in curatorial disassociation from and disinterest in them. As Rachel Hand notes, a 1972 internal report acknowledged that the collection’s public effect was ‘largely negative’:

There [is] also more than a touch of Imperialism … A century ago, the message of this collection was progress – with technological achievements, we are told, reason and decency would prevail, especially under British Guidance. The message today of these identical displays is of the destruction of lifestyles.15

Two faces of National Museum of Ireland African Collections
Patterns of post–independence acquisition and management of ethnographic materials within the NMI reveal the paradox of African collections in Ireland. As argued by both Pat Cooke and Rachel Hand, the tension between the desire to assert a coherent and homogenous nationhood, and a recent history that saw many Irishmen and women willingly involved in building and sustaining an empire, were crystallised in the curatorial history of the institution. This is because while the ‘collections reflected the involvement of Irishmen and women as settlers and travellers abroad, they also, less admirably, appeared to celebrate their involvement in the British Empire.’16 The negotiation of the tension between the ambiguous roles of the Irish, as both accomplices to and subversive agents of colonialism in Africa, is best reflected in the different curatorial treatment of the collections of two Irish men: Major General Hugh McCallmont, and Roger Casement. In what follows, I discuss how the politics of representation are revealed through these two collections.

**Major-General Hugh McCallmont (1845 – 1924)**
Dublin–born Major Hugh McCallmont was a veteran of both British wars of pacification in, and Irish participation in the colonial conquest of, Africa. He took part in the Third Anglo–Ashanti War in 1873, was aide–de–camp to the Anglo–Irish commander, Sir Garnet Wolseley, during the Anglo–Zulu war of 1879, and fought in the Anglo–Egyptian War in 1882 and Nile Expedition in 1884. As noted by Hart,17 and as NMI records show, McCallmont donated a sizable number of looted spoils to the NMI’s African collection: for example, he attested that he had ‘collected’ King Cetshwayo and King Sekhukhune’s apparel as booty of war.18 Under the Sarr and Savoy criteria,19 this would make them eligible for restitution.

At the height of British colonisation of Ireland, the McCalmont collection was prominent as part of the imperial display of power and triumph; but there is little trace of it in any current display or exhibition at the NMI.20 McCalmont’s collection can therefore be argued to represent a wish to forget an important part of Ireland’s intersecting history with Africa, and Irish participation in the imperial and colonial conquest of the continent. But is this selective representation, which conceals the uncomfortable and embarrassing aspects of Irish colonisation of Africa, the best curatorial approach to these collections? A review of how NMI treats Roger Casement’s collection betrays curatorial ambiguity toward this history.

**Roger Casement (1864 – 1916)**
Like Hugh McCallmont, Roger Casement was an active participant in the British empire. A career British colonial administrator in Africa before becoming a diplomat at the British foreign office, he was knighted for his investigation of the
atrocities of King Leopold’s exploitation of the Congo Free State. Casement is also celebrated as a patriot who in 1916 paid the ultimate price for his participation in the struggle for Irish independence. As noted by Hand, Casement represented the paradox of the ‘stark duality of the Irish participation in the British Empire and Ireland’s own colonial experience.’

Hart describes him as the most famous donor to the NMI’s African collections, and the exhibition (2016–2020) dedicated to him at the Museum confirms it. Casement’s donations were not direct spoils of war but, given the power dynamics operative in his relationship with Africans in King Leopold’s Congo, they cannot have been free, voluntary, equal exchanges either. Proud displays of his collections at the Kildare Street site, where he is noted as a champion of human rights, included an ‘iron knife and wooden sheath’ from the Mongo people and a ‘Nkisi’ statue from the Massabe people of Cassinga in Angola. As mentioned earlier, he also featured prominently in the Proclaiming a Republic: The 1916 Rising exhibition at Collins Barracks, where his Congo axe was displayed.

The museum’s celebration of the collections of Casement, compared to its indifference toward those of McCalmont, exposes the ambiguous and double-sided role of Ireland in the colonial conquest and colonisation of Africa. While the Roger Casement collection is used in testament to Ireland’s historical role as a champion of human rights and anti-colonial struggle in Africa, the entombment of the McCalmont collection reveals Ireland as an historical participant and beneficiary of the continent’s colonial conquest. In addition, the inaccessible storage of the African collections in general might be read as curatorial concealment to satisfy Ireland’s current geo-political expediencies. As referenced by Hand, the reason for the display of Roger Casement’s collections as epitomic of its ethnographic holdings was because their provenance ‘was seen as ‘ideologically acceptable’ with a ‘clean record in the treatment of the locals and the way in which they were collected.’ The curatorial neglect of McCalmont compared to Casement demonstrated opposition to their provenance of ‘British colonialism in favour of Irish Nationalism.’

Given the ambivalence that the comparative treatment of McCalmont and Casement shows, what are the emancipatory futures for these collections within the current context of the call for restitution of African artefacts in European museums and the decolonisation of museums and what are their implications for African Heritage Studies?

Case for restitution

In response to the realisation of the imperial burden this collection placed on the NMI, a 1972 internal report stated that the ‘collections were not being put to maximum use’ and that ‘these objects deserve the sort of attention they can receive only in museums where such material is of primary interest’. In order to rectify this anomaly, the Museum has been willing and proactive in returning material to its rightful owners. For instance, as early as the 1970s, several pieces of the Polynesian collection were repatriated with the hope of a reciprocal gesture of return of Irish objects from other countries. Although the initial effort at reparation was unsuccessful, it has nonetheless signalled the intention of NMI to return collections. Although NMI has no published policy specifically relating to restitution of its African collections, it does make room for restitution through its policy of disposal, which states ‘Repatriation: Response to a request to repatriate an object’ as one of the possible reasons for de-accessioning or disposal of artefacts from its collections. To its credit, NMI has been championing and has begun restitution of its ethnographic material, including to Benin. The proven provenance of African artefacts as spoils of war, of which the McCalmont collection is a classic example, makes the collection a sure candidate for restitution based on the recommendation of the Sarr–Savoy Report; and the ethical thing for the NMI to do is to initiate a process of ‘immediately and unconditionally’ returning all the objects to their rightful owners.

African heritage of Ireland

Restitution of the NMI’s African collections is not though their only possible future, especially if we consider their importance to African communities in Ireland. In this article, I have aimed to raise interest in the collections and awareness that they present, in the words of Pat Cooke, a ‘post-colonialist opportunity’ with ‘capacity to speak to the sociological and cultural development in contemporary Ireland’ marked by increasingly visible African populations. Their quest for
recognition of African heritage is at the forefront of effort by Africans in Ireland for engagement with the collection; and for opportunities for their research and exposition for the purposes of education and socio-cultural political advocacy, and the humanistic benefits they promise. The involvement of Africans of Ireland in curating the collections can engender the cultivation of the Africanness of Irish identity. The significance of the African collections for recognition of African heritage of Ireland is perfectly captured by Cooke’s observations that

"Collections once constituted under imperial conditions, and that, for all of Ireland’s twentieth-century post-colonial good intentions, retained the status of subaltern, neo-imperialist marginalia, can now be represented for an audience of ‘new Irish’ containing living representatives of the very cultures for whom these objects connote their actual history."

The term ‘new Irish’ is often used in recognition of contemporary multi-cultural visibility, but it also indicates racist discourse in Irish society: research is increasingly showing there has always been an African presence, and people of colour, in Ireland. If, as Pat Cooke argues (see above), colonial collections in Ireland have been condemned to a ‘wilful forgetting’, this discussion of a history of curatorial orientation in NMI toward its African collections has also captured the current state of African heritage consciousness in Ireland and in Irish scholarship overall. Exploring the traces of African presence in Ireland, and how Irish history is revealed by its NMI African collections, would be a useful place to begin.

**Conclusion**

Ireland’s evolving political climate has resulted in a lack of dedication to investigating or even acknowledging the imperialist origins of the collections which has been exacerbated by chronic, long-term underfunding of the Museum. A specific problem has been the absence of specialist staff to maintain these collections, although this is now being addressed through the recent advertisement and forthcoming appointment of an ethnographer for the NMI ethnographic collection. I would argue though that restitution is not the only possible future for the collection, at least in the immediate future. An aim of this article has been to indicate interest in curating this collection as an intellectual platform for the study of African-Irish historical connections, and their contemporary, socio-cultural, trans-generational significance from an African Heritage Studies perspective. This perspective believes that while, given the cultural political sensitivities it arouses, the issue of restitution has often been contentious and acrimonious, it need not always be so, especially in cases where museums adopt pro-active policies of consultation and engagement with affected communities in the source countries.

It is therefore the contention of this paper that discussion of NMI’s possible responses to requests for restitution and for collaboration with Africans (both in Ireland and in Africa) who are interested in the collections, will not only help the museum to position itself as having shaken off its colonial baggage, but will also raise awareness and interest in the collection.

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Notes


8. The National Museum of Ireland has kindly provided information on its African collections to the author.


20. Given its dating and reference to the Zulu war, this author believes that some of McCalmont’s collections might be part of the display in the ‘Soldier and Chiefs’ exhibition at Collins Barracks. (This is based on my observation of the current NMI permanent exhibitions at the NMI, Collins Barracks).


What does a ‘decolonised’ exhibition look like? How do policies of social inclusion and shared cultural authority shape an exhibition? When interpretation is determined by the community it represents, what happens to the visitor encounter and the process of cultural understanding?

This article explores the background, creation and meaning of Toraig on the Tobar, an exhibition founded on the principles of decolonisation. A collaboration between Cork Public Museum and Cork Traveller Women’s Network, this is the only permanent museum exhibition in Ireland about Traveller Culture that is curated by Travellers.

Based on conversations with Dan Breen, curator, and representatives from the Network, this paper analyses the exhibition’s presentation, and looks at the process, aspirations and challenges that shaped it. The paper is in itself an interpretation. It is influenced by my interests and expectations: as a member of multiple and changing interpretative communities, as a member of the settled community, and as an interpretative designer with an in-depth awareness of how heritage meanings and values are constructed and implied through design.

Introduction
Decolonisation argues for inclusion, collaboration and shared cultural authority. It can be read as an active dismantling of systems that deliberately construct particular narratives so as to privilege certain ideologies at the expense of marginalised communities. The word also evokes to some, aggressive images of rooting out, stripping away, of protest against authority and of a vigorous demand for equality.

In 2005, before the topic of museum decolonisation was mainstream, Stella Cherry, then curator of Cork Public Museum, along with Cork Traveller Women’s Network embarked on what has become an enduring relationship of quiet collaboration, inclusion and shared cultural authority. It was then, and is today, a process of decolonisation that is less about ‘dismantling’ and more about active meaning-making made visible through Toraig on the Tobar. Translated from Cant (a Traveller language) as ‘travelling the road’, this is the only permanent museum exhibition in Ireland that is curated by Travellers. The original exhibition opened in 2007 and to date has gone through three display variations.

In 2019, I met with present curator Dan Breen, and, separately with two representatives from Cork Traveller Women’s Network, Brigid Carmody and Louise Harrington. We discussed the process, aspirations and challenges that shaped the exhibition; how policies of collaboration and social inclusion work for a small local authority museum engaging with people from an ethnic minority; the views of the community concerned; and the perspectives of visitors who encounter the exhibition. I was also concerned with how these insights on the process might shape my personal appreciation of the interpretative presentation.

In this article, I first offer an analysis of...
the exhibition from my own perspective as an interpretative designer. I look at the editorial and spatial narrative, the objects and their juxtaposition, the media and language used, and consider the discourse and realisation. I then apply the insights gained from my conversations and explore the influence these have on my original understanding. My conclusions may only be considered temporary, as we must recognise that influences are dynamic, constantly being altered by knowledge and deeper understandings of what constitutes and shapes ‘our’ heritage.

**Being There**

*Toraig on the Tobar* is located on the second level of the museum. A handcrafted sign at the ground floor stairwell signals the route up to the exhibition. At the top of the stairs there is a full-sized papier-mâché mare. The body of the horse is a collage of photographic images depicting a diversity of Traveller life, past and present. I read this as being symbolic of the interconnectedness between animal and people as part of Traveller identity. The combination of photograph and horse is a symbolic monument to memory, reality and identity.

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*Fig. 1.* Handcrafted directional sign to gallery, depicting the traditional wagon in ceramic tiles. Credit: Ann Scroope.

*Fig. 2 & 3.* ‘Family Tree’, a papier-mâché horse made by young Traveller girls, is an explicit expression of the human connectedness of objects. Credit: Ann Scroope.

On entering the gallery, a full-size, barrel-top Traveller wagon looms over a small-scale replica of a Buccaneer wagon. This juxtaposition seems to suggest that the past dominates and modernity is in a lesser place. Photographs, artworks and a film playing on a loop are arranged around the perimeter walls. There are a series of leaflets available, each addressing an aspect of the Traveller Culture story and the role of Cork Traveller Women’s Network. However, the monumentality of the period wagon has authority and demands attention. It is perfect, untouched,
showing no sign of wear or of aging. The painted decorative motifs are pristine, suggestive of a happy, cheerful life on the road. But the interior is empty, making it difficult to visualise how people lived in the wagon. The wagon raises questions: why was it made, who made it and how did it arrive here? It appears so isolated and frozen from context that I assume it is a replica made specifically to carry a nostalgic view of the past for this exhibition. I am wrong. The film and the leaflets explain that it was made in 2005 by Travellers as part of Cork’s tenure as European City of Culture. This fact reveals further multiple meanings for the wagon. It is at once a work of art, an expression of traditional skills, and an expression of cultural pride. It represents the changing relationship between settled and travelling communities. In contrast to Buciek’s observation on the lack of information available on how and why marginal groups value objects, here value is evident and celebrated.

The leaflets, small labels accompanying the photographs, and a short three-minute film comprise the narrative text. The tone of voice and language used, while authoritative and firm, is not separatist. The confidence expressed challenges some media portrayals of Travellers as widely illiterate. Photographs taken between 1972 and 2005 speak of daily life on the road in all its diversity. Past and present sit together rather than in sequence. The editorial is free flow, without a fixed beginning, middle or end. The images communicate community coherence and integrity.

The interpretative ideology is neither dispassionate nor didactic. It does not take an activist position, attempt to moralise or elicit support for any particular standpoint. It does not call for empathy or sympathy from a settled person. The interpretation does not invite a settled person to experience what life is like on the road. It does not portray a community oppressed, excluded or marginalised. It is not a memorial to a nostalgic past. Though selective, it is not sanitised. I read the exhibition as being bounded by and bound to Traveller Culture only. It is a presentation of an aspect of Traveller Culture that defines and differentiates that culture. The surprising display of the wagons, the horse, the artworks and imagery, elicit feelings of curiosity and admiration which through my own reasoning evolve into insight. The exhibition validates the distinct ethnicity and presents it as a living society. This is not a monument to a fragile culture but a celebration of a robust dynamic culture. I feel the presentation has greater resonance and meaning for the Traveller than for a settled person. However, I, as the settled visitor, can sense the pride with which the Traveller sees his/her own culture. The dominant voice is that of a proud Traveller. This authenticity and confidence do not
rely on voices of other communities, academics, or visitors: to paraphrase Lavine, it is simply stating ‘we are here, and our story is ours’. While more voices may lead to greater resonance, here the ‘respect engendered is worth cherishing’. 

Discovery

At the end of Cork’s tenure as 2005 European City of Culture, Cork Traveller Women’s Network contacted Stella Cherry at Cork Public Museum asking if the Museum would be interested in taking the barrel-top wagon for display. Stella invited the women in to discuss what they would like to do and subsequently offered the Network a space in the museum. Along with the perceived prestige of the Museum as an objective authority of cultural authenticity, this decision opened many opportunities for both the Network and wider Traveller community. The Museum hosted activities showcasing Traveller women making Traveller crafts. The crafted sign, made with participation from other museum visitors, was the result of one of these demonstrations. The number of Travellers visiting the museum increased, as did donations of money and objects. The scaled Buccaneer trailer / caravan was made by the Traveller Visibility Group men’s project for Cork Traveller Pride week in 2015. Afterwards, this was brought into the Museum to be displayed alongside the barrel-top wagon.

In 2016 as the collection continued to grow, the Museum offered the Network a dedicated gallery with full curatorial control. This was a significant step that consolidated their relationship. This transfer of curatorial authority acknowledged the Indigenous Curator and their right to interpret and present themselves. It was a declaration by the Museum of the importance and value of the Network’s role and contribution to the Museum as a keeper of the cultural identity of the city. It was also an acknowledgement of mutual trust and respect that served to engender both pride and confidence for Travellers. The Network formed a cultural committee organising art projects with different Traveller groups. In 2018, Traveller artist Leanne MacDonagh, created the current exhibition layout in consultation with the Network, whilst the Museum facilitated and advised on exhibit management. During this process, the committee visited many other museums and galleries and consulted with other institutions. Leanne contributed her own artworks to the exhibition, and she wrote the poem, Travellers (fig. 8). The leaflets were written by the Network ladies, with assistance from the museum curator. A group of young Traveller girls made the horse model, calling it Family Tree. The colour photographs, taken by a Traveller, were selected to illustrate different communities and also how these communities are changing. These objects not only create meaning they are an expression of the cultural contexts which they produced them. They are a reflection of what it means to be Traveller. The exhibition is evidence that ‘transformations of people and objects are tied together’.

Gregory Ashworth asserts that heritage is concerned with meaning rather than with material. In this gallery, Traveller heritage is concerned with both meaning and material, with action and participation. From my discussions with both the Museum and Cork Traveller Women’s Network, I realised how much my position as a settled person and as an interpretative designer

![Fig. 6 & 7. Photographs in the exhibition both document and interpret Traveller life on the road. Credit: Ann Scroope](image-url)
had influenced my first appraisal of the exhibition experience. First, I had assumed that the museum had constructed the interpretation. Secondly, I judged this to be a deliberate, romanticised view. I was wrong on both counts. As I was told, for the Traveller, nomadic life is not only a better, happier life, it is their life and this is how they wish to tell their story. This was my moment of realisation, of seeing the real authenticity and value of this exhibition as a vehicle for consolidating the individuality of Traveller character and identity. This exhibition is not a fixed construction of one aspect of a heritage. It is an ongoing journey of an evolving cultural expression founded on a genuine wish to inspire, encourage and transform.

I want my children to be able go to school and be proud to say I am a Traveller.

As Brigid Carmody’s quote suggests, the gallery is a positive living space, for conversation and connection. It enables members of the community to share and record personal memories within a formal museum structure that recognises this heritage as integral to and embedded within the national heritage. It is a ‘contact zone’, enabling Traveller people to consider the interconnections and ambiguities that straddle past and present. It is an expression of inclusion that engenders pride. It creates awareness, encourages conversation on Traveller heritage and ethnicity, its value, meaning and position within Irish society. The effect and emotion engendered by the museum environment serves these aspirations.

We need ‘Toraig on the Tobar’. This collaboration makes us a better place, a better museum.
Dan Breen, Curator of Cork Public Museum in conversation with the author. 13 May 2019

It is clear from Dan’s statement that Cork Public Museum does not dominate, control, determine or shape Traveller identity. The museum facilitates, empowers and supports. The collaboration is sincere and valued. That a museum is often considered to be dispassionate and impartial may not apply in this instance.

*Toraig on the Tobar* is in fact a cross-cultural exhibition. It is evidence of a myriad of community relationships, between Traveller and settled, Traveller and authorities, and relationships within Traveller communities.

This has also been a significant personal journey. Insight into the work of the Indigenous Curator, as represented by Cork Travellers Women’s Network, has encouraged me to examine more deeply the interpretative process as a means to understanding.

**Decolonisation**

Interpretation communicates particular constructs between people, things and time. Rather than the ‘immersive experience’, great interpretation can encourage us to step outside ourselves and from this selfless position, we can consider and reflect on these constructs, how we fit with each other, with our past and present, and where we aspire to be in the future. In this respect, *Toraig on the Tobar* is great interpretation.

This exhibition is a careful selection of knowledge that, combined with selected media displayed in a particular way, supports cultural meanings and values that are cherished by Travellers. However, this is much more than an exhibition. For the Traveller community, the gallery space is theirs to discuss, shape, interpret and express their culture and heritage as they wish. It is a space that inspires. The interpretative
approach evolves from within, and the character of Traveller culture is embedded in the presentation. These are, as described by Howard Morphy, ‘active continuities’. To impose an interpretative approach from outside, risks de-meaning, de-valuing and divorcing the experience from the culture it represents. While ownership and self-determination are at the heart of Toraig on the Tobar, it is open to all.

Engaging with some of the people involved, and gaining insights into this collaborative process, has increased my appreciation and my understanding of the interpretation as expressed by the exhibition and the power of the Indigenous Curator. Toraig on the Tobar is also evidence of the positive impact that can be achieved when a museum and a community group engages in a long-term collaboration built on trust, sincerity, respect, and mutual understanding of equality, difference and parity. Not all aspects of decolonisation are visible. Visitors, whether settled or Traveller, may not be aware of the depth of all the complexities, meanings or values embedded in the exhibition, however they are there nonetheless. This is about a heritage that is neither fixed or finite or indeed resolved. Views are ever-changing and challenging.

What is constant is the evolving relationship of mutual trust and commitment to the preservation, interpretation, and continuation of Traveller Culture in Ireland. Both the Museum and the Network together encourage and support new ways of thinking about, and understanding, Traveller traditions, culture and history. The interpretation is an ongoing dynamic form of communication that, with the synergies and energies of both Cork Public Museum and Cork Traveller Women’s Network, continues to change and expand.

This journey began in 2005, a time preceding the rise in public discussion on decolonisation, on inclusion of marginalised people and on recognition of ethnicities. It started because one quiet lady had a ‘decolonising’ mindset that was less about dismantling existing structures and more about embracing and encouraging other voices and perspectives. Toraig on the Tobar is an enduring tribute to Stella Cherry, her ethics and her inherent understanding of what constitutes our culture and heritage. Official policies now in place at Cork Public Museum ensure that her legacy will continue. Toraig on the Tobar is an active illlustration and model of decolonisation. It is intellectual and emotional. It is an exploration of meaning. It is heritage in the making.

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Notes


2. Cork Public Museum operates under the governance of Cork City Council. It has four full-time staff, including the curator, Dan Breen. Cork Traveller Women's Network is a community development organisation run by Traveller women. Brigid Carmody, Traveller, and Network founder is Project Co-ordinator. Louise Harrington is Community Development Officer.


In 2011, I walked into a museum in Adelaide, South Australia, and found an image of my parents and myself on the inside cover of the museum brochure. This event forms the basis for an article that explores how the memory of Irish and Scottish experience of migration to Australia in the 1950s became entangled with the Australian cultural past. Resulting from a former colonial regime that maintained its presence in symbolic form in the vice-regal lodges that persisted in every Australian state, that memory was expressed by the subaltern presence of my parents in a museum that reified both a colonial inheritance, and the cultural and artistic legacy of a wealthy elite, by preserving their home, in its original state, as a museum. Were my parents a ghostly or disquieting presence, or a part of an entangled history in which immigration, colonial history and an Australian heritage intersected, however briefly? Did their presence disrupt or augment this heritage experience? The following case study provides an opportunity to study those intersections: between a museum celebrating the legacy of Sir ‘Bill’ and Lady Ursula Hayward and an individual Irish/Scots migratory experience that would otherwise be unremembered.

Fig. 1. The photograph in the Carrick Hill brochure, Aidan Dinkin is on the far right and Lillian Veniard is second right.
According to the historian Alison Light, family history can illuminate the ‘boundaries between local and national, private and public’ and it can also give the opportunity to ‘change the terms in which some are remembered and others forgotten’. Linda Curti asks, ‘must we understand that in places such as the museum or the art gallery the subaltern cannot yet speak?’ Despite the fact that the particular image in figure 1 had been chosen to reinforce the hierarchical structures that existed in the house that had become a museum, the image of my parents in the museum’s brochure allowed the subaltern a voice, even if it was a muted one. With this in mind, by speaking for them, but hopefully mirroring their own voices with regard to their individual experiences, this article is an attempt to lift my parents, Aidan Dinkin and Lillian Veniard, from the footnotes of history; and to explain their presence in a South Australian Museum.

The museum under scrutiny is known as Carrick Hill and is the former home of Ursula and William ‘Bill’ Hayward, a couple who enjoyed status as patrons of the Arts and as members of a South Australian social elite. Their house and legacy, which became the property of the South Australian state in accordance with the wishes expressed in their will, was described as one of the few period houses in Australia to have survived with its contents intact and its grounds undiminished; it is now a popular visitor destination, art gallery, site for cultural events, and powerful symbol of Adelaide’s cultural and artistic past. It is evident that the heritage discourse that surrounds this past both possesses and creates cultural meaning for the present, enabling the many Adelaidians who visit Carrick Hill to experience an emotional connection to their urban cultural past.

The Adelaide Establishment

This singular legacy was donated by the two previously mentioned figures whose pastoralist and business backgrounds made them a part of what was known as the ‘Adelaide establishment’, an elite body that cohered around the Adelaide Club. Established in 1868, many members of the Club had been a part of the City Council and the South Australian parliamentary body during Adelaide’s relatively short history.

Founded on the lands of the Kaurna people that are known as Tarndanyangga, Adelaide was designed in 1836 by Surveyor-General, Colonel William Light, on a grid system bordered by extensive parks. It was the only Australian city which did not develop from convict settlement and was a planned city of free settlers, based on the ideas of Edward Gibbon Wakefield. The city, with its broad thoroughfares, multiple churches and elegant nineteenth-century architecture, was intended to be a place where religious difference would be tolerated.

The liberal values on which Adelaide was founded led to the establishment of a new ‘paternalistic landed gentry and an agrarian rather than an industrial society’, which in turn led to the development of a politically conservative elite.
whose wealth was founded on land, commerce
and banking. The continuing influence of this
elite from the 1850s onwards manifested itself in
town planning initiatives which helped to preserve
Adelaide’s heritage, particularly in North Adelaide
where many had homes in the foothills of the
Mount Lofty Ranges in the Adelaide Hills, the area
in which Carrick Hill now stands.

Although migrants from Ireland were making
their way to South Australia, Adelaide was
the ‘least Irish’ settlement in the nineteenth
century and the Irish remained a minority
among the dominant Anglo-Scottish settlers.
Consequently, Irish revolutionary politics and
cultural affiliations did not establish themselves
there in any significant fashion. Like that of
the Irish, Scottish immigration often came from
poorer areas: communities of Gaelic speakers
were moved to South Australia by the Highland
and Island Emigration Society in 1852. However,
generalisations must be avoided in attributing a
particular character or stereotype to the Scots and
Irish who went to South Australia in that period.

Aidan Dinkin and Lillian Veniard: New Recruits
to Government House
Taking advantage of a scheme providing staff for
the newly appointed Governor of South Australia,
Sir Robert George, it was into this conservative
urban society that Lillian Veniard and Aidan
Dinkin relocated to in 1953. With the promise
of a two-year contract as a Government House
housemaid that included her passage, Lillian had
travelled on the P&O liner, Orontes, from Tilbury in
Essex in the company of her uncle, Ernest Veniard,
who had been engaged as butler there. In 1931–
1945, Veniard had worked in Ottawa’s Rideau Hall
under Canadian Governor-General, the Earl of
Bessborough.

Until the 1960s, it was the practice for governors
(who were expected to find their own household
staff in Canada and Australia) to recruit from
Britain in preference to local populations which
they did not always deem suitable for vice-
regal duties. Particular qualities of integrity and
honesty were required of staff and uniforms
indicating hierarchical positioning were worn.
This hegemony was broken to some degree by
immigration from Germany, Greece, and the
former Yugoslavia from 1952-56 and by the
assisted passage of Spanish domestics in the
1960s. However, it is revealing that, even though
by the 1960s there was a belief that ‘butlers
were a dying breed’, the Governor-General in
Canberra still employed both a butler and an
under-butler in 1958. Along with those of
Veniard, the couple’s employment opportunities
in Adelaide were therefore part of a legacy, within
the Commonwealth, of British colonialism – the
networks of which, for symbolic and diplomatic
reasons, remained viable.

Described by her uncle Veniard as ‘delighted’
at the prospect of going to Australia, Lillian had
previously worked at Glenfuir, a ‘magnificent
late Victorian property’ in North Berwick. A
Presbyterian, she had been born in 1936 on the
Island of Islay – and her maternal grandparents
were from Fifeshire. On her paternal side, her
grandmother had been born in Shetland and
brought up in Orkney, while her grandfather
was the son of a French artisan who in the 1870s
had moved to London. Aidan Dinkin, a Catholic
and the second of four children, had been born
in 1929 in County Monaghan to parents from
labouring and small farming backgrounds, who
were of a 1950s generation for whom lucrative

Fig. 3. Lillian (Veniard) Dinkin and Madeline O’Neill in the
grounds of Carrick Hill.
employment was elusive and who felt stifled by a lack of opportunity for advancement and adventure at home. Having left Ireland for London to work as a footman for the newspaper magnates, Lord and Lady Kemsley, Aidan (like Lilian) had considerable domestic experience before securing employment with Sir Robert George. Despite their different religious backgrounds, Aidan Dinkin and Lillian Veniard married in 1957 and, through the intercession of Sir Robert and Lady George, friends and frequent hosts to Sir Edward ‘Bill’ and Lady Ursula Hayward, the couple secured employment with them at Carrick Hill in 1958. It was there, in their two-bedroom, second floor apartment in the house that would later become a museum, that I spent my first three years.

An English Manor House in the Antipodes

Standing at the foot of Mount Lofty in the suburb of Springfield, Carrick Hill has been variously described as Jacobean and Elizabethan in style and is modelled on the English manor house. Faced in golden Basket Range sandstone and surrounded by terraces, rose gardens, and groves of trees, it is situated on land gifted to Ursula (1907–70) by her father, Thomas Elder Barr-Smith (1863–1941), a member of an old pastoralist family, upon her marriage to William Waterfield Hayward (1903–83). Bill Hayward’s father, Arthur Dudley Hayward (1874–1953), was Chairman and a director of John Martin’s department store which had been established in Adelaide in 1866. It is here where, after a period working as a ‘jackaroo’ and purchasing a spread on his own in Narrabri in New South Wales, Bill developed his own career. His mother, Mary Ann Pagan, was from Scotland.

Sharing an interest in art and architecture, Ursula Barr-Smith and Bill Hayward were more bohemian than might have been expected from these conservative beginnings. Despite a distinctly masculinist character, Hayward was a keen monarchist and wished his home to reflect his English cultural origins. While on honeymoon in Britain in 1934, the couple purchased contents — including an impressive 18th century staircase, oak paneling, a fireplace, windows and a 500-year-old dining table — from the sale of Beau Desert Hall, a Tudor mansion house in Staffordshire. The architect James Irwin (1906–90) designed Carrick Hill around these items.

Ursula was the first woman to serve, from 1953, on the board of the National Gallery of South Australia. Having received art tuition as a child from Sir Ivor Hele (1912–93) and later Margarita Stipnieks (1910–2010), she created a studio for herself, first in a small upstairs sitting room and later in a room above the garage, where she created floral paintings, some modelled on her own garden blooms. Carrick Hill became a cynosure for contemporary artists, musicians, actors and writers whom the Haywards entertained in diverse social gatherings. During these decades, they amassed a formidable art collection.

While not conservative for their time, it was no accident that the Haywards recruited from Government House and their household was...
run on the upper-class English model that they had inherited from their colonial forebears. In addition to a butler, they employed a cook, a live-in housemaid, two female dailies, a chauffeur, Jack Tucker (who had been Bill Hayward’s batman during the Second World War), and, as gardeners, Cliff Jacobs and a ‘Peter’ of Latvian origin.

The Dinkins’ career advancements were the result not only of the Georges’ patronage but also of the tutelage of Ernest Veniard. By the time they found employment at Carrick Hill, they were very familiar with the demands of running an upper-class establishment according to the rules and customs of a British elite. Rising to become a butler required long periods of training and gradual promotion through the ranks of footman, first footman, and under-butler; when Aidan Dunkin gained that post at Carrick Hill, it was a considerable achievement. In this role, he managed the household and was responsible for the cellar, silver, glass and ordering dry goods, and wore pinstriped trousers, a black jacket, waistcoat, white shirt and black shoes. He often changed his shirt for the second part of the day and wore a dress uniform, including tails and a black bow tie, for formal occasions when silver and good glassware were used. According to Lillian Dinkin, who acted as housekeeper, occasional cook, dining staff, and lady’s maid, the staff ‘all knew their job and got on with it’.

My parents remembered both the Haywards as undemanding, considerate employers; they recalled that relationships between staff members were friendly and co-operative. The Haywards addressed their staff with easy familiarity and by using their first names, preferring not to use the bell system except when signifying a change of course. Rarely referring to herself as Lady Hayward, Ursula’s relationships within the household were especially informal: she even watched Princess Margaret’s 1960 televised wedding with them and discussed the details afterwards.

**Australia’s Downton Abbey?**

Carrick Hill is frequently described in social media as ‘Australia’s Downton Abbey’. An analogy that evokes contemporary cultural nostalgia for previous hierarchical security, this nomenclature also expresses why the Dinkins’ presence there can, when interpreted in the present, become valuable as a component and expression of the hierarchical social relations that existed there. Their own cultural legacy can be perceived from their close involvement in its social life.

The house was not officially designated as a museum until 1983. After the death of Bill Hayward, who had outlived Ursula by 13 years, the gardens, buildings and contents passed into the ownership of the South Australian State. Consequently, the house and grounds have been preserved in their entirety in their original condition, leaving a pristine museum record of the social and cultural life of an Australian elite in the middle and later part of the twentieth century. This meant that, when in Australia, I could step into a place that had been both my early childhood home and my parents’ workplace and find it almost exactly as I remembered it. My father’s domain in the silver room was now behind glass and his pantry was open to the public. The garage, where I had used to visit Jack Tucker, was now a coffee shop. The famous pleached pear arbour remained much as it had been when my father and I used to walk in the garden.

Through these experiences, I felt my past and my present collide with an eerie sense of...
familiarity. As alluded to in the introduction to this article, a particular moment in our previous existence was captured on black and white celluloid in the museum brochure, offering a point of entry to the social structures of the time as my parents lined up with other staff members for a photograph. My parents, who had returned to continue their lives in Ireland in 1962 and 1963, had become memorialized; fixed within a South Australian history and its accompanying museum project.

Conclusion
This article began by asking whether my parents were a ghostly and disquieting presence at Carrick Hill. They are certainly a part of an entangled history in which stories of immigration, colonial history and Australian heritage intersect — however briefly.

The museum that Carrick Hill now is, demonstrates how the lives of an Adelaide wealthy elite were entangled in colonial and then Commonwealth history; but so too were the lives of migrant domestic servants on whom the elite relied. My parents existed as subalterns in 1950s and 1960s Australian suburban life, and by their inclusion in the museum brochure, their memories became codified into Adelaide history. Through such codifications, Carrick Hill becomes not solely an archive for an art collection or a memorial to one Adelaide family, but also a far more complex and interesting historical proposition in which questions of social class and the political and economic legacies of colonialism arise.

These questions make way for a bigger project in which family histories, recalled through individual memories and personal archives, connect to broader historical narratives — in my family’s case, concerning colonialism, migration and domestic service. When Aidan Dinkin and Lillian Veniard left their home countries in search of employment, travel and opportunity, they were part of waves of outward migration from Britain and Ireland that, being subject to individuals’ circumstances, can seem historiographically subordinate and therefore can become elided within the visible archives of the state.

It is an instance of how the subaltern tends to occupy an invisible space that, some fifty years later, I was startled to find both my parents and myself as an infant in my mother’s arms in the museum brochure: I felt unsettled because we had neither originated from a privileged elite, nor conceived of ourselves as part of expansive national histories. My reflexive experience of the museum has led to this case study and a personal narrative which attempts to identify the matrix of themes that intersect within this museum archive.

According to Kylie Message, ‘museums always reflect and embody the zeitgeist in which they are produced’. This observation is not quite accurate for Carrick Hill, as an example of how colonialism continued to exert influence even as late as 1983, when it acquired the formal classification of a museum. Colonial legacies infiltrated the lives of elites who perpetuated critical elements of its characteristics within the liberal, tolerant guiding principles on which the city of Adelaide was founded. The effects extended to the lives of individuals such as my parents, who had taken advantage of traditional commonwealth networks for travel and appointment and found themselves recruited into the more dynamic economy of 1950s-60s Australia.

These networks would be dissolved in the 1960s as Australia transitioned from a ‘dependent British Australia towards an emergent cultural nationalism’, but Aidan and Lillian left on the cusp of this cultural change. In addition to the furnishings, books, china, silver, and art collection connected with the history of British Australia, the stories that congregate around the lives lived in Carrick Hill also constitute an archive, to the existence of which my parents’ histories stands as testimony. Although through no volition of their own, and despite the fact that they were unconscious of the broader implications of all the social, economic and political forces that guided them to Adelaide in the first place, their stories are part of South Australian heritage.

The processes of heritage-making implicit in Carrick Hill’s functions as a museum have therefore carried in their wake stories, for the most part refused their place in the archives of the state, that contribute to the diverse nature of South Australian identity. For my own part, this heritage has raised unsettling, identity-related questions. These are intersected by the complex nature of post-colonial networks that played out in the personal history of my parents, an elite and a Jacobean manor house at the foot of the Adelaide Hills.
Born in Adelaide to an Irish father and Scottish mother, Madeline O’Neill was conferred with a PhD in history by NUI Galway in 2018. She completed a biographical study of a significant figure in nationalist and imperial history and has contributed to local Mayo history projects, as well as a forthcoming documentary on the first Irish Senate.

Notes


21. "Jackaroo" is the name given to a young man gaining experience and training on an Australian sheep or cattle station.


25. In 1954, the Dinkins had been introduced, along with the other staff, to Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip during their visit to Government House.


At EastSide Partnership, digital connectivity provided a social lifeline as COVID-19 lockdowns began. Embarking on the co-creation of an exhibition for the Ulster Museum, community groups working with this East Belfast-based regeneration charity used online engagement to talk openly about the current pandemic and found comfort in researching and reflecting on pandemics in the past.

The Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 (MCC) research project at Ulster University has focused on the experiences of and challenges faced by museums in Northern Ireland throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research work has looked at the adaptability of the sector in responding to COVID-19 and has considered the role in museums of digital technologies, contemporary collecting during a time of crisis, and the importance of museums to health and wellbeing.

EastSide Partnership’s exhibition, Atishoo, Atishoo, We Don’t Fall Down: Pandemics Past and Present (at the Ulster Museum, June 2021 – present), provides a case study giving insight into each of these areas. By discussing the exhibition, this article demonstrates the value of co-creation and of finding spaces to talk; it explores the incredible adaptability shown by museums in the past two years.

Introduction
This article discusses the exhibition, Atishoo, Atishoo, We Don’t Fall Down: Pandemics Past and...
that EastSide co-created with community groups during the pandemic. Displayed in the Ulster Museum’s Modern History Gallery in May 2021, the exhibition was conceived and researched by volunteers who had previously taken part in a heritage skills capacity-building project funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund. As the first community co-created exhibition to be featured in the space, it is intended that *Atishoo, Atishoo* will lead to other groups using National Museums NI’s collections and interpretive expertise to tell their own stories.

**Co-Production and Co-Creation**

EastSide Partnership’s work is distinctly different from more traditional acts of consultation, or even collaboration, where community groups provide input, but control over design and implementation remains with the institution. It is a form, instead, of ‘co-production’, defined in 1996 as a process where ‘citizens can play an active role in producing public goods and services of consequence to them’. Some of the challenges of co-production pertain to any community-oriented work and surround questions as to what constitutes a ‘community’: which communities are selected, who is included and excluded, and how communities are brought together. As EastSide Partnership has found in its co-production practice, it can be important to acknowledge that both geographic and socio-cultural boundaries are often blurred in this work.

Within museums and heritage practice, co-production has been described as the processes through which:

> people who are not professionals in such sectors can be represented and their capabilities and forms of expertise acknowledged. It refers also to how they can be empowered, via formal processes and projects, to contribute to and exercise control over outcomes, such as, for example, museum exhibitions...

As a project that not only valued the experiences of participants, but where their voices remained intact, EastSide Partnership’s approach to developing *Atishoo, Atishoo* clearly met this description. Throughout, the organisation remained strongly focused on questioning ‘what is being produced, why and for whom, and under what constraints and conditions.’ In what follows, we discuss ‘what, why and for whom’ we worked, before moving to show how this co-produced project was also an act of co-creation. In civic work practice ‘co-creation’ is a term in more common usage than the term ‘co-production’. In addition to managing heritage and museum projects, EastSide Partnership works for the benefit of civil society and for both younger and older people. Therefore, and because the principles of the two types of practice are closely aligned, in what follows we use the term ‘co-creation’ to describe a form of ‘co-production’.

**Contemporary Collecting and Displaying COVID-19**

From the outset of the pandemic and the imposition of the first national lockdown, museums across Northern Ireland embarked on programmes of contemporary collecting. For two MCC interviewees, the rationale for contemporary collecting focused on the issue of ‘responsibility’. National Museums NI’s Head of Curatorial, Hannah Crowdy, for example, described how collecting objects and stories around the pandemic could allow people to ‘share their experiences and comes to terms with what’s happened’. Another museum curator felt a responsibility to ‘collect what we can and contextualise it’.

It is important to emphasise that ‘displaying’ the pandemic requires careful timing. In MCC interviews, staff raised concerns surrounding sensitive and personal data gathered through contemporary collecting, and for ethical reasons, some museums have committed not to share information for a period of twenty years or more. Others questioned whether, after the experiences of COVID-19, audiences would want to see exhibitions about pandemics. One interviewee felt for example that this might need to wait until people were ‘not so desperate to get out or feel good about things again’.

MCC research shows that some museum staff felt that, while working from home because of the pandemic, they had been called upon to exercise personal judgement in these and other matters more frequently than had been the case when in-person communication had been possible. However, the group co-creating with EastSide Partnership gave a clear answer: an exhibition about ‘pandemics past and present’ would allow those involved to use the process of learning about...
past pandemics as a means of visualising how we might get through this one.

Museums’ contribution to health is well established but, while passionate about this societal contribution, professionals have raised concerns with MCC that it is difficult to substantiate the wellbeing impacts of their practice in either quantitative or qualitative terms. For example, they felt that there might be financial benefits for the public sector resulting from long term health improvements produced by engaging with museums, but that it was difficult to find and resource the use of metrics to measure and articulate these benefits. While public sector policy is often based on quantitative data, MCC has recommended increased use of qualitative data in government funding decisions.

Co-creation projects such as Atishoo, Atishoo offer opportunities to gather such evidence. While the exhibition project had initially been intended to focus on other aspects of east Belfast heritage, during the pandemic, participants in the project felt it was important to reflect on how COVID-19 had impacted the local neighbourhood. It was they who took the decision to produce an exhibition on pandemics and who identified the importance of using COVID-19 as an opportunity to learn about past pandemics. For its creators, the exhibition became a method of supporting wellbeing.

Atishoo, Atishoo and COVID-19
Project planning for the exhibition began in April 2020 and, although it initially involved volunteers already engaged with EastSide through a previous project, some had to drop out as the pandemic took effect. As with other museums and heritage organisations discussed in this issue, EastSide found that the move to digital platforms during the pandemic both shifted the group dynamic and disadvantaged those who lacked internet access, hardware and software, and digital skills. In addition digital fatigue became a factor as the pandemic wore on.

These same constraints brought uncertainty to those managing programming at the Ulster Museum where the exhibition would be displayed. In the hope that the exhibition could be shown once restrictions were eased, the group continued to meet regularly over the course of several months via Zoom, WhatsApp, group emails, and one socially distanced in-person session between lockdowns. Through these measures, and whilst accepting a level of uncertainty with the timeframe, the group continued to work through the project.

With limited access to physical collections in museums, libraries and archives during lockdown, research relied heavily on digital collections, online newspaper archives, local knowledge, and Ulster Museum curators’ access to collections. During Zoom sessions, areas of research interest

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Fig. 2. ‘Atishoo, Atishoo’ showing contemporary items collected by EastSide Partnership co-creators alongside objects from NMNI collections.
Credit: Andrew Adams and EastSide Partnership.
were identified, research tasks allocated, and results shared.

Having previously participated in EastSide’s heritage skills development projects, co-creators had a foundation of skills that they could adapt to the research challenges brought on by the pandemic. In this way, the exhibition’s success was based on the continuity of the partnerships that are at the heart of a co-creative project.

Alongside the exhibition development, collective sessions were used to reflect on the current pandemic. Volunteers were encouraged to create ‘mind maps’ of how they were spending their time during lockdown, to share photographs that reflected how public spaces had changed, and to keep diaries of their experiences. All these physical products contributed to the exhibition. In addition, group members undertook their own contemporary collecting, identifying objects that they thought were representative of their experiences and constructing video content from their own networks and relationships. The final exhibition is the combined product of these personal experiences and of the research and exhibition development skills that have been developed through the partnership.

The Ulster Museum guided the curation of the exhibition and designed and built the physical structures, but participants were fully engaged in this process: providing design briefs, conducting research, and donating objects. At the beginning of the pandemic, the volunteers had been working together for almost a year and were in the process of completing their previous project. They were in limbo, unable to make their work public as the launch had been scheduled for April 2020. During this year of working together, the group had forged friendships. They remained in regular contact outside of the project through a WhatsApp group, sharing experiences from their personal lives as well as information about local heritage. There was a desire from many of the group to continue to meet and to participate in another project, but the situation demanded this be carried out digitally.

Several of the members who continued to stay involved in the project with Ulster Museum commented that, during lockdown, the only conversations they had in several days were with this group. They also reported that their research often helped to distract them from anxiety about the pandemic. It was they who created the exhibition concept of ‘flashbacks’, a feature that was always framed in group discussion as challenges, including public health challenges, that the community had overcome in the past. There was an emphasis on the resilience of the people of east Belfast and also a recognition that historic pandemics had eventually come to an end. Although the seriousness of the situation was never ignored, this approach helped the group to focus on the fact that there would be an end point to the pandemic in the future, just as the previous challenges had ended. This thought was reflected in the title of the exhibition, chosen by one of the volunteers: *Atishoo, Atishoo, We Don’t Fall Down*.

This combination of personal experience and historical research comes through in the exhibition layout. Public health notices from previous pandemics or public health crises, such as the 1918 influenza pandemic and ‘consumption’ (tuberculosis) outbreaks, are presented alongside face masks and ‘stay at home’ posters from the current pandemic. Protective measures such as social distancing and the requirement to quarantine are given historical context. For example, a bar of Lifebuoy soap, commonly available during the 1918 flu pandemic, is placed alongside a tube of hand gel produced by the same company, as a product that came into high demand during the COVID-19 pandemic. A letter from U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, reinforcing the ‘stay at home’ message, is a stark reminder of the feeling of uncertainty as lockdown measures were imposed, while in front of it, a can of BrewDog ‘Barnard Castle’ beer tells the story of political controversies during the pandemic, the name a reference to government advisor Dominic Cummings’ journey from London to the Northeast of England at the height of the ‘stay at home’ directive.

The way in which *Atishoo, Atishoo* showed past and present pandemics alongside each other marked a separation from the predominantly chronological narrative told through the museum’s long-term exhibitions, offering a small example of how co-created exhibitions can bring value to a museum by providing alternative perspectives on the past. Most importantly though, this approach demonstrated that pandemics do end. A piece of introductory text to the exhibition states that:

*it is important to look for hope in difficult times, so we have explored how the resilient people of Belfast*
faced public health challenges in the past and what they can teach us about surviving and recovering.  

This message is reflected in the exhibition design as much as it is told through the objects themselves. Telling the complex and emotive stories was facilitated by the skills development and co-creative practice that underpinned its development.

**Conclusion**

The successful development of this exhibition is a testament to the efforts of each member of the co-creation team. It demonstrates the value of continuing to work with volunteer groups beyond single projects to provide opportunities for continued skills development, form connections, and support people through uncertainties like those of the pandemic and its repeated lockdowns. Some group members have continued to put these skills into practice through presenting their own research, pursuing academic qualifications, participating in further community–based projects, and taking on new roles such as heritage tour guides in East Belfast.

The exhibition has now been open to the public at the Ulster Museum for almost a year. Despite the fears that were brought on by the Omicron variant and an increased wave of COVID–19 cases at the end of 2021, there has now been a sustained period of opening for museums and other cultural venues. While the pandemic is by no means over, the protection offered by vaccinations and the continued development of new medical interventions against COVID–19 provide some parts of the world with increased security against the virus. That the public have been able to visit the exhibition in person reflects that component of the exhibition’s title – ‘we don’t fall down’.

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work and heritage–led regeneration. She is area representative for GEM NI and is a board member of Thrive Audience Development.

**Acknowledgements**

As authors we have sought to capture the spirit of the project. Credit for the successful production of an exhibition like this during a pandemic goes entirely to the creators themselves: Wendy, Gaynor, Gerry, Jeanette, Stephen, Emily, Christine, and Gillian.

Thanks also to Ulster Museum, in particular Dr Karen Logan, Senior Curator of History at National Museums NI, for supporting the research process and exhibition installation.
Notes


10. Crooke, E and Farrell–Banks D, (2021) Interview with anonymous museum curator. 20 October. See also article from Collette Brownlee, Ciaran Toal and Paul Allison, this issue.


In March 2020, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) had just completed two public events: a celebration for International Women’s Day and an exhibition on LGBT history as part of the international OUTing the Past Festival. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced the official archive for Northern Ireland to close its doors and move all work online, stopping Making the Future – the primary provider of PRONI’s outreach programmes – was not an option.

In this article, we discuss how the Making the Future team worked against tight deadlines to deliver a comprehensive outreach online between March 2020 and May 2021, from planning the first virtual programme, Ordinary People Extraordinary Times, to delivering the eighth, Border Sounds. Describing each project, we set out how we used digital technology to provide creative activities enabling more than one hundred people to engage with PRONI’s archives from their homes. We conclude with a reflection on the strengths and limitations of both in-person and virtual engagement.

Making the Future in PRONI
PRONI is the official archive for Northern Ireland. Created under the Public Records Act (1923), it has a legislative responsibility to acquire, preserve and make available the records of the devolved administration of Northern Ireland. In addition to this, the governing legislation also allows PRONI to acquire collections from private individuals.

The 1923 Act defines records as ‘rolls, records, writs, books, proceedings, decrees, bills, warrants, accounts, maps, papers and documents of a public nature’ and states, ‘It shall be lawful for any trustee or other person having the custody of any deeds or document to deposit the same’.

These same legislative definitions and instructions remain in place and in active use and PRONI now has 3.5 million historical records, including digital records, in its care. Of these, approximately two-thirds are official, government records, while the remainder, which range in size from thousands of documents to deposits of a single letter or photograph, have come from churches, local businesses, landed estates, clubs and societies, families and individuals.

Before Making the Future began, PRONI had run an outreach programme of traditional, in-person events. Most were within its own building, and included, for example, talks from both PRONI staff and external speakers on topics relating to its collections, and facilitating group visits through guided tours and document displays. External events, in which PRONI staff also participated included setting up stalls and speaking at large-scale events such as the Balmoral Show and the genealogy festival, Back to Our Past. Just before COVID, the organisation had also begun to explore live-streaming these events to online audiences via social media.

Making the Future was a three-year programme (2018–2021) funded under the European Union’s...
PEACE IV Programme (managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB)). Delivered through a partnership between PRONI, the Nerve Centre, National Museums NI and the Linen Hall Library, the primary aims of Making the Future were to develop more sustained and meaningful community engagement and to empower people of diverse backgrounds and ages to use archives and collections to explore the past to make their voices heard and to learn new skills. It was structured around nine thematic strands, with each partner institution having responsibility for exploring two or three of these strands through exhibitions, events, and outreach projects. Of these, PRONI delivered Women in the Archives which uncovered female stories; 100 Shared Stories which focused on bringing in new stories into the archives; and the Making the Future Oral Archive which collected oral interviews with participants of outreach projects.

During Making the Future, PRONI completed two exhibitions and an events series. In addition, thirty outreach projects benefited more than six hundred people. Of these, between March 2020 and May 2021, we delivered eight fully online. The platforms used included Zoom, which enabled live interaction, and Slack, which ensured continued engagement with participants between Zoom meetings. We describe these eight outreach projects in more detail below.

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Times. Fifty people created the content for an online exhibition by documenting how they experienced the pandemic through a three-week programme of conversations, letter writing, scrapbooking, music, and cooking.

YouTubers. 11–16-year-olds re-purposed sexist content from the UTV archive to produce short videos through a week-long film camp of three-hour Zoom workshops with industry professionals, in which they learned about archive copyright, audio recording techniques, and how to film and edit on mobile devices. UTV was the first commercial television operator on the island of Ireland.

Textile Stories. Nineteen women explored the connection between fashion and archives by embroidering photographs from PRONI’s collections using packages of materials received from the project. The workshops were accompanied by a series of talks from researchers, curators, and other experts.

Spooky Comics. Twenty-four illustrators, aged 7–13, brought spooky stories from PRONI’s archives to life in a new comic book through a week-long Zoom camp on the art of comic book creation.

Every Day is a School Day. Ten participants with varying degrees of sight loss produced short films on their experiences of education by connecting through an eight-week filmmaking programme, delivered in partnership with the Royal National Institute of Blind People with visually impaired YouTuber, Connor Scott-Gardner, and drawing on PRONI archives.

LGBT Stories. Fourteen people participated in an eight-week letter-writing programme, heard a series of talks on LGBTQ+ history and archives, and created slogans and letters which they then
donated to PRONI. We delivered this project, which ran alongside the Every Day... project, in partnership with HereNI and the LGBT Heritage Project.

Our Food, Our Place. Eleven people from minority ethnic and religious backgrounds came together over five weeks to share recipes, music and stories of migration and life in Northern Ireland and to compile a recipe book.

Border Sounds. Twenty-one participants from rural border communities explored the sights, sounds and stories of life on the Irish border through a three-week workshop programme on haiku writing, virtual reality and sound recording. Each picked a spot on the border, wrote a haiku about it, and captured sounds associated with it. These contributions drove the content for an 11-minute virtual reality film.

Lessons

The last of these projects, Border Sounds, took place in Spring 2021. When Northern Ireland emerged out of lockdown, Making the Future was able to move from virtual to in-person projects for the remainder of its programme, which was completed the following November. The experience of delivering thirty outreach projects through both virtual and in-person formats has taught us some valuable lessons about the strengths and limitations of each type of engagement.

The first is in relation to accessibility and inclusivity. Making the Future’s virtual engagement brought new audiences who, for health, geographical and financial reasons, could not have engaged with PRONI before. Border Sounds for example, was designed for rural people living near or on the border and would never have worked if they had had to come to Belfast to attend weekly workshops. The online format, by contrast, allowed the project to have a wider geographic spread, and therefore to capture more diverse stories for the virtual reality film. Online platforms help cultural institutions to break geographic barriers and to counter perspectives.
that view archives as restricted to urban elites and ‘open to civil servants, curators and academics but largely closed off to members of the public.’

One of the lockdown’s silver linings for Making the Future has been the ability to witness people, especially those from an older demographic, gaining increased confidence to use digital tools. Our experience has also shown how going virtual offers value for money and time efficiency for all. For PRONI, it reduced or eliminated travel, catering, and staff costs and provided opportunities to work with a wider pool of facilitators across the world. Meanwhile, participants could easily fit the project around other commitments. It was great to see people from all over the country, miles away from each other, coming together virtually to share their life stories. On the other hand, remote access did not evenly benefit all: not everyone had access to a reliable internet connection or could afford to buy suitable equipment which, in turn, limited the experience of some workshops.

Whilst reports have captured the benefits of virtual offerings as a means of overcoming physical access barriers, they also highlight that they can disadvantage people with disabilities as our experience confirms that virtual formats can be especially challenging for this group. Visually impaired participants could have learnt more from in-person filmmaking, because Making the Future could have tailored sessions to accommodate each person’s degree of sight loss and could also have provided access to professional equipment and software. Through its online projects, Making the Future has also learned of the importance of safe online practice. While using Slack to provide a private space for participants to interact between online sessions, we also issued safe use guidelines stipulating, for example, that participants should not share anything outside of this platform and must use respectful terminology.

Using Zoom combined with PowerPoint presentations, audio-described videos, and PDF documents, we brought archival collections straight to the comfort of people’s living rooms. We also found, however, that this digital tour of archives could not replace tactile experiences, such as that of holding an 1891 diary in your hands, or the smell of a 1910s school register book. These multi-sensory forms of engagement are, and always will be, regarded as the main modes of access and experiencing museum objects and archives.

Conclusion
The pandemic has proven that remote participation can work well for certain types of projects and can be cost-effective in most cases. Digital technology can play a key role in inclusive archival practice because it can ‘encourage the creation of more porous archives where the boundaries between creator, participant and user break down and there are opportunities to

Fig. 4. Staff and participants out in Warrenpoint filming with a 360° camera for ‘Border Sounds’. Credit: PRONI.
reflect and comment on the archive’. COVID and Making the Future have given PRONI valuable insights into how online provision might benefit its audiences. Having witnessed its importance for enabling inclusive practice, and for allowing both speakers and participants to connect on a global basis, PRONI regards live-streaming to be key to continued successful engagement.

This experience has also shown that many people are more comfortable to take their first steps in engaging with PRONI online, before attending the in-person sessions that are needed to build personal connections and relationships. Anecdotally, it is well known that potential users can regard public archives with scepticism and even fear. Allowing them to begin engaging in the place where they feel most comfortable — their own home — is key to reaching people who may otherwise be non-engagers. For all audiences, wherever they are, online provision can help PRONI to break down initial barriers and can encourage more people in Northern Ireland to physically step through the door and to engage with their archival heritage in a meaningful and sustained way.

Finally, the current interrogation and reshaping of engagement with the public archive is an attractive prospect but it comes with its own challenges. As our experience has demonstrated, current digital optimism and working practices are opening many much-needed doors, particularly in relation to accessibility and inclusivity. While doing so, we must not lose sight of what makes archives the coolest place on Earth: multi-sensorial havens of history.

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Dr Laura Aguiar is Community Engagement Officer & Creative Producer at the Nerve Centre where she is responsible for connecting with communities to make history and heritage more accessible and engaging through creativity and digital media. She is also co-founder and co-director of the Rathmullan Film Festival.

Notes


The launch of Lisburn Museum’s #VirtualMuseum in March 2020 was designed to illustrate that the museum service could continue to be relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sustaining what became a highly popular online service with daily updates of digital content, including online exhibitions, a contemporary collecting project, and a talks programme led to increased workloads as the team returned to providing in-person services. Responding to ever-changing restrictions at times these felt trapped in a strange ‘hokey-cokey’ dance: sometimes in, sometimes out and often feeling shaken about.

Empowering people to physically interact with collections is integral to the operating ethos of Lisburn Museum and, for two decades, staff have worked with participants in a shared-authority approach, tailoring experiences to accentuate the Museum’s unique value to participants. Throughout the pandemic, staff were acutely aware of the ‘digital divide’: the gap between those with and without access to online resources. Now, the team is building on the substantial benefits of digital engagement, to continue to enable remote access, using online services to enrich, rather than replace or dilute, the provision of physical, person-centred services. Within the context of resource limitations though, sustaining this hybrid approach remains a challenge.

Preparing for lockdown
As a local authority museum, Lisburn Museum is provided at the discretion of Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council and its relevance and value came to the fore during the pandemic. Historically, the Museum’s emergency and business continuity plans have worked on the assumption that if there is significant damage to the building, the service will move to another Council facility with access to telephones, computer equipment, and centralised servers. The scale and nature of lockdown made these plans almost irrelevant and a new recovery strategy had to be developed. Staff initially used personal phones and computers whilst working from home and this situation lasted until June 2020 when corporate hardware was provided. Consequently, digital project development was limited by lack of access to museum images, collections, and archives; all of which were needed for social media posts and for curating digital exhibitions and education content.

As the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic was realised, the Council’s emergency plan was initiated and its Emergency Management Team (EMT) coordinated planning, decision-making and procurement of all COVID-19 related material. The EMT quickly recognised the relevance of the work the museum was doing, particularly in meeting the Council’s Community Planning Objectives under the themes of ‘Children and Young People’; ‘Health and Wellbeing’; ‘Where We Live’; and ‘Our Community’. Aware in March 2020 that
something momentous but unpredictable was happening, we initially focused on keeping staff connected during closure. For front of house staff, it was difficult to allocate work to do at home and, from June 2020, most were furloughed and redeployed, while some casual and agency posts had to be discontinued. The service though was allowed to continue and a core team remained to prepare for recovery.

The adversity of the pandemic produced a chaotic creativity that presented new opportunities to illustrate the important social role of Lisburn Museum. This was a period of constant change and we often felt like reluctant partners in some strange dance. The requirement to respond at short notice to rapid and frequent shifts in lockdown policy produced uncertainty concerning whether (and which) services we could deliver during lockdown; which staff were in, out, or on furlough; how they would be impacted; and, most importantly, how the museum could support people and communities during this period of crisis.

As professionals ‘in it for the long haul,’ staff viewed these major challenges only as further obstacles around which to manoeuvre. It was clear that the service needed to keep going and that available staff needed to focus (albeit remotely) on one common goal: to maintain a museum service. Passionate believers in the social agency of museums, we worked together to continue to highlight the powerful ‘intangibility’ of local museum services.

Opening the doors of the Virtual Museum
Shortly before lockdown, we had sent out 200 ‘keep in contact’ letters to people whom we knew had limited access to digital technology and staff recorded videos of tours and demonstrations; prepared worksheets; photographed exhibitions and objects; created slideshows and walkthroughs; and collected material in anticipation of limited access to the building. A designer produced graphics for the website and social media platforms, and edited videos created especially for inclusion to Lisburn Museum’s #VirtualMuseum which was launched on 31 March 2020.

Crucially, when lockdown was imposed, Lisburn Museum staff were able to directly upload content to the museum’s website and social media portals. From March to September 2020, the virtual service was made possible through the work of a team of six, through goodwill, cooperation in using whatever technology they had at home, mutual support and in consideration of each other’s ability to work around family life. Initially delivered as a means of maintaining participant contact and reaching out to the community during lockdown, the #VirtualMuseum more than consolidated online services: the museum website had always targeted those visitors who may never to be able to visit the museum physically, but this was a strategic approach to maintaining those existing relationships whilst building new ones.

These online team contributions were both flexible and efficient. Over time, this developed into a new way of working as staff working from home operated a managed schedule for posting ‘everyday’ digital content, including, for example, contemporary photographs taken of our forlorn local community spaces and of closed shops and parks. To support families with children of different ages at home, a member of the education team toured the local area with ‘Flaxie’, our museum mascot for under-fives, creating a series of trails and workshops for young children together with educational taster sessions for school aged children. The education team produced a range of activities for both schoolchildren and families (these resources remain online today) and extended the reach of our small, local museum beyond the restrictions.
of its physical building and location. The research and collections team set about opening access to the museum’s archives and collection; the posting of old photographs proved increasingly popular and, whereas within the venue there is a physical capacity for only 120, thousands could view our online talks. In an effort to reach a range of audiences, Augmented Reality (AR) tasks and workshops on 3D scanning and modelling using objects from the museum’s collection were targeted at the 16–25 age group. While not every post resonated with the audience, videos, virtual tours and nostalgic photos (particularly of the local area) were hugely popular (Fig. 2). This knowledge informed the direction of the #VirtualMuseum as it evolved.

In the first phase of the #VirtualMuseum, from March–September 2020, the portal posted 164 pieces of content. The first post was a magnificent Marcus Ward print of Belfast’s Robinson & Cleaver linen warehouse, quickly followed by a video exploring flax and followed by a succession of articles on local history and objects from the collection. Feedback to social media or blog posts was often immediate, but not always. Since re-opening, several visitors have remarked on how they completed some of the workshops with their children or learned something new from our history blogs.

Developing digital exhibitions
In addition to adding daily content, the Research Officer re–designed several exhibitions, some of significant civic importance, that had been initially planned for the galleries, to go online. The 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day, for example, was marked with a virtual exhibition. Of these, perhaps the most challenging was a display marking the centenary of the Lisburn Burnings (Fig. 3). In August 1920, the I.R.A. assassination of R.I.C. District Inspector Swanzy, who had been
implicated in the murder of the Lord Mayor of Cork, led to days of vicious looting and rioting in Lisburn, forcing many of the town’s Catholics to flee. Museum staff felt an ethical responsibility to tell this story and to ensure, despite restrictions, that the anniversary was marked. Partnering with local historians and cartographer Charlie Roche, the museum produced a website, an interactive GIS map, and a database of the compensation claims. Fears that an online exhibition would somehow diminish the importance of the anniversary were not borne out, with one online visitor commenting: “an excellent, well-illustrated account...wonderful to be able to access all this from home”.

In April 2021, the museum launched ‘Planting a parliament’—partition and the foundation of Northern Ireland, 1920–22. Exploring the impact of the creation of Northern Ireland on Lisburn and its surrounding districts, this online exhibition was later opened as a physical display. The challenges of adapting what had been conceived as a virtual exhibition included assessing space requirements, re-writing text, and re-selecting objects. While online exhibitions can have considerable reach, the physical exhibition produced rewarding participation and feedback, allowing as it did audience interaction with displays and direct engagements with gallery staff.

Collecting the pandemic: Covid–19 and Me
As the COVID–19 wave washed over the world, we quickly recognised that, regardless of how horrendous the pandemic was, we retained a local duty to collect and record personal experiences for the benefit of present and future generations, resulting in the contemporary collecting project (Fig.4) Covid–19 and Me®. The title alludes to previous shared-authority projects developed by the Museum: The First World War and Us and The Easter Rising and Us, the results of working with communities to produce exhibitions and publications. Covid–19 and Me was different in that it acknowledged that we, too, were experiencing the pandemic at deeply personal levels. Our staff contributions kick-started this collecting initiative, stimulating others to express the impact of COVID–19 on their lives through writing, emails, drawings, photographs, handicrafts, and by sharing personal artefacts.

At first unsure where the centring of ‘self’ within the project would lead, we were nonetheless convinced that the sharing of personal experiences was a means of enabling meaningful connections during the pandemic. Posting snippets about things that we were doing at home proved to
be important in establishing trust as we moved from physical to online services. In a ‘Wisdom from Yesteryear’ blog, one staff member shared recipes and advice from her family’s 80-year-old household encyclopaedia (Fig. 5), encouraging older people to look for similar artefacts at home. One colleague posted images of his child having a home-haircut, another filmed herself on local walks. The Council’s Chief Executive contributed his own story, providing valuable insight to his position as a local government leader during the pandemic.

By taking us out of our personal comfort zones, these contributions helped to keep us united in the goal of developing a hybrid approach. Covid-19 and Me had one eye on the future, but it was also concerned with supporting participants’ mental health in the present. Through it, we used social media to provide opportunities for reflection. Thousands engaged with our weekly questions, such as ‘Describe the lockdown in one word’, and with powerful photos that were shared, including those of local healthcare workers. Through Covid-19 and Me, the Museum collected over sixty donations, including photographs, videos, letters, poems, stories, artworks, medical scrubs, and other pandemic ephemera. A little child’s facemask was especially powerful, reminding us of a very difficult time. Many of the submissions captured the uncertainty of the early days of the pandemic, from photos of empty streets and shuttered shops to diary entries: ‘I am anxious that I don’t know how long this situation will last for... and that so much is out of my control’.

Online Talks Programme
In late 2020, the #VirtualMuseum presented a programme of six virtual talks. The museum’s autumn lecture series began in 2014 and had always been well supported, but this was the first time it had been live-streamed. We wanted to continue to provide an interesting, challenging and locally inflected series to coincide with the arrival of dark evenings in lockdown. Speakers reflected on the Swanzy Riots; looked towards the Northern Ireland Centenary; and explored Ulster’s last great pandemic, the Spanish Flu. With over 1200 registrations, the talks were viewed in Lisburn, Belfast, Dublin and as far away as Germany, Canada, and the United States, with over 99% positive feedback from those polled. Uploading talks to YouTube sustained the life of the talks, which to date have been viewed for over 1100 hours online. Yet, running the series involved a steep learning curve: live streaming is expensive and technically difficult.

Finding Colour in a Black and White world
One of the positives from our pandemic experience, was that, by 2021, Lisburn Museum
was finding its voice within a wider museum community who faced similar challenges. New knowledge was being produced through UK and Ireland-wide online encounters organised by the Northern Ireland Museums Council, Group for Education in Museums, Irish Museums Association’s ‘Collecting Covid’ and the Museums Association’s ‘Covid Conversations’. It was during one of these that the phrase ‘finding colour in a black and white world’ was mentioned and it was reassuring to find, from these conversations between museum colleagues, that larger museums were facing the same challenges that we were. For example, the staff of many of these had to use personal mobile phones to upload content as we did and this allayed our concerns that professional standards might slip.

The challenge of maintaining virtual services
Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the Lisburn Museum’s service thrived; illustrating its relevance by addressing social isolation and broader wellbeing needs of participants, and reaching new audiences. In so doing, it reinforced its value as a cultural asset and highlighted the importance of sustaining local museum services. The poet Cecil Day-Lewis wrote that ‘selfhood begins with a walking away’ and the process was a walking away from established ways of working. Traditional linear hierarchies became almost irrelevant as individual team members were placed at the centre of this risk-taking virtual project, creating a collegiate approach that would continue to influence how we work together post-pandemic. In the process, a new museum self was created, one that values staff working outside personal and professional comfort zones while acknowledging that, whilst we all have a particular professional remit, it takes a team approach to keep the service relevant.

The need to balance workloads must also be acknowledged: the original #VirtualMuseum was in operation for just over a year and, as the doors of Lisburn Museum re-opened, it was difficult to maintain the same level of digital service without additional resources. Recent research has highlighted the need for recognition of the essential social role that museums have played during the pandemic, but the Museum is keenly aware of the need to properly resource both in-venue and digital cultural participation.

Re-opening: Lisburn Museum’s Response Recovery Plan
The process of preparing for re-opening in late August 2020 was labour intensive work and, due to resource restrictions, necessitated prioritisation away from the #VirtualMuseum service. In developing the Response Recovery Plan (RRP), the Museum Service Manager reflected on the learnings from offering a virtual service during the pandemic.

The ‘hokey-cokey’ dance continues today and,
at the time of writing, the museum management team are still working on different scenarios, from the dropping of Track-and-Trace, to changing social distancing guidelines, managing pinch points, updating way-finding signage, and visitor flow schemes. This is in addition to our regular, programmed work. As COVID-19 guidance changes, the RRP is updated: when the Museum partially reopened in late August 2020 we were working to version 12 and have had several changes since. The RRP outlines current service status; how the service would operate post lockdown; and the level of resources, staffing and budget required to continue or resume services. As we approached the second anniversary of lockdown, not all museum services had resumed: for example, the building continued to close early at 4pm to facilitate enhanced cleaning.

Analysing the Virtual Museum Service: the numbers game
Looking back on the Museum’s work during lockdown, and through the #VirtualMuseum initiatives described above, it was clear that we had a number of great successes as well as challenges. It was important to measure the value of the #Virtual Museum, and its sustainability, in order to assess the future of the museum service and to scope the advantages and disadvantages of continuing to provide a hybrid service.

The three mandated periods of closure in 2020–2021 (18 March – 24 August; 17 October – 15 December; 23 December – 29 April) had cut annual visits to 46,667 – a decrease of 70%. Even during the brief periods of opening (for example, eight days over 15–23 December 2020), visitor hesitancy and lack of confidence meant that comparative figures were far lower than for the same period in 2019–2020. Further, social distancing impacted on the number of group visits whilst the museum was open, with only 51 in 2021 compared with 368 in 2019. Visitor numbers are a crude but important metric for measuring the work of a museum and, in Lisburn Museum, COVID-19 resulted in a fall in visits by 70%–85% of pre-pandemic levels (Fig. 7).

Analysis of website and social media interactions shows (Fig. 8) that the Museum was successful in significantly increasing its digital engagement at a time of decreasing, or minimal, visitor numbers, with significant peaks in traffic from March 2020 through to September 2020 and a further peak in autumn 2020 as the museum closed again for lockdown #2. A focus on the website alone enables assessment of the significant impact of the #VirtualMuseum, which attracted 11,803 new users during the first lockdown (March–August 2020), with monthly users increasing by 64% to an average of 12,617
per month and page views doubling to 27,038 per month.

Online visits to Lisburn Museum include visitors to its website (www.lisburnmuseum.com), social media channels (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) and YouTube Channel.

Setting monthly visitor numbers to the building against monthly online engagement starkly shows the impact of temporary closures (Fig. 9). This clearly demonstrates that the #VirtualMuseum initiative helped to mitigate the catastrophic drop in visitor numbers.

**Lessons Learned and Prioritising Modes of Engagement**

Running a virtual museum service has taught us some important lessons. In practical terms, to improve accessibility and ensure the robustness of the service in the event of future lockdowns, we are Cloud-migrating the museum’s photographic collections. We have also been forced to reflect on our curatorial practice, including on the type of content we produce for the gallery in contrast to our #Virtualmuseum portal, and on the challenge – faced by many institutions post-pandemic – of addressing the differences in audience profiles between onsite and online visitors.

Importantly, our experience has taught us that without dedicated resources to plan, create, manage, and maintain digital content, the #VirtualMuseum, although valuable, is not sustainable. As Fig. 9 shows, in September 2021, online engagement dipped to the lowest levels since before lockdown. This drop was the result of staff shortages and accumulated leave and a return to physical museum programming, including the curation and installation of a new physical exhibition, *Lisburn: 100 years, 100 images* (17 September 2021–April 30, 2022). In addition, during this period, museum staff were involved in several new projects and events. In short, resources were spread too thinly and the demands of running the museum service afforded staff no time to create new digital content or invest in the #VirtualMuseum initiative.

**Conclusion**

Although aware of the huge advantages in offering a digital museum service and of the value of a website and using social media as a tool to engage online visitors and ultimately to encourage visitors into the museum, Lisburn Museum has found that maintaining a digital service alongside a physical museum is hugely challenging, particularly without additional resources. Developing a virtual museum in a time of crisis was Lisburn Museum’s response to rapidly changing circumstances. As mentioned above, local government museums are discretionary services; but for a short time, we were able to illustrate how essential museums are to human experience. During lockdown, Lisburn Museum’s online engagement spiked, but post-

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Fig. 9: Comparison of ‘in venue’ and online monthly visitor numbers 2019–2021.
lockdown, hard choices must be made and the focus must be on getting visitors back into the building. As alluded to in the introduction to this article, the Museum’s engagement ethos has always been on the real: real people (staff and participants), interacting with real objects, in a real building. A more integrated local authority approach to the resourcing of local museum services may be needed for a permanent hybrid model to become core local museum practice. In the interim, we will continue to dance the hokey-cokey between resources, programme development and balancing the ever-increasing expectations on our museum service.

Mr Paul Allison is the Museum Service Manager with responsibility for Education, Research & Collections and Administration & Technical managers. Paul created the recovery plan and is leading the museum service in the continued development of digital services.

Dr Collette Brownlee is Education Services Officer and was Acting Museum Service Manager at the time of the COVID–19 lockdown. Collette manages the education team who had responsibility for #VirtualMuseum education and learning content.

Dr Ciaran Toal is currently Acting Keeper of Collections and was Research Officer at the time of the COVID–19 lockdown with responsibility for #VirtualMuseum digital collection and exhibition development and content. Ciaran manages the collections team.

Notes


15. Group for Education in Museums (2021) Using Mindfulness in the Classroom as Part of Recovery. 20 July.


Making the Future at National Museums NI: Thinking differently and developing new working practices.

Niamh Baker

Making the Future (2018 – 2021) was a collaborative Peace IV project that, in National Museums NI, used collections and engagement to explore diversity and intolerance through ethical museum practices. Project exhibitions such as CultureLab and Collecting the Past/Making the Future. Marking centenaries 2021 pushed the parameters of museum interpretation to provoke discussion around cultural identity and mark the centenary of the partition of Ireland and the creation of Northern Ireland. Whilst being mindful of the challenges in interpreting these subjects with sensitivity and inclusivity, our approach was also innovative and experimental. This paper will outline how we developed these exhibitions and the associated engagement programmes to challenge preconceptions and encourage reflection.

Background

Making the Future was a collaborative regional programme funded through the PEACE IV programme and delivered by a consortium comprising National Museums NI, the Nerve Centre, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, and Linen Hall Library. Beginning in 2018, the project used collections and engagement to explore nine interlinked thematic strands, with the aims of exploring the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland, assessing where we are as a society today, and empowering people to create a vision for future change. Of these strands, through exhibitions, events, learning resources and digital content, National Museums NI delivered on the ‘Troubles Art,’ ‘CultureLab’ and ‘Partition’ themes.

Making the Future’s strapline was ‘Everyone has a Voice, Everyone has a Story, Everyone has a Future’. In keeping with this ethos, participants from different communities, cultural and religious backgrounds gained multiple opportunities to be creative and gain new skills. While building on National Museums NI’s previous success with ‘Decade of Centenaries’ exhibitions and engagement, this new project not only increased the visibility of collections, but also further enhanced opportunities for community discussion. In doing so, it promoted understanding of, and participation in, museum practice and met the overarching aims of PEACE IV in enhancing societal cohesion.

One component of Making the Future was the collection of both historic and contemporary material, for use in project exhibitions, connected to our past and our cultural identity in Northern Ireland. Mindful of our responsibilities according to Northern Ireland’s Section 75 equality legislation, we are committed to improving the diversity and representativeness of the collections. Through Making the Future and its exhibitions and engagement, we explored identity, diversity, and intolerance; demonstrating our commitment to a genuinely inclusive and ethical approach to museum practice.

By 2020, Making the Future had been underway for over a year and various exhibition and
engagement activities for the different strands of the project were up and running. The *Troubles Art* travelling exhibition, comprising reflections on the impact and complexity of the Troubles from artists from Northern Ireland and beyond, had travelled to Derry/Londonderry, Fermanagh, Armagh, Lisburn, and Monaghan. The public impact of Ulster Museum’s *CultureLab* exhibition, launched in February, was rapidly gathering pace and we recruited additional engagement staff to deliver surrounding community engagement programmes. In addition, plans for marking the centenary of partition and the creation of Northern Ireland were in development, a process requiring an especially considered response within the context of Brexit. With the March 2020 lockdown, arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus of *Making the Future* moved to the presentation of collections online and to virtual exhibitions, social media, digital engagement, and creative virtual programming. This article looks at the rationale behind the *Making the Future* project at National Museums NI, how it developed and how we adapted our working practices in response to the COVID–19 pandemic. It will explore the conceptualisation and delivery of project exhibitions and how they demonstrate National Museum NI’s vision of ‘telling the stories of our past, challenging our present, shaping our future’.

**CultureLab**

*CultureLab* aimed to push the parameters of museum interpretation. Centring on the strapline ‘Don’t Believe the Stereotype,’ it avoided attempting to provide definitive or accepted narratives about identity in Northern Ireland, while also acknowledging that interpreting this subject must be done responsibly. A review in *Museums Journal* confirmed that this experimental approach had succeeded in providing space for serious reflection on the cultural state of play, in its description of the exhibition as ‘risky, challenging, funny, thought–provoking and revolutionary.’

The exhibition included objects selected to provoke discussion and to support new questions around culture and identity in both Northern Ireland’s past and present. Objects offered glimpses into how identities on the island of Ireland have been and continue to be shaped, helped to challenge preconceptions and intolerance, and encouraged reflection. Items included a Gaelic League bannerette from Hannahstown, Sir Edward Carson’s court uniform as Solicitor General for Great Britain and Ireland, a ‘We Should All Be Feminists’ T–Shirt by Dior designer Maria Grazia Chiuri, an ‘Our Planet Our Rights’ poster from the Fridays for Future climate strike demonstrations, and a map of Gaelic East Belfast from Turas — an Irish language project.

*CultureLab* was an interactive exhibition structured around a concept of ‘Think, Test and Explore.’ Intended to unpack cultural heritage to help build a better understanding of the formation of identities and traditions over centuries, the ‘Think’ section included both historic and contemporary objects that, when juxtaposed, aided discovery of symbolism and stereotypes. Reference to Catholic and Protestant culture was ‘placed in conversation with subcultures’ that developed during the recent conflict and are present today in Northern Ireland. While developing the exhibition and thinking about then and now, we considered how best to pose questions concerning how perceptions about the past shape young people’s identities – a process that was ongoing even as we were writing labels and printing graphics. Objects selected to encourage reflection included a ‘Love Equality’ placard borrowed from the Rainbow Project, used in the campaign for equal marriage which became law in Northern Ireland just a month before the exhibition opened, and the work of the artist James Ashe, whose badges bearing the slogans ‘Save Sodomy from Ulster’ and ‘Ulster Says Yeooo’ have reinvented past political campaigns.

A further opportunity to explore different perspectives and some well–known stereotypes was provided through the recreation of the ‘differences’ blackboard from the opening episode of the March 2019 second series of *Derry Girls,* which had already acquired ‘iconic status’ before the episode ended. During the episode, Erin (Saoirse–Monica Jackson) and friends from her Catholic all–girls secondary school participate in a ‘Friends Across the Barricade’ cross–community weekend with a school group of Protestant boys. When asked what Catholics and Protestants have in common, they leave the ‘similarities’ blackboard blank whilst filling up the ‘differences’ blackboard with comical stereotypes such as ‘Protestants like to march’ and ‘Catholics like to walk,’ ‘Protestants keep their toasters in the cupboard’ and ‘Catholic gravy is all Bisto.’

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58
journalist Donald Clarke describes, ‘McGee has selected her slurs and generalisations brilliantly. They cross the spectrum from genuine prejudice to harmless misconception.’ This humorous capturing of all too familiar ‘differences’ in black and white provoked reflection on and highlighted the absurdity of ethnic stereotyping.

Following the blackboard, the section of the exhibition dedicated to the concept of ‘Test’ gave visitors the chance to test preconceptions and challenge traditional stereotypes through the ‘religious stereotype calculator’. A playful digital interactive in which users answer questions based on stereotypes drawn from the ‘differences’ blackboard to produce an exact percentage of how ‘Catholic’ and/or ‘Protestant’ they would be in the world of ‘Derry Girls’. Combining the blackboard with the interactive was critical in establishing the tone of the exhibition: ‘a mix of provocation, originality and humour’ that used collections to provoke discussion, asking us to look again at cultural identity in a place where it is sensitive and disputed.

In the ‘Explore’ section of CultureLab, visitors heard the voices from people of diverse backgrounds and age groups who had spoken about issues of identity and culture important to them while engaging with Making the Future programmes across Northern Ireland and the border counties. Through questions such as ‘how would you judge a person by what they said or how they looked?’, we invited visitors to connect the audio recordings, animated by BAFTA-nominated artist John McCloskey, with photographs of the contributors. In combination with the first two, through this final section of CultureLab, the
exhibition ‘introduce[d] the idea that you can be more than one thing, challenging stereotypes through humour and introducing intersectionality as a more accurate model of understanding identity in today’s Northern Ireland.’

When Ulster Museum’s doors closed in March 2020, we worked rapidly with Nerve Centre colleagues to make collections, interactives, and participant stories virtually accessible. Combined evaluation of the audience response to the exhibition, including both in-person and online visitors, showed that 85% agreed that the use of pop culture, humour and personal stories had been a good way of challenging stereotypes. 79% said that participants’ stories had made them think about their own culture and identity. All agreed both that the Ulster Museum offers a safe and open place to explore and discuss culture and identity and that it promotes local culture in a positive way.

The overwhelmingly positive comments included:

‘Very much enjoyed the mix of history and pop culture, it’s a very positive way to allow all ages to learn and take an interest.’

‘I think it’s brilliant that you are helping to shift needless boundaries. Well done.’

‘...great to see this discussion out in the open.’

‘...this exhibition made a point of showing what we have in common and challenged a new way of thinking making me feel a lot more positive about my culture.’

This feedback enabled us to reflect and build on our working practices to deliver the final exhibition of Making the Future: Collecting the Past/Making the Future. Marking centenaries 2021.


This was the exhibition with which the Ulster Museum reopened in May 2021, as COVID–19 lockdown restrictions eased; also available online. Marking the centenary of the partition of Ireland and the creation of Northern Ireland, this was part of National Museums NI’s 2021–2022 ‘100 Years Forward’ programme. The exhibition used historical and contemporary collections to explore the legacies and ongoing impacts on our lives of experiences during Home Rule, War, and Revolution, as the events directly preceding and after partition. Beside the 200 objects on display, the voices of younger Making the Future project participants could be heard speaking about conflict, culture, society and identity. The purpose was again to combine objects representing historic debates with contemporary reflection; to stimulate conversations about social, economic, and environmental challenges facing new generations; and encourage visitors to think about their hopes and fears for the future.

As a snapshot taken at its own moment in time, Collecting the Past/Making the Future provided a space to consider multiple perspectives on history, culture, and identity, and — in doing so — to better understand our shared identities. Everyone was invited to take part, and everyone could draw their own conclusions. To encourage audiences to ‘curate’ their own experience and unpack their own stories around partition, we used an exhibition wall with windows, through which visitors could look at objects displayed on museum trolleys as though they were being unpacked in a museum store, and graphics depicted storage boxes and crates. In this way, the exhibition represented what we do as a museum and how museums collect objects and stories, with a view to looking forward.

The exhibition displayed portraits donated by the artist Sir John Lavery to both the Belfast Municipal Museum and Art Gallery (which later became the Ulster Museum) and The Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin’s city gallery. Depicting significant political leaders who represented and harnessed the hopes and fears of the two broad traditions that existed in Ireland at the time of partition, the portraits offer unique insights into the period. Alongside these, ‘selfie stations’ allowed visitors to capture their own portraits and, therefore, to be part of the exhibition themselves. Further interactives included a touch screen which asked, ‘What do you think is most important to you as we face the future?’ Choosing from a selection of twenty–five themes, many represented by images from our collection, these perspectives were projected into a ‘future space’ of cumulative visitor responses. Together, the objects and interactives in the exhibition enabled thinking about where we have come from, whether we can see the past differently, and how we want to shape our future.
Visitor feedback to *Collecting the Past/Making the Future* indicated that 62.1% felt that they learned something new. The majority had enjoyed the exhibition and most felt both that the museum was a safe and open space to explore and discuss the past; that different perspectives about the shared history of Northern Ireland and Ireland were well represented. Comments included:

‘*Didn’t know much about partition and the nuances of the time period. The objects brought it to life…’*  

‘*Past brought us to this present.*’  

‘*...I had gained some new information & could make a better decision about partition.*’  

‘*More connected to the history of my home country. More able to form my own opinions…’*”

New engagement opportunities and outcomes

By building on the innovative museum practices National Museums NI developed through *Making the Future*, we believe we can further develop understanding of, and encourage further learning from, the past and can devise new engagement practice that has a crucial role for the future. This innovation was accelerated by the need for rapid adaptation of our access and engagement strategies in March 2020. Driven by thinking about what participants would need during this time and what would be important to capture for future generations, we created virtual initiatives to engage people through new opportunities to access and discuss collections. Using Slack,” we met as a team to change direction, developing new ideas and digital engagement programmes founded on the collection.

‘*New Parameters*’ was among the early pilot programmes. Providing access to National Museums NI collections featuring 1970s and 1980s photojournalism from Martin Nangle, Bill Kirk, Frankie Quinn, and AnnaLee O’Carrol, it also enabled participants to creatively capture the ‘new parameters’ of their lockdown experiences, documenting their lives through the themes of ‘containment’, ‘isolation’, ‘division’, ‘connection to place’, and ‘new perspectives’. Participants
connected with Bill Kirk to hear about how he had documented Belfast during and after the Troubles and, through reflections that resonated with our situation in Spring 2020, he also talked of how his work captured anxiety and uncertainty during the conflict. Participants had opportunities to develop their skills through photography masterclasses; and, via the Slack channel, accessed recorded sessions and shared ideas and photographs, interacting with each other and our team.

The work ‘New Parameters’ participants produced was poignant and powerful and we have acquired the photographs taken by participants into the National Museums NI collection. As an organisation actively engaged in contemporary collecting, we recognise the importance of ensuring that our collections represent the impact of COVID-19 for current and future generations; and are mindful, too, of the public mood and our ethical responsibilities.

Participant feedback gathered through evaluation of the ‘New Parameters’ programme allowed us to reflect on the outcomes of these new working practices. The responses demonstrate that participants found the programme meaningful and supportive:

‘It has been an exceptional programme that came at the right time to reduce the stress and isolation of lockdown. It has helped me see things from a different perspective, literally though a different lens and has helped maintain my creativity during a difficult time.’

‘As a person living in a rural area, it was a fantastic opportunity to engage in such a rewarding and creative project, which I would in normal times have to travel to Belfast or Dublin to attend. In particular during the stress of lockdown, this project has been a great inspiration and a source of calm.’

Building on the successful virtual engagement practices it helped establish, we have applied ‘New Parameters’ methods to deliver it for a second time with a new group of participants, and have also used it in ‘Folktales’, which looked at our folklore collections to inspire creative writing; ‘The Iconic T-Shirt Club’, a pop-culture programme inviting participants to create slogan t-shirts inspired by items in our collection; ‘Activism’, a series of artist-led workshops and talks on creating change; and ‘Portraits Past and Present’, in which participants worked with the internationally renowned artist Colin Davidson, who was responsible for the Silent Testimony exhibition.

Summary
Since its 2018 beginnings, Making the Future at National Museums NI has involved ‘thinking differently’ to place the democratisation of collections at the centre of everything we do. In Northern Ireland, confronting stereotypes, prejudice and exclusionary practices in museums and wider society means confronting societal division in this place. Through CultureLab and Collecting the Past/Making the Future, we championed inclusion, diversity, and accessibility.
within museum practice, and collaborated with participants to think about the future and continue to do so.

Overall evaluation of *Making the Future* substantiates its positive outcomes: 70% of visitors and participants agreed that they now see issues from the past in Ireland and Northern Ireland from a different perspective, while 80% agreed that taking part in the project had made them less prejudiced and more open to different opinions and identities. *Making the Future* posed ‘questions rather than providing answers, positioning the museum as a ‘verb’ – a place for making, thinking, growing, conversing and developing ideas, people and places.’

In conclusion, *Making the Future* enabled National Museums NI to develop sustainable working practices that it will continue to use to make a positive difference in Northern Ireland. COVID-19 restrictions necessitated the adaptation and creation of new working practices but rising to these new challenges also produced new opportunities and outcomes. Through the exhibition and engagement practices we developed, National Museums NI engaged with a wide range of participants, inviting them to take part in programmes that have challenged their thinking and encouraged them to make their voices heard. In so doing, they have told stories about their lives and proposed their ideas for a shared future.

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**Notes**

1. PEACE IV is managed by the Special EU Programmes Body.


3. Hannnahstown is a village outside Belfast.


5. The Rainbow Project, based in Belfast, aims to promote the health and wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ people and their families across Northern Ireland. See The Rainbow Project | Facebook. (Accessed 20 April 2022).

6. Written by Lisa McGee and produced by Hat Trick Productions, *Derry Girls* follows the lives of four teenage girls and an English cousin to take a unique look at growing up in Derry during the 1990s.


8. The popular ‘religious stereotype calculator’ is also available online: see CultureLab (2020) Who Are You? “Sister Michael, I don’t have a Protestant!” Available at: https://culturelab.makingthefuture.eu/who-are-you (accessed 20 April 2022).


Can citizen curation facilitate diverse participation in museums? Through their contribution to the European Union Horizon 2020 SPICE Project, the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) and The Open University are developing a case study which uses digital technologies to support communities to select and interpret works of art and share their perspectives. Reflecting on workshops with underrepresented communities, this article outlines the concept of citizen curation and argues for the potential of Slow Looking as a means of promoting active participation.

Introduction

Bringing about change can often feel uncomfortable. This is because you need to face difficult topics, have difficult conversations and hear about the experiences of others which may be unpleasant. However, without this discomfort change would never happen.

Black and Irish citizen curation script, November 2021.

Renewed debates on decolonisation and cultural democracy challenge museums to radically re-imagine themselves and to be re-imagined. These are not easy conversations to have, as they force a confrontation not only with the colonial legacies and historical roles of museums but also with their present function and composition.

At their heart, these debates are about what a museum is and who it is for; that museum visitors are highly unrepresentative of the public at large is an uncomfortable fact. In 2016, a visitor profiling report commissioned by the Northern Ireland Museums Council found that independent visitors to six local museums were most likely to be classed as ‘well-off’, ‘high-earning’, and ‘affluent’. In 2015, in addition to reporting that UK residents from higher socio-economic groups accounted for 87% of museum visitors, The Warwick Commission found that ‘the gap in participation between the white and BAME population is widening’. The challenge was not moreover only one of accessibility, but also of relevance: ‘low engagement is … the effect of a mismatch between the public’s taste and the publicly funded cultural offer’.

In the EU Horizon 2020–funded SPICE Project, IMMA and Open University are using citizen curation to democratise participation in meaning-making, to assist communities in finding relevance in the collections for themselves. This article outlines a case study in which IMMA is developing methods and digital tools to support people from a range of backgrounds to establish personal meaning in works of art. Central to this approach is the articulation of two distinct processes: interpretation, in which participants share personal responses about artworks; and mediation, in which they develop a set of questions and reflections in the form of an activity or script to guide the interpretations of others. Together, these processes open a way for the museum to support multiple voices around their objects, in which people not only interpret objects
but also mediate how others understand and experience them.

**Citizen curation**

‘Citizen curation’ can be defined as individuals and groups from outside the museum sector actively engaging in curatorial activities – such as the selection and interpretation of artworks – to communicate ideas and stories. Recalling citizen science and citizen journalism, in this case study we use ‘citizen’ to refer to an active mode of civic engagement rather than to the legal right to belong to a particular country.

Elsewhere, ‘citizen curation’ has been used to describe the process of training members of the public in professional curatorial methods. It was deployed, for example, by Barry Mauer with participants who responded through an exhibition to the 2016 Orlando Florida Pulse Nightclub shooting which targeted Latin and LGBTQ communities. Mauer defines citizen curation as a form of writing which is accessible to many, but which requires commitment and dedication:

> a pencil is probably the cheapest technology but the most expensive to learn to use effectively. The literacy required for becoming a professional writer takes years of practice and hard work to attain.  

As part of a further University of Central Florida research initiative (supported by Mauer and developed by Amanda Hill and others), students, likened to the amateur curators of the surrealists who challenged the ‘ways institutions like museums and galleries dominated and dictated the conversation’, were invited to create a digital exhibit. In the SPICE Project, we are developing the concept of citizen curation to explore how meaningful elements of curatorial practice can be employed by underrepresented communities to share their perspectives through the creation of digital activities. Crucially, this requires a lower time commitment than that needed to design a physical exhibition, making meaningful participation more accessible to hard-to-reach groups.

**Slow Looking**

‘Slow Looking’ is a key engagement method used in this case study in relation to visual art. Not unique to curatorial practice, the term has been defined as ‘taking the time to carefully observe more than meets the eye at first glance’ and as ‘a mode of learning, a means of gaining knowledge through observation’. Slow Looking aims to encourage more profound ways of looking at and experiencing art, providing guided forms of interpretation that focus not on acquiring domain knowledge, but on sharing subjective and personal experiences as a legitimate response and for supporting visitors to interpret works for themselves.

From 2019–20, as part of its Art and Ageing Programme for older people, IMMA’s Visitor Engagement Team developed a series of Slow Looking Art videos. Taking one artwork each, these start by reminding the viewer to make sure they are comfortable and inviting them to let their eyes wander over the work. Initial questions, introduced to prompt the viewer to think about what they see (for example, ‘what is our attention drawn to first?’), are followed by contextual

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**Fig. 1. Screenshot from an IMMA Slow Looking Art video.**

Credit: IMMA
information. Posing questions similar to those that may be asked during a group tour at the museum, this process is individualised through video, while social media platforms like YouTube do not always provide a safe space for viewers to share their responses and to access those of others.

The success of the video series led us to ask whether Slow Looking could be mediated by participants from outside the museum and could provide a scalable means of encouraging people from underrepresented groups to author narratives about visual art that both centred their own perspectives and shared them with others. To achieve this ambition, we designed Viewpoints, a web application with a data infrastructure that could efficiently manage an online collection of over 3,000 IMMA artworks. Low on technical requirements and compatible with multiple platforms (smartphone, tablet, laptop), the app helped us to maximise accessibility to target groups, including asylum seekers living in Direct Provision.

The use of the app brought with it ethical concerns surrounding privacy, surveillance, exclusion, and digital rights. Typically, social media platforms retain the licence to use, change and profit from user content. In our project, citizen contributions are recallable, so that participants retain the indefinite right to withdraw their consent for the use of their content by the museum. To ensure an empowering process, help legitimise contributions, and support participants’ dialogue with one another, in an ‘Other People’ section of the app, we designed—in the ability of participants to explore the responses of others.

A prototype of Viewpoints was first used as part of the IMMA Outdoors programme in July 2021. Focusing on a selection of eight outdoor artworks, it encouraged visitors to respond to a set of randomly selected prompts modelled on the IMMA Slow Looking video series. These included questions (fig. 3) that were both observational (e.g., ‘What is going on in this sculpture?’) and imaginative (‘How might you recreate this piece using materials around your own home?’). Responses were insightful and interesting: Gary Hume’s playful bronze sculpture Back of a Snowman, for example, reminded participants of ‘a ten-pin bowling skittle’, ‘an ice-cream sundae’, and ‘a magnetic desk toy’; while Bernar Venet’s 217 5° Arc x 12 was described as ‘outstretched arms’, ‘a shipwreck’, ‘hands reaching out to touch’, and ‘part of the roof’. Emotional responses to standing next to the artworks were also captured: visitors responded that they felt ‘happy and relaxed’, ‘hopefulness’, ‘sadness’, and ‘oppression’.

While the Viewpoints prototype enabled visitors to engage in autonomous Slow Looking, it was not without its limitations. Firstly, the random prompts necessarily limited the longer-form engagement that Slow Looking is intended to provide. Secondly, the site-based way in which the prototype was used engaged existing audiences rather than broadening access. Finally, while the question-led format enabled users to share their perspectives and explore those of others, the questions themselves had come from museum staff.

Deep Viewpoints was the app we developed to tackle these problems. Designed to be used with groups rather than individual visitors, this aimed to support communities through sequential thematic ‘scripts’ of questions, reflections, and stories. Directed at connecting participants with IMMA collections through universal concerns (e.g., ‘family’, ‘home’ and ‘activism’), Deep Viewpoints retained the ‘Other People’ section to continue
to enable them to connect with one another’s responses.

Citizen curation in practice at IMMA
From November 2021 to March 2022, asylum seekers, Black and LGBTQ participants, migrants, and young people in detention engaged through workshops with The Narrow Gate of the Here-and-Now, a museum-wide IMMA exhibition showcasing the history of the Museum since 1991. The focus for most workshops was the first chapter of this exhibition, ‘Queer Embodiment’, which explores representation, oppression, resistance, HIV/AIDS, bodily autonomy, domestic violence, and the experiences of Traveller, migrant and refugee communities.

The three-part structure of the workshops included an exhibition tour, Slow Looking with an IMMA mediator, and engagement with the ‘Deep Viewpoints’ app. Selecting themes that caught their interest, participants located artworks and worked through the existing ‘scripts’. After reflecting on their responses and those of others, they then decided on a theme to explore as a group, added artworks to their collection, and built a sequence of stages to develop an interactive script of their own.

New perspectives
Black and Irish is an activist and advocacy organisation for Black and mixed-race communities in Ireland. Representatives of this group created an activity, ‘Necessary discomfort’, with the following sub-heading:
Bringing about change can often feel uncomfortable. This is because you need to face difficult topics, have difficult conversations, and hear about the experiences of others, which may be unpleasant. However, without this discomfort change would never happen.

They opened their activity with a reflection:

The Black and Irish team were really struck by a number of pieces in this exhibition. Part of our work is having honest discussions around race and racism in Ireland. At times these conversations can bring about a level of discomfort. We found that while some of these pieces were uncomfortable to look at ... their message is what’s necessary to create change.

Their activity focused on four artworks, posing a series of questions such as ‘What uncomfortable aspect of the human experience is revealed here?’, ‘What does opening up and speaking about your experiences do to help others?’, and ‘How would you feel living under constant surveillance?’. The Black and Irish script was subsequently used by other communities to guide them through the exhibition. The ‘Other People’ section of the app displays how different communities have responded to the questions Black and Irish posed: a group of participants from Direct Provision wrote that it made them ‘think about family and how people separate’ and another answered that they felt ‘Vulnerability, displacement and longing’.

New and unexpected interpretations of artworks emerged during the workshops. A group of participants from ‘Migrant Women – Opportunities for Work’ (Mi-WOW) showed the potential for revitalising museum objects by contributing new layers of meaning. One of the works they included in their script was Alice Maher’s *Berry Dress*. A child’s dress decorated with berries that have withered and dried over time, this was first introduced to the group through a script authored by IMMA that framed the work in terms of temporality, focusing on the passage of time and the loss of childhood innocence – ‘What happens to berries over time?’. However, the participants took a different view on its significance. The questions they posed focused on the meaning, not of the dried berries on the outside of the dress, but on the needles within; for Mi-WOW, these pointed to bodily, uterine pain: ‘Look inside the dress at the needles and describe how you feel.’ Choosing the theme of ‘Activism’, their script reframed the work as political and feminist and their questions opened discussions of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights (fig.4-5).

A group of Afghan refugees living in the Mosney Direct Provision Centre used the lens of war and peace to mediate an exhibition with a different set of concerns. Exploring ‘Chapter 2: the Anthropocene’, which examines human impacts on the planet, their script invited visitors on a ‘short tour of four pieces that look at different feelings of peace’. One artwork on which they focused was John Kindness’ *Dulce et Decorum est...*, in which homeless Vietnam veterans are pictured on the yellow bonnet of a New York City taxi. Their script drew attention though not to the representations of the veterans, but to the
taxi bonnet, which they likened to soldiers and civilians on the front line of war who are the first to feel its impact.

‘Queer Reflections’, a script authored by Dublin-based Black Queer Book Club, included an artwork from an artist outside the IMMA Collection as a suggested corrective to their perceived lack of representation of ‘queer joy’ within it. This connects with the call from Museum Detox for ‘Outsider Activists’ – people who are free to be critical by virtue of their position outside museum hierarchies and who are not dependent on them for their salary, who therefore as co-curators can help to decolonise museums.

In Oberstown Children Detention Campus, citizen curation was used to facilitate engagement with the IMMA Collection for a group of young people who lack physical access to the museum. SPICE tools and methods helped the young people articulate and share their perspectives, both on their own paintings and works they had selected from the museum’s collection. Their selections and perspectives, captured over a series of workshops in Oberstown, formed the basis for a physical exhibition of the young people’s work at IMMA, *The Ride Away from the Storm*, which opened in May 2022.

**Reflections**

The interpretations of citizen curators in these workshops helped us to understand how people experience collections in distinct ways and have led to ongoing work at IMMA as we further develop these tools and methods. While each intervention captures ideas and perspectives at a particular point in time, it is clear that citizen curation projects must be open-ended to allow their possibilities for the enrichment of creative experiences to take shape.

Citizen curation is a channel through which people can share their perspectives. It can help
people to make museums more relevant to them by mediating engagements with collections for themselves and for others. It is also a means for museums to learn and to become more polyphonic and democratic spaces. While not always an easy process, as noted by the Black and Irish citizen script above, ‘without this discomfort, change would never happen’.

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Notes
1. These debates are not new. For example, as early as 1970 Ghanaian filmmaker Nii Kwate Owoo produced You Hide Me, in which he presented the case for the restitution of African art in the British Museum.


4. The research leading to this publication has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement SPICE No 870. This article reflects the authors’ views. The Research Executive Agency (REA) is not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

5. The notion of scripts has been used in science education, as a method by which educators can specify a scientific inquiry for students by selecting and instantiating a sequence of stages related, for example, to hypothesis formulation and data collection. See Sharples M, Scanlon E, Ainsworth S, et al. (2015) Personal inquiry: Orchestrating science investigations within and beyond the classroom. *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 24(2): 308–341.


10. IMMA’s participation in the Museum Technology Working Group has been crucial in helping to articulate these ethical concerns. The Working Group consists of museums and cultural centres across Ireland and is supported by the IMA and Irish Museums Trust.
11. Between November 2021 and March 2022, the following groups and organisations took part in citizen curation workshops as part of the SPICE Project: Migrant Women – Opportunities for Work (Mi-WOW) via New Communities Partnership, Black and Irish, Black Queer Book Club, asylum seekers and staff and students from Dublin City University as part of the MELLIE Programme, and young people at Oberstown Children Detention Campus.


13. This group is part of the umbrella migrant support network, New Communities Partnership.


Reflecting on the possibilities of oral history in heritage, Barbara Allen Bogart maintained that ‘an oral historian collects memories in the same way a museum collects artifacts.’ Increasingly, museums themselves are collecting oral testimony and utilizing it within their educational frameworks. For 14 Henrietta Street, the Your Tenement Memories project has influenced programming, tours, and publications. Through interviews with museum guides at 14 Henrietta Street, this article examines their dual role, not only as presenters of information, but also as practitioners in the gathering of oral testimony.

Introduction
Writing in his landmark 1991 text, Dublin Street Life and Lore: An Oral History, Kevin Kearns lamented how:

Collectively, Dublin’s numerous street types make up a valuable repository of what has been termed ‘urban folklore’. They possess their own heritage, customs, traditions and city lifeways, compromising what local historian Éamonn MacThomáis calls Dublin’s unique ‘lore of the street’. Yet there is virtually no written record of Dublin’s street figures and their lore in archival collections.

A Professor of Geography at the University of Northern Colorado, Kearns has made annual research trips to Ireland which have led to a wide variety of publications exploring oral history, from the urban village of Stoneybatter to the lives of Dublin’s female street traders and a groundbreaking study of urban living, Dublin Tenement Life: An Oral History (1996). In September 2021, Kearns was awarded the Lord Mayor of Dublin Scroll, an honour rarely bestowed on one living outside of the city.

Much has thankfully changed since Kearns penned his battle cry, that ‘this unique heritage deserves to be recorded and preserved for future generations of Dubliners.’ Today, the city is home to a growing collection of projects which seek to capture the historical experience of Dublin’s people. This article will explore 14 Henrietta Street’s oral history work through a focus on Your Tenement Memories, a project which aims to capture the living memories of tenement life in Dublin. An initiative from Dublin City Council Culture Company, this collaborative 14 Henrietta Street programme has engaged with communities across Dublin city and county since launching in early 2019.

Oral history has been especially important to museums focused on, or partially focused on, working class social history. In the case of the Tenement Museum in New York’s Lower East Side, for example, Barbara W Sommer notes:

The Tenement Museum interprets working class and immigrant history, but much information about its two sites is not available through the written record. Oral history information is the foundation...
of its interpretation. Exhibit designers draw on the information for everything from describing families who were residents of the building to placing furniture in the exhibitions.  

At 14 Henrietta Street, such information has also shaped the guided tour and furnishing of the museum environment. On entering the building, the first artefact a visitor encounters is a framed religious image belonging to the Brannigans, a former resident family, which hangs on the very same nail that it did in the 1940s. This information, brought to the attention of the museum in interviews with Peter Brannigan, is an example of how the testimony of those who knew the building as a home, and not a museum, shapes it today.  

Drawing on interviews conducted with the tour guides of 14 Henrietta Street, this article will demonstrate how the Your Tenement Memories project both influences the tour experience, and shapes programming output more broadly. Providing an overview of the museum and the varied forms of engagement – historical and cultural – which shape it, it will introduce the voices of guides who have shared thoughts on oral history and its place in this historic home. These guides have become gatherers of living memory and knowledge and their work centres the museum and its programming around oral history.

14 Henrietta Street: Making a Museum  
Trinity College Dublin’s Professor in Architectural History, Christine Casey, has described Henrietta Street as ‘the finest Early Georgian street in Dublin’ and ‘of the first importance in setting new standards of scale and ornament in domestic architecture.’ Commissioned by the Dublin City Council Culture Company and the council’s Heritage Office, architectural historian Melanie Hayes has published on the Georgian history of the building and its residents, while Timothy Murtagh has documented its gradual decline. Their research provides vital contextualization and historic knowledge to shape our understanding of the house and how the uses of buildings on the street changed over time.

Henrietta Street was the vision of Luke Gardiner, a pioneering developer, who in 1729 began the process of laying out the street. Number 14, built in the late 1740s, was first occupied by the Right Honourable Richard, Lord Viscount Molesworth and his second wife, Mary Jenney Usher. Owing to the presence at its apex of the King’s Inns, Ireland’s oldest school of law, the street withstood the dramatic decline visited upon the Irish capital by the 1801 Act of Union which stripped Dublin of parliamentary power. The fact that the former homes of the gentry became bureaucratic offices of the legal profession ensured a slower tumble downwards in Henrietta Street than happened in other parts of the Georgian city.

In 1876, landlord Thomas Vance acquired number 14, installing nineteen tenement flats of one, three, and four rooms. While other cities had high-quality, purpose-built tenements (a journalist in The Times recently wrote of how ‘there is no denying Scotland’s love affair with tenements’), Dublin’s nineteenth century tenements grew within the shells of earlier aristocratic homes. This tenement history is a core part of Henrietta Street’s story and contributed to the city’s sometimes uneasy relationship with its eighteenth-century architecture. The final tenement residents only left in the 1970s,
by which time conservationists had begun the process of revitalizing the street. Particularly active was historian, architect, and preservationist, Uinseann MacEoin, who leased homes and studios to artists for nominal rents. These efforts were acknowledged as ‘heroic and remarkable commitment[s] and steadfastness over the last thirty years’ in the Henrietta Street Conservation Plan (2004), an action of the Dublin City Heritage Plan carried out in conjunction with the Heritage Trust. The Conservation Plan identified 14 Henrietta Street as being at particular risk. Following the purchase of the house, completed in 2008, a decade-long journey commenced to ‘rescue, stabilize and conserve the house’. The conservation of the building, overseen by Shaffrey Architects, was recognised by several awards, including the RIAI Irish Architecture Awards prize for Best Conservation/ Restoration Project in 2018.

What kind of museum could occupy such a restored home? Which kind of artefacts – if any – could be placed within it to tell a story? Writing of historic house museums, preservation expert Laura C. Keim has noted:

House museums enable objects and narratives to co-exist in conversation, each enriching and contextualizing the other, and fostering experiential learning through a variety of senses. Exploring the past through the material objects of everyday life connects us to the core of common human experience across time.

Within 14 Henrietta Street there is a series of narratives, rather than only one: the aim was to not to create a Georgian townhouse museum or a tenement museum, but instead to provide a journey through a Dublin home in its different ages.

Engaging with the past(s)
References to 14 Henrietta Street as ‘the Tenement Museum’ are plentiful in press coverage but in fact, the focus of the museum is much broader in scope. There has been a clear focus on diverse narratives from the beginning, relating to the different periods in the history of the site; each offering unique approaches to interpretation and education. Beyond historical engagement with the building, the museum has also encouraged creative engagement.

There is a growing body of research on the opportunities — and challenges — for museums in creative engagement. In the UK National Museum Directors’ Conference’s report, Museums and Galleries: Creative Engagement, we read of how ‘museums and galleries, in common with many other major cultural institutions, traditionally offered the public — or a limited section of it — an exclusive version of art, culture or science.’ At 14 Henrietta Street, collaboration is used in a wide variety of fields to move beyond merely offering any ‘exclusive version’ of the past. For example, in ‘Museum’, a book of eleven sonnets and accompanying photography, poet Paula Meehan and photographer Dragana Jurišić were invited to collaborate on work inspired by the house. Paula Meehan’s poetry is incorporated within the tour, vividly brought to life as we are invited to imagine the experiences of Mary Jenney Usher of the house through a reconstructed bedroom.

When tours began, it quickly became apparent that tenement living had been a lived reality for many participants and that there was considerable potential to collaborate with them on the interpretation of the house. The following is drawn from interviews with three guides, Joe Kavanagh, Pat Garry, and Sheila Robinson, who shared how they engage with visitors through the Your Tenement Memories programme.

Oral History at 14 Henrietta Street
At the outset of the interviews with Joe, Pat, and Sheila, I asked each if they had been familiar with oral history before their involvement in Your Tenement Memories, perhaps as consumers, consulting researchers, or active participants. Joe mentioned Hands, a pioneering television programme by David Shaw-Smith, that documented craftspeople at work between 1978 and 1989. Kavanagh recalled how this had given him a sense of the importance of stories of everyday people, ‘This was oral history, but in a visual form’. Garry recounted the importance of storytelling and the oral tradition within his own household, and recalled Éamonn MacThomáis, a popular Dublin historian who had been a formative influence in shaping his own interest in oral histories:

Éamonn MacThomáis is Dublin’s greatest ever gift, he was absolutely brilliant. I knew him before he ever did the television programmes. I was involved
in the Liberties Festival and Éamonn MacThomáis, he almost single handedly made that festival.

MacThomáis, who produced a variety of historical works and memoir, placed great emphasis on capturing the oral tradition. The way in which he used oral history in telling the history of places made a defining impact on Garry and shaped his own tours, ‘The story is absolutely what makes a site.’

Robinson’s experience was different: while she had no familiarity with the work of MacThomáis, Kearns or others, ‘I had done my own oral histories, in terms of family oral histories.’

Responses to the building
While architectural, political, and social historical research is vital to understanding the people of the past, oral history allows museums to tell personal stories. Interactions between guides and participants at 14 Henrietta Street introduced us to people with stories that could inform the experience. Sheila Robinson, Joe Kavanagh, and Pat Garry were all conscious of the ability of the building, as a physical place, to inspire memory and recollection amongst visitors. Joe Kavanagh noted that this is not only personal memory, but is also communal and inter-generational:

On the tours you have people who lived in tenements, and you have the children of people who lived in tenements, who are here out of curiosity. The people who lived in tenements will recount their stories, but the children will recount the secondhand stories of their parents to you and it’s all quite a living thing.

He also described traditionally shared places of the home as a place where visitors are often forthcoming with personal memoir:

For me, I’ve found it’s happened a lot in the staircase and the landings, because the staircase and landings in tenement dwellings they can bring back memories for people, and sometimes not the best memories.

Pat Garry spoke of the importance of stories ‘not in the history books’, which can often supplement the other research. He emphasised his own personal response to the building on first entering it, recalling that:

There’s something about the house that just captures you, you become part of the house as soon as you walk in the door...the building took on a meaning for me that had never been taken on by a building before.

To his mind, this is an experience that many others have too on entering. The frequent sharing of recollection, which can occur on any tour, makes the museum feel different from any other he has encountered:

It’s a living museum for real people. It’s not a museum in the sense that you store goods one on top of the other or something like that. This is a people’s museum created for the stories of these people and by the stories of these people. It’s not your typical museum.

Similarly to Garry, Sheila Robinson was taken on
first entering the building by its physicality. To her, it was the contrast in its stairs – the opulence of the initial staircase and the crowded nature of the later staircase – which set her thinking of the duality of the site. It is a feeling that reaches its crescendo in the recreated tenement room known as ‘Darkest Dublin’:

*The floor comes up and the ceiling comes down, you can feel that, people can’t explain it, but you can feel it. I felt that when I first came here, that it was a great physical space to move through.*

Garry likewise recalled ‘Darkest Dublin’ as a room which tended to evoke strong feelings and a change in atmosphere. On a tour, a member of the public had spoken of her own family’s eviction from their room:

*She used a phrase I had never heard, which was ‘No rent and out with went.’ There was no grace period, and we don’t realise the hardship that was there and how people suffered.*

**Your Tenement Memories**

The potential of museum oral history programmes to establish meaningful connections with individuals and groups is clear. Exploring her oral history work at India’s Partition Museum at Amritsar, for example, Priyanka Seshadri recently noted:

*Oral history interviews rely on an ‘active human relationship between historians and their sources’.*

These interactions encourage museums to maintain consistent and long-term relationships with the people they interview.

Dublin City Council Culture Company is strongly committed to developing sustainable relationships with individuals and communities through oral history work and, in early 2019, commenced a series of *Your Tenement Memories* roadshows that visited community centres, libraries, and other civic spaces in the suburbs. These visits began with plans centering on identifying areas of Dublin with strong connections to the tenement past. Suburban developments such as Crumlin (on Dublin’s southside) and Cabra (on the northside) had resulted in significant migration outwards from the city centre in the 1930s, with further expansion in the 1950s, westwards, to places like Ballyfermot (colloquially known in Dublin then as ‘Bally–far–out’). Older suburbs are physically close to the city centre but families living in those that are newer and therefore more distant tend to engage with the city itself less and, for them, the experience of moving is a present memory.

The museum devised a clear and simple methodology for workshops and conversations utilising a ‘memories’ form, with appropriate releases and protections, which enabled trained oral history guides to transcribe the recollections of attendees. Where participants were willing, some of these forms led later to audio interviews. A framework for the sensitive and ethical collection of histories, and for the creation of a friendly, welcoming environment which put
participants at ease, was vitally important to the roadshows. Wherever possible, contact was established with existing local history groups, and many were contacted through libraries that had existing connections to local groups interested in historical and heritage events. In her interview, Sheila Robinson noted that turnout, which varied from venue to venue, was shaped by a number of factors but that ‘it also depended on how that particular suburb had connections, still, with the tenements.’ In the case of Ballyfermot, which is a more recent suburb, the presence of a strong local history group – who had programmed events themselves in the past on both oral history and the emergence of Dublin suburbia – ensured a significant collective willingness to partake.

In the memories of each guide who had participated in the Your Tenement Memories roadshow, there were individual moments that remained. For example, Joe Kavanagh, who had been active in developing musical tours of 14 Henrietta Street, remembered a special moment when a song, recalled by one interviewee, encouraged many in the room to collectively find their voice and join in.

It should be noted that even for the earlier periods of 14 Henrietta Street’s existence, for which there is an absence of direct memory, there is scope for oral history. Sheila Robinson, for example, recounted meeting two Molesworth family members during a guided tour. The Georgian residents of the street may not have known poverty, but as she made clear, ‘they had lives too, they had their ups and downs, they were human beings.’ Interviewing Molesworths who lived in the house is beyond us, of course, but interviewing their descendants is not. Likewise, there is the possibility to explore the Georgian heritage of the street in oral history focused on preservation and conservation.

The uses of Your Tenement Memories
Transcribing Your Tenement Memories has provided the museum with first-hand insights into the folk memory of twentieth century Dublin, and themes and characters frequently emerged that had not initially been considered in our examinations of the social history of the building. Frequent references, for example, were made to Dublin’s street characters, such as the Garda, Jim Branigan (remembered as ‘Lugs’ by generations of inner-city Dubliners who came to both fear and respect his paperwork-light approach to policing); and Thomas Dudley, a mid-twentieth century Dubliner affectionately known in the city as ‘Bang Bang’.

The playwright Dermot Bolger, whose play exploring Bang’s life has been published by Dublin City Council Culture Company, has described how ‘Bang Bang’ were the words he shouted… whenever he jumped from the platforms of open-backed buses to open fire with the huge key he carried in his pocket. Following frequent mentions of Bang Bang in the testimonies gathered by Your Tenement Memories, 14 Henrietta Street invited Daniel Lambert – a young Dubliner who led the campaign for a memorial at the grave of Bang Bang – to partake in a Teatime Talk, the museum’s monthly scheduled
talks and presentations. Future talks, including talks on the culinary history of the city and a talk exploring Dublin’s Jewish community, have also been programmed in recognition of the strong presence of these themes in our oral history collection. These and other stories have strongly influenced tours of the museum, bringing personal detail that can help in our understanding of the space. Recorded in the publication as 14 Henrietta Street: From Tenement to Suburbia 1922–1979, these stories comprise the third in the trilogy of books on the history of 14 Henrietta Street published by the Dublin Culture Company.

Your Tenement Memories, the Pandemic, and the future

Like all aspects of 14 Henrietta Street’s work, continuing to deliver Your Tenement Memories was challenging throughout the COVID–19 pandemic. When unable to meet with individuals or conduct roadshows, the museum refocused on providing online content such as a four-week course on the history of social housing in Dublin. This was a period too of planning for future oral history outreach, when we identified areas of the city which will undoubtedly have much to contribute to the tapestry of memory that is developing.

Establishing relationships is vital for museums, but so too is maintaining them. Oral history has allowed 14 Henrietta Street the privilege of learning from those for whom the tenements were home and has allowed individuals and community groups to become active participants in a developing social history space. Oral history has also allowed the museum’s guides not only to conduct tours, but also to gather testimony which will shape the museum experience into the future.

Donal Fallon is a social historian with the Dublin City Council Culture Company and is author of 14 Henrietta Street: From Tenement to Suburbia (Dublin, 2021). He was previously Historian in Residence to Dublin City Council.

Notes


Women’s museums globally explore the connections between gender, human rights, women’s movements, and societal development. Yet there is no dedicated museum that focuses on women or women’s history in Ireland. Does Ireland need a women’s museum? This article presents the findings of a 2021 survey in Ireland that explored current museum programmes and exhibitions related to women’s studies and gender history, and the opinions of Irish museum professionals on the availability of such resources in local cultural and social establishments. Based on its results, gathered from thirty responses from people working in national cultural institutions, local authority museums, and subject-specific museums, this article suggests that Irish museums need a wider range of initiatives and projects to interpret history in a more gender-balanced way, including from women’s perspectives. It concludes that a women’s museum is needed in Ireland to empower communities, explore gender history, contribute to the positive construction of Irish identity, and create new research opportunities.

Introduction
Discourse shapes both our understanding of the world and the societies in which we live, and museums produce socially accepted discourse by presenting artefacts to focus on specific historical narratives and through their interpretations of events. There is an absence of women in museum narratives, which stems from a general historic silencing and discrediting of their work within public discourse, which has in turn resulted in a lack of research and collected materials in twenty-first century collecting institutions.

To counter this problem, feminist museology has created assessment tools to evaluate gender biases in museums. In addition, women’s and gender museums around the world provide spaces for discussion of the gaps in knowledge that stem from historical prejudice against women and a lack of research on their identities and social roles. Taken up through museum strategies, these initiatives help to establish a more coherent and multi-perspectival view of history, with the intention of both empowering communities and acknowledging the roles of women in society.

How do women’s museums operate, and would a similar model fit into the Irish museum landscape? While several Irish museums have current exhibitions, projects, and discussions on women and women’s history, there is a clear gap in research that might lead us to find new ways of diversifying museum displays. This paper centres on the idea that, by examining the subjects of women and gender relations in public, cultural, and political history, museums could present a more holistic interpretation of societal development and the construction of Irish identity.

Feminist Museology and Women’s Museums
Feminist museology is an umbrella term for research on how marginalised groups and
perspectives have been excluded from history and science.\(^2\) It considers that the historic preference in museums for approaching their interpretation objectively has been problematic, because using passive language sustains gender biased assumptions and lack of representation within museums.\(^3\) This is because historically, language used to address women and other marginalised groups has been harmful: presenting them as victims, secondary, or only represented by a few extraordinary individuals; and by excluding their overall contribution to society.\(^4\)

Therefore, feminist museology can bring fresh perspectives to existing museums. Accompanied by a range of theoretical approaches and evaluation tools such as discourse analyses of interpretive texts and narratives and of the meaning they create, and through quantitative measures of selected materials, feminist museology helps to expose gender imbalances in the content of museum displays\(^5\) and can help eliminate bias against women.

**Women’s Museums**

Addressing women in history can both create more engaging museum content and bring new research opportunities for museum professionals. While some museums added more perspectives and diversified their displays, specific women’s and feminist museums began to emerge at the end of twentieth century. This related to the second wave feminist movement and an emergent focus on public engagement that allowed for a branching out of museum practice and the creation of new curatorial approaches.\(^6\)

The International Association of Women’s Museums sets out the history and purposes of women’s museums and coordinates discussions and collaborative projects between them. Its website offers a map of women’s museums worldwide,\(^7\) most of which emerged as a way of focusing on women’s roles in history, culture, and gender politics in response to the gap in traditional museums.\(^8\) Based on their context, founding bodies, and the availability of research and resources, these museums range in themes, purpose, and objects collected. Through examining the subjects covered by these institutions, it becomes clear that women’s museums can explore a variety of subjects, including:

- Women in culture, politics, art, economics, and social and professional roles in both local and global histories;
- Women of antiquity and in the modern world
- Feminism, activism, solidarity, and gender equality struggles;
- Femicide and violence towards women;
- Pioneering and prominent women in history;
- The concepts of gender, sex, and sexuality;
- Childcare and unpaid work;
- Women’s health and health research;
- Interpretation of women in language, legends, and fairy tales.

While the topics explored and objects displayed by the museums vary, they share similar objectives: to empower women and to acknowledge their contribution to their societies. Women’s museums are valuable institutions because they focus on examining the roots of current inequalities, biases, and in the ways that they are striving for and leading change.\(^9\)

**Museum Survey**

In view of the importance of feminist museology, I decided to survey people working in museums in Ireland on whether Ireland needs a women’s museum and on the availability of publicly accessible material, the representation of women, and gender-oriented content within their institutions. There had been a previous initiative to establish a women’s museum as an online platform\(^10\) but, unfortunately, the website had not been maintained and the initiative had not progressed. I sent the survey to 100 cultural institutions in Ireland in July 2021, resulting in a total of 30 responses, including from national cultural institutions, local authority museums, and a range of smaller museums.\(^11\) The survey was helpful in examining how museum professionals view the introduction of feminist content and the history of women, and in highlighting current discussions, exhibitions, and future plans. The participants’ responses presented a divide in opinions on the necessity of adding more gender-related content in their museums.

**Current exhibitions, tours, and programmes**

The survey aimed at assessing the current representation of women in Irish museums. Significant contributions to the discussion of women in cultural history covered women in local
histories, female artists, pioneers, and their roles in familiar Irish historical narratives, such as women in the fight for independence and suffrage. Thirteen participating museums hold dedicated events on International Women’s Day with a focus on ground-breaking women, women in Irish society, and women’s involvement in human rights. In addition, some museums provided online profiles, talks, and online discussions on important women in their subject area.

Most agreed that their newer and temporary exhibitions were more attentive to the representation of women, and more recently appointed curators seemed to make conscious decisions for the introduction of these topics. Thirteen respondents provided examples of exhibitions and panels in their museums that reflect on gender inequalities or women in history. Nano Nagle Place in Cork, for example, focuses on the life of a woman and her contribution to society and all the museum’s programmes, tours and talks are in reference to that subject. Another crucial contribution was the exploration at the National Museum of Ireland of the histories of the Magdalene Laundries, Mother and Baby Homes, and Industrial Schools, as well as its contemporary collecting programmes related to LGBTQ+ and abortion laws in Ireland. Other notable exhibitions included references to domestic violence, women in state affairs, and women in antiquity. Single panels or sections on the role of women were also found in museums focusing on aviation and maritime heritage.

Eleven respondents confirmed the existence of some educational activities, talks, and tours related to women and gender. For example, relevant programmes explored women’s suffrage, how the rural electrification of Ireland affected women’s lives, women in art and crafts, and ‘forgotten’ figures such as the vicereines of Ireland. Some museums provided tours on request concerning female artists and women who previously lived on the historic site of the museum and talks reflecting on gender in their collection. Most of the surveyed museums (twenty-one), however, do not provide such tours. Specialist subject matter restricted the range of topics some museums could cover; whilst others were prevented from covering women’s history due to a lack of funding or other priorities, including the histories of particular individuals, event anniversaries, or developing creative activities for children.

Collecting and Contemporary Collecting

One means of countering gender bias is through contemporary collecting programmes. Only a few museums stated that they were financially and spatially prepared for such new acquisitions at the time of the survey and were able to collect anything of relevance to their museum. Although most respondents did not have specifically feminist archives, notable archives mentioned included, for example, those focusing on women’s suffrage and involvement in the Irish Revolution, the Wallace Sisters, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Ladies Land Leagues, Soroptimists, and feminist art. While some did not rule out developing women’s archives, others felt that they would not be relevant to their museums or that focusing on one sex would be sexist. Seventeen participants stated that their acquisitions policies did not especially highlight women or gender, whilst half stated that their policies would allow this focus. Art museums claimed to have considered gender diversity in recent acquisitions and certain history museums planned to diversify their collecting in the future. However, some claimed that gender-related acquisitions would not be as relevant to their museum due to its focus on a male dominated field.

Representation, equality, diversity, and collaboration for and about women

Most participants stated that their institutions strive towards representation and equality, presenting multiple voices and planning future projects in collaboration with the public. Eleven respondents could describe opportunities within their museums for collaborating with women’s groups to support research, provide necessary information for discussions, and create new exhibitions. Of these, work with the Irish Countrywomen’s Association, local Traveller and crafts groups, art communities, the Irish Community Archive Network, and an Islamic Centre were mentioned.

Twenty-one survey participants agreed that they strive to introduce more community-empowering content in their projects and exhibitions. The National Museum of Ireland, for example, is launching a new community engagement strategy; while county museums are working with political and social groups to explore different experiences of people have within local communities. Two of the subject specialist
museums agreed that they wanted to introduce more content on women; while others wanted to expand their target audience and include more information for younger people. While some current collaborative projects explore the roles of women in history, due to factors such as lack of staff, funding, and safety procedures during the recent pandemic, and because of a focus on alternative projects, expanding community outreach was not always possible. Some also mentioned the impact on their work of the COVID–19 pandemic as a reason why they were not prioritising projects for, and about, women.

When asked about their awareness of public resources for women’s projects outside of their museum, fourteen participants referred facilities such as university and youth programmes, women’s centres, and community groups, and reiterated the availability of specific museums including Nano Nagle Place and the National Museum of Country Life. None of the participants agreed that there were enough public resources on women’s studies in Ireland.

Future possibilities
When asked whether their museums are working towards the promotion of gender equality by bringing issues to the surface through their displays, ten participants strongly agreed, while eight others said that there is room for improvement by adding more on women’s contribution to their areas of research. Some museums represented were willing to create these displays; twelve participants confirmed that they are discussing future possibilities for adding more gender focused items and projects. In particular, the National Museum of Ireland aims to include a greater variety of voices in the creation of its exhibitions, and art and literature museums are acquiring and making exhibitions relevant to gender. Three museums had plans to add more information on the history of women in their local areas, or to focus on women’s roles in regional developments.

Does Ireland Need a Women’s Museum?
Thirteen respondents strongly agreed, and nine somewhat agreed, that the public would benefit from a dedicated women’s museum in Ireland. However, most concluded that they would rather diversify their own displays, exploring women’s history insofar as it was related to their museum’s subject matter. The arguments against a new women’s museum included that, rather than expend public resources on setting up such a museum, it would be better to target new activities and experimental modes of interaction in existing museums. Based on the rationale that it was a niche and even sexist proposal, some participants felt that setting up a new museum could not be justified.

In the survey, I offered a selection of topics that a women’s museum could cover, including politics; human rights and inequalities; men in feminism; body positivity; and the spectrum of gender identities. Fifteen said they would be interested to see all these suggested topics in a museum setting. Especially popular topics included the history of Irish women, injustices throughout history, and important female figures. One respondent commented that they would like to see more content on how gender, ethnic, and other identities affect people’s lives. Claiming that it is better to look at contributions to history without a gender focus, one participant was not interested in focusing on any of the suggested topics.

Discussion
Museums shape knowledge and cultural memory of the places in which they are situated, and their social role in this respect demands that they reflect multiple perspectives. Public engagement can be advanced through wider representation, ensuring viewer relevance and empowering communities through validating the contribution of their members to societal development. From the survey, it is clear that, while current and past exhibitions have been crucial for the representation of women in Irish history, they have rarely been the main focus for the museum and on the whole these representations have been temporary. It can also be concluded that gender equality is not of vital importance to the majority of respondents and that, while most of the museums address specific women’s history and identities in some way, there is a lack of reflection in the sector on the status and role of women in our society.

It is also clear from this research that there is a need to develop museum strategies focusing on gender. When analysing the results, I was concerned that some participants had used purposeful objectivity to justify their claim that to focus on women would be ‘sexist’ and that
women’s history was a niche interest. While further research is needed, this suggests that in the Irish sector there has been the same history of unconscious bias and misrepresentation as that identified by feminist museology elsewhere.

It should also be noted that there are many museums in Ireland that focus on male historical figures or explore events in history from male perspectives. The gender diversity of the Irish public requires a more representative approach within museums. There was consensus among respondents that it would be better to diversify existing institutions, but it is difficult to envisage how this could be achieved without a wholesale overhaul of current museum strategies and displays. To champion women in Ireland, a stand-alone women’s museum is one option that could be explored.

The accomplishments of feminism for everyone’s rights and freedoms are essential to the cultural and social history of Ireland. Without their inclusion in museum programmes, feminist activism will continue to be misunderstood and misrepresented. Wider collection of women’s and feminist artefacts and archives, publicly beneficial research, and the sponsoring by museums of public discussions on past, present and future struggles in the fight for gender equality can provide points of reflection and inspire people to work together for a better future.

The establishment of a women’s museum could be an effective way of bringing together academics, students, museum professionals, and the public to create a space for discussion on women in Ireland. This new museum could engage the public of all ages and genders, while for museum professionals it could be an exciting opportunity for further research, collections, and collaborative projects.

Polina Shikina is committed to continuing an academic and professional journey in the field of arts and heritage, further exploring links between personal identities, cultural memory, and representation within public institutions. Polina completed an MA in Museum Studies at University College Cork in 2021 with a dissertation on “Museum of Herstory: Purposes and Opportunities of a Women’s Museum in the Republic of Ireland”. This article is one outcome.
Edmund Rice Centre
Foynes Aviation & Maritime Museum DAC
Garda Museum
Glebe House and Gallery
Irish Military War Museum
Irish Museum of Modern Art
Kerry County Museum
Kilmainham Gaol
Knock Museum
Limerick City Gallery of Art
Limerick Museum
Marsh's Library
Michael Collins House Museum
Michael Davitt Museum
Monaghan County Museum
Museum of Literature Ireland
Nano Nagle Place
National Museum of Ireland
Rathfarnham Castle
Tarbert Bridewell Courthouse and Jail Museum
The Butter Museum
University College Dublin
Waterford County Museum
Nano Nagle Place  
Winner of 2022 Council of Europe Museum Prize

Michael Waldron

In December 2021, the Council of Europe Museum Prize was awarded to Nano Nagle Place. It is the first such acknowledgement of an Irish institution since Monaghan County Museum took home the prize in 1980. This recent recognition of the city centre attraction, although still often considered one of Cork’s best kept secrets, was wholly deserved and affirmed its place as more than a traditional museum. The secret, if it ever existed at all, is well and truly out.

Nano Nagle Place is located on a sloping, triangular site in Cork’s historic South Parish, close to the River Lee and the thirteenth-century Red Abbey tower. It is named for ‘Irish Woman of the Millennium’, the Venerable Honora ‘Nano’ Nagle (1718–1784), who, in 1775, during the Penal Laws, established the Presentation Sisters and pioneered education here. For over two centuries, it has been a spiritual site, place of learning, and community hub. Before its closure in 2006, generations of Cork children were educated at ‘South Pres’, and, on 19 December 2017, following years of planning and redevelopment, the renamed Nano Nagle Place was officially opened by former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese.

In awarding Nano Nagle Place the Museum Prize, the Culture Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe noted the continuity of ethos that characterises the museum: ‘it continues the same mission to provide support and care for people in need.’ This mission is secured not only by the museum’s extensive learning programmes, but also through the ongoing presence on the site of its communities, ranging from the Presentation Sisters who still live there, through to the empowering and inclusive work of the Cork Migrant Centre and The Lantern Project and the Cork Centre for Architectural Education (CCAE).

The accessible campus that makes up Nano Nagle Place is richly varied and includes multiple buildings and both indoor and outdoor spaces. It includes the 1770s convent, an 1860s chapel, a 1920s school which now forms the main visitor

Fig. 1. Cian Clarke and his sister Aine exploring the museum at Nano Nagle Place in 2019.
Credit: Claire Keogh.
entrance, and twenty-first-century social housing. At the heart of the site is a modest graveyard, the final resting place of Nano Nagle. Due consideration has been given to the sanctity of this spot, yet visitors are permitted to come into contact with ‘The Lady of the Lantern’ herself through a small hatch in her raised (and glazed) tomb. Elevated above the graveyard is a tranquil garden oasis which is managed for wildlife and combines traditional and contemporary landscaping and planting. Here, visitors will also find the excellent Good Day Deli, a sustainable foods café which keeps things local, organic, and supremely tasty.

If these aspects of Nano Nagle Place represent the heart, senses, and spirit, then the Museum attends to the head and imagination. Located in a heritage building and accessed through one of the site’s two bookshops, it deftly resituates the visitor in eighteenth-century Cork. The Museum tells Nano’s Story through audio-visual, textual, and interactive displays, as well as selected objects. This is further activated and extended through a series of temporary exhibitions; a case in point is the current Changing Habits: 250 Years of Convent Life, which has recently been extended through 2022. A tour with one of the excellent guides – perhaps even one of the Sisters – provides further access to Nano Nagle’s eighteenth-century parlour and objects directly relating to her.

Fig. 2. Dr Naomi Masheti and Fionnuala O’Connell of Cork Migrant Centre in front of the MoLI’s Frederick Douglass exhibition (2021) on loan to Nano Nagle Place. Credit: Clare Keogh.

Fig. 3. The gardens of Nano Nagle Place and sustainable food café Good Day Deli. Credit: Clare Condon.
At present, the site handsomely addresses the busy Douglas Street in Cork’s largely residential South Parish. In time, further improvements to the public realm adjoining the premises – including traffic calming and a TFI Bike Share station – would serve to acknowledge the desire lines that locals and visitors alike have enthusiastically set down.

Nano Nagle Place is that rare creature which successfully blends its significant history with a vibrant present and hopeful future. Part visitor centre and archive, it is also a community space and learning hub in which an ethos of care and social justice rings true. A warm welcome awaits.

Dr Michael Waldron is a curator and art historian who works at Crawford Art Gallery, Cork. He is also a board member of Sample-Studios. Curator of ‘Recasting Canova’ and ‘Laura Fitzgerald: I have made a place’, he has previously published in ‘Irish University Review’, ‘PVA Journal’, and ‘Irish Arts Review’.

Notes
A Wild Atlantic Way: Irish Life and Landscapes  
The Hunt Museum, Limerick  
9 July – 3 October 2021

Marie Bourke

Museums and cultural institutions worldwide have been challenged to provide services during intermittent periods of closure due to the COVID virus pandemic. Many used the time to plan programmes. The Hunt Museum’s A Wild Atlantic Way: Irish Life and Landscapes, curated by its Head of Exhibitions and Collections, Naomi O’Nolan, proved a successful summer exhibition and was a fitting tribute marking her retirement, following a distinguished career at the Hunt Museum.

This appealing and informative show opened just as Irish people emerged from a long winter lockdown. The theme came from Jack B. Yeats’s An Atlantic Drive, held in the Hunt collection, which formed the catalyst for a trip through art and history centred on the west of Ireland’s ‘Wild Atlantic Way’. Visitors were invited to view the artworks and ‘follow the geographical route as each painting acted as a stop along the journey... and see the rugged beauty of the landscape, moments from everyday life and the social interaction of the people’.

It was a clever idea to focus on the ‘Wild Atlantic Way’, which – as the acronym WAW – is referenced in the new Coastal Atlas of Ireland. The route has become popular with tourists and provided a sound basis for a series of businesses along the western coastal counties. The concept originated with Fáilte Ireland, which came up with the long-distance driving trail to present the varying coastal regions from north Donegal to west Cork by drawing on concepts of ‘landscape’, ‘people’, and ‘place’. The trail covers 2,500 km of coastal roads in nine county council jurisdictions, encompassing environmentally and culturally sensitive landscapes, seascapes, and communities. Well-established and celebrated, it is one of the longest designated coastal driving routes in the world.

The exhibition comprised fifty-five paintings sourced from public and private collections, enabling visitors to see familiar and unfamiliar works by artists including Samuel Lover, Nathaniel Hone, Aloysius O’Kelly, Augustus Burke, Camille Souter, Derek Hill, and John Shinnors. It was an eclectic selection, if a bit uneven as not all counties were equally represented. Opening with Donegal and ending with Cork, the show took up the entire lower exhibition gallery, which, together with two additional display cases of historical material, provided a picturesque tour of the western coastline of Ireland.

Galway was at the exhibition’s core, dominating the show through twenty-three paintings showing Connemara, the Claddagh, Roundstone, Clifden, Cleggan, and the Killaries. Mayo followed, with ten paintings of Achill and the Atlantic Ocean by the artists Paul Henry, Eva Hamilton, Sarah Purser, Grace Henry, Mainie Jellett, and Mary Lohan. The inclusion of work by Pat Harris and Donald Teskey reflected the increase in northern Mayo landscape painting emanating from residencies at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation. At the other end of the scale, Limerick, represented by just one painting, seemed a bit of an anomaly.

Two works representing Sligo included Jack B. Yeats’s key work, An Atlantic Drive, Mullaghmore, Sligo, 1944. Painted when Yeats was in his seventies, it depicts several people, probably tourists, travelling on a sidecar gazing at the blue sea around the coast at Mullaghmore. Executed in unmixed primary colours using a palette knife and expressive brushwork, the painting conveyed Yeats’s memories of events drawn from his youth in Sligo.

The catalogue pointed out that, although Killarney in Co. Kerry had been a popular destination for artists since the mid eighteenth century, many painters including George Petrie, David Wilkie, William Evans, and Frederic Burton turned to Galway and the west of Ireland in the nineteenth century. A colony of Irish and English artists developed in the west before, during, and after the Famine of 1845–50.

A deeper thread, beyond the picturesque, emerged through the West of Ireland being explored as a symbol of an authentic Ireland. The iconography of western landscapes depicted by painters – blue skies, the sea, white–washed thatched cottages, green fields, and stone walls – became recognised as the image of rural Ireland. As in earlier periods, artists continued to be inspired by the wildness and beauty of the remote landscapes in the twentieth century; together with a lifestyle that included fishing, farming, spinning, and entertainment featuring music, song, and dance. Offering a glimpse into
how the people lived, these paintings included Alfred Fripp’s portrayal of a young Galway Girl in 1846, Seán Keating’s handsome Aran Islanders in Simple People, Grace Henry’s gossiping women in Top of the Hill, Achill, Co. Mayo, and Charles Lamb’s attentive group hearing the news from a paper. Social life was evident in paintings by Lilian Davidson and Maurice McConigal of fair days in Westport and Roundstone, where animals were bought and sold, and also in images of provisions being conveyed home by boat, as in Gerard Dillon’s picture of Returning Islanders, Co. Galway. Market days ended with music and dancing at the crossroads, as shown in a scene by James Humbert Craig. Western lifestyles also included wakes, funerals, and people attending religious services and, as illustrated in Co. Diarmuid O’ Ceallacháin’s St McDara’s Pattern, celebrating saints’ days.

Many of the images of rural Ireland reflected a vanishing world of people at work, cutting turf, farming, weaving, and sailing. One of the earliest images, Samuel Lover’s Kelp Gatherers, Renvyle (1835) shows the traditional practice of gathering and burning kelp for fertiliser along the Galway coastline. Turf was shown being transported to the islands, together with paintings of the sea and the lives of fishermen, as in Lilian Davidson’s Western Boatmen and Keating’s Waiting for the Tide.

The advent of modernism in art, which gained momentum in Ireland in the twentieth century, overtook this view of rural Ireland, as artists such as Mainie Jellett found new ways to express their vision of the Irish landscape and lifestyle. A deep-rooted conviction, that the West of Ireland is associated with concepts of Irish identity and authenticity, formed a key component of how artists responded to the West over the centuries. It continues to inform contemporary art in twenty-first-century Ireland.

The exhibition catalogue has a well-researched introductory essay by art historian Dr Julian Campbell, providing an historical background to painting the west of Ireland, and illustrates the entire exhibition with short texts and artists’ biographies.4 A programme of public events included podcasts by contemporary artists and historians, onsite landscape painting classes by prominent painters, a family discovery trail, and public lectures held in situ and online.

Charles Lamb’s The Quaint Couple (c.1930, Crawford Art Gallery) depicts the artist’s neighbours, Pádraic McDonagh (Patch Seán Dan) and his sister Bríd (Bideach), from Rinn in Connemara. This is a work of great assurance, exemplifying the monumental portraiture at which Lamb excelled, and, in its portrayal of an elderly couple, encapsulates generations of western people who Lamb felt reflected the ‘national essence’ of Ireland. The image of their stoicism, resilience, and determination to survive is source of inspiration; and, of all the paintings in A Wild Atlantic Way: Irish Life and Landscapes, made a lasting impression during these difficult pandemic times.

Dr Marie Bourke is a cultural historian, formerly Keeper–Head of Education at the National Gallery of Ireland. Author of ‘The Story of Irish Museums 1790–2000’ (Cork University Press, 2011, 2013), she curated the recent NGI Frederic William Burton exhibition. She is vice-chair of the RDS Arts Committee.

Notes
3. In 2012 Fáilte Ireland commissioned the Paul Hogarth Company to develop the Wild Atlantic Way concept which was finalised in 2014.
Museum of Broken Things by Jane McCormick, Artist in Residence at Cavan County Museum
10 July 2021 – March 2023

Sally O’Dowd

On March 12th 2020, Cavan-based sculptor Jane McCormick visited Cavan County Museum to begin a year–long Artist in Residence program. The following day, a national lockdown was announced. Working from home, she began to bring together found objects collected throughout her life and to create five works: ‘Covid Diary’, ‘The Corracanvy Hoard’, ‘Covid Tea Party for One’, ‘The Outing’, and ‘I Can’t Breathe’. Through these thread multiple narratives including feminism, human rights, equality, ecology, religion, popular culture, and personal memoir. Presented meticulously by the artist in museum cabinets and vitrines as if they are of archaeological significance, the exhibition they make up, Museum of Broken Things, acts as a museum within a museum.

COVID Diary
To view the Museum of Broken Things, visitors must first make their way to the top floor of the former convent where the artwork, ‘Covid Diary’, is displayed: a wall of sealed, labelled transparent bags into which the artist has placed an item each day, beginning on the first day of the residency and ending in December 2019. The result is a visual diary of lockdown: Domestos labels, family photos, gold foil, and more are formalised in dated recordings, acknowledging the passing of time.

‘The Corracanvy Hoard’
This is an installation of found and deeply personal objects meticulously set out on bespoke shelving, under glass or in neatly packed jars, wall-mounted or directly pasted to the wall. An abundance of objects collected over the past forty years that are broken, discarded and pre–loved, reshowcased as if they were of archaeological significance.

The small room that the hoard inhabits has a large window, filling the jam–packed space with bright natural light. Below a curated display of broken glass, McCormick’s carving tools and studio knives tell of a sculptor and former board member of the Sculptor’s Society of Ireland (now Visual Artists Ireland). On the wall and in a low vitrine there is a catalogue of artefacts stained by earth, tarnished by time, dismantled by kids, and well past their use by date.

Highlighting the universal appeal of what’s on show, one of the items on display that I warmed to is the Spice Girl Cutouts from an old Smash Hits magazine, presented between Perspex sheets and wall mounted. As a teenager, I didn’t want to like them, but I did. I liked the empowered woman image. In McCormick’s exhibit, the woman is present and as a woman I feel represented here. McCormick is a social activist. Amongst the collection are multiple marriage equality badges, an extravaganza of 1980s lifestyle, culture, entertainment, and current affairs magazine covers including Magill, I–D Magazine, Spare Rib, and In Dublin’s ‘The Gay Generation’. The hoard itself is an act of activism, drawing attention to the environmental impact of capitalism and disposable culture.
Interventions in the Permanent Collection

Three of the five works are situated amongst the exhibits on other floors of the building. McCormick uses this to both give her work historical context and offer a new way of looking at items in the museum. Placed in the World War One gallery, ‘I Can’t Breathe’ is a vintage gas mask covered in public health newspaper notices about mask wearing. As Morris notes in the exhibition catalogue, it ‘echoes the gas attacks in the WW1 trenches and the mask-wearing controversy during the 2020–21 pandemic.’

Women of Influence

On the First Floor, under the Women of Influence window, stands the ‘Covid Tea Party for One’ (covered in cuttings from local newspaper COVID-19 Health and Safety notices). Intended as a space to use, I was privileged to sit with the artist and chat about life in Lockdown; as always with Jane, with lots of laughter. Lastly, a small video work brings the audience right back to the foundation of the County Museum itself. A significant figure in the Irish Countrywomen’s Association, Mrs MP Faris saw historical importance in her hoard, leading her to open a museum in her farm’s sheds. Much of this local hoard was a major donation at the birth of the Museum. And so, located inside ‘The Pig House Collection’, ‘The Outing’ is a video work by McCormick, composed of original footage of the Killeshandra ICA filmed by her father-in-law. By placing her work here, McCormick draws attention to this Woman of Influence and alludes to the significance of her own hoard.
Closing: What History and whose history are we displaying?
Many stories reveal themselves here, including the loosening grip of Catholicism in Ireland; music and youth culture; personal histories; and stories of contemporary Ireland. At Cavan County Museum, Jane McCormick has put her personal collection of life and womanhood in 21st Century Ireland on display. The artist has created a deeply personal, and yet inclusive, exhibition that shows great generosity towards every object, cleverly presenting the post-modern period with wit and sensitivity.

Sally O’Dowd is a visual artist and curator living and working in Belfast. She is a former Creative Director of Townhall Cavan Arts Space and a founding member of Vault Artist Studios Belfast. Her artwork is in the Northern Ireland Civil Service Collection and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland Collection.

Notes

Credit: Sally O’Dowd.
For those of us who have worked or work in cultural organisations, Pat Cooke’s *The Politics and Polemics of Culture in Ireland* is essential reading. Drawing on relevant theory and a wide range of official documents and media coverage, it offers a cogent and at times alarming analysis of why the cultural policy sector in Ireland is, at its highest levels, dysfunctional.

The anti-intellectual strain in Irish political culture has permeated all major decisions regarding the structure and power of cultural bodies, without any fundamental awareness of the wider role of culture in society. As an example, Cooke notes that the Department of Culture (currently the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media), since the point of its long-awaited foundation in 1993, has been reconfigured every time there has been a change of government. One of the reasons for its constant recasting, according to Cooke, is that there is no electoral risk associated with culture and therefore bureaucrats feel free to tinker with its management. The establishment of the Department came out of the immediate need to reconfigure ministerial portfolios rather than from a well-conceived plan.

Through lack of reform of education and support for community arts, the State has continuously failed to prioritise wider engagement and awareness of the arts and has consistently avoided the provision of proper funding and independent management of cultural institutions and heritage sites. Many of its major initiatives, such as the setting up of the Arts Council in 1951 and the formation of Aósdana in 1981, blindly followed British policy rather than looking to the workings of more comparative democracies. Joseph O’Connor summed up the Irish politician’s use of culture, when in 1998 he declared that ‘For most members of our political class, culture is a branch of the tourist industry or an aspect of economics. It is something to make speeches about…’.

The Cultural Revival, ‘pivotal to our understanding of the evolution of cultural identity in modern Ireland’, is a leitmotif throughout the book. This golden period of cultural activity, in which the arts joined with sport, the co-operative movement and the Gaelic League to transform Irish society through practical voluntarism, and through widespread devotion to cultural activities throughout the country and across social classes, was overtaken in the post-independence period by a narrow focus on the Irish language. The compulsory system of education used to enforce this took away the ‘open-ended sense of possibility that had characterised the Revival period’.

Up to the 1970s, voluntarism remained the dominant way by which cultural activities were made, partly because the government could not be trusted to deliver. Many future political leaders had been enthusiastic members of the Gaelic League and, while this aspect of the Revival remained the most influential, the arts – especially painting, sculpture, and classical music – were associated with the Anglo-Irish and consequently tainted with colonialism. The dropping of drawing from the primary school curriculum in 1922 was a direct consequence of the decision to focus on the acquisition of Irish as the national language at the expense of another fundamental cultural activity.

The content is led by public figures associated with cultural policy. These are all male and middle class, and as a rule conservative and Catholic. By and large, they subscribe to the hands-off approach to culture inherited from Victorian liberal ideas that continued to dominate official attitudes to the arts in Ireland throughout the 20th century. There is a contradiction here between constant political interference in the...
arts, and the desire that it remain independent of political influence. For example, while the Irish Irelanders Michael Tierney and Daniel Corkery saw the modern state as ‘an alien imposition on the nation’, they supported state censorship of films and publications. The internationalist Sean O’Faolain, director of the Arts Council (1956–59), and – more significantly – editor of The Bell (1940–46), believed that the state should only influence culture indirectly. Even Charles Haughey’s introduction of Tax-Free Status for artists in 1969, regarded as one of most significant events in the history of Irish arts policy, is, according to Cooke, ‘consistent with the liberal principle that the artist should only receive indirect support from the state’. By 2002, the scheme was working in a regressive way, with 24 million euros in taxes being claimed by 28 artists, while the income of 87% of artists was less than the average industrial wage and thus never made it into the tax bracket.

While reflective of the marginalisation of women in Irish public life, their regrettable neglect in the book is also due to its focus on decision makers rather than those who facilitated wider cultural engagement or who lobbied in the background for official support for the arts and cultural endeavours. One such figure, Muriel Gahan, was the only woman appointed to the Arts Council between its foundation and its reform in 1972. In addition to a lack of gender equality, most of the influencers on cultural policy were dismissive of the working classes and popular culture. The latter flooded into Ireland via the airwaves and the cinema, transforming Irish society more profoundly than the fine arts could ever do. 1950s surveys reveal that two out of three Irish households had a radio set, over half of which were tuned into the BBC Light Programme, and that for most Irish listeners their least favourite programmes were the Irish language ones. The 1950s and 1960s was the heyday of the showband, with, at its height, over 800 of them criss-crossing the Irish nation and spreading ‘the glamour of transgression’. Cooke speculates that radio, ballroom dancing and cinema may have induced ‘wanderlust and discontentment’ in the youth of rural Ireland. From 1961, Irish television, which due to its funding model depended on a high level of imported, mainly American, content, further diluted the Irish Irelander cultural model of previous decades. Unsurprisingly, voluntarism declined in the face of these distractions.

The 1970s was a watershed decade in cultural policy, with the Arts Act (1973) reforming the Arts Council, and Ireland’s membership of the European Union bringing in largescale funding for heritage projects. The period saw an historic shift from voluntarism to the idea of the arts as a public resource dependent on public investment. While the Council and government advisors favoured direct funding of individual artists, issues of access and the wider economic role of the arts became major areas of debate. Access and Opportunity (1987), the first ever White Paper on culture, argued for a more systematic approach to enhancing access. Community arts, which emerged in working class Dublin in the 1970s, was mainly funded through ‘back to work’ programmes and, despite the appointment of a Community Arts Officer in 1981, it remained marginal to Arts Council funding and priorities. From the 1990s, the Council promoted the connection between the arts and economic goals. Having been neglected for decades, heritage became a concern because of its significance to the tourism industry. Controversies associated with how the OPW spent massive EU grants dominated the media, with the Mullaghmore visitor centre generating unprecedented opposition to the State’s plans.

The legacy of the Celtic Tiger era, when Ireland became one of the most globalised economies in the world, is, according to Cooke, cultural. Today many Irish citizens have hybrid cultural identities, leaving the State struggling to find a balanced and multi-dimensional cultural policy to manage this. Rather than critiquing the status quo, the arts, reflecting the effects of globalized consumer capitalism, are often deployed as a national brand. Even Marina Carr’s play On Raftery’s Hill, which deals with incest and suicide in rural Ireland, served to promote the State when it formed the centrepiece of a festival of Irish culture in Washington in 2000.

This ability of capitalism to incorporate all aspects of culture, even the dissenting, means that the principle of artistic freedom has become meaningless. The ideologies of Catholicism and nationalism that prevailed in the past, despite their shortcomings, allowed culture to be thought of in a holistic manner. Today, without any ideology, the role of policy makers is to embed culture in stable government and institutional regulations. Ireland is not alone in grappling to co-ordinate cultural policy. Imaginative and balanced
ways of facilitating meaningful engagement with arts and culture across diverse populations is the major challenge facing policy makers of the future throughout Europe and beyond.

This book, while providing a thoughtful and comprehensive account of this wide-ranging subject, is also entertaining and provocative in its sharp analysis and judicious use of quotation and statistics. It deserves to be widely read by artists, cultural workers and, especially, politicians and their advisors.

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‘The First National Museum’; Dublin’s Natural History Museum in the mid-nineteenth century
Sherra Murphy (2021)
Cork: Cork University

Elizabeth Crooke

In her monograph “The First National Museum”: Dublin’s Natural History Museum in the mid-nineteenth century, Sherra Murphy has written an engaging and detailed account of the history of the Natural History Museum in Dublin in a critical period for its foundation.

The book approaches the museum’s history in two parts: the first looking at its early history and the second the role of the museum as a place ‘to think about the world’ (p. 107). The beginnings of the Natural History Museum are found in enlightenment thinking: placing learning and public service as a means to ‘civilise the natives of our said kingdom’ (George II, referring to the formation of the Royal Dublin Society p.19). Murphy demonstrates the museum was far from provincial; rather it combined interests in Irish science with scholarly work across Europe, evident in networks, displays and publication. Through reading her book, we get a clear insight into the factors shaping one of our national cultural institutions in that period, such as the influence of learned societies and gentleman scholars, and the role of the industrial exhibition movement in generating interest in museums. We also get further understanding of the dynamics between Dublin and the Department of Science and Art in London regarding completion and maintenance of the new museum in the mid-nineteenth century. Citing from Parliamentary reports and newspaper sources of the 1860s, we see Dublin-based frustration at a museum ‘in a state of abeyance for some years’ (p. 93).

Sherra Murphy has demonstrated how the history of our cultural institutions can provide us with remarkable insights into the character of the people and the place they are located. In her exploration of the growth of the collection, we get an understanding of the ‘Irish men of science’ (p. 117) who, through regular donation, made the collection what it is. We learn of the one-off somewhat eccentric donations from individuals across the island, revealing public perceptions of natural science and confidence in what they can
individually contribute to it. By way of example, in its early years, the museum received a ‘deformed hen’s egg’, ‘a queen ant and scorpion from India’, and Nicaraguan snakes, nests, turtle and ‘the ear bones of a manatee’ (p. 119). Were these curiosities the beginning of a curator’s headache, negotiating how to decline an enthusiastic donation? Or, do such collections help us understand how museums connect, communicate, and make sense of the world around us? These and further questions will be inspired by reading this book, perhaps also stimulating further research interrogating the origins of museum processes and influence across the island.

‘The First National Museum’: Dublin’s Natural History Museum in the mid-nineteenth century is a welcome addition to the increasing interest in museum history, provenance of collections, the history of cultural institutions in Ireland, and our understanding of the growth of natural history. As well as being of relevance to those working in and with museums, curious about the passions that drive museum and collections development, it makes a valuable contribution to furthering our appreciation of the ‘Dead Zoo’, in the heart of Dublin.

Professor Elizabeth Crooke (Ulster University) leads the postgraduate programmes in heritage and museum studies and the UKRI-funded project ‘Museums, Crisis and Covid19’. She has published ‘Politics, Archaeology, and the Creation of a National Museum of Ireland’ (2000), ‘Museums and Community’ (2007), and ‘Heritage After Conflict’ (2018).