

War monuments in St. Patrick's Cathedral

Writing in last Thursday's Guardian newspaper, Michael D Higgins delivered a typically thoughtful and forthright opinion piece¹ on British imperialism. He referred to the "feigned amnesia" around the "uncomfortable aspects" of the shared history of Britain and Ireland. Addressing the nature of Irish attitudes to British rule at the time, he said that "there are important benefits for all on these islands of engaging with the shadows cast by our shared past".

The complexities of that "shared past" are encapsulated in Dublin's St Patrick's Cathedral. This building is one of the jewels of the city's historical architecture, attracting big numbers of tourists in normal times. For many of those tourists, familiar with epic – sometimes mythical – stories of Irish rebellions and heroic resistance to British rule, the experience of visiting it must be quite confusing.

The cathedral is filled with monuments, from an effigy of the 13th century Archbishop of Dublin, Fulk de Saundford, to 20th century busts of the Protestant presidents Douglas Hyde and Erskine Childers. There are statues to writers, churchmen, lawyers. Nothing unusual there; however, the sheer volume of military monuments and trappings in the cathedral is rather disquieting. Christianity and warfare have long been intertwined in metaphor and messages as in "Onward Christian soldiers ...", but in this place of worship warfare itself seems almost to be celebrated. Regimental flags from the British army hang high on the walls. There are umpteen memorials, from statues to stained glass windows, erected to Irishmen who died serving in the British army and navy. The majority of the wars these Irishmen died in were colonial, as the British Empire spread across the world.

A bit off the beaten track, in the North Transept, there is a very disturbing monument: a massive marble bas-relief depicting the storming of Burma's Shwedagon Pagoda during the second Burmese War in 1852. The onion dome of the pagoda rises above the troops of the 18th Royal Irish Regiment of Foot besieging the building; on the steps lies a fallen soldier. It is extraordinary that in a great Christian cathedral we should have such a monument, celebrating the violent capture of another religion's sacred shrine during a colonial war. This monument has a companion: next to it is one by the same sculptor, Terence Farrell, which commemorates Royal Irish soldiers who died in the China War of the 1840s. Historian Albert Fenton, in his guide to the cathedral's monuments, writes with admirable honesty that

"It is unfortunate that two of the finest monuments in the cathedral are memorials to the British Empire's most unforgivable wars. Indeed, the China War, also called the Opium war, was one of the most sordid and vicious events in the history of the empire."

Should these monuments be removed? I don't think so. They are of their time, and are salutary reminders of how religion can be used to justify and excuse acts of war. They are controversial, but they should be viewed in their historical context. And they are counterbalanced by another powerful monument which decries the horror and loss of warfare. In 2014 the Tree of Remembrance was unveiled, placed opposite the China and Burma monuments: an 18-foot-high steel tree, blasted and leafless, surrounded by twisted barbed wire, a stark image from World War 1 trenches. It was designed by the cathedral's

education officer Andrew Smith and brilliantly crafted by Bushy Park Ironworks. Smith sees it as a metaphor of hope as much as of destruction:

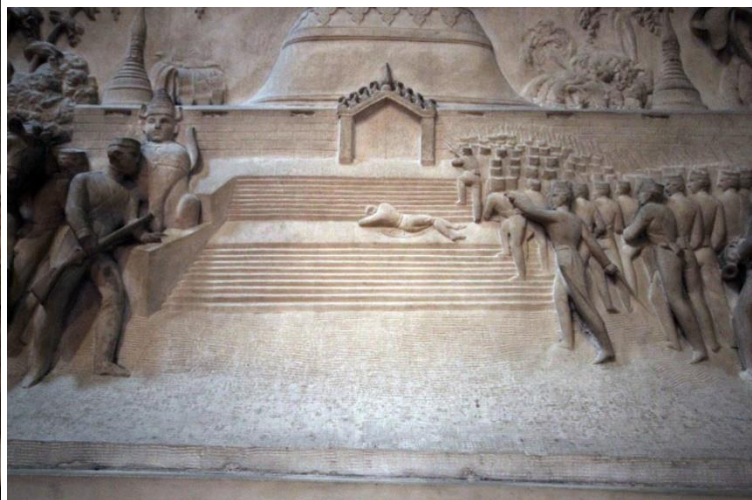
“It is a bit like the poppy which flourished amid the debris of war. The tree has survived war and over the course of the four years, it will bring a message of hope and peace.”

It is interactive: visitors are invited to write messages on leaf-shaped paper remembering people who were close to them, and tie them to the tree. It quickly became festooned with these memorial leaves after its unveiling; it was the centrepiece of the wider ‘Lives Remembered’ exhibition, which looked at the impact of World War 1 on people’s lives, and ran for four years.

Whenever visitors are allowed again into St Patrick’s Cathedral, they will continue to be shocked by memorials like the Burma and China monuments. However, if they look around more, they will see how today the cathedral tries to take a very different view, showing us the tragedy of lives lost, and thus contributing in its way to what President Higgins calls the “journey of ethical remembering”.

¹Higgins, Michael D., ‘Empire shaped Ireland's past. A century after partition, it still shapes our present’, *The Guardian*, 11 February 2021

Roger Bennett, February 2021



Burma monument



China memorial



Tree of Remembrance