Property Violence and Postmemory in the Republic of Ireland

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Research question: *How does postmemory relate to place attachment in the 'burnt out' families of Ireland's 1920s civil conflict?*

Outline:

1. Introduction
2. Literature review
3. Methodology
4. Findings
5. Reflection
6. Bibliography

Introduction

'As happens in post-colonial societies, nationalist Ireland tried very hard to forget its colonial past. Such forgetting may be seen as part of the healing process, but it can also endanger the memory of what brings us to the present... The narrative of the revolutionary experience of the Big House is as fragmentary as country house ruins'.

— Terence Dooley, 'Burning the Big House' (2022), p.282.

The toll of Ireland's bloody 1920s civil conflict can be quantified not just in deaths, but in the building ruins which still dot the Irish landscape. Between 1920 and 1923, almost 300 'Big House' country residences – mostly owned by Protestant gentry – experienced arson attacks from the IRA (Dooley 2001, pp.286-287). The psychological impact on Protestant communities at the time was profound, and most burned houses were never rebuilt (Dooley 2001, p.233).

Postmemory describes how younger generations relate to traumatic events experienced by their ancestors (Hirsch 2008). Place attachment theory suggests that these inherited impressions can affect a person's emotional bond to the location of their ancestors' trauma (Lewicka 2021). This study probes the question, 'How does postmemory relate to place attachment in 'burnt out' families?'

Nine in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of 'burnt out' Protestant families. The interview explored three dimensions of emotional attachment to the site of a family's historic burning: (1) place-based memory and identity, (2) attachment to physical landscape, and (3) attachment to local

community. Themes were studied inductively using constant comparative method and thematic analysis.

Findings show that place attachment is affected by the style and strength of postmemory. Postmemory, in turn, depends on contemporary family, social and geographic ties to the area of the burning. Attachment is strongest when individuals still live in the area, have friends locally and inherited family memories of the house, pre-burning. The circumstances of the burning also matter; families with particularly violent experiences identify with physical landmarks, but relate less to local residents.

This study is the first to demonstrate that the memory of Ireland's 1920s property violence reverberates beyond those who experienced it first-hand. It captures the perspectives of 'burnt out' families 100 years on, and questions whether Irish society has fully reckoned with that history.

It is hoped this research can help us forecast the long-term impacts of contemporary property violence around the world, such as in Myanmar and western Sudan.

Key words: Postmemory, place attachment, cultural trauma, property violence, sense of place, place identity, scale development

Literature Review

The 1920-23 Country House Burnings

This project queries the modern-day impact of revolutionary-era trauma in the southern Irish Protestant community. Protestants were historically associated with British administration in Ireland, beginning with Crown plantations in the 16th and 17th Centuries. The community maintained varying degrees of political, social and economic privilege, even as repression of the Catholic majority deepened (Connolly 2008). In an era when land ownership was prized as a marker of class, Protestant family wealth was often projected through country houses, sometimes called 'Big Houses' – vast, Palladian-style mansions overlooking estates in the Irish countryside. This ostentatious privilege became a liability during the War of Independence (1919-1921) and Civil War (1922-23) as gentry-owned estates were targeted by local bands of the IRA, with motives ranging from agrarian grievances to the families' perceived pro-British sympathies (Dooley 2001). In all, about 20% of southern Irish country houses were burned (Dooley 2022, pp.15, 272).

Many house burnings occurred without warning. A typical burning began with a group of armed men raiding the house overnight. Owners were given 15 to 30 minutes to pack their belongings, then were evacuated with their servants and stood outside while the house burned (Dooley 2022, pp.179-185)(Donnelly 2023). A minority of burnings were accompanied by physical violence such as kidnapping and executions, well-worn tactics of the broader national conflict (Dooley 2022)(Clark 2014). Paintings, silver and other valuables were looted. In some cases, rare shrubs were dug up from the garden and demesne trees were cut down for firewood (Dooley 2022, pp.193-202).

Unsurprisingly, burnings wrought a hefty financial loss on the owners. Among looted or burned treasures were also items of sentimental value: family portraits, rare books, archives and mementos which had been handed down through generations (Dooley 2022). The shock of these losses may have been compounded by the families' sudden displacement – anecdotes recall families relocating to local hotels, to relatives' homes or, frequently, abroad. In those anecdotes, relocation was often done under threat of further IRA violence (Dooley 2022)(Donnelly 2023). Some gentry – especially, it seems, the largest landowners such as Lady Gregory of Coole Park, Co. Galway – preempted the loss by vacating their homes in advance, shipping family members and valuables to England (Dooley 2022, pp.202203)(Gregory 1922, p.180).

At the conclusion of the Civil War, the Irish and British governments established compensation funds for victims of violence. Southern Protestants made over 4,000 compensation claims to the Irish Grants Committee, many of which concerned burned properties. Yet only half of the claims were successful and payouts were often meagre (Dooley 2022)(Clark 2014). A minority of 'burnt out' families decided to rebuild. Many houses were left to ruin, while their demesnes were sold to new owners or compulsorily acquired by the Irish Land Commission, to be divided among local tenant farmers (Dooley 2022).

The Burnings In Historical Context

Though the burnings incurred few fatalities, they arguably marked the emotional climax of an older, deeper struggle. Landed Protestant communities in pre-independence Ireland struggled to reconcile their traditions – rooted in class power, cultural Britishness and estrangement from the local Catholic population – with the increasing democratisation and

social mobility of the late 18th Century. Historians trace a ‘long revolution’ of aristocratic decline, beginning with the 1872 disestablishment of the Church of Ireland or the 1879-82 Land War (Dooley 2022, p.282)(d’Alton 2024). An extended period of depressed agricultural prices encouraged landlords to sell up, as did the generous incentives of the 1903 Wyndham Land Act (Dooley 2022). Then came the First World War, where Protestants were overrepresented among the estimated 200,000 Irishmen who enlisted, and the 30,000 who were killed (Fitzpatrick 2015)(Dooley 2022).

By 1920, many Protestant families of the south were financially enfeebled and heirless. Things could have been worse: Dooley (2022, p.184) suggests that it was precisely the irrelevance of the old gentry to the Catholic nationalist majority which protected them from the worst excesses of the revolutionary conflict. Russian nobles, also on the wrong side of agrarian-nationalist revolution in the 1910s, were persecuted and tortured, while their contemporaries in Hungary were interned in concentration camps (Dooley 2022). Similarly, it has been argued that partition between southern Protestants and their more bullish, politically organised Northern cousins in 1921, after the First World War knocked back Home Rule, possibly helped avert an all-island wave of sectarian-style violence. In such a conflict, Protestants in the south may have been easy pickings (Fitzpatrick 2015).

Protestant national identity in the decades following the burnings was contested territory. Some struggled to reconcile simultaneous loyalties to the Catholic-dominated Irish state and to the receding British Empire, instead feeling alien to both (d’Alton 2024). The novelist Elizabeth Bowen, of a 190-year pedigree at Bowen’s Court in Co. Cork, said that her people ‘were really only at home in mid-crossing between Holyhead and Dun Laoghaire’ (Glendinning 1977, p.11). Emigration, which had been rising among southern Protestants since the turn of the century, accelerated in the revolutionary period. In the fifteen years

following 1911, the southern Protestant population fell by an estimated 33%, compared to a 2% contraction among Irish Catholics (Bielenberg 2013).

As the Irish Free State developed, many Protestants continued to inhabit a closed world of Protestant-run schools, hospitals, farms, businesses, social groups and sports clubs. The Cork historian Ian D'Alton (2024, p.115) nicknames it the 'Protestant Free State'. With effective social segregation, ‘Protestants could live a Protestant life and die a Protestant death without much troubling the other side. Which suited the other side, too.’ After independence, many Protestants maintained cultural ties to Great Britain (d’Alton 2024). Ireland’s eventual departure from the Commonwealth in 1948 felt, according to d’Alton (2024, p.32), like ‘some sort of umbilical cord had been snapped’.

Existing Scholarship

Over the past two decades, research on the country house burnings has expanded dramatically. Much of it has been conducted by historians, using textual analysis of compensation records, government documents and family archives. Dooley (2001, 2022) has done much to situate the burnings in their complex historical context, at a time when social, political and agrarian conflicts were often intertwined, and their causes and effects difficult to isolate. Others like d’Alton (2024), Hanley (2016) and Clark (2014) follow the paper trail on how the burnings affected Protestant integration in the early decades of the Irish Free State. A constellation of local historians have done impressive work preserving and publishing the histories of individual country houses around the country. Commendable examples, which were encountered during the exploratory research process, include Coombes (2019), McCutcheon (2022), Browne (2016), Fitzmaurice (2015), Fraher (2022), Lorenc (2026), O’Byrne (2022) and O’Hea O’Keeffe (2022).

The other field of study where the 1920s burnings appear is literary fiction. The genre of the Big House novel was born in the mid-18th Century. Yet only after the Civil War did the fiery destruction of houses emerge as a common motif of Anglo-Irish fiction. Through the 20th Century, images of burned houses gained popular recognition in the works of Bowen, W.B. Yeats and Aidan Higgins, among others (Lubbers 1992). In many of these novels, d'Alton (2024) analyses that burnings are represented as a kind of 'purgatory' – on one hand, proffering rebirth and atonement for ancestral wrongs; on the other, imparting a sense of loss, liminality and placelessness, leaving descendants suspended somewhere on the vague boundary between heaven and hell. The essayist Hubert Butler mused that, as Protestants faced social decline and colonial-era resentment from Catholics, the destruction of their material heritage presented an opportunity. He described the Church of Ireland in the Free State as a 'poor old phoenix' which, 'moulting and blind and bedraggled, gazes mesmerised into the fire but unable to summon up the courage to take the last leap.' Yet, he wrote, 'I think it has the power to lay a very fine egg' (Butler n.d.).

Something is surely missed when the field of research is limited to historic documents and novels. Many 'burnt out' families have surviving children, grandchildren or greatgrandchildren – as testified to by the sample size of this study. Yet to date there has been no dedicated academic research on those descendants. Little has been published about them, with the exception of O'Hea O'Keeffe's (2013) oral history project. Qualitative engagement with the descendants is a natural next step for the field – not just to test the conclusions of historical and literary studies, but also to generate new insights. The most promising analyses may derive from an interdisciplinary approach, spanning sociology, social and political history, and literary analysis.

Place Attachment

The study's theoretical framework draws on two concepts in cultural memory studies: postmemory and place attachment. Place attachment is the emotional attachment felt towards a location – in this study, the site of an individual's historic family home, which was burned. Place attachment has three dimensions: (1) attachment to place-based memory and identity, (2) attachment to physical landscape, and (3) attachment to local community (Lewicka 2021).

Postmemory

Postmemory originated in the work of Holocaust scholar Marianne Hirsch. Hirsch (2008, p.103) defines postmemory as 'the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right'. The primary site of this memory transmission is the family, where storytelling, inherited objects and photographs help later generations develop a sense of ownership over their ancestors' past (Hirsch 2008).

Postmemory is an especially useful framework to understand inherited trauma: adverse historic experiences can become internalised and are continuously reconstructed by younger generations. They become 'pre-established' cultural images, often reflecting the present-day interests, values of the descendants (Hirsch 2008). While Hirsch focuses on the children of directly affected individuals, empirical studies suggest that postmemory of episodic trauma can extend to the third generation, fourth generation and beyond (Hepworth 2019)(Kidron 2008).

Social Forgetting

What's missing in Hirsch's theory is a recognition that postmemory is built on more than just memory. Rigney (2012, p.221) claims that the key issue in cultural memory studies 'is not really how societies remember but how societies (learn to) forget'. In his book 'Forgetful Remembrance', Guy Beiner (2018) argues that memory can pass through generations in a muted form, and that memory has particular longevity when it lives in the tension between private remembrance and public forgetting. Social forgetting is a community's decision to 'seemingly suppress public remembrance of historical episodes that do not correspond to present interests' (Beiner 2018, p.17). Families nonetheless find subtle ways to preserve these inconvenient memories – if not by choice, then simply because 'the singling out of a subject for forgetting makes it all the more memorable' (Beiner 2018, p.42).

Beiner identifies a culture of social forgetting among Ulster Presbyterians, northern brethren of this study's sample population. Like most southern Protestants, Ulster Presbyterians arrived in Ireland as planters on confiscated land from the 17th Century. Unlike most southern Protestants, Ulster Presbyterians did not enjoy full immunity from the repressive Penal Laws and other persecution from the British Crown (McBride 1998). For this reason and others, Ulster Presbyterians played a leading role in the 1798 United Irishmen rebellion against British rule. Yet subsequent military repression – and a dramatic turnaround in Presbyterian loyalty to the Crown – largely drove this memory underground. Today, Beiner says, memory of the rebellion persists in small, rural communities around Northern Ireland. Relatives who participated in the rebellion, those who faced punishment and those who escaped live on in the oral history of Presbyterian families. This is despite a pervading, embarrassed silence on the topic in the wider Ulster Protestant community. It even defies

community efforts at decommemoration, including the Orangemen's destruction of the graves of local 1798 revolutionaries (Beiner 2018).

South of the border, social forgetting is a relative blackspot in academic study. This is curious, not least because of the temporal and geographic proximity many families still hold to the events of revolutionary period (Clark 2014). Historical myths and a popular historical consciousness have been highlighted as central to the construction of national identity. As philosopher Ernest Renan put it in his 1882 lecture 'What is a Nation?', 'Every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew' (Renan 1882, p.11). Birthed from conflict little over 100 years ago, Ireland's understanding of it revolutionary period arguably continues to influence political and social discourse. What is remembered – and forgotten – has important implications for the present. The Belfast historian Anthony Stewart surmises: 'There is something wrong with the shape of Irish history. [...] It is very difficult to see where the past ends and the present begins' (Stewart 2011, p.1).

The role of burned country houses in the Irish revolutionary postmemory varies. Dooley (2022) argues that the sight of burned ruins constitutes a trophy and icon of republican heroism for many, and a sad tribute to wanton violence for others. Material structures help sustain the memory in popular discourse. He writes, 'Ruins are not just the physical reminders of the imposing structure that once was, but they also symbolise the fall of the people who gave them meaning. Over time, the physical disappearance of the Big House very often led to the eradication of the memory of the house and those who occupied it' (Dooley 2022, p.281).

Methodology

This study took a qualitative approach to the research question, ‘How does postmemory of the 1920s burnings affect place attachment in 2026?’ Nine in-depth interviews were conducted with the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of families directly affected by IRA burnings. Most were directly descended from ‘burnt out’ country house owners, except for one participant who inherited a burnt house from distant cousins, and another whose family emigrated under threat of a burning which was never realised. In addition, two informants from heavily ‘burnt out’ areas were queried on changing social attitudes to the burnings.

The scope covered burnings in counties Kerry, Cork and Waterford, where IRA violence was particularly concentrated (Dooley 2001, p.286-287). Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Given the small size and geographic dispersion of ‘burnt out’ families, recruitment took place after liaising with a network of about 15 local historians, who were contacted through direct outreach and peer referral. Interview transcripts were reviewed using the constant comparative method and thematic analysis.

Interviews were inductive and comprised mostly open questions. They began with an outline of which burning memories were passed down and how, then progressed to deeper questions concerning interpretation, identity and how participants relate to the legacy of the burning today.

Findings

1. **Strong postmemory of burned houses**

Participants express a strong emotional bond to the location of the trauma. This was especially grounded in stories from their relatives' childhoods and photos of the houses before they were burned. Participants expressed nostalgia for the houses before they were burned and less affection for the houses that remain onsite, particularly if the house was rebuilt by a different family or not rebuilt at all.

2. **Psychological trauma**

Some participants reflected that the burnings had lasting mental health consequences for their old relatives. In some cases, the ripple effects passed down to generations with no autobiographical memory of the burnings. Two incidents of

3. **Reticent to discuss experiences**

'Social forgetting' was present in all families interviewed. Many descendants expressed a reticence to speak of postmemory outside of a closed family environment.

Descendants' material archives of the burning memories

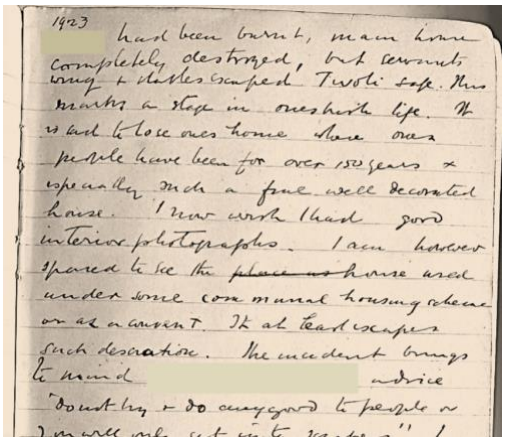

1923 had been burnt, main house completely destroyed, but servants wing + stables escaped. Two[illegible] safe. This marks a stage in one's Irish life. It is sad to lose one's home when one's people have been for over 150 years + especially such a fine well decorated house. I now work [illegible] good interior photographs. I am however spared to see the ~~place~~ house used under some communal housing scheme or as a convent. It at least escapes such desecration. The incident brings to mind [illegible] advice "Do[illegible] + do anything to people or

Image 1: An archived diary account of one family's house burning:

'On arrival found that [the house] had been burnt... This marks a stage in one's Irish life. It is sad to lose one's home when one's people have been for over 150 years.'

Difficulty identifying with the social world of country houses:



Image 2: A decsendant's photo of their family's country house prior to the burning

'In the photo there's a man standing, looking at a child. My grandparents were very distant from children. They were gentry and there were other people to mind the children. In my mind, this picture is emblematic of the emotional distance of that class.'

Reflection

For me, this research project was a valuable crash course in project management. Over six-plus intensive weeks, I engaged in research, outreach, interviewing, transcribing and data analysis. I checked and double-checked all aspects of the research proposal, constructing schedules and spreadsheets. I drew up contingency plans to avoid getting derailed. My success strategy was to make sure I always knew what to do, in every scenario, no matter what. But surprisingly, my biggest takeaway from the research process at the end was to get comfortable with the unknown. As weeks passed, the research question, sampling strategy and scope were reformulated several times. Interviewee recruitment initially felt like a dead end, as I found it near impossible to track down 'burnt out' families. I adapted by contacting over 15 local historians, who led me to 9 willing interviewees. This taught me that it's okay to make mistakes along the way, as long as I keep an open and flexible mindset.

Over the six weeks, I also think I grew as a person. First, I strengthened my personal drive. I have always had an interest in Irish Protestant identity, but this project allowed me to dive far deeper than before. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know. It feels great to love what you do and wake up each day with a sense of purpose. Second, I realised that soft skills are acquired through experience. Since I'm shy and quiet, I expected that I would find interviewing tough — having to meet people, make them feel comfortable and ask spontaneous follow-up questions. Yet I found my feet after the first two or three interviews. In the future, I want to pursue more opportunities that push me outside my comfort zone.

Lastly, this project taught me how important human connection is when doing research. Interviews were by far my favourite part of the research. I was welcomed into people's homes, shown interesting perspectives and able to make critical judgements in the moment. Overall, talking to 'burnt out' families gave me a huge sense of fulfilment. The feeling may have been mutual; many of my interviewees expressed a personal interest in my research topic, had nuanced opinions, and seemed eager to share their family stories. Some of them, I suspected, had privately harboured deep and complex opinions on the topic for their entire lives — not speaking out, but waiting for someone to ask the question. It was a privilege to be the person to ask the question.

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