Building understanding

Irish history museums on both sides of the border

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Title

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Abstract

This work is an MA thesis in museology focused on Republican and Northern Irish state-governed museums and how they may inform the creation of a collective national Irish identity. The aim of the thesis is to establish how Irish history is told by Irish state-governed history museums, to what degree the Irish public can participate in those museums and their exhibitions, and how that may define the collective Irish national identity. This aim is realised using a comparative study between The Ulster Museum of Northern Ireland, and The National Museum of Decorative Arts & History as well as The General Post Office Museum of the Republic of Ireland. The sources are interviews, digital and physical observations of the museums' exhibitions as well as exhibition analysis, with the theoretical framework of collective memory theory, participation theory, narrative and paratext theory. The results and analysis found that the museum sector of Ireland is undergoing a change in their approaches to Irish history in the wake of The Decade of Centenaries and are moving to more cooperative modes of operation across the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland. It also found that the museums are in general moving towards a more democratic and communicative approach regarding the museums' audiences. The study also found that The Ulster Museum is ahead of the other ones studied in this democratisation process, while the museums in the Republic have been slower to change. The study concludes that the collective national identity of the Irish on both sides of the border is undergoing a shift to becoming more inclusive than it has been previously, which is reflected by the museums' democratisation process.

Acknowledgements

Innehållsförteckning

1. Introduction

What is "Ireland"? Is it a people, a nation, an island? Who are "the Irish"?

These questions are not so much topics of discussion as they are shouting matches between multiple parties – and how long these shouting matches has been going on depends on who you ask (Foster 1988). This thesis doesn't intend to settle these complex questions of nationality and culture once and for all. Rather, it is rooted in the seemingly simple question: how is Irish history told by Irish museums?

At first, this thesis spawned as an exploration of how museums function as places of collective memory, where people of a country can tell their own history, and what possibility museum goers might have to influence said history; whether history museums truly reflect the people they represent. Throughout the study, however, another question emerged: how do you break a century of silence?

For nearly a hundred years, since the Irish Partition which created the today separate Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, so too have their museum practices and the way they tell Irish history and define their Irish identity been separate. Northern Ireland's museological traditions has been largely influenced by British museology as they are under British rule (Levin, 2005). Meanwhile, the Republic of Ireland took over an established British museological tradition and changed it after the Irish rebellion to match their burgeoning idea of what an independent Irish nation should look like (Levin, 2005; The National Museum of Ireland, 2024).

Examining Northern Irish and Republican Irish museums side by side therefore provides a fascinating glimpse into how two different museum traditions can develop side by side, with different narratives surrounding their shared history and culture.

The idea from which this thesis first spawned was not specifically concerned with Irish history. Throughout the museological masters' programme this thesis was written for, the idea of museum neutrality has come up frequently; how do and should museums engage with politics, how are they affected by politics, to what degree are they truly democratic institutions?

Museums are some of the most trusted public institutions there are, in part because they are seen as being neutral sanctums of truth, of true history (Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014). This view of museums as neutral in their portrayals of, for example, history, made me curious as to what "neutrality" would look like for two countries which used to be one nation, especially in separate exhibitions showing shared events. There are multiple examples of this to be found in Europe, particularly in formerly Soviet nations — and in the case of the two Irelands.

With considerations for the language barrier between myself and the many countries of Eastern Europe, as well as the material constraints of this thesis' scope, I chose to focus on Ireland. I believed there would be a wealth of previous research on Irish museums,

considering the many changes next door in the British museum sector (Hooper- Greenhill 2008), and that the rich history of the two Irelands would be like catnip for museologists.

I was wrong; as the previous research section of this thesis can attest, Irish museology (particularly recent museology) is a relatively unexplored subject. Particularly research focusing on more contemporary Irish history exhibitions is scarce, at least research which can be accessed by Lund University. As for the question of neutrality, there is nothing that I have found.

With this thesis, I intend to explore the idea of democracy and museum neutrality I first set out to investigate, but in so doing also prove that the museum field in the two Irelands are deserving of further exploration. As this thesis will show, the two nations are currently in a state of change, and further research into the nations and their museums may prove beneficial to international museology overall.

1. 1. Background

In order to understand the different challenges facing Irish museums on both sides of the border, it is necessary to establish some of the historical context behind the divide between Northern and Republican Ireland and how this relates to the establishment of their respective national museums.

The island Ireland of today is divided geographically and politically into the independent Republic of Ireland and the British municipality Northern Ireland. This divide has formally existed since the Irish Partition of 1921, an event which sparked a civil war that ended with the formation of the Irish Free State (the later named Republic) in 1923.

As two different nations, the North and the Republic have developed their own museological sectors and traditions, and each have their own national museums. Northern Ireland's state-governed museums follow the same laws which govern other British museums, whose key concern is transparency, ensured by such measures as making their policies and governing bodies accessible to the public, as can be seen by The National Museums of Northern Ireland's (NI) website (National Museums NI, 2024).

The Northern Irish national museum of interest for this thesis is The Ulster Museum in Belfast, which functions as The National Museums of NI's history museum (National Museums NI, 2024).

The Republic's museological traditions purposefully differ from those of the United Kingdom, as can be observed by the way that The National Museum of Ireland was established. The museum was first put in place by the British government in the year 1877, with the name The Museum of Science and Art. In 1921, the Irish Free State took control of the museum and renamed it The National Museum of Ireland (or Ard-Mhúsaem na hÉireann in Gaelic), concurrently transforming its purpose to that of the commemoration and displaying of Irish culture. It has remained thus ever since. (National Museum of Ireland, 2024).

Similar to The National Museums of NI, The National Museum of Ireland consists of a group of cooperating, interconnected museums. The one most relevant for the case of this thesis is The National Museum of Decorative Arts & History, located in the previously military Collins Barracks, Dublin (National Museum of Ireland, 2024).

The two national history museums of Ireland differ both in scope of the history displayed and the size of the buildings. The Ulster Museum is larger, with a history exhibition that stretches from pre-history up to the modern day (National Museums NI 2024; Observation 1). The National Museum of Decorative Arts & History is smaller and, up until this year, featured little of Ireland's history beyond the formation of the Republic in 1923, with the exception being some exhibitions on current events. Other than that, modern history has largely been excluded from The National Museum of Ireland (National Museum of Ireland 2024; Interview 2).

Overall, The Ulster Museum puts equal amount of focus on all periods of the nation's history, but it puts the most emphasis on the modern historical period known as the Troubles, while The National Museum of Ireland focuses more on Ireland's pre-modern history (National Museums NI 2024; The National Museum of Ireland 2024). These differences are necessary to keep in mind when examining both museums' exhibitions.

There exists another state-governed Republican museum which is described as focusing on Ireland's modern history: The General Post Office Museum: Witness History (The GPO Museum), located in the national post office building in Dublin (An Post 2024).

The modern history-focused GPO Museum's location is itself historic: the national post office in Dublin was used as headquarters by the rebel leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, the event which sparked the rebellion which led to the creation of the Republic (An Post 2024). As such, the museum's main exhibition is focused on said Rising.

Unlike The National Museums, The GPO Museum is not governed specifically as a museum by the Irish state, and is not a member of the International Council of Museums (ICOM); rather, it is organised as a body under the Republican national post service An Post (2024; Observation 2; Interview 3). Therefore, despite technically being operated by a government body, its organisation differs from that of The National Museums.

The GPO Museum was unveiled in 2016, as the Republican Irish government wished to create a museum dedicated to the Easter Rising in time for the event's 100th anniversary (Murphy 2016; Interview 3). This 100th anniversary was one of many which occurred from 2013 to 2023: a time called The Decade of Centenaries. The context behind The GPO Museum's creation is relevant for understanding the two national Irish museums, as well as the state of Irish culture and politics, specifically because of The Decade of Centenaries as a context.

Both Irelands have, for the past 100 years, placed much significance on the commemoration of their historic anniversaries, both socially and politically. The events commemorated, such as the Easter Rising, Bloody Sunday, and the formation of the Free State in 1923, have been commemorated in different ways throughout the decades, and the

way they are commemorated reflect the socio-political and cultural landscape of the Irelands commemorating them (Walker 2012).

Commemorative events in Ireland were historically occasions of demonstration but have since the period of The Troubles between 1968–1998 shifted towards events focused on reconciliation and the fostering of peace (Walker 2012). Peace both between the different political factions in Northern Ireland, but also peace and reconciliation between Northern Ireland and the Republic, with an emphasis on community (Walker 2012).

The Decade of Centenaries, as a decade of significant 100th year anniversaries, has therefore provided Irish museums on both sides of the border with reasons to reflect upon both their past, and how they shall define their purpose going forward (Interview 1; Interview 2; Interview 3; National Museums NI).

As the previous research section of this thesis will show, there is little research on Irish museums which have been conducted since or during The Decade of Centenaries. This means that there is little research which shows how museums have been impacted by or adapted themselves to this decade of anniversaries so far. Therefore, this thesis partially examines an aspect of Irish museums hitherto unstudied.

One question Ireland has reflected on since long before The Decade of Centenaries, however, is who are included in the group "Irish". What people are allowed and not allowed to call themselves Irish is an issue which has existed for more than two centuries, and the majority opinion has shifted over time. In the last century, the definition of someone Irish has meant someone who is catholic, and Republican, meaning that in some cases Irish Americans with Irish catholic ancestry are considered Irish, while Northern Irish, particularly those who are protestant, do not qualify as Irish (Foster 1988). This context of some or all Northern Irish not being considered Irish is important to factor into comparisons of the two Irelands' view of their history and of themselves, as something which informs the sociocultural politics of Ireland also beyond the museum field.

The question of what historical events should be exhibited in museums and how is a current and relevant topic in Ireland, particularly Northern Ireland. More specifically, the issue of how The Troubles should be commemorated has been and continues to be discussed ever since its conclusion with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (Walker 2012; Meredith 2018; National Museums NI 2020; Museum of The Troubles Initiative 2024).

The period of The Troubles is therefore relevant to keep in mind when discussing how Irish museums have changed in recent years, and how those changes speak of changes in Irish cultural and social attitudes. Ulster Museum's first Troubles exhibition was created less than ten years after the end of The Troubles, and their most recent exhibition called *The Troubles and Beyond* was unveiled in 2020.

The National Museum of Decorative Arts & History will be unveiling their first exhibition which addresses the period this year (2024) (National Museums NI 2020; National Museum of Ireland 2024). The Troubles is mentioned in The GPO Museum's

exhibition, though as part of a timeline rather than with a dedicated exhibition or section, and it is not mentioned in their online presentation of their exhibitions (Observation 2; An Post 2024).

The premiere of The National Museum of Ireland's inclusion of The Troubles in their history exhibition signifies in their approach towards how Irish history is portrayed, however, particularly by virtue of it also being the first time that Northern Irish history, past the formation of the Free State in 1923, is included in their exhibitions at all (National Museum of Ireland 2024; Interview 2). The reasoning behind this change in Irish museums' approach to The Troubles is, similar to the impact of The Decade of Centenaries, largely unexplored (see: Previous Research), hence why this thesis exists – in order to begin to fill the research gap on Irish museums, and that Irish museums can be used as case studies for the role of national and state-governed museums in other museum fields as well.

1. 1. Aims and research questions

This thesis aims to establish how Irish history is told by Irish state-governed history museums, to what degree the Irish public can participate with those museums, and how that may define who the Irish are. This is done by examining how Northern Irish and Republican Irish museums represent modern Irish history and how that representation may define the collective Irish identity. The thesis examines how democratic and representative of their nation state- governed museums are, by using Ireland as a case study of how collective national identities may be constructed in state-governed museums — and to what degree museum visitors can influence the museums. To summarise: who are the Irish, according to the Irish?

The study is conducted using the following research questions:

1. How do the selected museums portray Irish contemporary history? How do they use terms such as "Irish"?

2. What narratives are presented by the selected museums' exhibitions, and what is the collective Irish identity according to those narratives?

3. In what ways can the museums' audiences participate with the museums and their museum exhibitions?

1. 3. Previous research

In recent decades, academic research focusing on ideas of collective memory, trauma, and the impact of colonisation on peoples and nations, have become increasingly common in multiple academic fields, especially in the realm of museology.

Museums in previously colonised countries face a multitude of challenges which can provide a chance to study the role museums play in society in general, not just in previously colonised countries. For example, research into recently created or recently reorganised museums in the wake of great societal and political change can be used to examine the role museums play in the creation of cultural phenomena such as heritage, cultural traditions, and processes, and how people engage with memory (Crampton, 2003; Nanda, 2004; Jethro, 2013).

1. 3. 1. South Africa

One previously colonised country that remains relatively unexplored in more recent museological research (or, at least in research which is accessible to Lund University) is Ireland. What museological research there is, skews more towards the Republic of Ireland than Northern Ireland, which is still a part of the United Kingdom.

This means that this thesis cannot be entirely supported by previous research into Irish museums; it necessitates diving into museological research focusing on countries with

situations and museological tendencies which are more comparable to Irish museums. One such country is South Africa.

South African museum studies can provide insights into how cultural memory processes and heritage practices have developed following a relatively recent political and social change, following the end of Apartheid. South African museum transitions following social change have occurred after the establishment of new museology and during the popularisation of post-colonialist perspectives in academia, which, as Apartheid ended in 1994, nearly coincides with the formal conclusion of The Troubles in 1998. This makes a comparison between Irish, particularly Northern Irish, museums and South African museums, apt for the purposes of Irish museological studies such as this thesis.

The previous research into South African museums which have been gathered for this thesis all focus on the themes this thesis aims to explore, such as: ideas about the creation of a national identity, heritage formation, reconciliation following a troubled political and social past which still impacts the nation and its peoples today, as well as wider ideas about the formation of a collective memory (Crampton, 2003; Nanda, 2004; Gibson, 2009; Marais, 2011; Jethro, 2013.)

Some of the gathered previous research, such as Crampton's, focuses on the role museums in particular play regarding the formation of a national identity, both historically and in the wake of major social and political transformations (2003). Crampton also discusses how museums are not only influenced by such change, but can be used to contribute to it, or even steer it. Museums, particularly state-governed ones, represent the nation and its ideologies, and their exhibition spaces can be used to foster support for the state and its policies. The latter, Crampton explains, is not so explicitly stated by the museum or the state, rather the state takes on a role of apparent benevolence towards its citizens in creating and maintaining museums, while the museums' official role, as stated by policy and staff, is educational (Crampton, 2003).

Nanda's article on South African museums discusses museums primarily having an educational role while also working to create a cohesive national identity as well. (2004). She states that what museums hope to be, are places that educate visitors, both national and international, about the country's past, to facilitate understanding as well as critical examinations of said past (Nanda, 2004).

Nanda and Crampton, however, both write about South African museums while the changes which had occurred in them were relatively recent. In their articles, they can only postulate as to whether or not the government's wishes for museums to be educational, reconciliatory and useful in constructing a national identity would come true (Crampton, 2003; Nanda 2004).

Marais' article, written in 2011, instead reflects specifically on whether or not the state's and museums' reconciliatory efforts were successful. The conclusion Marais reaches is no, that while museums and heritage sites can educate about the past, their efforts do not guarantee reconciliation. Those who were the victims of Apartheid wish to talk about and

reflect on the past, while those who were the beneficiaries or perpetrators of Apartheid would prefer to stay silent (2011).

One thing museums do not do, as Crampton, Nanda, and Marais all state, is to look beyond the struggles of the past to those of the modern day (2003; 2004; 2011). As stated by Crampton, not all would like to speak of the struggles of the past, let alone how those continue to affect the country and its population in the modern day (2011). Beyond that challenge lies the fact that it is difficult to capture the present while it is occurring – difficult, though not impossible. Some might choose not to accept the challenge of representing the present in favour of establishing truths about the past. The former, to represent the present, gives more power to the visitors, while the latter, to represent the past, gives the institution presenting it control and power over the truth (Crampton 2003).

About reconciliation, Gibson states that reconciliation between the past and the present is an active choice that must be made by all sides of a conflict (2009). Museums do not have the power to decide whether reconciliation has been reached, although they can facilitate discussion between the affected parties (Gibson, 2009).

This effectively puts the decision about what the collective's new identity is in the hands of the collective, although the decision is facilitated by heritage institutions (Gibson, 2009).

1. 3. 2. Eastern Europe

Beyond South African museology, there are some other articles written from a European museological perspective which provides relevant examples of communicating cultural trauma in the wake of social and political change, such as the work by Tatsi, Réti, and Verbytska, which is more recent than the South African research (2014; 2017; 2023).

In the case of Réti's article, it discusses the transmission of cultural memory at heritage sites in Hungary, specifically sites focusing on the end of the Hungarian dictatorship following the fall of the Soviet Union (2017). Similar to The Troubles, there are adults born in the country who themselves have not experienced the cultural trauma which affected their country and their families – they have grown up with cultural trauma stemming from events they did not experience.

When communicating cultural trauma, Réti says, it is about more than reconciliation, coming to terms with or confessing the past: it is about making the past and the trauma understandable and relevant to those who did not experience it (2017). Part of this process is to create a narrative that the generations born after the trauma occurred can process; a narrative which can function as the basis for a new national identity.

To make those heritage sites relevant to young generations, it is important to make the sites accessible both as places where different generations can communicate with each other about the past, but also sites where the youth can examine the transmitted memories themselves (Réti, 2017). Therefore, the sites need to both be accessible to those using and those not using multimedial tools such as audio-guides or other technologies, so that

visitors are offered choices on how to communicate with the memories presented (Réti, 2017).

Réti also criticises how some of the examined sites have chosen to present the nation's history, making the narrative in some cases too one-sided, or the Hungarian state and people as solely victims of history and denying its complicity by the state in the cultural trauma affecting the Hungarian people (2017). As with some of those who benefited from Apartheid in South Africa, some would prefer the state to remain a silent witness and bystander of its own history (Marais, 2011; Réti, 2017).

Similar to Réti's article, Tatsi examines how a museum in a previously Soviet controlled nation might cope with their recent past and attempt to establish a national identity in the wake of recent independence, using Estonia and its national museum at Raadi as an example (2014). The museum was created shortly after Estonia gained its independence in 1991 and its exhibitions then focused on Estonian culture of the past, particularly a romanticised idea of its traditional, rural culture (Tatsi 2014, pp. 21–24). When the museum was rebuilt after 2005, everything from the placement of the building (it was attached to a Soviet airfield) to the contents of the exhibitions invoked the more recent past, in an attempt to reckon with the Soviet era and invite discussions from and among visitors (Tatsi 2014, p. 24). The desire from the Estonian national museum to invite discussions of the Soviet era was met with intense debate, as some supported it, and others saw this as an imposition which ignored Estonians cultural memory altogether (Tatsi 2014, p. 26). The effort to rebuild The National Museum of Estonia into a place of discussion about the Soviet past failed to achieve its goals, Tatsi argues in the article, because it did not involve its intended audience in the rebuilding.

The museum had the aim of being a place of participation and communication, but its first act on this route was to fail to adequately communicate with the very nation it sought to represent (Tatsi 2014, p. 30–32). The museums examined by Verbytska went the opposite route to The National Museum of Estonia, though it had similar aims; where the Estonian museum failed to communicate with the public, those Verbytska examined strive to include as many perspectives into their museums as possible, and the discussion they desired follows (Tatsi 2014; Verbytska 2023).

Verbytska's article is focuses on the narrative of war presented by European museums, in light of cultural memory trends and new museology (2023). Some of those trends, Verbytska explains, are to present narratives which transcend national borders and include as many perspectives as possible. In part, it means that political influences are not the sole authority affecting their work. Museums today are subject to a greater number of sources of influence than before: social, political, international, and more (2023). Part of the greater spectrum of voices influencing modern European museums are the number of personal testimonies now dominating exhibitions. Museums have effectively anthropologised their exhibition narratives, with oral testimonies and a greater diversity of personal stories included as exhibition material (Verbytska, 2023).

Museum perspectives are increasingly pluralistic as well, with narratives crossing borders, demographics, and over-all efforts towards including the greatest number of perspectives possible. This is further emphasised by museums encouraging communication from visitors to both the museum and other visitors, taking efforts to both educate visitors and facilitate communication between visitors (Verbytska, 2023).

1. 3. 3. Ireland

Although little material could be found on the subject of Irish museums for the purposes of this thesis, there exist some articles of interest. One such is Amy Levin's work on Irish museums and the rhetoric of nation (2005).

In her article, Levin examines increasing criticism towards museums as representatives of dominating powers, as well as how museums aid nations in their building of a collective, national identity. Levin explores the history of the Republic of Ireland's marketing of itself, at first romanticising its countryside and a fairy-tale like brand of simplicity, creating a vibrant tourism industry as a result (2005).

However, this romantic idea of Ireland was at odds with the history of its "Famine, industrialization, and battles for independence" and eventually became a hindrance to Ireland's efforts to compete in the global markets. This led to a modern rebranding of Ireland, emphasising cosmopolitan culture and technological innovation. Museums were at odds with this, and as a response "began to offer narratives that drew on a powerful rhetoric about the nation, its long history, and its sophisticated culture" (2005, p. 79).

Rhetoric of a modern, cosmopolitan Ireland was framed with contradictions, as it "involved acknowledging the interconnected roles of colonialism, class, and religious oppression in the nation's history" which did not match the image of a strong, stable nation attractive to major investors (2005, p. 80).

Levin further examines multiple Dublin museums, finding and examining examples of how their exhibitions frame the narrative of the nation. Her results found that the museums established a rhetoric of nationality and culture, "attempted either to ignore colonial domination or to re-appropriate sites associated with its oppressions", and framed the nation's history as being economically and politically stable (2005, pp. 88).

The rhetoric of the nation portrayed Ireland and the Irish people as being remarkable for their strength in overcoming adversity, which differs from the Irish identity presented by The Ulster museum. Levin states, "These efforts [by Dublin museums] mitigate against the many losses and silences inflicted by a colonial history" (2005, pp. 88–89). The Ulster Museum in Northern Ireland meanwhile (one of the museums studied for this thesis) offered contrasting perspectives in its exhibitions — and yet, the thread connecting them was a narrative emphasising "family life and the continuity of heritage", while downplaying and restricting pain and conflict. About Ulster and Dublin both, Levin concludes: "Ireland's history, as presented in museum, becomes as a fetish, its power dominated through the very act of gazing" (2005, p. 90).

Since Levin's 2005 article, research about Irish museums have largely been concerned with the effects of the 2008 recession. In 2017, Emily Mark-FitzGerald comprised said research into an article that argues for the development of strategic planning for Ireland's museums (Mark-FitzGerald, 2017). Having been written shortly after Brexit was first announced, it remarks that the future for museum collaboration across the Irish border is uncertain, though it argues for the strengthening of Northern-Republican relations. It also states that the museum sector had, at the time of the article's publication, become increasingly professionalised. It is cautiously optimistic for the future, arguing for increased collaboration between museums, and increased planning overall (Mark-FitzGerald, 2017). Mark Fitz-Gerald's article thus provides a glimpse into the Irish museum sector of 2017 and the challenges it had weathered at that point, and what challenges lay ahead. Some of those past challenges, which Fitzgerald did not foresee, remain, such as those caused by the global covid-19 pandemic, though the prospect of a hard Brexit (which would have affected political relations between the north and south) which alarmed Fitzgerald did not come to pass (European Union, 2024).

Moving beyond the realm of museological research, there is research on the impact of historical and political events on the Irish which is relevant to this study. One such example is Ian Miller's 2021 article on the idea of neutrality as a root of trauma for Northern Irish people who experienced The Troubles.

As Miller explains, an aspect of The Troubles which caused trauma and continues to impact the people of Northern Ireland was the silence from officials attempting political neutrality. For example, health care professionals and researchers who wished to remain "neutral" on political issues would not factor in The Troubles in the care for some of their patients, as stating or concluding that a patient might be suffering negative health effects caused by political unrest would be considered a political act. Therefore, health care workers chose to remain neutral, by being silent (Miller, 2021). Thus, neutrality being seen as "silence" was one the reasons that the increasing amounts of patients suffering due to trauma-related afflictions in Northern Ireland was unspoken and untreated for years — in some cases, decades (Miller, 2021). Retroactive care can only do so much (that is to say: it does little) to mend the wounds caused by The Troubles.

The intergenerational impact of The Troubles is also discussed by Natalie Day and Netalie Shloim (2021) in their article focusing on Troubles-related trauma. Like Miller (2021), Day and Shloim remark that silence from those who suffered from The Troubles prevent both healing and understanding across an intergenerational divide, specifically those who did not live through The Troubles (2021, pp. 4–5). For the personal and cultural trauma caused by The Troubles to heal, Day and Shloim argue that the experiences and effects of The Troubles should be explored and explained across social, generational, and cultural and collective divides (2021, p 14). Cultural cohesion, according to Day and Shloim, would be a starting point for the cultural trauma's healing process. The cultural and social divide which exists in Northern Ireland hinders ongoing work towards reconciliation and recovery for those directly and indirectly affected by The Troubles.

Prior to Miller (2021) and Day and Shloim (2021), the cultural trauma of The Troubles had also been studied by Dawson in his 2007 book on memory, trauma, and the Irish Troubles. Dawson focuses both on the effects of cultural trauma upon a culture and a population, both those who experienced the events which caused the trauma and those born after it, as well as the path to reconciliation with the past (Dawson, 2007). The path to reconciliation after traumatic events, Dawson explains, is a complex and at times paradoxical combination of phycological, cultural, as well as political measures. There are also some traumas whose effects can never be truly healed, which will continue to be felt by coming generations and define them as a group (Dawson, 2007). Still, Dawson says that "reparation is the mobilization of hope, so that the living can go on" (Dawson 2007, p. 85). Some measures of reparations include political measures such as supporting the health care necessary for those most impacted in the wake of the trauma, but also to use commemorative events as platforms for reconciliation (Dawson, 2007). The power of commemorative events is also discussed by Walker in his 2012 article.

Both the power and the role of commemorative events and anniversaries in both Northern Ireland and the Republic have shifted throughout the years (Walker 2012). For some, commemorative events have not been cause for celebration but for demonstration. It has not united, but further emphasised the existing divide between the two Irelands, especially before the start of The Troubles (Walker 2012). During and after The Troubles, the tone and purpose of the commemorative events surrounding historical anniversaries in Ireland have shifted towards arguing for peace and reconciliation. This marks a shift in both the political and social environment in Ireland, towards a common goal of fostering peace and increased collaboration and friendship between the Republic and the North (Walker 2012).

This accounting of the power of anniversaries in Ireland is especially relevant to this thesis, as The Decade of Centenaries was frequently brought up as relevant in important throughout the conduction of the main study (Interview 1; Interview 2; Interview 3; Murphy 2016). Walker therefore provides context for The Decade's significance in the political, social, and cultural landscape of both Irelands.

2. Theoretical framework

This section will explain the theoretical framework chosen for this thesis. It is divided into three different sections, based on the authors of the chosen theoretical texts this section is based on. It is divided by authors as there are four theories in total, though two of those are penned by the same author and comes from the same realm of research.

2. 1. 1. Ron Eyerman on cultural trauma and collective memory

Museums do not exist in isolation; museum institutions have a long and varied history, and it is not uncommon to see museologists apply theories belonging to other academic fields to museological research (Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014). In the case of this thesis, the main theory used as framework for both its methodology and analysis comes from the realm of cultural sociology: Ron Eyerman's exploration of cultural trauma and collective memory (2019). The explanation of the methodology and theory presented by Eyerman is largely gathered from his 2019 book, which is a compilation of his research on cultural trauma. In his introduction he clarifies some of the terminology he uses in his work, most of which is based on previous work within the realm of cultural sociology (Eyerman, 2019).

Eyerman first explains the difference between individual and collective trauma. Individual trauma, he says, is a result of something horrible being done to or experienced by an individual; collective trauma is instead when members of a collective have gone through one or more traumatic experiences which changes their collective consciousness. Thusly, once their collective consciousness is changed, a change of their collective identity follows (Eyerman 2019, p. 23).

With this understanding of collective trauma in mind, Eyerman explains the definition of cultural trauma, which is more far-reaching than collective trauma. Cultural trauma, according to Eyerman, is "[a] dramatic loss of identity and meaning" which affects a "group of people who have achieved some degree of cohesion", which must be "explained and made coherent through public reflection and discourse". The trauma, having destroyed a previous sense of cohesion, is then part of the foundation for the formation of a new collective identity (2019, p. 23).

Eyerman then elaborates on the idea of collective identity formation, stating that it is "intimately linked with collective memory, may be grounded in loss and crisis, as well as in triumph. [O]ne way of dealing with loss is by attempting to turn tragedy into triumph" (2019, p. 24).

Eyerman also delves into previous research on collective memory, such as the Durkheimian tradition, which sees collective memory as central to the reproduction of a society. "Collective memory is defined as the recollections of a shared past that are passed

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on through ongoing processes of commemoration," Eyerman explains. Those processes mentioned can be forms of sanctified rituals focusing on a shared history and heritage, which both embody and recall the past (2019, p. 25).

On the general function of collective memory, Eyerman says:

> Collective memory unifies the group through time and over space by providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it, and which, because it can be represented as narrative and as text, attains mobility. The narrative can travel, as individuals travel, and it can be embodied, written down, painted, represented, communicated, and received in distant places by isolated individuals who can thereby be united culturally, if not physically, with the collective.
>
> *Eyerman 2019, p. 25*

Consider the above explanation of collective memory as applied to, for example, those born and raised in America that have a claim to an Irish, or specifically Irish American, identity, while those born and raised in Northern Ireland might not be considered Irish at all, depending on who you ask (Foster, 1988).

Eyerman also speaks of the construction of narratives that canonise the origin of a "we" in a group, and thus, who "we" are based on that narrative. In so doing, "they", understood to be a anyone outside the group, are excluded and forgotten (Eyerman 2019, p. 26).

Understanding and researching collective memory and cultural traumas can, with the above in mind, be used to understand the foundations of a collective: what it is that unites them, and what ideas or events they might see as threats towards their collective's cohesion. In short, if one understands a group's collective memory and trauma, one might understand its fears and priorities.

The most important aspect of Eyerman's work for the purpose of this thesis is, as Woods writes, that he has "shed light on the relationship between cultural trauma and collective identity" (2019, p. 198). It is relevant for this thesis as it can be applied to the Irish collective identity, with both the Partition and The Troubles being key examples of culturally traumatic events which have shaped the collective idea of what it is to be Irish.

2. 1. 2. Pruulman-Vengerfeldt and Runnel on Participation theory

This thesis also explores, beyond the idea of collective memory, the democratisation of museums and museum participation by visitors. This facet is largely be based on the work of Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel's Democratizing the museum, in which they explore different modes and perquisites for audience participation (2014). With participation theory, the term "audience" is used to refer to those studied using a participation perspective. The word "audience" rather than "visitors" conveys that "people receiving messages are seen as an important part of production of meaning. 'Visitors' come and go and leave a mark only when invited to write something in the guest book". However, Pruulman-Vengerfeldt and Runnel maintain that terms such as visitors, users,

and participants, are part of the umbrella term "audience", meaning that visitors and users are also seen as participating in the creation of meaning regarding museums (Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014, p. 13).

For the analysis section of this thesis, the term "audience", as established above, is used to invoke the meaning of it in participation theory.

Part of participation theory are the studying of participatory technologies; a general term which includes both literal technologies as well as activities meant to foster audience engagements. The technologies include simple material objects such as pen and paper, as well as more complex technologies such as digital social networks and the internet. The activities fostering engagement may include such things as guided tours, role-play, and other activities (Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014, pp. 13– 14).

Although not all museums encourage audience participation, there is still an identifiable trend in museums towards increased participation and participatory technologies, in order to enable their role as democratic, public institutions. Because of this, there is an increased amount of what can be called "the communicative museum". Museums are increasingly multivocal, meaning that the museum makes space for other speakers, rather acting as a monovocal authority (2014, p. 15–16).

Participation is understood by Pruulman-Vengerfeldt and Runnel as something mutually beneficial, which aims for balanced power relations between museums and audiences, or at least the fostering of dialogue between the parties. Participation theory also argues that participation is the key to ensuring museums are democratic, and that this is necessary for a functioning democratic society (2014, pp. 35–36).

In order to facilitate museums' democratic functions, it is necessary to abandon the idea of museums as "sanctums of truthful memories", and to instead see museums as "as reflexive knowledge institutions". This would foster and support critical thinking in their audiences, using participation as key (Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014, p. 50). This is relevant when examining how museum audiences can participate in the creation of a collective national identity, as the museums must enable participation and communication so that the audience may participate.

Part of an analysis using participation theory for museum studies is to see "Who says What to Whom?": what kind of participation the museums offer, what their motive behind enabling participation is, and what in turn motivates visitors to participate (Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014, p. 49). In the case for this thesis and its analysis section, participation theory is used to analyse "Who says What to Whom?", further strengthened by narrative theory, as well as what kind of participation is possible in the museums and what participatory technologies they utilise.

2. 1. 3. Gérard Genette on Narratology and Paratexts

Part of this thesis' exploration of museums and their exhibitions focuses on the texts present within and surrounding the exhibitions, and the theories chosen to examine the texts themselves reflect this: paratextual theory, and narratology, as they are defined by Genette (1980; 1997).

Narrative and paratextual theory are tools intended for literary textual analysis. As this thesis will look at how Irish museums portray the history of Ireland in their exhibitions and how they refer to Ireland in their exhibition texts, such text-based theories can be applied, as previously established with Eyerman's use of narratology (2019).

Genette established the term paratext to describe factors presenting a text which can influence the interpretations of said text. In the case of books, this includes the work's title, the author's name, chapter titles, the book's cover design, the book's description, as well as genre classification. They are what a reader will read before engaging with a work; the texts might persuade a future reader. The paratexts present the work, and the presentation shapes the audience's initial expectations for the text and informs their interpretations of it (Genette, 1997). For this thesis' analysis, the framings of exhibitions are treated as paratexts. The paratexts thus include exhibition's title, presentations, posters and other promotional or introductory material. This can be used to understand how visitors, similar to readers, might interpret an exhibition based of the initial paratextual reading, as well as how museums desire the exhibitions to be perceived.

Genette's theory of narratology is about the text itself: what is a narrative, and what does it tell its recipient. Genette uses the word narrative to describe the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself, meaning that the narrative is the discourse presented by a story, the narrative is what the story conveys to the reader. Narrating is what produces the narrative action itself (1980).

Analysing narrative, as Genette describes, is to study the relationship between narrator, narrative, and recipient (1980, p. 28). The narrator is the conductor of the narrative, though they need not be present in the presented narrative. The function of the narrative, Genette describes, is to report either real or fictive facts, and the recipient is the one or those intended to receive the narrative (1980).

Genette suggests that those conducting a narrative analysis should not confuse information given by a focalised narrative (a narrative purposefully told from a limited point of view), "with the interpretation the reader is called on to give it" (1980, p. 189).

When analysing a narrative, then, one is trying to ascertain the following: who the narrator is, what they are narrating, what the narrative is, in what ways they convey that narrative, and what the reader is intended to interpret (Genette, 1980). For the analysis part of this thesis, narrative analysis is used to determine how the studied Irish history exhibitions tell visitors to interpret Irish history.

2. 2. Terminology

This part of the thesis explains the chosen terminology included in the text, explaining both their meaning and the reasoning behind them having been chosen.

Ireland and Irish

The terms "Ireland" and "Irish" have been used in segments prior to this one. Unlike the rest of the terminology utilised in this text, "Ireland" and "Irish" are words whose definitions are not so easily defined; they carry a long, divisive, and political legacy, and their meaning is usually contextual (Foster 1988).

How the terms "Irish" and "Ireland" are used in Irish museums is also part of this thesis' research questions, which means that their significance will also be explored as part of the results and analysis section.

For the purposes of this study, the terms Ireland and Irish define: the entire island of Ireland, both Irish nations (the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland), all people inhabiting the island, and all things related to both nations (including language, culture, history, and similar matters both material and immaterial).

For matters specifically related to the Republic of Ireland, it will be referred to as "the Republic" and "Republican", and their northern neighbours will be referred to as "Northern Ireland" and "Northern".

The public

This term is used to apply to Northern Irish and Republican citizens whose histories are represented in the museums and whom the museums communicate with most frequently (Interviews 1, 2, & 3). It is used more generally to apply to museum visitors than the terms in the heading below.

"The public" differentiates from "visitors" and "audience" which can include international visitors. The terms visitors and audience, as stated in the theoretical framework section, refer to those who visit and interact with museums specifically. The terms as defined by Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel does not make mention of international versus national visitors or audiences (2014). This necessitates the use of a term referring specifically to Irish citizens and serves the purpose of differentiating short-term international visitors who have less opportunity to communicate with Irish museums and are not the ones represented in the exhibits, from those whom the museums seek to represent and communicate with.

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3. Method

The methods used for this thesis are all qualitative in nature, consisting of semi-structured interviews, observations, exhibition- and text analysis. The chosen methods can be described as a blending of ethnological, sociological, as well as literary science-based approaches. This is in part due to the variation of material selected for the conduction of the study, as well as a desire to approach the subject from multiple angles in order to form more cohesive results and analysis, based on the method used by Eyerman. (2019). In brief, museological studies are traditionally a blend of different scientific and analytical approaches, and this study is no different.

The study was planned with different methodological phases: the first being the background research into previous research, theory, and historical and political context; the second, the initial documentation and observation of the exhibits and digital material; the third being the interviews; fourthly, the transcribing of the interviews and compilation of the material gathered during the second stage; concluding with the analysis of the gathered and compiled data.

For the museum observation — the examination and documentation of the museum exhibits — two assistants of the author were present. They were one historian and one literary student, and are not otherwise associated with the study, not associated with any museums, and have no education in museum studies. Their assistance was mainly in the form of photographical documentation. The documentation was done by the direction of the study's author.

The photographical documentation by the assistants being done by the direction of the author means that the author told them what, in the exhibits, they were to document. This included telling them what to photograph and what to film; examples include them being told to film the paths through the exhibitions from start to finish from all possible directions.

The assistants also offered commentary on the exhibitions, which were documented as field notes. These comments and observations are, when quoted in the *Results* section of this thesis, be stated as being quotes and comments by the assistants, but are otherwise referred to as being part of an observation, such as "Observation 1".

The chief reason behind the use of assistants was material constraints: the size and scope of the exhibits meant it would be an inefficient use of time to document all necessary aspects of the exhibitions over the course of the visits. Moreover, their observations as international visitors with no insight into museum studies were more visitor-oriented, which complemented the author's professional and theory-based observations.

The observations were conducted both digitally and physically. The physical observations were those conducted in the museums and their exhibits and were documented using photographs, video, as well as written notes noting both initial impressions and thoughts of the exhibitions, as well as the movements of the visitors present in the exhibits. The

assistants aided in the photographical documentation of the exhibits, specifically with video-taping the rooms and the films in the exhibits. These videos are used in the study to recollect the paths available to visitors and the filmed parts of the exhibits.

The digital observations were conducted only by the author and documented using written notes as well as screenshots. The digital observations were mainly used for the paratextual part of the subsequent analysis, as well as the part of the analysis concerned with the audience participation theory by Pruulman-Vengerfeldt and Runnel (2014).

The other method used is that of qualitative semi-structured interviews. The intent behind the interviews is for them to provide material and context which the other material, such as the museum exhibitions cannot. As stated by Eriksson-Zetterquist and Ahrne, interviews function best when utilised as one of multiple methods in a research project, in order to compensate for the different methods' shortcomings (2022, p. 56– 78). Hagström and Nylund Skog argue in their text *Intervjuer* that interviews conducted within the cultural sciences are most often used as part of a larger work of documentation and research, which is the case for this thesis (2022).

As previously stated, the interviews are qualitative in nature. As Hagström and Nylund Skog explain, qualitative interviews allow the interview subjects to form their own answers, rather than choose among pre-selected alternatives. (2022, p. 129). Since the questions were intended to offer a deeper understanding of the museum exhibitions and the Irish museum landscape, qualitative interviews were deemed to be ideal, as they allow for longer and more varied answers than with quantitative interviews (Hagström & Nylund, 2022).

In order to encourage flexibility in the answers, the interviews were semi-structured. That is, as Hagström and Nylund Skog explain, they all touch on a pre-decided research subject, and some pre-written questions which introduced the research and kept the subjects on track yet allowed them to reason and to structure the interview to their own liking (2022, p. 139). The majority of questions asked during the interviews were adapted according to the interview subjects' answers, while the prepared questions were based on the initial exhibition-based and digital observations.

Regarding the interview subjects themselves, they were not specifically selected; the museums were selected, contacted with requests for an interview, and then one person from each museum reached out to volunteer. Only the first step of the two-step selection described by Eriksson-Zetterquist and Ahrne was fulfilled: the selection of organisations from which the individual subjects will later be decided. (2022, p. 78).

Due to the geographical distance between myself and the interview subjects, the interviews were conducted digitally, and were digitally recorded. As explained by Hagström and Nylund Skog, recording interviews permit the interviewer to maintain greater focus on the subject and make them feel comfortable, and it is better for the recollection and documentation of the acquired data. This explanation from Hagström and

Nylund Skog was the basis for the interview method and the choice to record them (2022, pp. 141–142).

The analysis part of the study is based on Eyerman's methodology, specifically that which Woods refers to as his multidimensionality, or "thick explanation". In brief, that means the incorporation of as many perspectives into an analysis as is possible, in order to reach a broader understanding of a research subject. For Eyerman, that also means the inclusion of other modes of analysis as well, such as historical analysis, social analysis, and narrative analysis (Eyerman 2019, p. 199).

Eyerman's use of narrative analysis is what inspired the use of narratology as part of this thesis' analysis. For Eyerman, narrative analysis allows him "to connect seemingly disparate individual narratives about an event to more established narratives" which "helps to identify patterns of potentially competing narrative" (2019, p. 199).

In the case of this thesis whose methodology is mainly based on this "thick explanation" approach, it means the studying of multiple different forms of material (such as both interviews, exhibition material, and observations) and the use of other theoretical frameworks in order to build a multidimensional understanding of said material. As with Eyerman, part of that means the inclusion of a narrative analysis, which in this thesis is based on the narratology described by Genette (1980).

The method used for the narratological and paratextual analysis is based on Genette's previously mentioned narratological and paratextual theories. (1980, 1997). The method for the narrative analysis includes studying the language of the text, such as searching for common story themes, examining word choices, nothing what pronouns are used, as well as whether the language is utilising active or passive grammar (Genette, 1980). The paratextual analysis looks upon visual aspects as well as language used in the texts, such as the significance of colour and over-all visual impressions and the most common connotations suggested by those paratextual visuals (Genette, 1997).

The subsequent narrative gleaned from the exhibitions was analysed according to the previously mentioned theoretical framework of collective memory as established by Eyerman (2019). Meaning, that the narrative established by the narratological analysis was used as a basis for answering the question of what the collective identity of the Irish are, according to the studied Irish history museums.

3. 1. 1. Case selection

Museums were selected as cases based on their relevance to this thesis' aims and research questions. A set of criteria based on the aims and research questions were created for the case selection, which are as follows:

- o The museums are to be affiliated with the government of either Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. All privately owned and operated museums are disqualified for the selection.

- o The museums must have exhibitions relevant to the study. The exhibitions must therefore be about one or more of the following subjects:
  - i. Modern Irish history (the exhibition shall be, in their introductory texts on the museum's website, described as being about "modern" history).
  - ii. The Troubles
  - iii. The Partition and the creation of the Republic of Ireland
- o The museums must have websites discoverable using a search engine.
- o The museums' websites must contain information describing their contents.

The last two criteria were necessary to include as part of the main study was conducted digitally, due to the distance between the author and the selected museums.

The material for the exhibition analysis was collected between the 3rd and 7th of February 2024 on physical visits to the selected museum exhibitions. Notes were taken during the visits, as well as photographs of the exhibitions as records of the exhibition material. This permitted a remote analysis of the exhibitions, after the visits' conclusion.

In order to find museums, the search engine DuckDuckGo was used with the search words "museum" and "Dublin" or "Belfast". Each museum's website was visited and read to see whether they were affiliated with the government and if their exhibitions were historical. The results found that The Ulster Museum in Belfast, Northern Ireland was the largest museum with exhibitions which fit the profile, being a national museum in the Northern Ireland's capital city with exhibitions focused on the history, culture and collective memory of Northern Ireland. Their collection focused on modern history and "cover[s] the period from 1500 to the present day. It … illuminates themes of social and cultural history, war and conflict, politics and economic history," which is relevant to this study (National museums NI, 2023).

The afore-mentioned National Museum of Ireland has a museum of decorative arts and history, though as of yet no exhibition focusing on modern Irish history. Since one such exhibition will be unveiled this year however, and they have a digitally accessible history collection, they were one of the museums selected (National Museum of Ireland, 2024).

Research revealed another museum in Dublin that represents modern Irish history, which was selected for the study: The General Post Office Museum (GPO Museum). It is not affiliated with The National Museums, but it fits the criteria of government affiliated museums.

The organisation behind The GPO Museum, An Post, is the national post service of the Republic, run and funded by the government. An Post's website shows that the organisation presents the company's history as having close ties to Ireland's modern history, with the title of their history page stating: "The Post Office in Ireland, from railways to rebellion" (An Post, 2024). Little introduction to the museum exhibitions' content is made on the website for GPO Museum. The introduction to the museum itself is brief: "The GPO Museum is an immersive, interactive and engaging experience telling the story of the 1916 Easter Rising and Modern Irish History" (An Post, 2024).

Despite it not being a government-affiliated museum, attempts were made to contact the Museum of The Troubles for an interview, as multiple parties involved with the project are politicians (The Museum of The Troubles and Peace, 2024). Having an interview with museum staff would have made for an even number of museums from Northern Ireland and the Republic. No interview could be realised however, as the museum did not respond to any of the requests for contact.

In conclusion, the museums selected for this study are: The Ulster Museum in Belfast, Northern Ireland; The GPO Museum, and The National Museum of Decorative Arts & History Museum, in Dublin, the Republic of Ireland.

3. 1. 2. Limitations

The main motive behind the limitations imposed on this study are time constraints, as well as relevance. Regarding relevance, state-funded and governed museums were selected to fit with the thesis aims of exploring the creation of a national Irish identity. Therefore, national museums and state-run museums fit as an example of institutions shaping and informing a collective identity, specifically a national identity. Relevance was also the reasoning behind limiting the search to Dublin and Belfast, as those are the capitals of the respective nations and thus more closely tied to the government.

Initially, the study was intended to be conducted on an equal number of Irish and Republican museums, though this ultimately could not be realised. As previously stated, attempts at contacting one of the selected Northern museums failed. This limits the case study and comparative aspects of the study, as there being solely one Northern museums limits the ability to adequately compare Northern and Republican museums.

The reasoning behind limiting the number of interviews to one member of staff per museum was due to time constraints and the chosen method. In order to achieve as well rounded an analysis of the museums as possible, it was necessary to analyse multiple types of material and to focus solely on interviews would limit the scope of the analysis, as explained in the previous part of the method section. Therefore, it was more suitable to instead limit the number of interviews.

3. 2. Material

The material used for the investigation is mixed, consisting of digital material, interviews, observations, as well as various types of material taken from museum exhibitions. The museum exhibitions were documented using photographs, video, and written notes.

The different modes of the documentation of the museum exhibits focused on different aspects. The photographs were taken to document the display cases, the items within, all exhibition signs, and other material objects and written texts on display. The video material documented the different paths one could walk within the exhibits, the overall

layouts, as well as the noise impression of the exhibits. The written notes documented questions for the later interviews, observations of visitors, general impressions of the exhibitions, as well as interactions with staff.

The digital material consists of museum websites and online digital collections. It has been documented using screenshots. Due to the size of the historical digital collection which was studied (10 000 posts), not all items were documented. Rather, the introductory texts, user instructions, and subcollections' texts were documented, while the database itself was examined through observations with notes taken during said observations.

The interviews were intended to number between three to six; in the end, three were carried out. Though they are few in number, they were great in influence upon the rest of the acquired material. The initial results from the interviews were what influenced the trajectory of the thesis beyond the pre-planning stages; this despite the exhibition material being the first to be documented.

The interviews were conducted digitally via Zoom and used the software's built-in recording function to record both video and audio. The interviews were transcribed by the interviewer. The transcribed interviews are the chiefly used interview material.

3. 3. Ethical concerns

As explained by Hughes Tidlund and von Unge (2022), one of the most vital parts of ethical research practice surrounding interviews includes assuring the subjects are all duly informed about this research and its purposes so that they may give their informed consent to participate, as well as make sure that their personal information and the research data is used and stored in a responsible way (2022). Their definition of ethical research forms the basis for this thesis' ethical guidelines.

The interview subjects were given a consent form to sign, informing them of what the interviews would be used for, managed, and stored, and other details necessary for them to be able to give informed consent to participate. Measures were taken in order to maintain the interview subjects' privacy, in accordance with the promises given in the consent form. This means that their data has been stored locally, their names and other potentially identifying details have been removed from the transcript and kept out of this written text. The consent form also stated that the data (the recordings, transcripts, digital communication between subject and interviewer) will be destroyed upon the publishing of the final version of this thesis, to ascertain that the data cannot be utilised for future studies without the participants' consent.

Beyond maintaining ethical standards and guidelines during the interviews, the political nature of this study's chosen subject could be cause for ethical concerns. As the museum exhibits document a history still within living memory and which is still cause for political discourse, and whose effects are also felt by the people born after the conflict's official

resolution, it is important to strive for understanding the subject as well as handle it with care. Moreover, the study documents some persons' individual thoughts and opinions regarding political issues, which further necessitates a careful ethical approach to handling their involvement and personal details. In the case of the participants, their personal histories and other potentially identifying information has been discarded from the research material, upon their request.

It should be noted that the author of this study is not Irish and is not involved with any Irish political parties. The historical research conducted for the purposes of this study was done with the intent to gain understanding for both sides of the Irish border, the factions for and against Irish unification and all sides impacted by The Troubles.

Due to the study's constraints, it is not possible to become entirely aware of all the nuances of Irish contemporary history and culture, but the subjects have been approached with respect and awareness of the author's lack of prior knowledge. As is the nature of an outsider's perspective, some details or nuance to the stories studied might be missed, though it can also allow for a new perspective and questions posed that might be missed from those on the inside. Having no prior knowledge can mean having no prior bias, which in the case of a sensitive and troublesome topic like The Troubles might be a boon.

3. 4. Disposition

The results and analysis have been combined as one, with the conclusions at the end serving as a summary of both. The results and analysis section is split into different sections, which analyse the material taken from the three different museums; these museums each have their own section, with the other subheadings touching upon the themes relevant to the chosen theoretical framework. The Conclusions section which summarises the conclusions drawn from the results and analysis, and which answers the chosen research questions comes after the results and analysis. After that, the Discussion and future research section discusses the conclusions and possible future research.

4. Results and analysis

The following subheadings contain the results and the analysis of the conducted study and are divided into different thematical sections. The results are coupled together with analysis and interpretations of said research, rather than separating the results and analysis into different sections. The first main section examines the museums chosen as cases, while the following sections combine the various cases into themes based on the theoretical framework.

4. 1. The case studies

The following subheadings all detail the results from and analysis of the different museums which were studied for this thesis, including the interviews. It consists of three larger subheadings, one for each museum studied. The first museum presented is The Ulster Museum, followed by The National Museum of Ireland, and then The General Post Office Museum (GPO Museum).

4. 1. 1. The Ulster Museum

This section explains the results and analysis of the material gathered from The Ulster Museum and the interview with one of its curators. The main emphasis rests on the findings from *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibit, as it is the museum's most recent exhibit, as well as the one exhibiting the most contemporary Irish history (Observation 1; National Museums NI 2024).

The interviewed curator was one of the persons directly involved with the creation of the museum's *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition (Interview 1). This means that they can provide insight into the decision making and the creation process behind the exhibition, though they are only tangentially aware of the creation process behind the general history exhibition.

4. 1. 1. 1. The Troubles and Beyond, and Discover History

The Troubles and Beyond exhibition can be reached from two points: the entrance on the first floor, or upon exiting the general history exhibit. When consider how to approach it upon the visit, a guard posted right at the museum's entrance said, "Start from the top and work your way down" (Observation 1). The general advice takes a visitor descending through history, from the Irish isle's ice age towards the *Discover history* exhibit (which concludes with the year 1968), down towards The Troubles *and Beyond*.

The general *History* exhibit has little colour to it, favouring black text on white walls, which allow for the display cases to take focus (see fig. 1). There is no comprehensive thematic colour scheme to the display cases, although they all have colourful backdrops (Observation 1).

Fig. 1. The Discover History *exhibit covering the history of the 1800's* (Observation 1).

This choice of black and white in the *History* exhibit, said the curator in the interview, was purposefully done to bring focus to the items themselves. The backdrops are further decorated by subtle repeating patterns taken from an item on display in the case. Some display cases chose a deliberately significant colour as the backdrop: the example provided in the interview was the display case focusing on World War One uniforms, which used a muddy brown backdrop as a reference to the trench warfare; a significant and generally recognisable symbol of said war. Other than that, the colours themselves carried no purposeful significance. (Interview 1). Naturally it is no guarantee that some choices were not made subconsciously, though this is difficult to argue both for and against.

The lack of conscious colour choice is not the case of *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibit, where the question of colour is more important. As The Troubles are still within living memory, and may be traumatic even for those with no direct experiences of the event (Day & Shloim 2021), some colours are more likely to evoke responses from visitors. There are some colours that they would not use due to their significance, the curator explained in the interview. These being any colour associated with either the Irish flag or the Union Jack (green, orange, white, red, and blue) which left a limited colour palate (Interview 1).
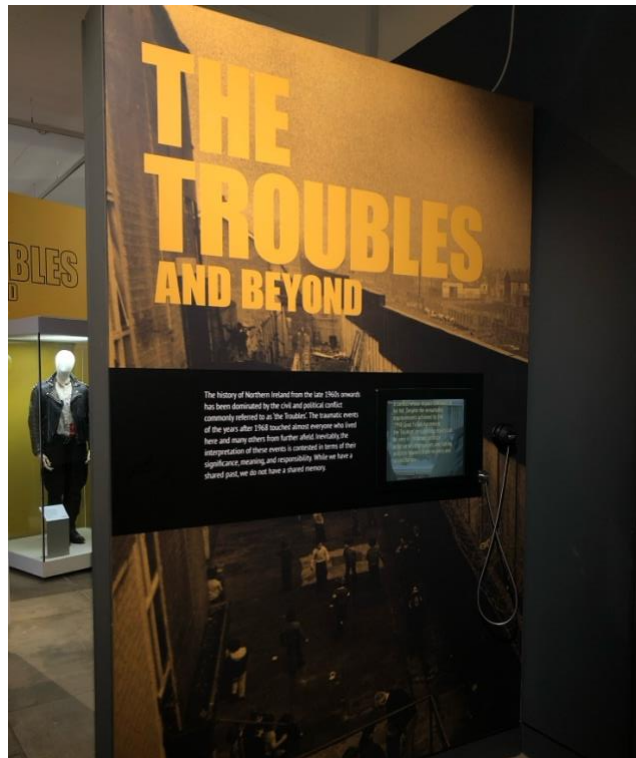
Fig. 2. The introductory sign to The Troubles and Beyond *exhibition* (Observation 1).

The colour they ended up using for *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibit was yellow (see fig. 2). This has the result of lifting The Troubles away from history: it becomes its own epoque, almost divorced from the two flags which are the very background to The Troubles' existence. Although the exhibition's contents, as well as the *History* exhibition leading up to it make sure that the visitor cannot entirely view it as divorced from the rest of Irish history; yet, it remains a marked historical era. (Interview 1; Observation 1; National Museums NI 2020).

The introductory text to the exhibition (see fig. 2) gives visitors a brief explanation of The Troubles, as well as the exhibitions focus, which is that of the period's effects.

> The history of Northern Ireland from the late 1960s onwards has been dominated by the civil and political conflict commonly referred to as 'The Troubles'. The traumatic events of the years after 1968 touched almost everyone who lived here and many others from further afield. Inevitably, the interpretation of these events is contested in terms of their significance, meaning, and responsibility. While we have a shared past, we do not have a shared memory.
>
> *Observation 1*

The text lets visitors know that The Troubles continue to carry significance for many, and that the events are traumatic, and still felt by many, including those who were not present for them. It echoes Eyerman's explorations of cultural trauma as event or events traumatic in nature whose effects spread beyond those who experienced them, and may be felt for and throughout an entire culture long past the events occurred (Eyerman 2019). Interestingly, the text says that "we" do not have a shared memory, which is of interest when the events are previously stated to be felt and shared by the people of Northern Ireland and "many others further afield". Though, as Eyerman explained, one source of

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cultural trauma may also be that the same events are not remembered the same, causing a conflict within a collective, such as the people of Northern Ireland, which becomes a facet for cultural trauma (Eyerman 2019). For The Troubles, this lack of conflict and its effect on the cultural trauma surrounding The Troubles can also be seen in Day and Shloim's article (2021), where they argue that cultural cohesion is necessary for cultural trauma to be healed; cultural cohesion which does not yet exist, as one may see in *The Troubles and Beyond* (Observation 1).

"We do not share a memory" may also be a signifier of how the collective identity of Northern Ireland has not yet been established, the collective has not reached a consensus. As Eyerman (2019) explains, cultural trauma may form a basis for a collective identity if the collective agrees on how that identity is to be defined based on the experiences of that trauma. The nature of The Troubles and their effects are still divisive. This exhibition may be a means of reconciling with that division, to reach what Day and Shloim (2021) would call a "cultural cohesion" (p. 14), as part of a communicative process of identity creation.

The phrase "While we have a shared past, we do not have a shared memory", is one of the sole examples of "we" being used throughout the exhibition. Who "we" are supposed to include is ambiguous. Considering the sentence itself is about the memory of The Troubles, it is not solely the "we" of those who created the exhibit, and if it is meant to signify the people whose testimonies are used, it likely would have been clear as it is in the rest of the exhibit (Observation 1). Based on the contents of the sentence itself, considering the "shared past" comes after the explanation of The Troubles, it may signify either those who have a past wherein The Troubles play a role; meaning, by and large, the public of Northern Ireland.

As the exhibition was intended to also be comprehensible for those with no prior knowledge of The Troubles, it may be worth considering what the impressions of the author and the assistants were upon first entering the exhibition. Upon seeing the use of "we", after a larger history exhibit which used passive and impersonal language, both assistants noted and pointed out the changed grammar. "This feels personal," said one of the assistants, meaning that it felt more personal than the exhibits we had seen in the museum prior to entering *Troubles and Beyond*. (Observation 1). Any other exact words of the assistants' thoughts were not recorded in the field notes, though they remarked that the use of "we" made the exhibit feel more "alive" and "present" than the rest of the museum (Observation 1). It is not perhaps remarkable that an exhibit on contemporary history would feel more alive and present than other, older history, though it is notable that the use of "we" and, later, the personal testimonies, was what made the difference for the assistants, both of whom were foreign tourists.

Returning once more to the subject of language, the language used throughout the *History* exhibit up to and including *The Troubles and Beyond* uses passive grammar. The exceptions are those signs in *The Troubles and Beyond* where the museum speaks more clearly about their work, or wishes to interact with the museum's audience (see figs. 4 and 5). No narrator is thus stated, unless the exhibition texts quote specific historic

sources, and the sources are, when about political conflict, balanced between the different sides (Observation 1).

This passive historical voice complements the historical focus of the *History* exhibition from the 1800's to the year 1968 (the year The Troubles began), which is economy. The history exhibit provides a largely economical background to explain the later burgeoning ideological divide between the Unionists (those who wished to remain with the UK) and the Home Rulers (those arguing for Irish independence). It emphasises the industry being largely focused to the north and Belfast, and that this region thus had closer ties to the British Crown, while the rest of Ireland suffered more of the negative material consequences of British occupation (Observation 1).

The rest of the *History* exhibition functions in part as context for *The Troubles and Beyond*. Between the chronological general history exhibit and The Troubles, there is an exhibition focusing on video testimony of people present during the events which sparked The Troubles. It serves to provide both the historical and political context, as well as different points of view and experiences of the events, as the people interviewed are of varied backgrounds (Observation 1). This segue way to *The Troubles and Beyond* was intentional to provide context for the exhibit (Interview 1).

The exhibition placed before The Troubles also serves to prepare and inform the visitor of the emotional, traumatic nature of The Troubles (Observation 1). It is made clear with the interviews that despite the events having occurred decades before the interviews took place, the wounds left by them still linger and have continued to inform the rest of the lives of those who experienced it, as well as still being a source of conflict for many people (Observation 1). This lets the visitor know that the exhibition they are going to walk into is a source of strong emotion and conflict, despite being, at this point, history. It prepares visitors to face more than facts, but also discourse.

This emotional preparation can be said to also encourage visitors to engage with discussing The Troubles. Visitors walk from an exhibition featuring personal testimonies, to another exhibition featuring personal testimonies among ordinary passively written exhibition texts, to at last stand before a station displaying visitor testimony, where the visitor may leave their own testimony. One might say that the visitor could become more likely to engage and communicate with the museum and the exhibition because much of the exhibition itself is previous communication.

4. 1. 1. 2. Audience and public participation

The Troubles exhibit, despite the passive narrator, has signs which directly encourages the museum audience to "Stop & Think" (Observation 1; see fig. 3). The signs all feature additional historical texts and are added below larger signs. The "Stop & Think" texts are the most openly critical texts against the state, as they feature information about government actions and are positioned under titles telling the visitors to stop and think (Observation 1). The visitors are, in this way, encouraged to engage critically with the history presented in the exhibition.
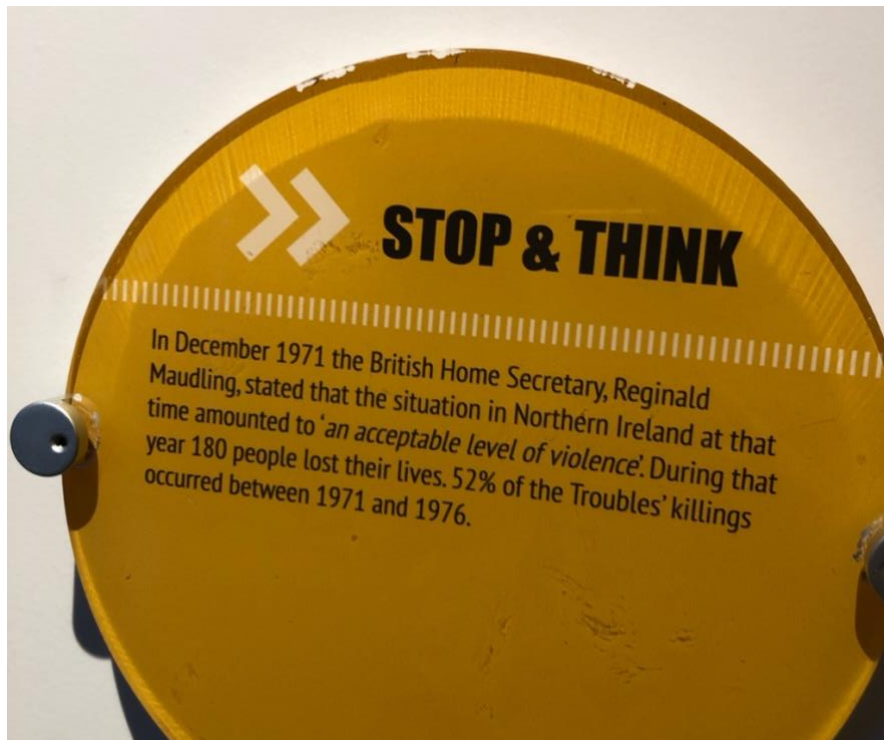
Fig. 3. "Stop & Think" sign featured in The Troubles and Beyond (Observation 1).

The exhibit also abandons the passive grammar when it is more directly engaging with the museum audience, such as the "Share your thoughts" section and the sign where the museum tells of a project conducted with members of the public, with the intent to inform the public of the creative power behind museum exhibits (see figs. 4 and 5).

There are elements of the exhibit's construction which the curator said were intended to encourage visitor interaction and feedback. There is a part of the exhibit where visitors can either fill out a form, a blank note with their thoughts, which they can address to the museum, or they may interact with comments left by previous visitors on a screen, so that all may see the previous comments. Here, the museum becomes "us", told by the sign's "please let us know what you think", which makes the sign feel more personal and communicative to the visitor. The provided feedback and comments later become part of the exhibit itself (Observation 1; Interview 1). The exhibit is ever-evolving, always due to its visitors, because it was designed that way.
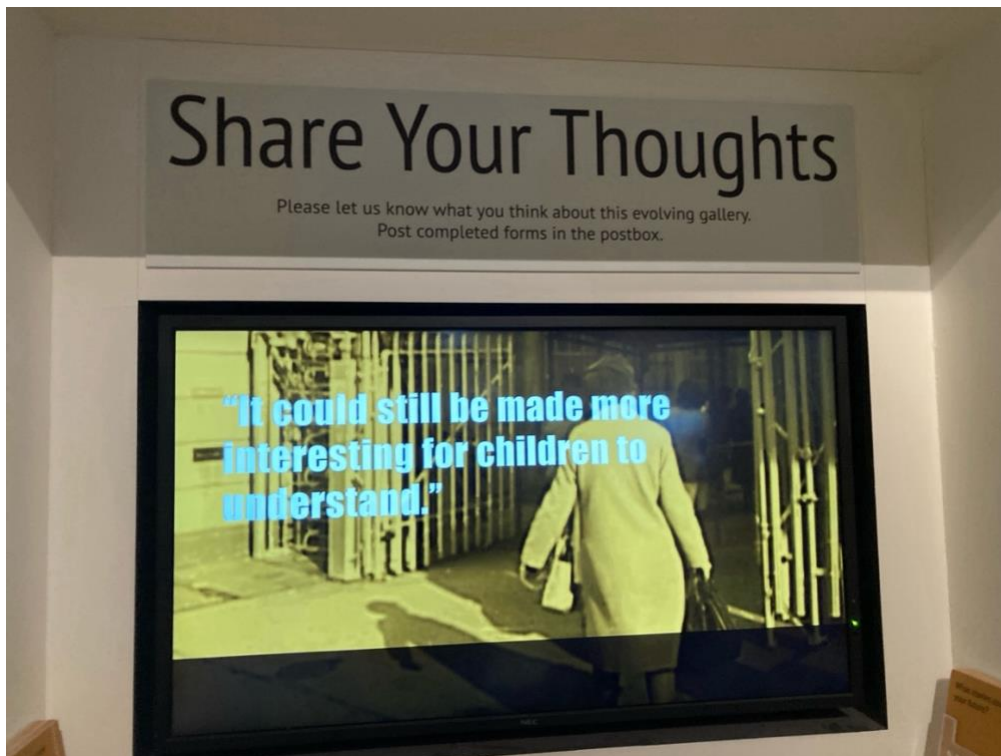
Fig. 4. The sign in The Troubles *exhibit encouraging visitors to "share your thoughts" above a station where visitors may write responses on anonymous cards and forms. Below the sign is a digital screen showing various comments left by previous visitors* (Observation 1).

The Troubles and Beyond, said the curator, was built to be easily changed and adapted. *The Troubles and Beyond* was built to never be finished and, as the curator said, is changed about once a year (Interview 1).

Because of The Troubles exhibit's adaptability, it has been through a complete overhaul. In the beginning, it was created as a thematic exhibit, but upon feedback from visitors it was changed to instead be chronological. This is a dramatic change, which could not have been accomplished if the exhibit had not been designed with the purpose to allow such change (Interview 1).

The Troubles and Beyond, as told by the curator, is visited both by Northern Irish citizens and international visitors. No exact estimates were given, although the mix was said to be about an even split between Irish and international visitors (Interview 1). This also means that the encouraged communication between visitors and the visitors and museum is also accessible to international visitors, which the available forms consider in their questions (Observation 1).

As such, the exhibition needs to be comprehensive to both those with foreknowledge of, and those with no prior knowledge of The Troubles. The exhibition was created with this in mind, with the curator saying that it is a delicate balance to make the exhibition feel worthwhile and representative to Northern Irish visitors, while also being comprehensible to international visitors (Interview 1).

Visitors may also glean an insight into the process of creating museum exhibitions within *The Troubles and Beyond,* and are invited to reflect upon said creation process. Next to

the station where visitors can leave feedback, there is one display case dedicated to showcase how different texts and perspectives may shape someone's understanding of something, for example museum objects (Observation 1). There is a sign stating, "How the stories we tell shape who we become…" (see fig. 5) which explains that The Ulster museum asked different people to choose items which carried significance to them and write descriptive texts of those objects (see fig. 6). This display case invites the exhibition's audience to reflect on both exhibitions as and objects as storytellers, which may invite visitors to reflect on the power of museums as well — how the way we view an object may change, depending on who describes it. It also returns to the use of "we" and is directed to "you", the one reading the sign, the audience. "We" in the case of this sign is both the museum staff, as well as part of the audience, as who the people behind the exhibit are, is also shaped by the stories they tell. The sign is both communicative and social with the audience in this manner, and it also reveals that the staff, too, are affected by what they present, and that what they present may shape who they are. Objects may be neutral, but the stories one chooses to tell about them are not.
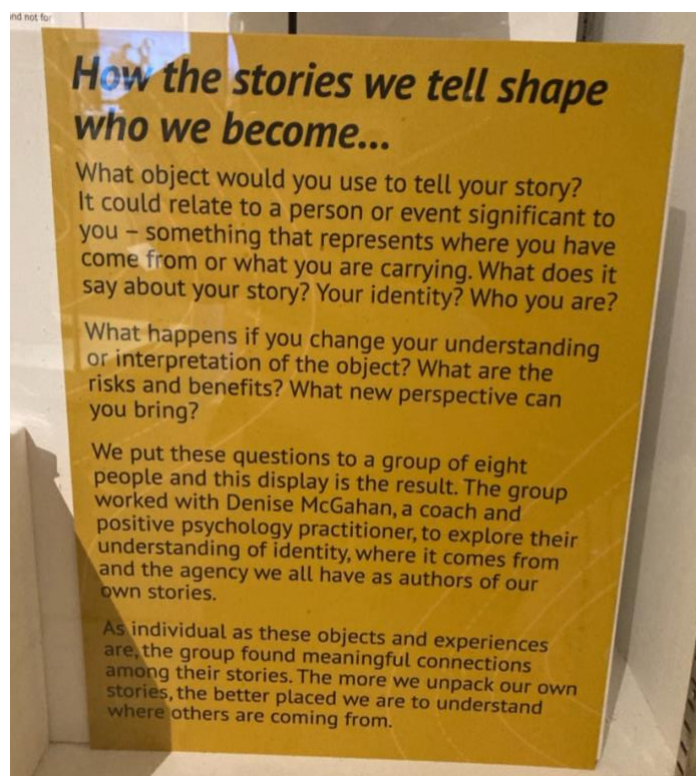

Fig. 5. A sign reading "How the stories we tell shape who we become…" in The Troubles and Beyond (Observation 1).
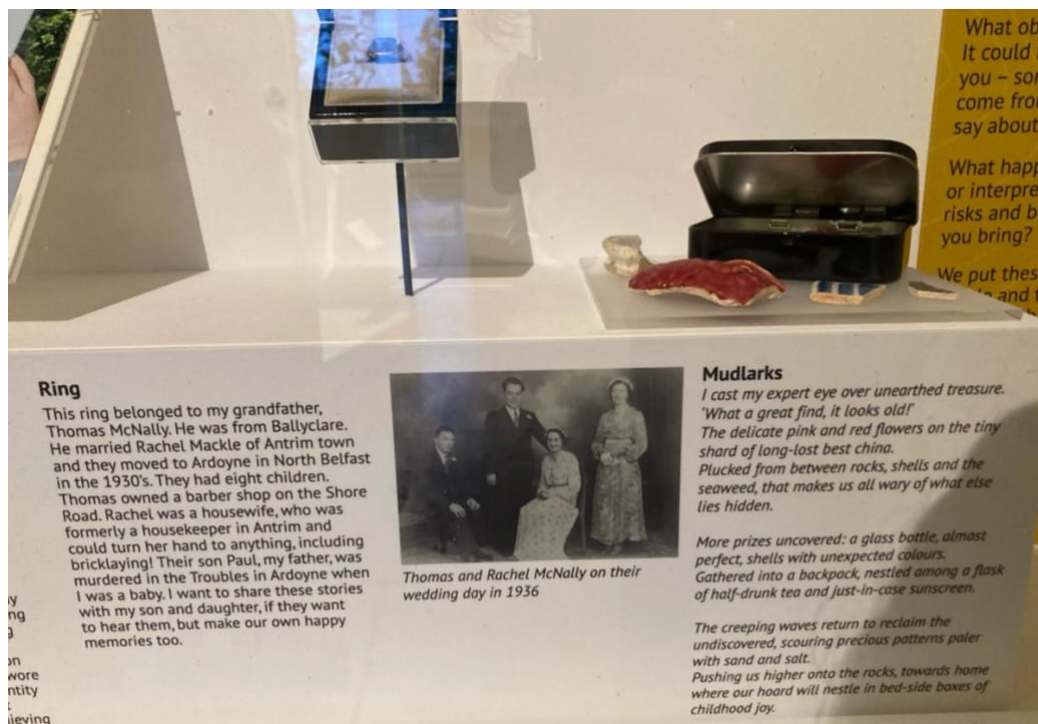
Fig. 6. Objects presented and described next to the sign seen in fig. 5. (Observation 1).

Participatory technologies within The Troubles exhibit are typical of what Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel call the "communicative" museum (2014, p. 15). The station where the audience is encouraged to leave feedback in one or multiple ways – be it with a questionnaire, a letter, or a reply to other visitors' comments – is arguably as communicative a museum can be with both its audience and between visitors, short of visitors talking with each other or the curators face to face (Observation 1). The fact that comments and feedback are listened to, make up part of the exhibition, and have been used as basis for changing the exhibition, this encouragement of communication is not for show, either (Interview 1; Observation 1; National Museums NI 2020).

The museum's mission as stated by The Ulster Museum curator is "building understanding" (Interview 1). To "build understanding" sounds like a mission put in place by a reflexive knowledge institution (Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel, 2014). Building understanding is to invite participation, making it clear that the museum welcomes and seeks communication, without explicitly stating what it is it wants its audiences to understand. Although, as "building understanding" was said by the curator of *The Troubles and Beyond*, one can assume the understanding is meant to be an understanding of The Troubles: its causes and effects.

The curator at The Ulster Museum spoke of cooperating with other museums and historians in order to include as many perspectives in the exhibitions as is possible. The museums include The National Museum of Ireland, a fact corroborated by the interviewed curator at the museum. The historians were of varied backgrounds, in order to, again, include multiple perspectives, particularly for *The Troubles and Beyond* (Interview 1; Interview 2).

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Ulster Museum also actively works with the public to gather material for their contemporary and modern history exhibitions. As with the historians, they work to include material from as many different backgrounds as possible, be they geographical, political, economical, or other (Interview 1).

With *The Troubles and Beyond*, the curators set out to find material from all the political camps involved (Interview 1). These efforts were described as successful; they did not face difficulty in gathering material from people of the opposing sides of The Troubles, or at least never felt that they had to "hunt anyone down" (Interview 1). They requested the public come forward with their testimonies, and by and large experienced that people were eager to share their experiences (Interview 1). The communication from the museum was, in that way, embraced and reciprocated by the public.

From the perspective of Pruulman-Vengerfeldt and Runnel's participation theory (2014), *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition is an example of a communicative, democratic museum from the start of its production to the fact that it has no end. It came into existence because the public was dissatisfied with the previous Troubles exhibit, it was created using personal testimonies and donations, and the exhibition itself encourages communication. (Interview 1; Observation 1; National Museums NI 2020).

Although it is a case of a democratic museum as exemplified by Pruulman-Vengerfeldt and Runnel (2014), one could argue that the exhibition's format puts the burden of creating a narrative on the audience rather than the museum. Formatted to let personal testimonies take the forefront, with a construction allowing for changes to the exhibition's format, it puts the burden of telling the history of an event whose effects are still felt by Northern Ireland, even by those born after The Troubles' conclusion. (National Museums NI 2020; Miller 2021; Observation 1). The suggests and material left by the museum's audience must still be filtered through the lens of the museum after all (Interview 1). This means that the deciding factor in what gets included and how, and what is left out, still rests upon the decisions made by the museum's staff, calling into question what influence the audience truly has on the exhibition.

Still, *The Troubles and Beyond* as an exhibition shows that The Ulster Museum is, at least in part, an example of a democratic institution rather than a static sanctum of truth. Rather than a traditional exhibition, its function is akin to that of a forum. The museum provides and manages the debates which take place between the public in that forum. In this manner, the exhibition may be seen as a showcase of a collective identity being reshaped and interrogated by the collective, rather than solely by an authority and representative for the collective.

4. 1. 2. The National Museum of Ireland

This section of the thesis focuses on the findings and analysis of the material gathered from the Republic of Ireland's National Museum of Decorative Arts & History, which includes an interview with one of the museum's curators as well as a digital observation. The digital observation material is taken from The National Museum of Ireland's (NMI) historical database, and NMI's site explaining a planned contemporary Irish history exhibition. The section is split into two different subheadings, the first which discusses the museum and its relationship to the public, and the second which explores the planned 20th century history exhibition.

4. 1. 2. 1. The museum and the public

The interview with one of the museum's curators was focused on the digital historical database and the planned contemporary history exhibition. As the curator was one of the people responsible for the creation of the historical database, one of the people involved in the creation of the planned contemporary exhibit, as well as a curator with past experience of creating exhibitions in The National Museum for Decorative Arts & History, the interview provided insight into all the above-mentioned projects (Interview 2).

Since no physical exhibitions were examined in the case of NMI, it is not possible to parse what participatory technologies are used throughout their exhibitions in this study. All the same, the digital historical collection online is a participatory technology in the vein that it facilitates open access to the museum's collection (Pruulman- Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014; Digital observation). The interviewed curator stated as much, as the collection was made to be used by the Irish public: "We're The National Museum of Ireland, we're completely paid for by the taxpayers' money, and our images that we hold, the objects, they're in the trust of the Irish public", (Interview 2).

As was stated in the previous section, NMI and Ulster Museum both spoke of cooperating with each other, as well as other museums (Interview 1; Interview 2). This cooperation extends beyond the sharing of historical resources to the communicative, such as meeting to discuss which museum should acquire an artefact put up to auction in which they both have an interest (Interview 2).

NMI's curator spoke of working with the public to gather material for their contemporary and modern history exhibitions (Interview 2). With exhibitions regarding political periods of history, such as the Republic's referendums on the right to abortion and gay marriage, the curators set out to find material from all the political camps involved. For the referendum, this meant the yes and no sides of the vote. The curator mentioned that it was difficult to gather material from the no side; there was an unwillingness for that group to come forward (Interview 2). Nevertheless, the museum attempted to establish communication with them, and regretted being unable to fully do so (Interview 2).

About the museum's collection of contemporary history, the curator at NMI spoke of how museums cannot, in truth, be neutral. (Interview 2). By gathering material on current

events, such as the Referendum, those events become history, and thus part of the collective memory. As the curator said:

> The reason why I had [collected material] was the social change. If the status quo had been maintained, if [the vote] had been no, I probably wouldn't have collected much at all […] the very fact that we collected, you communicate with the public, you invite citizens in, you display, publicise – that means that you're not neutral. We come down on the side of human rights.
>
> *Interview 2*

The selection of what to collect and to make history is also not a neutral decision. The interviewed curator spoke of how museum's understanding of events may play a role in what is collected, and how that might mean that other histories which the museum's staff did not understand falls through the cracks (Interview 2). "And I am quite sure that I am doing exactly the same thing with my curatorship, because it's just human nature", (Interview 2).

The view of museums NMI's curator stated echoes the idea of museums as being communicative and social, they are impacted by social change as well as institutions which may play an active part in it, as they collect and document the change. (Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel, 2014). NMI was particularly social as the public was also invited to partake in the exhibition's creation process; much like with the decision to hold the Referendum as well, to give the public the power to decide (Pruulman- Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014; Interview 2).

As museums are government institutions, and the democratic government is affected by the public, museums cannot be neutral because the government is not. Despite this, the curator explained, there is an expectation both from the staff of the museum itself as well as the public that the museum be neutral. "[W]hat is neutrality? I don't think we see ourselves as neutral. I think there's an expectation that we should be neutral. That we're all just, I don't know, robots in an institution" (Interview 2).

Again, the NMI curator echoed Democratising the museum, with a sentiment sounding like disagreement with the idea of museums being seen as "sanctums of truth", rather than reflexive knowledge institutions (Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014, p. 50). That museums should be seen as the latter is not stated by NMI's curator, though the sentiment sounds similar, with the curator supporting a museum that is not neutral but acts on behalf of and with the people the museum represents. (Interview 2).

NMI's historical collection online is another example of the public's impact on the museum. According to the curator, the project started because that collection was the most popular and sought after by visitors, and to put it online was the curator's way of ensuring that they had full access to that themselves. "[T]he Irish public owns these objects, we just look after them, for them. Therefore, they should have full access to them, as much as possible, certainly for what's within our resources" (Interview 2).

Created to be accessible to the public, the posts within the digital collection are of items donated by the public. As the curator explained, access to the collection was often requested by the public before the online collection came to be, meaning that the creation of an accessible, digital collection of the items online would be of use to both the public and the museum as well, as the museum would no longer have to handle as many requests to see or handle the collection (Interview 2).

The digital collection itself is called the *Historical Collections Online* and is varied in terms of content (Digital observation). It is presented as telling "the military and political history of the Irish […] from the 16th to the 20th centuries" and consists of 36 000 objects, varying between material such as records and photographs, to textile materials such as uniforms and flags (see fig. 7). Making this collection accessible online also ensures that some items which cannot be displayed physically due to "preservation concerns" (see fig. 7).

Fig. 7. Historical Collections Online, *as hosted by The National Museum of Ireland* (Digital observation).

The timing of the collection's creation is also of relevance, as its launch coincided with the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising of 1916, and the previously explained Decade of Centenaries (in fig. 7. described as "Decade of Commemorations"). This timing was purposeful, said the curator, as the project was started with the intent to launch the collection in time for the Rising's jubilee, a fact reiterated by the collection's introductory text (Interview 2; Digital observation). The Easter Rising was "a really, really important event", and was described as "the core of what this collection is" (Interview 2). The Decade of Centenaries was also one factor in an increased demand for access to the collection from the public, as some members of the public wanted to, according to the curator, find out more information about their family history and family connection to the historical events of the Centenaries (Interview 2). The anniversary was also the right moment, according to the curator, to get the project of the collection funded.

That was one of the driving factors, this was a key moment to get money to be able to do this, to maybe start a process of making things available, without that layer of curatorial gatekeeping, it was about pushing clean and correct data online for the first time, so people would have what they were looking for.

Interview 2

From this, one might gather that were it not for the significance of The Decade of Centenaries, for both the museum and for the Irish public, the collection might not have been created, at least not within that decade.

Fig. 8. Providing Feedback, *as part of the* Historical Collections Online, *hosted by The National Museum of Ireland* (Digital observation).

Altough the collection is launched in its entirety and has been online since 2016, the collection's website has a page titled "Providing feedback" which instructs users on providing feedback on the collection to NMI (see fig. 8). When asked about the public's reception of the collection, the curator stated that it was mainly feedback on the information told in the posts.

[W]e have our registers to work from and things can be registered incorrectly. It's very much that type of collection where, if you've got a photograph of ten men, you don't know who those ten men are, maybe you only know three of them. It's the public that actually know those missing gaps of information so when they feedback to "oh no, that's actually my great grandfather such and such, second from the left" then you can fill in that detail into the information management or the record, with the [unintelligible] that it's from a member of the public. With this kind of collection, that's the best you're going to get because it's not necessarily recorded anywhere in historical sources.

Interview 2

Taking the curator by their word, it makes the collection an example of a communicative channel between NMI and the public. The museum has made communication possible, so the collection in itself is an example of a participatory technology, although the public are not able to change the posts themselves without first contacting the museum. Still, their feedback is taken into account by the museum, and implemented to make up for gaps of missing information within the museum's records. (Interview 2).

The collection itself does not showcase all of the reported 10 000 posts within it; it shows which collections are available, and above them a search bar is available for the collection's user (Interview 2; Digital observation). The user may navigate between the different collections, and the collections are all presented with an explanatory and introductory text, along with images of examples of the items available within the collection (see figs. 9 and 10).

Fig. 9. Historical Collections Online *presentation page, including a search bar and links to relevant sites below* (Digital observation).

Fig. 10. An example of an item featured in the Historical Collections Online (Digital observation).

The search function shows how many posts are within the collection that match the utilised keyword in the search. The posts which are shown include their titles, an image, as well

as a brief informational text about the post (see fig. 11). The titles function as links, which take the user to the post's full site when pressed. The post's site shows further information about the object, such as its object number, donor, date, and so on, along with further images of the object, if those are available (see fig. 12).
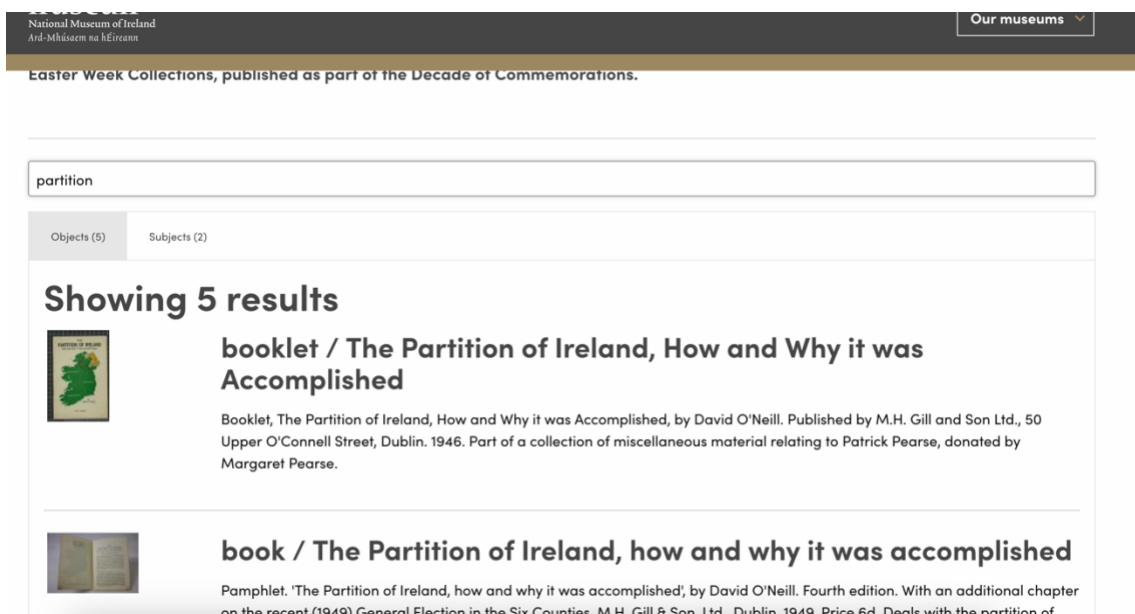
Fig. 11. The results of the search for "partition" within Historical Collections Online (Digital observation).

Fig. 12. Detailed image of the object which was the first result of the "partition" search (Digital observation).

Overall, the collection is transparent towards the users. The starting page for the collection also includes links to pages with relevant information for the users, such as instructions on how to use it, information about its creation, its contents and its sponsors. The facet in which it may lack is that it is not made for spontaneous use, but rather those

who already know what they wish to search for. The introductory texts to the available collection do show some examples, but it may not be clear enough for those users who may not know with what searches to start and would prefer a complete catalogue to peruse (Digital observation).

Still, it was created mainly to satisfy the needs of those who already know what it is they wish to search for, as the curator explained (Interview 2). This is reflected by the construction of the digital collection and the search function, so it ultimately succeeds with its intended goal.

When asked about what the museums' missions were, the curator stated that theirs is to make Irish history comprehensive to the public, with a focus on multiple perspectives (Interview 2).

To make a history comprehensive can be implied to mean that the mission of the museums is to be primarily educational; unlike The Ulster Museum, whose main mission can be interpreted as to foster communication.

4. 1. 2. 2. The planned exhibition

The planned exhibition will be a physical exhibition housed within The National Museum of Decorative Arts & will also be complemented by a digital exhibition online in order to make the exhibit more accessible. A digital exhibition will also provide the museum the opportunity to include more material that they cannot add to the physical exhibition, as the location of the exhibit is limited in size. (Interview 2).

A digital exhibition might risk being seen as a wastebin for the material not considered a priority to the physical exhibition. It permits the museum to add material which otherwise would have been entirely excluded, though it also permits the museum to add material which might be considered problematic or particularly controversial to the online sphere. In this case, as neither the digital nor the physical exhibition has been put in place and thus cannot be analysed, it is difficult to ascertain what kind of material shall be put in the digital exhibition and why.

According to the interviewed curator, the deciding factor is space. The digital exhibition is a way for the museum to include more exhibition material than they have the physical space for, though it is material related to the subjects which were already planned to be part of the physical exhibition (Interview 2). What the case will ultimately prove to be remains to be seen, until the exhibition opens, both physically and digitally.

The website with information about the planned exhibition "the 20th Century History of Ireland" lies somewhat hidden on NMI's website, as it is inaccessible through the navigation menu. The quickest way to find it is to search for it, which requires that the website's visitor already knows to look for it, which might be seen as an inefficient way of communicating the information to the public. Should a visitor to the museum's website search for upcoming exhibitions, they risk losing out on this information. (Digital observation).

The purpose of the planned exhibition as stated on the website is as follows.

> These exhibition galleries will demonstrate the important legacy of The Decade of Centenaries and the manner in which arts and culture in particular have been important drivers in providing space and a platform to reflect on both the positive and difficult elements of our shared history.
>
> *NMI, n. d.*

This exhibition, as explained by the interviewed curator, is the first of its kind in the Republic, as it will touch on struggles of the 20th and 21st century Republic as well as Northern Ireland, and also illustrate some parts of the Civil War which has not previously been included, such as the Free State's incarceration of Irish citizens (Interview 2). Previously, the Northern part of the isle has been largely left out of Republic history, and the Civil War and Free State of the Republic in parts unexplored. (Interview 2).

The curator stated that this is The National Museum of Ireland's first inclusion of The Troubles in an exhibition of theirs and that is has posed some challenges, such as difficulties gathering material for the exhibition. "[T]here's absolutely no way we can get it right […] we're just trying to, from the lessons learned, get it the least wrong as possible, but there's no right version, just lots and lots of missing gaps in the material culture" (Interview 2). The material related to The Troubles which will be included comes from one bequeathed collection and that they have, in the past, have difficulty gathering any material at all. Paramilitary groups involved in The Troubles, for example, would not talk to the museum twenty years ago, nor would they talk to The Ulster Museum, according to NMI's curator.

When asked why the curator believed people such as those from Paramilitary groups would talk to the museum now when they were not willing before, the curator said:

> I think twenty years is not such a long time in the museum world, but in people's lifespans, it is a long time and I think that people are more willing now 20 years after the fact to give us the material that they've been holding on to, because for them now, it's their past. People are passing away, also, they're coming to that age group, and I think that maybe feel a need to pass on these objects before they go.
>
> *Interview 2*

That people would be more willing to speak of their history now, when it has become history and is no longer within living memory, echoes sentiments expressed by Réti and Verbytska (2017; 2023). When time has put a distance between an event and a person who experienced it, speaking of it and performing actions which will ensure that the event is remembered may become easier and more desirable, despite the trauma that may yet cling to the event. If people's memories and experiences of an event are recorded and put in places of collective memories, such as a museum, the events as well as its effects will be preserved for those who did not experience it for themselves (Réti 2017; Verbytska 2023).

Once an event such as The Troubles is accepted as part of a collective's history, it may then go on to inform that collective's identity, as Eyerman explains (2019). As The Troubles has previously been largely absent from Republican Irish history, it might be

argued that it did not inform the collective Republican Irish identity, or that the rejection of it informed that identity. With it being collected and displayed, however, that may change, and thus inform the collective identity in a way not previously seen.

An exhibition called "the 20th Century History of Ireland" which includes events such as The Troubles may in that way speak for an emerging redefinition of "we" to include Northern Ireland. It is further bolstered by the increased behind-the-scenes collaboration between museums in the Republic and the North, a collaboration which was also mentioned by the interviewed Ulster museum curator. (Interview 1; Interview 2; Interview 3).

It is difficult to say what the design of the exhibition may signify, as it does not yet exist, but the colours chosen to present it online are not ones associated with any particular flags. The colour is a hot pink, which does not, at least to this author's knowledge, carry any Irish historical significance (Digital observation). The choice is similar to that of *The Troubles and Beyond* and their choice of yellow, though in this particular case the choice of a neutral (meaning, a colour lacking any specific political or historical associations) may be due to the large period of history the exhibition is intended to cover. A neutral colour may let the specific historical periods and their own signifiers be distinguished from the rest.

Fig. 13. Overview of approach *from The National Museum of Ireland's information about the upcoming exhibition* (Digital observation).

Northern Ireland's inclusion is small, judging by the events quoted to be included in the planned exhibition (NMI, n. d.). Still, it is a shift from nothing to something, and speaks of the change to Irish museums called for by both Levin and Mark-FitzGerald: that, in order to adapt to and change with the times, there should be increased collaboration between Northern and Republican museums. (2005; 2017).

It is the modern struggles of 20th and 21st century Ireland which sets this planned exhibition apart. It is still another Irish exhibition focusing on past struggles, as Levin might have described it, but it is not stuck in the time before its independence, when the role of oppressor and oppressed was more clear-cut and with the Irish victims without agency, much like how Estonians were depicted in their national museum before 2005 (Levin 2005; Tati 2014).

The focus on struggles not directly caused by the British in the planned exhibition shows that it is more than the definition of "we" which is changing. The Irish are redefining their identity both regarding who they are, and what they are: autonomous people, beyond the previously limiting role of "victim" which Levin described in her 2005 article. With the planned exhibition and the digital online collection, The National Museum of Ireland, specifically of Decorative Arts & History, has shown itself to be, according to this author, a communicative museum which is open to change with the times, and with the public it strives to represent.

4. 1. 3. The GPO Museum

The following subheading reports and analyses the material gathered from The GPO Museum and the conducted interview with the museum's supervisor. It first describes the museum in general terms as well as its background, before first exploring the exhibition *Witness Revolution*, and then the exhibition *Commemorative gallery* in two different subheadings. After the description of the exhibition, there are two subheadings, one of which is focused on the participatory technologies of the museum, and one which discusses the role of the museum.

The GPO Museum is smaller compared to Ulster Museum and The National Museum of Ireland, both physically and regarding its exhibitions. All of the museum's exhibitions are historical in nature and focus on modern Irish history, starting with the late 1800's up to the museum's inauguration in 2016 (An Post 2024; Observation 2). This means that all the museum's exhibitions are relevant to this study.

The supervisor at The GPO Museum could not personally speak for the thought process behind the creation of the museum and its exhibits. Instead, they quoted those responsible for its creation and what their wishes were, as well as what the aims of the museum were as explained to them in their role as supervisor (Interview 3). This means that the supervisor cannot explain the choices behind the museum's exhibition, though they still offer a generalised understanding of its creation process. The supervisor can instead provide insight into the general history of the museum, its mission, as well as its

interactions with visitors and members of the public (Interview 3). These facets are useful in understanding who it is that visits the museum and for what purpose.

The GPO Museum was created from scratch as part of the commemoration of The Decade of Centenaries, by order of the government. The GPO Museum supervisor said that the intent behind its creation was to have a historical museum focusing on the Easter Rising in particular, which could be unveiled on the 100th anniversary of the Rising in 2016 (Interview 3). This fact is corroborated by *The Irish Times* (2016). This means that the museum's creation can be read as a commemorative event itself.

The existing exhibitions at The GPO Museum were developed by Republican and Northern historian hired to take part in the project of the museum's creation. These people could not be named by the interviewee, but their being from both Irelands was noted to be a deliberate choice on the part of the project leaders to, as the interviewee described, make sure that the exhibitions were "objective" in that they put forward no specific political agenda and showcased multiple perspectives of the historical events (Interview 3).

As such, The GPO Museum has no curators as part of its staff; the main Rising exhibition was intended to be permanent. There are also no conservators. The majority of staff taking care of the museum, its exhibitions, and the historical artefacts, according to the supervisor, are the museum guides (Interview 3). This means that the museum's ability to change their main exhibit is limited, a fact corroborated by the supervisor, and that the Rising exhibition might stand for as long as the museum itself does (Interview 3).

The main exhibition present in The GPO Museum is *Witness Revolution*, which is focused on the event known as the Easter Rising. The museum's website describes the museum as "telling the story of the 1916 Easter Rising and Modern Irish History" (An Post, 2024). The modern history shown in the museum is mainly that of the *Commemorative gallery*, which is described in a subheading further below.

The objects displayed in The GPO Museum were all loaned to the museum, said the interviewee, though the process of finding donors could not be explained (Interview 3).
The aim of The GPO Museum was to bring history to life, and to be objective in doing so. As stated by the supervisor, about the museum's mission: "There are two main things: that we're bringing history to life […] and making sure that the new museum was objective in its looking at that particular period of history" (Interview 3). The supervisor also made mention of the museum's full name, which is "GPO Witness History".

The "objective" aspect of the museum is part of the name "Witness history". As the supervisor explained: "the museum isn't taking a political stance. It is about people's experiences; it's not about putting forward any particular point of view" (Interview 3). This can be read as neutrality or objectivity being for the museum to not be the voice of authority in the history it presents.

To achieve objectivity in their historical narrative, the GPO's Rising exhibit, called Witness Revolution, is told through multiple perspectives. The exhibit was purposefully created to focus on the rebels, the loyalists, the people caught in the crossfire, and other civilians (Interview 3). This can be seen in the various themed parts of the exhibition about the Rising, such as one which showcases the civilians caught in the crossfire of the Rising and the effects the Rising had on them, their lives, and livelihoods (Observation 2).

The Witness Revolution shows its intent to display the history of the Easter Rising through multiple perspectives in its first few introductory signs. Visitors descend into the exhibition, which is located below ground, and first enter a corridor which leads them into the exhibition proper. Along the wall of this corridor are black and white painted pictures of various types of people involved in the Rising (see fig. 14), along with shorter texts explaining the group of people the image represents. This introductory segment to the exhibition also utilises audio, as multiple voices play from speakers on a loop, which are meant to represent the various people on the signs. (Observation 2).

Fig. 14. The first signs seen upon descending into the Witness Revolution exhibition at the GPO Museum (Observation 2).

Fig. 15. The introductory sign to the Witness Revolution *exhibition at The GPO Museum* (Observation 2).

The corridor leads to the introductory sign of the museum itself, which showcases the title of the exhibition, *Witness History*, first in Gaelic and in English below. Gaelic is used throughout the entire museum, every text has a Gaelic translation, although the title *Witness History* stands out, for the fact that the Gaelic name comes first, and the English one follows. In the rest of the museum, the Gaelic follows the English (Observation 2).

The inclusion of multiple perspectives in the *Witness Revolution* exhibit is also present in the form of video material. Along two walls of the exhibit are videos featuring mainly historians, focusing on different aspects of the Rising (Observation 2).

Despite the museum's explained mission to be objective (Interview 3), the museum and the Rising exhibit uses what Genette (1980) calls a non-focalised narrator. By non-focalised narrator, it means that the museum is still the narrator, although the narrative is told using multiple perspectives (Genette 1980). As previously stated, those multiple perspectives include for example civilians, those participating in the Rising, and Loyalists. Even so, the museum has a clear narrative it presents, which is that of the titular Revolution which later gave rise to Irish independence.

Despite the museum's aims of objectivity, there is a clear narrative presented by the exhibition's very title: *Witness Revolution*. It is not Rising, Riot, or Insurrection, despite the events portrayed being, in isolation, a failed and violent Revolt against a state. It is a Revolution: a successful overturning of the governing body, a sudden change of government (Cambridge dictionary, 2024), which is made clear by the general timeline of events in Irish history displayed in a separate room of the museum, which begins its recounting of events after the Rising (Observation 2).

4. 1. 3. 2. The Commemoration Gallery

The Commemoration Gallery is the most recent history exhibition present within The GPO Museum, though its size and contents are small in comparison to *Witness Revolution*.

The *Commemorative gallery* differs from *Witness Revolution* in scale, aesthetics, contents, and material. The exhibition is largely black and white and consists mainly of short texts below dates of historical events, with only some displayed artefacts, and some digital screens which contains more information about the mentioned events. The gallery mainly consists of a timeline which begins with the Irish Partition and concludes with the opening of The GPO Museum in 2016 (Observation 2). It mentions some of the larger events which have occurred in between, without going in depth on any issues in particular. The timeline covers two walls and is thus limited in what it can display, especially as it also shares space with the museum café (see figs. 16 and 17).

Fig. 16. The Commemorative gallery *in The GPO Museum* (Observation 2).

Fig. 17. The Commemorative gallery*, with the museum's café and café seating* (Observation 2).

The first text, which explains the partition, is dubbed "The tale of two Irelands", and this is true for the timeline entire. Northern Ireland is referred to as *Northern Ireland* while the Republic is either Ireland or the Republic, but it is most often Ireland. When events affect both nations, or people from both nations are described, they are both "Irish" (Observation 2). Thus, the Republic, after the Partition, is both Ireland and Republic, though more often Ireland, but the island in its entirety and the people of both nations upon it are, in the *Commemorative gallery*, Irish.

Beyond *who* is Irish, is the question of who is *not* Irish. Although Northern Ireland is described as a nation which is a part of the United Kingdom, its inhabitants remain Irish. The troops sent to Northern Ireland to deal with "unrest" are "British", while Northern Ireland is not. Still, some events are distinctly not Irish, such as The Troubles which is described as conflict in Northern Ireland specifically, although some Republicans were involved. (Observation 2).

The *Commemoration Gallery* uses the same passive voice in its texts as *Witness Revolution*, though it doesn't tell its story using multiple perspectives, and seems to differ in its purpose (Observation 2). It, more than *Witness Revolution*, can have no other narrator than the museum itself, speaking to its audience, and the names of the two different exhibitions may also say something about what the two exhibitions are meant to achieve, and its audience to take away from them. To *Witness* informs and demands that the audience be a witness to the historical event being portrayed, it communicates an action. *Commemoration Gallery* is a name which demands no action but informs the audience of what it contains. If we see the two titles as paratexts according to paratextual

theory, the titles might suggest that *Witness Revolution* makes its history alive and tells the audience that they are a part of it; the *Commemoration Gallery* suggests that the contents of the gallery consist of memories — history which has passed — and that it is a gallery meant for remembrance and collective memory. Perhaps these different approaches to the history portrayed in both exhibitions is because the gallery consists partially of history which still is in living memory, while no one alive remembers the Rising. Thus, one exhibition can be a place of remembrance, while the other cannot.

4. 1. 3. 3. Participatory technologies in The GPO Museum

The participatory technologies present within The GPO Museum are of the traditional, interactivity-focused sort (Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014). There are screens with information the visitor must navigate on their own, interactive and educational games focused on technologies used during the Rising, such as morse code (see fig. 18). Other facets of the *Witness Revolution* exhibit are more immersive, such as reconstructed parts of rooms meant to display the Irish homes of the 1910's (Observation 2). Thus, the *Witness Revolution* exhibit is interactive, though otherwise not communicative between visitors or between visitors and the museum.
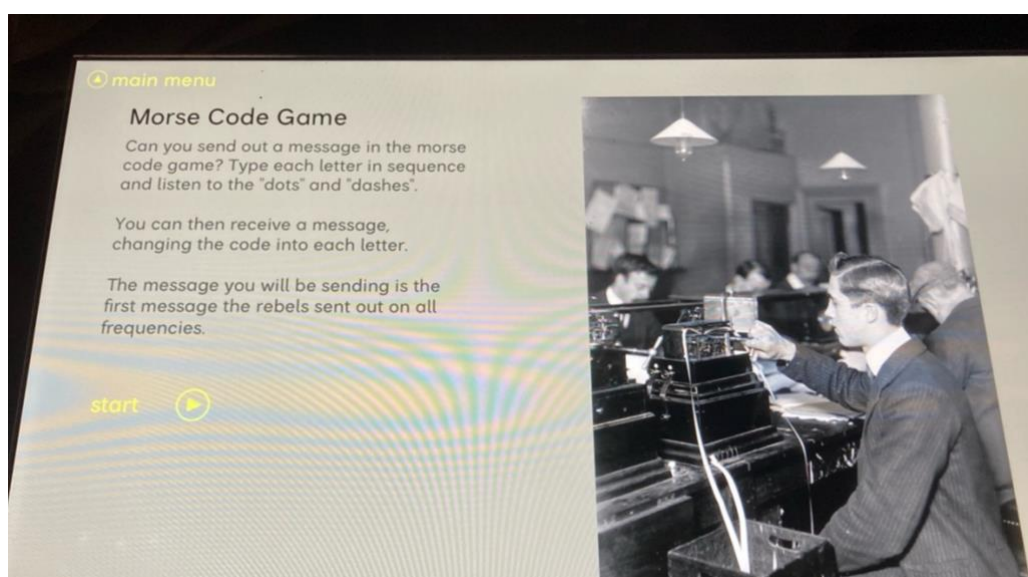

Fig. 18. "Morse code game" featured in the Witness Revolution *exhibition at The GPO Museum* (Observation 2).

The exception to the otherwise interactivity-based participatory technologies is a screen at the end of *Witness Revolution* that asks visitors to state their opinions on the historical events presented in the exhibition. The questions differ, though it is unclear how many different versions there are – between three attempts, the two observing assistants got two different sets of questions. The questions allow the visitor to see, between the different options, how many visitors picked what, percentage wise. (Observation 2). It is a way to leave an opinion and engage politically with the events portrayed in the exhibition, though it, unlike The Ulster Museum, has no room for feedback or the implication that there might be change. You cannot say anything as an individual, you must pick an already prepared answer out of a set.

The GPO Museum is this less of a communicative museum, and more so a "sanctum of truth": a museum focusing on the Easter Rising, to be completed in time for the 100th anniversary of the event. (Interview 3). The degree to which the public was able to influence the exhibition is difficult to ascertain, especially from the interview. The lending of museum objects by members of the public is the sole effect mentioned, other than visitor surveys conducted by the guide staff (Interview 3).

4. 1. 3. 4. The role of The GPO Museum

As The GPO Museum was created for the centennial anniversary of the Easter Rising, within the building used as headquarters by the Rising's leaders, its existence functions as a memorial. It is similar to Réti's description of Hungarian heritage sites commemorating the nation's traumatic past, with the purpose of making history understandable for those who did not witness it (2017). *Witness Revolution* offers those born after the Rising the opportunity to witness what they could not, and to understand its heritage, while the *Commemoration Gallery* functions as a site of remembrance for those who were part of that history to explain it to those who were born after the events. It also serves a similar function to the traditional commemorative events and anniversaries in Ireland discussed by Walker (2012). The GPO Museum is not similar to those commemorative events which occurred during The Troubles that Walker described as being divisive and demonstrative in nature, nor does it necessarily match the post-Troubles trend of commemorative events done for the purpose of reconciliation and peace (Walker, 2012).

Fig. 19. The Irish flag and a copy of the original proclamation of the Republic in the entrance of The GPO Museum (Observation 2).

The GPO Museum can be described as a commemorative heritage site, which may also function as a place of celebration. The Rising, as the *Witness Revolution* and the

supervisor's interview state, was the event which eventually led to the Republic's independence (Observation 2; Interview 3). This aspect of the museum's history is shown upon entry into the museum, where the first two things which greet visitors are the Declaration of Irish independence, and the Irish flag (see fig. 19).

Whether or not one walks into *Witness Revolution* pro- or anti-Irish independence, it is clear that the narrative of the Rising has become something of a founding mythology for the collective Irish identity. It is seen as the event which sparked the revolution, which led to independence, and this significance is can also be shown by how politicians interact with and subsequently give meaning to the museum.

The GPO Museum is seen as a representative of Irish identity by some foreign officials. This can be seen in the way that high-profile politicians visiting the museum was seen as "nothing out of the ordinary" by the museum supervisor (Interview 3). The supervisor mentioned a recent visit by a high-profile US-American politician — with American politicians being some of the most common high-profile international visitors. When asked why that might be, they replied:

> Because the Irish American electorate would be quite important to American politicians, so emphasising or having some kind of acknowledgement of Irish American connections is quite important. Part of the exhibition is the Thomas Francis Meagher exhibition, which would be of particular interest to American visitors because of the connection between Thomas Francis Meagher and Ireland and American and the flag [as the creator of the Irish flag who later settled in the USA]. The Irish proclamation of independence is on the Washington monument, one of the few countries that has a plaque on the monument. So, there are a lot of Irish American connections. It does seem to be a thing that a lot of American politicians engage with
>
> *Interview 3*

One part which may reinforce this idea of the Rising as a national founding myth is the film at the end of *Witness Revolution* which portrays the Rising's leaders in a heroic light. When the observation of the museum took place, there were multiple groups of school children present, who were guided through *Witness Revolution.* Multiple of the guided tours occurred simultaneously, though they started at different points of the exhibition, as it is themed rather than chronological (Observation 2). The supervisor explained in the interview that the guides will stagger tours and begin at different points in order to accommodate multiple groups at once (Interview 3). Regardless of the starting point however, all guided tours ended with the same element of the exhibition: the previously mentioned film. The film depicts the events of the Rising, using the General Post Office building (in which the museum is located) and the rebel leaders within as its focal point (Observation 2).

As the interviewee stated, the museum is about "people's experiences; it's not about putting forward any particular point of view" (Interview 3) but in the film, the rebel leaders are those whose points of view are shown. All the people included in the film, whether they be bystanders, rebel allies, or British military personnel, are shown from above, so that only the tops of their heads and actions are visible. The only ones whose faces the audience sees are the rebel Leaders of '16, who have the lion's share of lines,

and whose faces are clearly visible to the audience every time they are shown. This makes them the only people who are personified, while the rest of the people are stand-ins for general groups, rather than individuals. The music used throughout the film adds to the story being shown, and its nature is specified by the film's subtitles for those hard of hearing: the film begins, and ends, with "traditional Irish flute music" (Observation 2).

The Leaders ultimately lost to Britain during its Rising, and were executed for their rebellion, but the ending of the film is not that of a sombre defeat, but a triumphant one. The Leaders of '16 are defeated, but their speech about a free Ireland does not echo that defeat, but of the victory which came years later. The music also adds a wistful tone, which makes the ending of the film bittersweet. Such was at least the interpretation of the two assistants and myself (Observation 2).

The film was made by those who were not present at the Rising, and thus know what it ultimately led to, which does ultimately impact the film's and, as it is the final part of the exhibition, the end note of *Witness Revolution.* After the film, it is precisely that which the audience has witnessed; not a Rising, but a *Revolution*, and the birth of the nation in which the museum stands.

4. 2. The narrator and the narration

This section of the thesis is focused on the narratives presented by the selected museums' exhibitions, as well as the museums' intended narrative according to the interview material, which takes its theoretical basis in Genette's narrative theory (1980) and Eyerman's theory and method of examining collective identities (2019). The *Historical Collections Online* is not a digital exhibition and thus is not subject to the narrative analysis, though planned exhibition at The National Museum of Ireland (NMI) will be touched upon in brief. The main focus of this section however is *The Troubles and Beyond* at Ulster Museum, and *Witness Revolution* at The General Post Office Museum (GPO Museum). This section also touches upon the aspect of participatory theory concerned with communication and reception, that described by Pruulman-Vengerfeldt and Runnel as "Who says What to Whom?" (2014), as the recipient of the narration (the audience) is discussed.

A common thread throughout all three interviews was political neutrality regarding the narrative presented by the museums and their exhibitions. The way this idea was phrased, however, differed between all three. The Ulster Museum curator spoke of using personal testimonies gathered form all possible perspectives to ensure a neutral approach, while The GPO Museum supervisor said the aim of telling the story of the Rising using multiple perspectives was to be objective (Interview 1; Interview 3). The National Museum of Ireland curator spoke of desiring to gather and present material from all involved sides in a historical event, similar to the other two museums, though they

questioned whether neutrality is possible to achieve, since the museum, in gathering and presenting material, is not taking a neutral stance (Interview 2).

What events the exhibits all wish to tell the visitors are simple to grasp from their titles alone, to look at them as paratexts carrying a promise of their contents. *The Troubles and Beyond* wish to speak not only about The Troubles, but the time that has come after it; *Witness Revolution* does not ask but tells visitors that what they will see is not simply a Rising, but a revolution (Observation 1; Observation 2). The planned exhibition of the Decorative Arts & History NMI is called *20th Century History of Ireland Galleries*, which explains that the exhibition will be a gallery presenting the 20th century history of Ireland (Digital observation). The fact that it is called a *gallery* speaks to the plan of letting objects take the forefront of the exhibition and be the basis for the story told within it, which matches the curator's statement that the exhibition will focus on physical objects (Interview 3).

As previously mentioned, the *20th Century History of Ireland Galleries* will include parts of Northern Ireland's history, meaning that the name implies Ireland as encompassing the entire Island. While parts of the planned exhibition do make a difference of the Republic versus Northern Ireland as to what events occurred where,

It is usual that academic texts are written in a passive voice and this, too, is the case with the museum texts examined for this study. They are written with a passive voice, which signifies that the text itself has no opinion — but to say that an exhibition wishes to convey something, that a text itself wishes to convey something, is impossible. Naturally, they were, at the end of the day, written by someone, even if that someone is a collective voice whose authorship is therefore more difficult to pin down, such as with the exhibitions being written as collaborative projects, some with the assistance of academics (Interview 1; Interview 3).

Again, the exhibitions all tell different stories. The GPO Museum and The Ulster museum both tell of the same events but in vastly different ways; their narration and presentation differ. Who then, shall one say is the narrator?

In the case of both *The Troubles and Beyond* and *Witness Revolution*, a common thread throughout both exhibitions' texts are the testimonies. *The Troubles and Beyond* consists nearly entirely of personal testimonies, both historical and contemporary – the latter of which are therefore changed and contextualised by the passage of time and the impact The Troubles have had on those giving the testimonies, as memory is a social and malleable thing (Eyerman 2019). Still, the personal testimonies are filtered through the lens of and presented by The Ulster Museum. That which ties the various testimonies together to form one cohesive story is the museum, meaning that the museum is presenting a narrative, which it narrates, using personal testimonies.

The narrative presented by *The Troubles and Behyond* is that The Troubles are not over. The testimonies tell, among other things, of how The Troubles continue to affect them (Observation 1), while the museum shows in other parts, such as with signs, the other effects The Troubles have had on Northern Ireland. This is presented with the paratext

of the exhibition also, as was previously stated with the choice of the word "Beyond", and the introductory text to the exhibit (Observation 1).

The narrator of *The Troubles and Beyond* is ultimately the museum, as it is the museum which has compiled and presented the narrative of The Troubles. Yet, it is also the case, as was explained in section 4. 1. 1. 2. *The Audience and public participation* that the exhibition functions mainly as a forum. It is, as a narrative, set apart from the other examples studied that it is meant to act as a communicative forum to encourage and facilitate dialogue about the historical events presented and explained. It is a two-edged task, both to give the public a space to share their stories and testimonies and interrogate their past and present, while it is meant to be comprehensive to those with no prior knowledge of The Troubles (Interview 1; National Museums NI n.d.). *The Troubles and Beyond* straddles the line between forum and exhibition, between moderator and educational narrator.

Witness Revolution loses the contemporary (and thus somewhat unreliable) angle to its exhibition by virtue of being completely historical; there are none left alive who remember the events. The Rising is all but canonised in the national memory, so central to the idea of the Irish identity that the government saw a need to build an entirely new museum commemorating the event for its 100th anniversary (Murphy 2016; The GPO Museum n. d.; Interview 3).

By displaying history in exhibitions, the museums are presenting a narrative, and are thus the narrators; what Genette describes as a non-focalised narrative[1], is still a narrative regardless of how many focal points are used. All the involved museums speak of using multiple different perspectives, and The Ulster Museum and The GPO Museum desires to remain neutral or objective (Interview 1; Interview 3), though this not guarantee that the narrator, the museum, is neutral. In telling select parts of history in their exhibitions, museums present a narrative and whether that narrative is ambiguous or not, the museums cannot be entirely removed from the narrative presented.

It is worth asking if the inclusion of multiple perspectives is what makes something neutral. No matter how many perspectives a museum includes, at the end of the day they must all be part of one narrative as put forth by the museum; again, the parts shown are ultimately selected by the museums. The passive text and multiple perspectives may be more neutral than the inclusion of merely one or none, but the overall narrative cannot be entirely obfuscated by the texts and perspectives in the exhibition — the presentation gives the narrative away.

The colours used throughout the exhibitions, the music used (when present), audio tracks, and titles of both the exhibitions themselves tell the museum audience what to expect. They are the paratext informing the museum visitors' expectations. Some of these mentioned aspects have been discussed previously in this text, such as the colours chosen and the significance of the exhibitions' names. To summarise it again: *The Troubles and*

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[1] A narrator who uses multiple different perspectives to tell a story (Genette 1980).

Beyond and *20th Century History of Ireland Gallery* and *Commemoration Gallery* all use colours without any associations to the depicted (or planned depictions of) events, while the entrance to The GPO Museum features and Irish flag, and *Witness Revolution* is green (Observation 1; Digital Observation; Observation 2). The paratext for *The Troubles and Beyond* is that of an event which has not fully passed and that it takes no specific sides of the conflict and prepares the visitor for an event with many different sides to it. Regarding the website for the planned *20th Century History of Ireland Gallery*, the paratext of the introduction explained in section 4. 1. 2. 2. *The planned exhibition,* the text says, similar to *The Troubles and Beyond*, that it will showcase an at times difficult and divisive history, told through objects such as art from the eras of the events (Digital observation). It prepares the visitor for a gallery of art displaying a long, complicated history, of events which occurred on both sides of the Irish divide. It, and *The Troubles and Beyond*, have paratexts which promise not neutrality, but multifaceted history. *Witness Revolution*'s paratext tells the visitor to witness the birth of a nation, through its revolution.

The intent with including multiple perspectives of the Rising, such as civilians, the rebels, the English, and so on, was to make the exhibition neutral (Interview 3), and yet this effort may have failed. With the movie, there is a narrative about the Rising presented, with the leaders of '16 being depicted as heroes. Heroes whose actions are not always good, as the violence they ignite do, for example, cause civilian casualties, but heroes which do eventually succeed in their goal of a free Ireland, if only posthumously (Observation 2). This film narrative puts the supposed neutrality of the rest of the museum into question. Whether or not one agrees or disagrees with the depiction of the Leaders as heroes, the narrative is that the Rising was the first event which later led to the formation of the Republic, and that this was a good thing, although not wholly achieved through good means. This narrative, true or not, is not objective.

Since the museum is in the Republic of Ireland, and touches upon the first instigators towards the nation's existence, the Rising cannot be anything but good, its authors nothing but heroes (if morally complicated and tragic ones). As Eyerman says of cultural trauma and the creation of a collective identity after a dramatic event and tear in the social fabric, the identity "may be grounded in loss and crisis, as well as in triumph. [O]ne way of dealing with loss is by attempting to turn tragedy into triumph" (2019, p. 24).

That is what the Rising is, in The GPO Museum: it is a tragic tale of heroic sacrifice — a battle lost, and a rebellion won. It is portrayed in the film with mournful "Irish flute music" as the film's captions say, as it personalises the Leaders of '16 as they are the only ones whose faces the audience can see, facing their failure but stating that this is not the end for a free Ireland (Observation 2).

With the audience's knowledge that the failure and execution of the Leaders of '16 led to the end of British occupation of southern Ireland, the audience knows that ultimately, victory fell to the Leaders, and to the Republic of Ireland. Thus, as the film is in a museum which was created to commemorate the Rising, and dedicated to the Rising, in

a nation which would likely not exist if not for the Rising, the film must balance between being educational history, and a portrayal of the Republic's founding mythology.

Such is the narrative; the question remains of who the intended recipient is, to whom the narrative is being narrated. As the interviewee said, The GPO Museum is often visited by school classes (Interview 3), and this was the case when the observation of the exhibition took place, as multiple groups of teenagers were guided around the exhibit simultaneously (Observation 2). Though they are also visited by those of different backgrounds, international and national alike, as well as being a place not unaccustomed to visitors who are politicians (Interview 3). The participatory technologies present in the museum matches those traditional participatory technologies which are commonly used for educational purposes in museums, particularly towards children (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014), though the text screens are placed at a height which makes them more accessible to the average fully-grown adult than children[2] (Observation 2). The narrative is thus directed towards multiple different groups, though it may be more directed towards those with a prior knowledge of the Easter Rising and its significance to Irish history.

The title *Witness Revolution* in The General Post Office Museum may assume that the visitor already knows what revolution has a connection to the post office, and it risks alienating those unfamiliar with general Irish history. The assistants who were along for the observation, for example, knew nothing about the Easter Rising, and wondered why the study would focus on a museum called *The General Post Office Museum,* when the focus of the study is modern and contemporary Irish history museums. (Observation 2). The museum may be more for those already in the know of its significance, and intended to broaden the knowledge of it. The supervisor said the museum is meant to show history in an "objective" way by focusing on multiple perspectives (Interview 3) and though the objective nature of it has already been called into question in this text, its inclusion and explanation of different perspectives involved is a fact, and it broadened the understanding of the Rising for the author of this thesis, who did already possess knowledge of the Rising (Observation 2). The museum's construction being tied to the 100th anniversary of the Rising by order of the government may also support the idea that the museum is for an audience already in the know, and that it was built as a commemoration for it, similar to other commemorative ceremonies traditional to the Irish Republic and commemorative places which exist in other countries, such as South Africa (Duane 2013; Interview 3; To summarise, *Witness Revolution* may be more intended for an audience already familiar with the Rising.

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[2] The screens are placed at waist-height for the author of this thesis, who is slightly above the average height of Irish women, the average being 165 centimetres (NCD Risk Factor Collaboration 2016; Observation 2).

4. 3. Who are the Irish?

This section of the thesis examines the question of "Who are the Irish?" based on the results from the conducted study. The main focus lies upon the answer presented by analysis of *The Troubles and Beyond* at The Ulster Museum, *Witness Revolution* at The General Post Office Museum (GPO Museum), as well as the planned exhibit at The National Museum of Ireland (NMI).

The curator interviewed from The National Museum of Ireland (NMI) stated that the museum has not previously included the North in their exhibits (Interview 2). The implication of previously leaving out the North from Irish is that only the Republic is Ireland, only its history Irish history. As Eyerman writes, a cohesive identity, such as a national identity, is created by establishing who "we" versus "they" are (Eyerman 2019, p. 26). Solely including the Republic and Republican stories means that, for the NMI, "we" were Republican Irish, and the Northern Irish thus become "they". To now include the North in their history exhibits, shows that the "we" for the Republic may be changing to include the North, who was previously "they".

If a cultural trauma is "a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people who have achieved some degree of cohesion", it stands to reason that the Partition, which split Ireland into two separate parts wherein the majority opinion was that the northern part was not Irish, is an example of cultural trauma that has in turn become the foundation of a collective identity (Northern Irish) separate from those who rejected them ("the Irish", or those Irish who are of the Republic of Ireland), (Eyerman 2019, p. 23)

The Irish, as one seems them in the studied museums, are not one people: the thing that unites them is their division. The "North" has for a long time not been part of the history considered "Irish" in the Republic and although that may be changing, the change has not been fully realised yet and, once the planned exhibit is put into place at the NMI, it will still be so only for that museum. (Interview 1). When the North is brought up in the *Commemoration Gallery* of The GPO Museum, it is only done so briefly, and it does not factor into the exhibit which is focused on the Rising (Observation 2). As the exhibition was not made to be updated or changed, it may never be included there. (Interview 3). As for The Ulster Museum, Ireland is throughout its *History* exhibit seen as one island where a division began to emerge before the Partition which officially split the island in two, based on the material factors which made Belfast more closely tied to Britain during the industrial revolution (Observation 1). For the North, it has therefore been standing slightly apart from the rest of the island for longer than the Republican museums show they have, as the North only becomes "the North" after the Partition (Observation 2; Digital observation). In The Troubles exhibit, the identity of the North and the public there is tenuous and fluid, as they "do not have a shared memory", which may in a way necessitate the involvement of the public in the creation of a shared memory (Observation 1, see fig. 2). What makes the Irish on both sides of the border Irish, is the struggle to agree on what that term "Irish" means, and that there is currently a discussion surrounding it.

One aspect also not brought up in any of the studied exhibitions is the experiences of those who live on or next to the Irish border. They are not mentioned in The Troubles exhibit, nor the GPO *Commemoration Gallery* or *Witness Revolution*, and their story is not stated to be a part of the planned *20th Century History of Ireland Galleries*. Whether the experiences of those living on the border are unique or uniform to those who more clearly live on either side of it, cannot be said based on the studied exhibitions. Are they, those on the border, Irish, or merely "they"? If both sides of the border are more intent on collaboration, is there a future in which the border itself may be involved? Those questions go beyond the scope of this thesis but could hopefully be the subject of future research.

As for who the Irish are more broadly, little has truly changed since Levin's 2005 article where Irish museums were described to focus on their past struggles. The romantic framing and narrative of the Irish as hardy and humble peasants have changed, as has the narrative of them as solely victims to circumstance, but it is still struggle which defines the idea of the Irish in their museums.

Much has changed during the past decade for Ireland. It is reflected by the increased collaboration between northern and southern Irish museums, and the admission from Republican Irish museums that history did not stop after the Republic was formed (Levin 2005; Interview 1; Interview 2). The national identity as created in Irish national museums on both sides are that of a divided people, struggling to overcome and reconcile with their past hardships. It is a changed image from the contradictory notion of Republican Irish museums which used to deny that hardship defined the Irish, as they could always overcome it — but they did still feel a uniquely challenging hardship based on both their past occupation and nature itself (Levin 2005). The Ulster Museum also presents *The Troubles and Beyond* as a challenge which the Northern Irish are still facing, whose legacy also poses unique challenges, and the memory of which yet divides them. Still, the active violence of The Troubles has ceased, meaning that their challenges have changed — and based on the changed attitudes towards the North by the Republic, they can also change who they are regarding the Republic. They are no longer necessarily excluded from the Irish narrative and identity and may in collaboration with the Republic be party do defining what that identity is. Still, they may first need to reach a conclusion as to their own and decide on what is their collective memory.

4. 4. Audience participation

This section compares the uses of participatory technologies in the studied museums, as well as the seeming intent from the museums to involve the public in the museums' practices, particularly extent to which the public may and is intended to engage and communicate with the exhibitions.

All studied museums include various participatory technologies, to varying extents. As was stated previously, The GPO Museum includes traditional participatory technologies intended to give a more in-depth educational experience to the museum's audience, such as touch screens and educational games. While *Witness Revolution* does have a screen at

the end where visitors may answer questions and state their opinions of the events of the Rising, the choices are all pre-determined and is not intended to influence the exhibit in any way. The result of this interactive element is more akin to that of a quiz one might take in history class as a child, which suits the overall educational nature of the museum (Observation 2). The Ulster Museum and its *Troubles and Beyond* also uses some traditional participatory technologies, such as video and screens, though it also includes participatory technologies which permit the audience to directly influence the exhibition, such as the "Share Your Thoughts" section, as well as elements which challenges the audience's perception of history, such as "Stop & Think" (Observation 1). The result of these technologies, coupled together with the use of expressions such as "we" makes the exhibition both feel and be more communicative, rather than a static Sanctum of Truth, which The GPO Museum more closely resembles. The *Historical Collections Online* in and of itself is a participatory technology, one which also permits and encourages its users to communicate with the museum concerning the digital collection (Digital observation). The public does interact with the participatory technologies present in *The Troubles and Beyond*, as the interviewed curator stated, and this is also the case for *Historical Collections Online* according to the interviewed Republican curator (Interview 1; Interview 2). To summarise, The National Museum of Decorative Arts & History intends to involve the public and facilitates this communication, as does The Ulster Museum, while The GPO Museum has no intent to involve the public in communication between it and the museum, only for the audience to interact with the exhibition as it stands.

This means, according to audience participation theory, that the democratic nature and potential of the museums also varies. It is difficult to gauge the overall democratic nature of the planned *20th Century History of Ireland Galleries,* though, as it seems to be an object-focused exhibition, meaning that it may as an exhibition be actualised as more of a sanctum of truth than a communicative exhibition (Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014; Digital observation). The *Historical Collection Online*, however, is an example of democratic museum practices, in that it, as the curator said, acknowledges that the items within it belong to the public, and must thus be made accessible to the public (Interview 2). The two-way communication between visitor and museum is one thing which Pruulman-Vengerfeldt and Runnel (2014) describe as an aspect of democratic museums. In this manner, some aspects of the museum may be considered more democratic than others, while others are more traditionally one-way communications with the audience receiving the museum's knowledge but being unable to influence it. The GPO Museum has no such democratic aspects, meanwhile, and does not seem to have had the intent to involve the public to begin with either. Its goal was to present the history of the Easter Rising from multiple perspectives and was created by people from different backgrounds (Interview 3), but it was not made to invite other perspectives or to evolve beyond what was there upon its opening. The Ulster Museum is the most democratic museum overall, based on the participatory technologies present and the intent to involve the public. Their intent also has become action in that *The Troubles and Beyond* has already been through one overhaul based on public feedback, and it exists to begin with due to the public's displeasure with the previous Troubles exhibit. (Interview 1; National Museums NI n.d.).

It can be argued that the Republican museums are more hesitant to encourage audience participation than The Ulster museum. If there are no ways for the public to influence the constructions of the exhibits, it is more difficult for visitors to provide feedback of the exhibition or communicate with the museum, should they so desire. The ghost of the idea of the "neutral" museum also lingers over the planned *20th Century History* exhibition, since it is said to be an exhibition primarily based on material objects, which cannot, unlike humans, present interpretations of history (Interview 2). Objects can be interpreted by the museum and by the visitors, but they alone do not necessarily invite communication between visitors of with the museum. It, as previously stated, is more akin to a static sanctum of truth, and the traditional idea of museums as educators of the public and not mediators between members of the public. Still, it is notable that the planned exhibition will not continue The National Museum of Ireland's previous depictions of Irish history as having stopped in 1923 (Interview 2); there is history beyond that, and Northern Ireland is a part of it and thus, a part of Ireland.

The reason for why the museums' participatory technologies differ might stem from the political nature of the events portrayed, and those events' relevance to the culture of the Republic versus Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland has not faced a cultural trauma similar to that caused by The Troubles in living memory. This can also influence the degree of participation and communication with the public is believed to be needed, both by Republican museums and the public. Eyerman describes a split in the shared, collective consciousness, such as a trauma or a similar break of a pre-existing identity, as a common cause for the need within a collective to adjust or create a new collective identity (2019). If there is no such traumatic split in the collective consciousness, then there would not be as much of a need to foster dialogue and communication about the collective identity. If, rather, the cause for re-evaluation of a collective identity is commemorative, such as a significant anniversary, the re-evaluation may not perhaps be as notable for all members of the collective or treated with the same severity as if it had been a break of the existing identity. In this case, The Decade of Centenaries may have provided a cause for the Republic and its governmental institutions, such as The National Museum of Ireland, to reflect on their past 100 years as an independent nation and evaluate where they are to go from here. Such an evaluation need not be felt as keenly as is perhaps The Troubles and the discussions of it.

Similarly to the political nature of The Troubles, the Easter Rising is another political event whose consequences are important to Irish history and the Republic specifically. As it is a political historical event presented in The General Post Office Museum as the result of a government project, it also makes sense that the museum should strive for political neutrality. Where this clashes is in its memorial, commemorative aspect. As it is a jubilee and something of a founding event for the Republic, it makes sense that the Republican government should perhaps desire for it to be at least somewhat celebratory in tone. It would explain the film at the end of *Witness Revolution* which clashes with the otherwise passive, multifaceted, educational approach of the rest of the exhibition. The museum thus becomes something akin to a compromise between existing to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Rising, and being an educational, cross-borders collaborative project.

5. Conclusions

This section of the thesis presents the conclusions drawn from the results and analysis, based on the thesis' research questions.

1. How do the selected museums portray Irish contemporary history? How do they use terms such as "Irish"?

As was shown by the case studies, the only exhibition studied which explores contemporary Irish history in depth is The Ulster Museum's *The Troubles and Beyond* (see heading 4. 1. 1. 1. *The Troubles and Beyond*). The General Post Office Museum (GPO Museum) has its *Commemorative gallery*, though it does not explore contemporary Irish history in depth, instead briefly summarising the events after the 1916 Easter Rising (see heading 4. 1. 3. 2. *The Commemorative gallery*). The National Museum of Decorative Arts & History mention that it has and has had contemporary Irish history museums in the past (Interview 2), though the current physical exhibitions of the museum were not part of the study, and thus no conclusions can be drawn from them. Instead, the focus for The National Museum of Ireland was for the planned exhibition *20th Century History of Ireland Galleries* (see heading 4. 1. 2. 2. *The planned exhibition*). Because *The Troubles and Beyond* was the sole exhibit which explores contemporary Irish history in depth, it cannot effectively be compared and contrasted to the other studied exhibitions.

The contemporary history portrayed in The Ulster Museum's *The Troubles and Beyond* is multifaceted and communicative. It shows, as is discussed in its subheading, that the history of The Troubles is still alive in the cultural memory and is still being discusses and interpreted by the public of Northern Ireland. It is depicted as a historical event with the historical context provided by the exhibit, while it is still treated as a period of history which is not truly over, as its consequences are felt *Beyond* the period of The Troubles. This is reinforced by the exhibit's purposefully impermanent nature, as the exhibition cannot be finished while The Troubles are not finished in the cultural psyche. The exhibition is overall focused on Northern Ireland specifically, and terms specific to Northern Ireland are what is overall used to describe the history. Less contemporary history in the *Discover History* exhibition uses Ireland and Irish interchangeably up to the Partition, after which Northern Ireland is referred thusly.

It is difficult to ascertain what the contemporary history portrayed in the planned exhibition of The National Museum of Decorative Arts & History will be like before the exhibition is unveiled. It is possible to gather some conclusions from what it is described as planning on portraying, however. *20th Century History of Ireland Galleries* will include events which occurred in Northern Ireland and although those events seem to be described as affecting the North specifically, Northern Ireland still falls under the banner of "Ireland" and is thus "Irish" contemporary history within the Republican National Museum.

The GPO Museum speaks of Ireland and Irish in general when referring to the Republic, with Northern Ireland first appearing in the *Commemoration Gallery.* There, Northern

Ireland is included as Irish and as being part of Ireland, though the terms are treated as umbrella terms. The Republic is simply Ireland, though it is also the Republic, while Northern Ireland is only Ireland when it is grouped together with the Republic, and it is also Irish when spoken of together with the Republic.

In the two Republican museums, Northern Ireland it seems to only be "Ireland" and "Irish" when grouped together with the Republic, while the Republic is also described as "Ireland" in isolation. The impression this may create is that the Republic is the standard set for Ireland — it can stand for Ireland in its entirety, while Northern Ireland is a separate part which sometimes falls into the same category and is "Irish" when together with the Republic. Northern Ireland referring to itself as Northern Ireland and not Ireland in The Ulster Museum can be seen as reinforcing this idea of the Republic being Ireland, but Northern Ireland being simply Northern Ireland.

2. What narratives are presented by the selected museums' exhibitions, and what is the collective Irish identity according to those narratives?

The above research question was largely answered in sections 4. 2. *The narrator and the narration*, and 4. 3. *Who are the Irish?* This question and those two sections are largely concerned with the exhibitions studied for this thesis, meaning that the main onus lies upon *The Troubles and Beyond* and *Witness Revolution*, with *20th Century History of Ireland Galleries* being by and large a hypothetical narrative due to the narrative analysis of it having been gleaned only from its described plan (see subheading 4. 1. 2. 2. *The planned exhibition*).

The narrative displayed in The Ulster Museum's *The Troubles and Beyond* is that The Troubles is a complex, multifaceted era which is not yet over and which is still a cause of conflict for those with differing opinions on it and its consequences. Based on the exhibition's communicative and democratic nature, as well as quotes from the exhibition such as "we do not have a shared memory" (see fig. 2), the collective identity portrayed in The Ulster Museum and *The Troubles and Beyond* specifically is that the collective identity is in question. The identity is not "shared" as the memory is not shared (see fig. 2), but still being discussed, and the exhibition may function as a forum for that discussion, as visitors may communicate both with each other and the museum about that identity. In short, to be Irish, according to the sole Northern Irish museum studied, is to not know or agree on what it means to be Irish.

The narrative for the planned exhibition at The National Museum of Ireland is not quite clear, though the collective identity it will present may be possible to parse. It is said and described that it will be the first exhibition at The National Museum which includes Northern Irish history. This could imply that the collective Irish identity has been focused on the Republican Irish experience before, and that perhaps The National Museum did not see Northern History as being Irish history. To now include Northern Ireland into its exhibitions can imply that this view of the Irish collective memory and this the collective Irish identity is changing to include Northern Ireland. It may reflect that the collective identity is changing overall and being more actively discussed, such as seen in The Ulster Museum. This is further elaborated upon in the Discussion section.

The narrative being presented in The General Post Office Museum's *Witness Revolution* can be interpreted as that of a founding myth. Its paratext mostly shows the museum as something for those who are already familiar with the Rising's significance (see heading 4. 2. *The narrator and the narration*), which is likely to be the Irish public. The museum and its history of the Rising is treated as politically important, such as with the museum being constructed for the Rising's 100th anniversary and it being visited by politicians (Interview 3). It is also often visited by groups of school children and teenagers (Observation 2; Interview 3) and the participatory technologies within it are typical of technologies intended to be educational (Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2014; Observation 2). The educational and policial significance of the museum lends itself to it being perhaps seen as important to the national collective identity, and the film included in *Witness Revolution* shows a heroic narrative. With these factors in mind, the narrative is that of a founding of a nation.

A nation or a collective's founding myth is, according to Eyerman (2019) important for the creation of a collective and/or national identity. Taking into account the narrative of a founding myth presented in The GPO Museum, the collective identity of the Irish presented in the museum may be seen as inherently Republican, as the Rising is the first proclamation of the Republic and the inciting incident for the Republic's formation (see heading 4. 1. 3. 1. *Witness Revolution*). The collective Irish identity according to The GPO Museum is thus to be a citizen of the Republic, or to otherwise have a connection to the Republic.

3. In what ways can the museums' audiences participate with the museums and the museum exhibitions?

The answers to this research question are mostly based on the results and analysis presented in section 4. 4. *Audience participation*.

There are participatory technologies present at all the studied museums which the audience may engage with, though the types of technologies differ, and the intent to involve the public or the public's ability to influence the exhibitions vary.

The Ulster Museum and especially its *The Troubles and Beyond* is the most intentionally and practically communicative of the exhibitions and museums studied, as its participatory technologies invite and encourage the museum audience to take part in the exhibition. It also invites feedback which may be implanted into the exhibition and such feedback has been implemented before. The public can, is encouraged to, and to some extent does both participate with and influence *The Troubles and Beyond* (see sections 4. 1. 1. 2. *Audience and public* and 4. 4. *Audience participation*).

The National Museum of Decorative Arts & History's *Historical Collections Online* is an example of a participatory technology which has communicative aspects and is founded on the democratic idea that as it contains items which belong to the public, it should therefore be accessible to the public. The museum has made it so that the

collection invites participation from users as it invites feedback and lets the users navigate the collection freely (see subheading 4. 1. 2. 1. *The museum and the public*). The planned physical exhibition is does not seem to be intended to be influenced by the public, though the planned digital exhibition is another example of a participatory technology akin to *Historical Collections Online.* Past exhibitions have also involved the public in the gathering of material and been transparent about its plans in that manner (see subheading 4. 1. 2. 2. *The planned exhibition*; Interview 2). The National Museum of Decorative Arts & History is in this manner not as communicative or as democratic in its construction of exhibitions, though it may still be considered a changing, communicative museum with different democratic aspects and democratic goals.

The General Post Office Museum involves traditionally engaging and educational participatory technologies but does not otherwise have communicative technologies or other similar factors which could foster communication between the museum and the public. The audience and the public are invited to engage with the museum's exhibitions, though it is not built in such a way that the public can influence it. The museum was not created with a long-term goal in mind, nor does it have curators as part of its staff, which complicates the museum's ability to change or reconstruct its exhibitions should there be a desire for it to do so. (See the subheadings beneath section 4. 1. 3. *The GPO Museum*).

Summary of conclusions

To summarise the results and analysis, it appears that Irish museums invite participation from their audiences and the public, though the degree of communication fostered between the museums and the public differs in the different museums with The Ulster Museum being the most communicative. The narrative surrounding the collective Irish identity seems to be that, to be Irish, is to question what "Irish" should mean. In the Republican museums, it seems that this questioning of the Irish identity might be a more recent development of the collective identity than it is in Northern Ireland, with the Republican aspect of the Irish identity still being considered important.

6. Discussion and future research

This part will discuss the conclusions drawn from this study and suggest which avenues future research on the subjects that this thesis touches upon ought to take, as well as to reflect on the conduction of the study and what parts of it could have been improved upon.

Although this thesis has shown that The Ulster Museum is the most democratic out of the three studied when studied from an audience participation theoretical perspective, it is difficult to ascertain why that might be the case. It is worth considering that the chosen case studies might be outliers and cannot represent general trends in the Irish museum sector on both sides of the border, especially since The Ulster Museum is the sole Northern Irish museum studied. Nevertheless, the democratic nature of The Ulster Museum and *The Troubles and Beyond* may stem from the fact that the history portrayed and discussed in the exhibit is the most contemporary out of the various exhibitions studied. As the events of The Troubles is still within living memory, and a previous iteration of The Troubles exhibit received negative commentary from the public (National Museums NI 2021.), the current exhibition can be seen a case of a lesson learned, and feedback heard and implemented. It may also be because The Troubles, as a period of history, is the source of recent cultural trauma (Dawson 2007; Ferry et. al. 2017; Day & Shloim 2021; Miller 2021), unlike the Republican exhibits. The trauma caused by The Troubles having not yet healed may be that which fosters discussions and divisive views of the events, which in turn necessitates a more communicative, democratic, and participatory exhibition for The Ulster Museum.

Future research on Irish museology and Irish museums could elaborate on the depictions of The Troubles in museums and how it pertains to collective identity. As has been stated by research into other fields, and is explained in *The Troubles and Beyond*, that period of history is still alive in the collective psyche and the culture today. As there has been previous research on trauma surrounding The Troubles, and research on the idea of "neutrality" and The Troubles (Dawson 2007; Ferry et. al. 2017; Day 2021; Miller 2021) it could be of interest to explore The Troubles specifically in museums further, and perhaps also the aspect of neutrality regarding The Troubles in museums.

It is also perhaps understandable that The National Museum of Ireland, in their first portrayal of Irish history that includes Northern Ireland, would choose a cautious approach to that history. To have Northern Ireland considered part of Irish history and portray that history by letting material culture take focus may open the door for future exhibits which may explore Northern Ireland more in depth, or in other ways.

One unexpected facet of the study was the role The Decade of Centenaries played for the museums. The Decade of Centenaries came to be a significant finding for this study, though it was only first discovered during the gathering of digital material from the selected museums. The true relevance of The Decade of Centenaries for Irish museums was further emphasised when it came up repeatedly in the three interviews. The Decade of Centenaries is likely going to play a significant role in future developments for Irish museums. Considering The Decade's importance to the museums, especially the

Republican ones, it would be of interest for future research to examine the impact of The Decade of Centenaries on the Irish museum sector generally, especially as it regards to the collective Irish memory and the Irish tradition of commemoration and memorials, as discussed by Walker (2012).

Another unexpected but welcome discovery made during this study was that the wishes of Levin and Mark-Fitzgerald (2005; 2017) would prove to have come true, at least in some regard. Both articles expressed a need for there to be increased collaboration across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic and all three interviews brought up the matter of cross-border collaboration as something they considered to be needed, welcome, and helpful. The exact degree or nature of said collaboration was not expressed in detail. It would be interesting, for future research, to see how much collaboration there is across the Irish border, what that collaboration looks like, what museum professionals on both sides of the border think of this collaboration, and what effect that collaboration has had on Irish museums beyond the quick mentions of it in this thesis.

This thesis has explored the participatory technologies present in the studied museums, though not in an exhaustive manner. The application of participation theory has given some interesting results regarding in what ways the public can interact with and perhaps influence museums. The study and this text have also briefly touched upon some of the intent behind those technologies and how they have been received by visitors. For future research on public participation in Irish museums, it might be of interest to look either more in depth on what museum professionals think of participatory technologies, and to look on the other side of the participation aspect and see what museum audiences think of those technologies. Is there a general desire for participation present in the public? To what extent does that desire, if such exists, stretch, and what sort of participation might it be that the public is interested in? Exploring participation theory in terms of how it applies to Irish museums would contribute to exploring the development of Irish museums and their relationship to the public in general.

A theory which might have been of use in the conduction of this investigation, which may yet prove useful for future research, is profession theory. As not all the museums studied for this thesis turned out to have curators and conservators, it would perhaps be interesting to see how professionalised the museum field is in general in Ireland, and what tasks the staff of museums have. In the case of the GPO Museum, for example, the staff is focused mainly on visitors and visitor experiences, which can be problematic regarding the conservation of the objects held and displayed by the museum. It would be interesting to see if the GPO Museum is an outlier in this case, or if it is par for the course to have no member of staff with conservational tasks, and if such is the case, why that is.

Institutional theory might also have been a constructive and suitable choice for this thesis or for future research on the role of Irish history museums. Institutional theory could be used to explore the role of history museums as institutions, which can be explored from multiple different viewpoints. Those may include the opinions of staff in the museums as to museums' role as institutions, or the public's regard for museums as institutions. It might also be used to explore the relationship between museums and the government

more in depth, such as regarding what laws museums may or may not be beholden to and how that might affect their museum practices and relationship to both the public and the government.

Institutional theory and profession theory may also be combined to explore what knowledge people in the government who may have influence over their countries' museums have of museums' needs and roles. The GPO Museum again comes to mind, as its creation with no long-term plan for its management and future collections could perhaps be seen as short-sighted by those who oversaw the project which created it.

Regarding the Irish collective identity and who the Irish are according to the studied museums, it is brought up in section 4. 3. *Who are the Irish?* that the perspective of those living on or near the Irish border is absent from all the studied museums. For future research on Irish museology and museums in general, and the collective Irish identity in particular, it would be interesting to see how museums explore and/or depict the border perspective. In those museums, how is that perspective depicted, and is it similar to Irish museums further away from the border, such as those studied for this thesis? It would be of interest to research whether any museums focus on the identities and experiences of people living along the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland and whether these differ from those of people who live further inland on either side.

The previous research section of the thesis discusses examples of collective memory, and national identity studies in other nations. For future research, the methods used here, and findings discovered, can be fruitfully analysed in comparison to other countries with similar situations such as the previously mentioned South Africa and Hungary in order to further develop research on collective memory and trauma in museums.

Now that this study is concluded and the text written, the room for improvements regarding its conduction can more plainly be seen. To make the study more suitable for comparison between Republican and Northern museums, more efforts should have been taken to select a second Northern museum to be examined. It might also have been beneficial to, during the observations, take further notice of how other museum visitors interacted with the exhibitions and how they moved through them, as it would have given a better understanding for how the existing participatory technologies are used. The study could also have had a tighter, more streamlined focus had it been solely focused on the national museums of the Republic and Northern Ireland. As it was, the lack of a physical visit to The National Museum of Ireland (NMI) hindered some parts of the study, though visiting it and including that material as well as the material from The GPO Museum might have been beyond the scope of this thesis as the material could have proved too extensive to study within the study's given timeframe. A comparative study between the national museums only would perhaps have been a more suitable comparative case study than the comparison between The Ulster Museum, The GPO Museum, and *Historical Collections online* and the planned *20th Century History of Ireland Galleries* at NMI.

To conclude this thesis, Ireland and the Irish museum sector is undergoing something of a change, at least partially due to the significance of The Decade of Centenaries. It would be fascinating to see what might change in a couple of more years' time, and especially

interesting to see how the planned exhibition at The National Museum of Ireland is received both by the museum sector and the public. Undeniably, more changes lie in store. To study and discuss them would be of interest both for Ireland and Irish museums, and the international museum sector, to see what of Ireland's practices might be found, or applied, elsewhere.

7. References

7. 1. Field material and interviews

7. 1. 1. Interviews

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Interview 2. 2024-02-19. Curator at The National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.
    Conducted and recorded digitally.
Interview 3. 2024-03-13. Senior supervisor at The General Post Office Museum,
    Dublin. Conducted and recorded digitally.

7. 1. 2. Field observations

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Observation 2. 2024-02-06. The General Post Office Museum, Dublin.

7. 1. 3. Digital observations

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7. 2. 1. Digital museum material

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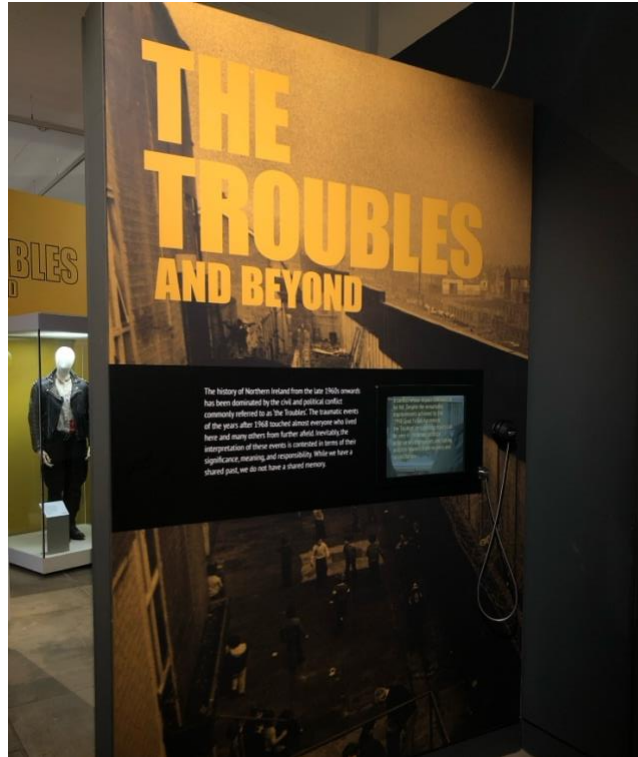
8. Enclosed material

Fig. 1.

The *Discover History* exhibit covering the history of the 1800's. Photograph taken during Observation 1 at The Ulster Museum, Belfast, 2024-02-04.
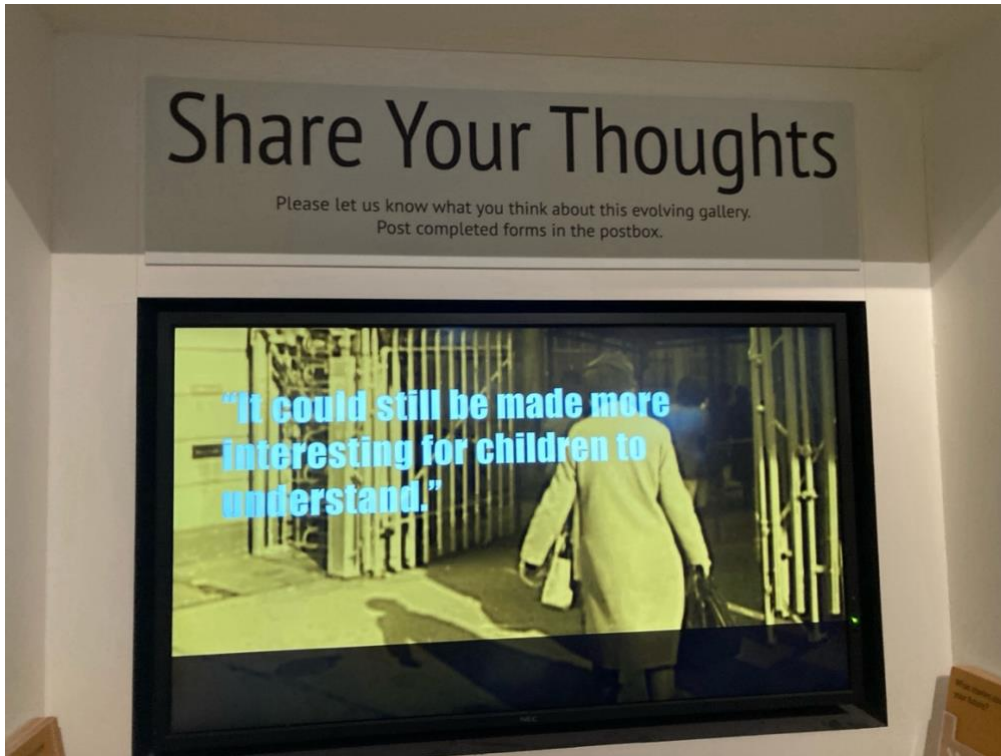
Fig. 2.

The introductory sign to *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition. Photograph taken during Observation 1 at The Ulster Museum, Belfast, 2024-02-04.

Fig. 3.

"Stop & Think" sign featured in *The Troubles and Beyond*. Photograph taken during Observation 1 at The Ulster Museum, Belfast, 2024-02-04.

Fig. 4.

The sign in *The Troubles* exhibit encouraging visitors to "share your thoughts" above a station where visitors may write responses on anonymous cards and forms. Below the sign is a digital screen showing various comments left by previous visitors. Photograph taken during Observation 1 at The Ulster Museum, Belfast, 2024-02-04.

Fig. 5.

A sign reading "How the stories we tell shape who we become…" in *The Troubles and Beyond*. Photograph taken during Observation 1 at The Ulster Museum, Belfast, 2024-02-04.

Fig. 6.

Objects presented and described next to the sign seen in fig. 5. Photograph taken during Observation 1 at The Ulster Museum, Belfast, 2024-02-04.

Fig. 7.

Historical Collections Online, as hosted by *The National Museum of Ireland*. Screenshot taken from The National Museum's website during the Digital observation. https://collections.museum.ie/ (Accessed: 2024-02-16 10:37).

Fig. 8.

"Providing Feedback", as part of Historical Collections Online, hosted by *The National Museum of Ireland.* Screenshot taken from The National Museum's website during the Digital observation. https://collections.museum.ie/ (Accessed: 2024-02-16 10:37).
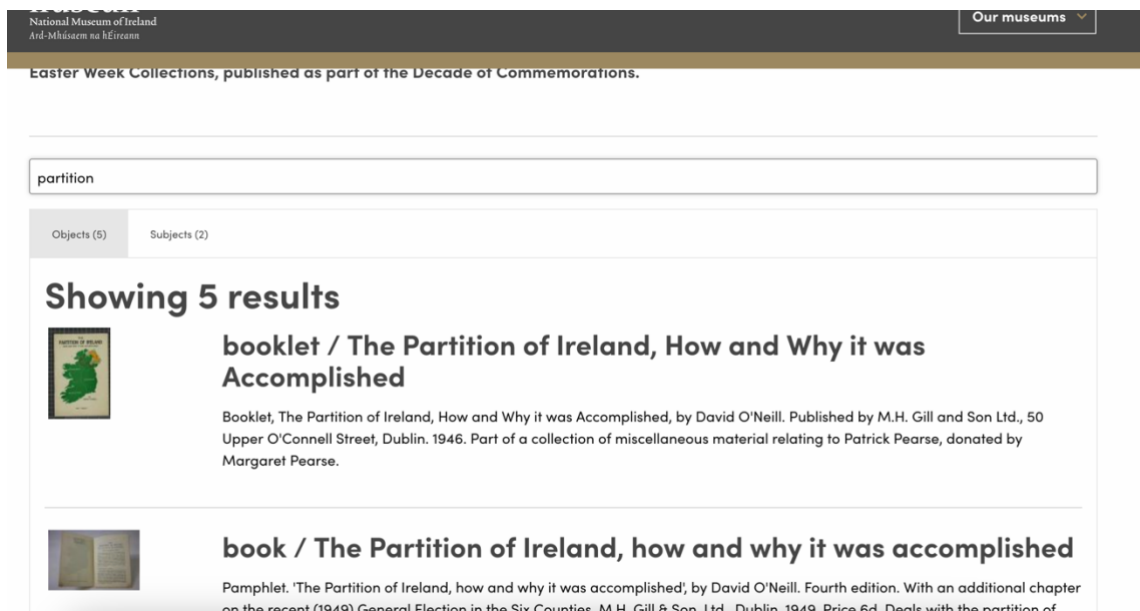
Fig. 9.

Historical Collections Online presentation page, including a search bar and links to relevant sites below. Screenshot taken from The National Museum's website during the Digital observation. https://collections.museum.ie/ (Accessed: 2024-02-16 10:37).

Fig. 10.

Gold medal awarded to Éamonn Ceannt for uilleann piping, 1906. (Object Number HE:EW.5675)

An example of an item featured in *Historical Collections Online* Screenshot taken from The National Museum's website during the Digital observation. https://collections.museum.ie/ (Accessed: 2024-02-16 10:37).

Fig. 11.

The results of the search for "partition" within *Historical Collections Online*. Screenshot taken from The National Museum's website during the Digital observation. https://collections.museum.ie/ (Accessed: 2024-02-16 10:37).

Fig. 12.

Detailed image of the object which was the first result of the "partition" search. Screenshot taken from The National Museum's website during the Digital observation. https://collections.museum.ie/ (Accessed: 2024-02-16 10:37).

Fig. 13.

Overview of approach from *The National Museum of Ireland's* information about the upcoming exhibition at The National Museum of Decorative Arts & History. Screenshot taken during the Digital observation of The National Museum of Ireland.

https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Museums/Decorative-Arts-History/Exhibitions/20th-Century-History-of-Ireland (Accessed: 2024-02-16 12:33)

Fig. 14.

The first signs seen upon descending into the *Witness Revolution* exhibition at The General Post Office Museum. Photograph taken during Observation 2 at The General Post Office Museum, Dublin, 2024-02-06.

Fig. 15.

The introductory sign to the Witness Revolution exhibition. (Observation 2). Photograph taken during Observation 2 at The General Post Office Museum, Dublin, 2024-02-06.
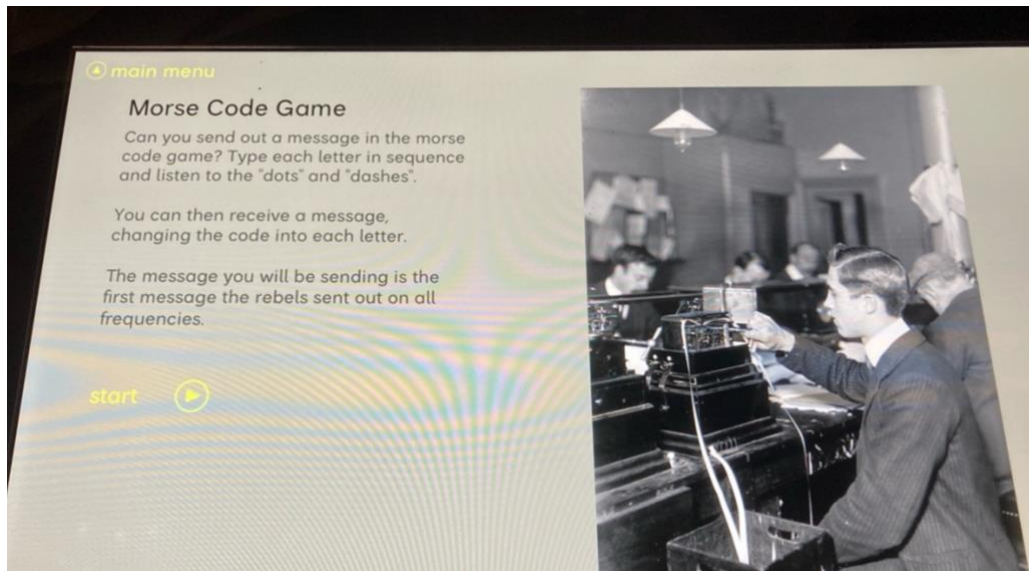
Fig. 16.

The *Commemorative gallery*. Photograph taken during Observation 2 at The General Post Office Museum, Dublin, 2024-02-06.

Fig. 17.

The *Commemorative gallery,* with the museum's café and café seating. Photograph taken during Observation 2 at The General Post Office Museum, Dublin, 2024-02-06.

Fig. 18.

"Morse code game" featured in the *Witness Revolution* exhibition. Photograph taken during Observation 2 at The General Post Office Museum, Dublin, 2024-02-06.

Fig. 19.

The Irish flag and a copy of the original proclamation of the Republic in the entrance of The General Post Office Museum. Photograph taken during Observation 2 at The General Post Office Museum, Dublin, 2024-02-06.