

# ‘Silent but eloquent reminders’: the nationalist monuments in Cork and Skibbereen<sup>1</sup>

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The latter part of the nineteenth century in Europe witnessed a glorification of national pasts. Heroic histories that emphasised ancient lineages and romanticised historical events were written to legitimise the political aspirations of various nations. However, the built environment came to encapsulate the canon of national memory in a way that was far more accessible to the majority of the population than formal written histories. Commemorative statues served as an idealised celebration of national heroes and of central canonical events in a grand historical narrative whose ultimate purpose was political self-determination.<sup>2</sup> Statues of Marianne became a feature of many French towns; in Germany, Bismarck was often the subject of monuments during this period, and in Ireland, it was the centenary of the 1798 rising that provided the impetus for the erection of national monuments.

The centennial produced thirty monuments in various locations around the country. As Gary Owens has pointed out, this remains the most concentrated outpouring of commemorative statuary that Ireland has ever seen.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I focus on just two memorials, the Maid of Erin, Skibbereen and the National Monument on Grand Parade, Cork.

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, Ireland, like most of the British empire, had many monuments dedicated to monarchs and generals. It was to counter this domination of public space by colonial symbols that nationalists erected statues of Irish patriots. Speaking in November 1898, Sir Thomas Esmonde, the nationalist MP for North Wexford, said:

Our towns are studded with memorials of English Kings, of Lord Lieutenants [but] we have nothing to show. How is Ireland to remain if her

<sup>1</sup> Edward Barry described the monument erected at Skibbereen as a ‘silent but eloquent reminder to future generations of the ideals for which their forefathers yielded up their lives in dungeon, scaffold and battlefield’, *Skibbereen Eagle*, 3 December 1904, p. 2. <sup>2</sup> Nuala C. Johnson, ‘Sculpting Heroic Histories: Celebrating the Centenary of the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland’, *Journal of British Geographers*, 19 (1994), p. 80; John Turpin, ‘Oliver Sheppard’s 1798 Memorials’, *Irish Arts Review*, (1991), p. 71. <sup>3</sup> Gary Owens, ‘Nationalist Monuments in Ireland, c1870–1914: Symbolism and Ritual’ in Brian P. Kennedy and Raymond Gillespie (eds), *Ireland: Art into History* (Dublin, 1984), p. 104.

history is forgotten by Irishmen? What incentive to patriotism are we to give our children if Englishmen and English achievements are alone set up for public recognition and remembrance amongst us?<sup>4</sup>

The centenary of the 1798 rising came at an opportune moment for Irish nationalists. Since the fall of Parnell no charismatic nationalist leader had emerged. The Irish party at Westminster was in disarray and Home Rule seemed more remote than ever. Membership of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) had also dwindled. The 1898 celebrations were to provide an opportunity to reassert Ireland's right to self-determination. Partly as a riposte to the celebrations surrounding Queen Victoria's golden jubilee in 1897, a skeleton committee, led by the old Fenian John O'Leary and composed mainly of IRB members, was established to memorialise the heroes of 1798 and other Irish rebellions. Frederick Allen, secretary of the IRB Supreme Council, remarked that it might result in nothing but 'speechmaking, demonstrations and flag-waving' but hoped 'it might put a little national spirit in the young men here and Lord knows they want it'.<sup>5</sup> Although initiated by hard-line nationalists, constitutionalists quickly swung behind what was to become a national movement. Both groups hoped to gain politically from the centennial: the republicans desired recruits to their cause while constitutional nationalists saw it as a suitable occasion to cement the cracks of discontent and to regain popular allegiance for parliamentary politics. John Turpin and Timothy J. O'Keeffe have suggested that parliamentarians gained control of the '98 committees.<sup>6</sup> However, this does not seem to have been universal; republicans seem to have dominated the monument committees in Cork and Skibbereen.

By the turn of the twentieth century, many nationalists had assumed positions of power in local government and were therefore able to ensure that the '98 monuments were located in the busiest part of towns, so that the ideas they represented received the widest possible exposure. The monuments were often made of local stone and generally carved by Irish stonemasons. One striking feature that differentiates the '98 memorials from the statues raised earlier in the century was the preponderance of symbolic images, derived largely from Young Ireland ballads and Catholic iconography. Pikemen, Celtic crosses and especially figures of Erin were predominant.

Why was this image of Ireland personified as a chaste, young woman so frequently used in these monuments? The female form has traditionally been used to represent concepts such as justice, liberty and the nation. Marina Warner suggests that one of the main reasons for this is because abstract nouns of virtue are feminine

4 *Wexford Independent*, 2 November 1898, p. 3. 5 Frederick Allen to John Devoy, 29 December 1897, quoted in William O'Brien and Desmond Ryan (eds), *Devoy's Postbag 1871-1928* (Dublin, 1967), vol. 2, p. 338. 6 Johnston, 'Sculpting Heroic Histories', p. 33; Turpin, 'Oliver Sheppard's Memorials', p. 72; Timothy J. O'Keeffe, 'The 1898 Efforts to Celebrate the United Irishmen: the '98 Centennial', *Éire-Ireland*, 22 (1988), pp. 51-73.

in gender in most Indo-European languages. Allegorical female figures are often paradoxical in so far as what they personify is usually different to the position they hold in reality. For example, the Virgin Mary is venerated in Catholic culture, while women, for the most part, are prevented from participating except in ancillary roles in that church.<sup>7</sup> Ireland may have been portrayed as 'Dark Rosaleen' longing to be rescued from the 'fetters' of British rule but Irish women were only allowed play a subservient part in the rescue attempt.<sup>8</sup>

The representation of Ireland as a woman has a long history. In pre-Christian Ireland, there were numerous female symbols of sovereignty. In eighteenth-century poetry, the *Aisling* lamented the decline of Gaelic and Catholic power by personifying Ireland as a beautiful woman in Saxon captivity hoping for assistance from the Catholic monarchs of Spain and France. During the Celtic revival of the 1890s, this image was revived by William Butler Yeats, in the persona of Kathleen Ní Houlihan, and others.<sup>9</sup>

There is an other more pragmatic reason why many '98 monuments took the form of virginal maidens. The growth in church building after the Famine meant an increase in stonemasons familiar with sculptural decoration for churches and cemeteries. Significant changes did not have to be made to this type of form to change it from the Virgin Mary to the figures used in these monuments. The fusion of Mary, mother of God, and the representation of Ireland as a woman expressed the popular feeling, despite rhetoric about the unity of class and creed, that Irish identity was intimately bound up with Catholicism.<sup>10</sup>

The style of the monument was, in most cases, dictated by the local organising committee in liaison with the sculptor and within the available budget. Money was raised through collections at church gates and fairs but the '98 committees also relied on the Irish diaspora for funds.<sup>11</sup> The *Skibbereen Eagle* claimed that were it not 'for the financial aid received from America the present handsome monument would never have been erected'.<sup>12</sup> The monument committees around the country devoted considerable time, money (the Cork monument cost over £2,000) and energy towards the 'heavy undertaking' of erecting a memorial, as the Skibbereen committee described the project.<sup>13</sup>

The '98 committees were extremely influential. At a time when Irish history was rarely taught in schools, the 1798 centenary movement provided nationalists with the ideal opportunity to give their version of Irish history. It was not only the 1798 heroes who were honoured during the centenary; national heroes like Robert Emmet and the Fenians were also celebrated. It was hoped that an increased

7 Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: the Allegory of the Female Form* (London, 1985), pp. xi-xx. 8 Sinead McCooile, *Guns and Chiffon- Women Revolutionaries 1916-23* (Dublin, 1997). 9 Johnston, 'Sculpting Heroic Histories', p. 33. 10 Judith Hill, *Irish Public Sculpture* (Dublin, 1997), p. 130. 11 Johnson, 'Sculpting Heroic Histories', p. 33; *Skibbereen Eagle*, 1 October 1904, supplement p.1. 12 *Skibbereen Eagle*, 13 July 1901, p. 3. 13 *Cork Examiner*, 19 March 1906, p. 7; *Skibbereen Eagle*, 13 July 1901, p. 2.

awareness of Ireland's struggle for independence would lead to a renewed patriotism among the Irish people. The press, as a conduit of information, was crucial to this process of constructing a collective past. Local nationalist papers provide extensive coverage of the meetings leading up to the unveiling ceremonies at Skibbereen and Cork, as well as the occasions themselves. The *Freeman's Journal*, the *New York Herald* and the unionist *Cork Constitution* also reported on the unveilings.

## II

Many local committees had not enough money collected in 1898 to erect a monument. Therefore, it was not until 1904 that the 'Maid of Erin' was unveiled in Skibbereen. She is depicted as a young, graceful woman carrying shamrock and leaning on a Celtic cross, and with her eyes fixed on a distant goal. As many Celtic revival emblems as possible were included on the monument. Each side of the plinth commemorates one of the 1798, 1803, 1848 and 1867 risings. The celebration of all four rebellions on the monument is an effort to create a seamless history of a militant tradition. Irish is used on two of the panels, indicating the increasing politicisation of the language at that time. The inscription on the east side (1848 panel) is noteworthy:

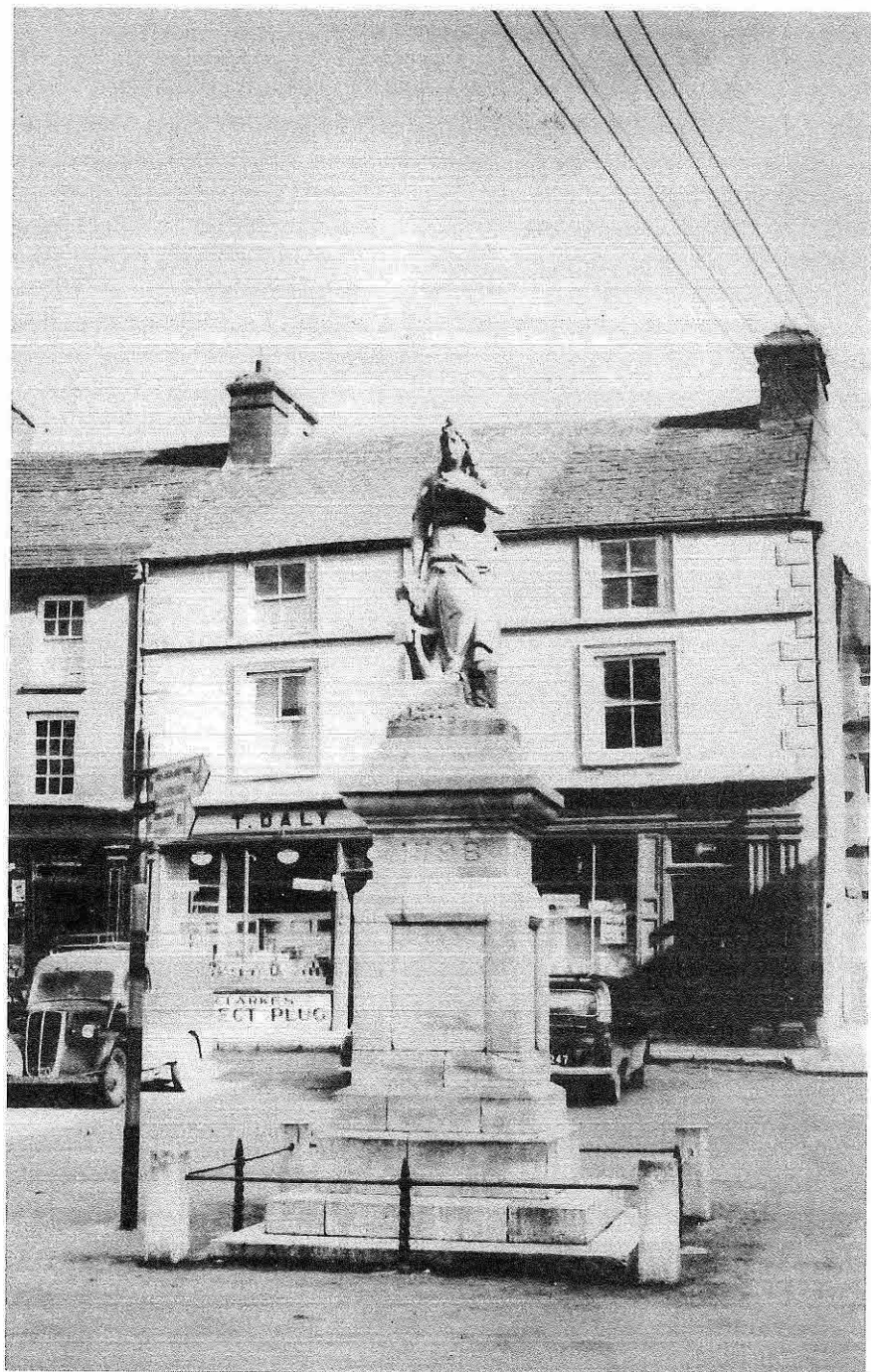
Start not, Irish-born man,  
If you're to Ireland true,  
We heed not race nor creed nor clan  
We've got hands and hearts for you.<sup>14</sup>

This pluralistic gesture seems somewhat anachronistic underneath what looks like a cemetery effigy of the Virgin Mary!

On 27 November 1904, thousands descended on Skibbereen for the dedication ceremony, which coincided with the anniversary of the Manchester Martyrs, an important national festival at the time. The Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa returned to his native area from the USA to unveil the monument. His presence at the ceremony provided a living link with the 1867 rebellion and, by implication, with the risings of 1848, 1803 and 1798. He declared his unswerving allegiance to his principles of the past: 'Men of action are wanted not men of words if the unconquered heirs of the murdered and plundered owners of Ireland are to gain their inheritance . . . The blood of martyrs cried out for vengeance and on united Irishmen and national principles depend Ireland's salvation from foreign oppression.'<sup>15</sup>

John Roynayne, secretary of the Young Ireland Society in Cork, continued the

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Davis, quoted in *Skibbereen Eagle*, 27 July 1901, p. 2. <sup>15</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 28 November 1904, p. 2.



Maid of Erin, Skibbereen, Co. Cork, courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

rhetoric of violent resistance. The Young Ireland Society, which was responsible for the erection of the monument, was basically a front organisation for the IRB. Roynayne appealed to those present to pledge themselves to the principles of '98 and '67 and not to put their entire faith in constitutional agitation. He urged them to rally around the Skibbereen Young Ireland Society which, he maintained, represented the true gospel of Irish nationality.<sup>16</sup> The next speaker was Edward Barry, MP, who claimed it was courageous of him, as a representative of constitutional nationalism, to follow Roynayne's speech, but added that he 'represented constitutionalism for the moment only'.<sup>17</sup> Barry acknowledged the sacrifices that had been made by the men of 1798 and 1867 and said that had he been old enough in 1860s he would have been by Rossa's side. Perhaps it was just rhetoric but it was very different in tone to speeches made by parliamentarians at similar ceremonies in Wexford which will be discussed later. The speeches at Skibbereen went on for over three hours. The general sentiments expressed were best encapsulated by the chairman of the Skibbereen Urban District Council, John Burke, who said:

What is the meaning of this monument? And what is the meaning of this meeting? Is it not that we will be never content to live in an English province? (Hear, hear.) Is it not that you will carry on the good fight which these men carried on? (Hear, hear.) Is it not that you will never retire from the contest until, in the words of Grattan, you "breathe the air of liberty in your own land". We have raised this monument to the chivalrous dead. Shall we forget the living while we commemorate the dead?<sup>18</sup>

No Catholic priest was publicly involved in the Skibbereen celebrations, probably because the presence of extreme nationalists was too flagrant. This is in stark contrast to the Enniscorthy ceremony, where six priests were present on the official platform, a reflection of the domination of the monument committee there by clerics and constitutional nationalists.<sup>19</sup>

### III

The location of the national monument on Grand Parade, Cork provides an interesting example of 'symbolic decolonisation'. A statue of King George II astride his horse once stood on Grand Parade but the only trace of it that remains is the Irish name for the street – Sráid na Cappall Búí [Yellow Horse Street].<sup>20</sup> By colonising a public space where a British monarch was once memorialised, those responsible for the national monument increased its political significance. Like the other

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17; *Skibbereen Eagle*, 3 December 1904, p. 2. <sup>17</sup> *Skibbereen Eagle*, 3 December 1904, p. 2. <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3. <sup>19</sup> *Enniscorthy Guardian*, 6 July 1908, p. 4. <sup>20</sup> Johnson, 'Sculpting Heroic Histories', p. 79; Peter Woodman, "'Who Possesses Tara?': Politics in Archaeology in Ireland" in Peter J. Ucko (ed.), *Theory in Archaeology – a World Perspective* (London, 1995), p. 282.





The National Monument, Grand Parade, Cork, courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

'98 monuments, it was another manifestation of the growing confidence of Irish nationalism.

At forty-eight feet high, the monument (which has been restored recently to mark the bicentenary of the 1798 rising) is physically impressive. The style is Irish Gothic. That it looks like a mini Cathedral, replete with a spire on top, may be seen as a reflection of the parallel faiths of Catholicism and nationalism of the majority of Irish people at the time. Its style is similar to Holy Trinity Church on Fr Mathew Quay, both of which were designed by a local engineer, Dominic Coakley. On each of the four sides is a panel listing some of those involved in the 1798, 1803, 1848 and 1867 Risings. Flanking each facade are pedestals on which figures of Theobald Wolfe Tone, Michael Dwyer, Thomas Davis (the inclusion of Davis on the monument was highly appropriate, given his views on literature and art being used to serve the cause of nationalism, together with the fact that many of the symbols used on the memorial were popularised by the *Nation*) and Peter O'Neill Crowley (a local Fenian hero) stand protecting the central figure of Erin. She is like the Skibbereen figure – they were both made by the same craftsman, John Davis. Clad in a high-waisted robe and a cloak fastened with a Celtic brooch she supports herself on a Celtic cross and harp. Unlike similar figures elsewhere, for example, Marianne or Liberty in France, she does not wear a cap of Liberty but a coronet. According to Fr Patrick Kavanagh, OFM, who unveiled the monument, the patriots commemorated on the monument gave all to 'replace the crown of nationhood on the discrowned Queen'.<sup>21</sup> His *Popular History of the 1798 Insurrection* was first published in 1870 and influenced the way the rising was represented during the centenary celebrations. In his history, Kavanagh interprets the rising as a spontaneous revolt in which priest and peasant united to defend faith and fatherland against an anti-Catholic oppressor. This portrayal is literally set in stone and bronze in the Enniscorthy monument, where his great-granduncle, Fr John Murphy of Boolavogue, points the way for the young insurgent.

Like Skibbereen, the erection of the Cork monument was mainly due to the Fenian-dominated Young Ireland Society. The Cork '98 Centenary Association laid the foundation stone of the monument in Grand Parade in 1898. The Association was an unhappy coalition of republicans, Parnelites and anti-Parnelites, an alignment that disintegrated before the turn of the century. The project was taken over by the Young Ireland Society, an organisation which the authorities saw as worth monitoring.<sup>22</sup> The Young Ireland Society's emphasis on the physical force tradition can be seen by the dedication on the 1798 panel:

<sup>21</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 19 March 1906, p. 2; Ken Inglis, 'Father Mathew's Statue: the Making of a Monument in Cork' in Oliver MacDonagh and W. F. Mandle (eds), *Ireland and Irish Australia: Studies in Cultural and Political History* (London, 1986) pp. 133-4. <sup>22</sup> National Archives of Ireland, CBSR, 17 582/s, 1898; *Skibbereen Eagle*, 27 July 1901, p. 2; *Freeman's Journal*, 19 March 1906, p. 8; *Cork Examiner*, 19 November 1906, p. 2.



Erected through the efforts of the Young Ireland Society to perpetuate the memory of the gallant men of 1798 1803 48 and 67 who fought and died in the wars of Ireland to recover her sovereign independence and to inspire the youth of our country to follow in their patriotic footsteps and imitate their heroic example and righteous men will make our land A NATION ONCE AGAIN.

The unveiling on St Patrick's Day 1906 was an elaborate affair. According to the *Cork Examiner*, 'never before were there so many people in the southern capital'.<sup>23</sup> Special trains from all over Munster carried people to see what was a spectacular political rally. Gary Owens has observed that as the IRB had experience in staging memorial services such as the Terrence Bellew MacManus funeral, they reverted instinctively to familiar funerary symbolism and ritual when they erected monuments.<sup>24</sup> There was a huge procession, reminiscent of a funeral cortege, through the streets of Cork, made up of forty-two different marching groups, including various bands, trade associations, temperance societies, the Gaelic League, the Gaelic Athletic Association, the students of the Christian Brothers and the surviving members of the 1867 movement.

The Young Ireland Society invited Fr Patrick Kavanagh to unveil the monument. For him it was not just a nostalgic commemoration of the past, as he said:

This monument owes its inception and completion to a society known in this city and elsewhere as the Young Ireland Society, a society for extreme nationalists and not ashamed to be what that name signifies – that is to go to whatever lengths necessary not forbidden by the divine law-giver to win back the laws of our country. They are not mere dreamers with thoughts that dwell only in the past. They are fully alive to the requirements of the present and the hopes of the future.<sup>25</sup>

Because of an ancestor's involvement in the 1798 rising and his own writings on the period, Fr Kavanagh was invited to many unveilings of '98 monuments. His speeches elsewhere were not as inflammatory as the one he delivered in Cork. He did not suggest that he was supportive of armed resistance at either the Enniscorthy or Wexford ceremonies.<sup>26</sup> Following Fr Kavanagh, the *Cork Constitution* reported, 'speeches eulogistic of Fenian leaders were delivered by Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, C.G. Doran and prominent spirits in the more advanced sections of Nationalists'.<sup>27</sup> A Capuchin priest, Fr Thomas, gave the keynote oration. He recited a poem, 'Erin's Flag', which extolled the virtues of blood sacrifice. The poem, which was written by an Irish-American priest, reflected the tone of the proceedings:

<sup>23</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 19 March 1906, p. 3. <sup>24</sup> Gary Owens, 'Nationalist Monuments', p. 114.  
<sup>25</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 19 March 1906, p. 2. <sup>26</sup> *Wexford People*, 7 July 1908, p. 4. <sup>27</sup> *Cork Constitution*, 19 March 1906, p. 8.

Erin's dark night is waning, her day-dawn is nigh,  
 Lift it up! Lift it up! the old banner of green,  
 The blood of its sons has but brightened its sheen,  
 What though the tyrant has trampled it down,  
 Are its folds not emblazoned with deeds of renown,  
 What though of ages it drops in the dust,  
 Shall it droop thus forever! No, No, God is just (cheers).<sup>28</sup>

Nationalist MPs were conspicuous by their absence at the unveiling ceremony in Cork. This contrasts with the commemorations in Wexford where parliamentarians were solidly behind the 1798 celebrations and made sure their support was publicly acknowledged. Both William Redmond, MP (brother of the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party) and Sir Thomas Esmonde, MP, were present at the unveiling of Oliver Sheppard's monument at Enniscorthy. In his speech, Redmond was careful not to advocate insurrection, adding that the most important lesson to be learned from the United Irishmen was that of union and brotherhood. Redmond acknowledged that nationalists might differ as to the best means of achieving their aim but warned of the dangers of disunity, which, he said, might jeopardise all chances of political self-determination.<sup>29</sup>

The Latin root of the word monument is to remind and the memorials in Cork and Skibbereen sought to remind passers-by both of past heroes and of what remained to be done to further the national cause. Fenian sympathisers dominated the committees at Cork and Skibbereen, in contrast to '98 committees elsewhere, and the monuments and the dedication ceremonies there celebrated armed resistance. While the '98 monuments may have been artistically limited, they played an essential role in the self-representation of the Irish nation. Arthur Griffith's newspaper *Sinn Féin* saw the erection of these monuments as a waste of resources and as a distraction from the goal of achieving independence.<sup>30</sup> However, the '98 commemorative movement did serve its intended nationalist purpose, inspiring Bulmer Hobson, among others, to become involved in the separatist movement. The movement helped to unite the Irish party and IRB membership also increased. The '98 monuments and the rituals that accompanied them were an important part of the liturgy of nation building.<sup>31</sup>

Then, as now, few seemed to fear to speak of '98. As Fintan O'Toole has observed, 'everything we say about the past, we say in the present and the present is full of its own meanings'.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, public memorials often say more about the politics of the time of commemoration than of the events or people commemorated. The '98 monuments may be seen as an expression of the nationalist

28 J.F. Concannon, "'Erin's Flag" and Cork's National Monument', *Cork Holly Bough*, July 1981, p. 7. 29 *Enniscorthy Guardian*, 6 July 1908 p. 4. 30 *Sinn Féin*, 8 December 1906, p. 1. 31 Gary Owens, 'Nationalist Monuments', p. 117. 32 Fintan O'Toole, *Black Hole Green Card: the Disappearance of Ireland* (Dublin, 1994), p. 89.

imagination and values of the time. They reflect an Ireland growing in political confidence, yet unsure as to which path to take to political self-determination. They show a simultaneous belief in the Irish race as essentially Catholic and in the religiously inclusive Irish nation. The monuments may have looked similar to Catholic madonnas but they were accompanied by pluralistic gestures, like the inclusion of Tone and Davis. These monuments act as fascinating barometers of the cultural and political climate at the turn of the twentieth century. We can only speculate on the ways historians in the future will analyse the legacy of the bicentenary of the 1798 rising.