

Celebrating momentous events of 1912

THE YEAR of 1912 was a momentous one for Ireland. The Third Home Rule Bill was introduced in Westminster, signalling the realistic prospect of self-government for Ireland for the first time since 1800.

1912 also saw the signing of Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant - and the Declaration for women - by almost half a million people opposed to Home Rule. In 2012 we commemorate the centenary of these milestones. We are afforded the opportunity to reflect on their legacy and the journey that Ireland - North and South - has taken in the intervening century.

The centenary of the introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill and the signing of the Ulster Covenant and Declaration are the first landmarks in a decade of significant centenaries.

In my capacity as Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht I am leading, on behalf of the Government, the preparation of a substantial commemorative programme for the coming decade. This programme will follow the timeline of significant milestones thereafter, culminating with the Government of Ireland Act - establishing the parliament of Northern Ireland in June 1921 - and the coming into force of the Anglo-Irish Treaty on December 6th, 1922, that marked the formal establishment of the Irish Free State.

It is vital that our commemorative programme reflects the complexity of our shared history, North and South. The all-party Oireachtas Consultation Group on Centenary Commemorations and the Expert Advisory Group on Commemorations have been established to ensure that we capture the facts and the essence of all aspects of these events accurately and with due regard to the memory of the men and women involved.

I have been working with partners from east to west and north to south on these islands, and I will continue to do so, taking advantage of the unprecedented age of positive relations that we are currently enjoying. As the Taoiseach stated on a visit to Belfast some months ago, "by working together we can remember and reflect on the turmoil, conflict and tragedy of 100 years ago through the prism of peace and progress in the 21st century".

In the commemoration of conflict and difference, both armed and peaceful, we must acknowledge the differing values and principles that impelled actors and events. We must also acknowledge the domestic and international context in which they occurred. Our commemoration programme must show respect for all traditions, adopt an inclusive approach and facilitate a non-partisan exploration of our shared history and heritage.

It is my hope that, guided by these principles, these centenaries will contribute to enhanced understanding between communities and traditions on this island and further afield. It is also my hope that the challenge of commemoration will yield lessons from the past and divert us from potential mistakes in the future.

A commitment to comprehensive, contextual treatment of the period means a casting aside of preconception and a fresh-eyed read of the events of that decade. Those events must be viewed anew against the background of the Irish cultural, social and economic situation at the time, with recognition of events as they unfolded on the island, within the British empire, in Europe and, of course, during the first World War.

We will commemorate all of those Irishmen and women, North and South, who made the ultimate sacrifice, both at home and in conflict abroad during the first World War. We will also have an opportunity to remember those who struggled to bring about social change in Ireland in the lockouts of 1912 in Wexford and 1913 in Dublin.

The official programme for commemorations will provide a framework that will doubtless be complemented by the initiatives of local authorities, national institutions and associations, churches, community groups and other interested parties.

Commemorating Irish history is not confined to Ireland. From the All-Ireland Peace Park in Messines, Belgium, to Ellis Island, Irish history is written across the globe, and we will reach out anew to the broad community of Irish abroad, and to all of those with an affinity for Ireland and an interest in Irish history.

I would like to conclude by expressing my sincere appreciation for the initiative of The Irish Times in producing its supplement on Home Rule today.

I hope that this will be a valuable resource for anyone wishing to understand the years that shaped modern Ireland, and particularly for students and new communities in Ireland who may be learning of these events for the first time.

The Irish Times has a unique and valuable collection of material and first-hand and eyewitness accounts of the events of 1912 to 1922. I look forward to further instalments in the series of supplements as we continue our commemorations in the decade ahead.

Jimmy Deenihan is Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

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