

# ■ Regional museums in Ireland – Division and Diversity\*

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## Résumé

**Le cadre de vie de l'auteur, élevé dans des conditions très particulières en Irlande, illustre l'idée que l'histoire est un processus continu et que les musées doivent ignorer les divisions entre le passé et le présent. L'auteur affirme que la tâche spécifique des musées régionaux est de permettre aux habitants de se situer en un temps et un lieu où ils peuvent se reconnaître. Il s'agit de comprendre quelles forces sont intervenues à l'échelle humaine, et comment elles peuvent être comprises de façon plus personnelle. L'auteur explique brièvement l'origine de la différence culturelle et politique entre les Irlandais, qui a mené à la violence et la tragédie. Le travail du Down County Museum, terrain d'entente où tous les aspects de l'histoire et de la culture peuvent être explorés sans peur par tous ceux que cela concerne, illustre le rôle des musées régionaux au cœur de cette situation. L'article conclut en affirmant que les musées régionaux devraient être des institutions politiques. Il leur faut exploiter la variété et la complexité sans avoir peur de dire ce qui est, même si cela n'est pas plaisant. Cela vaut d'être prudent à l'égard du tourisme, parce que la tâche ne consiste pas à faire toujours plaisir à tous. Le devoir principal des musées régionaux est de présenter une communauté à elle-même.**

**M**y father was an Irish Protestant preacher. And in his tradition and conviction, and my own, I begin with a text from the Bible. The book of Job, chapter 8, verses 8 to 10:

*Inquire now of older generations  
and consider the experience of their  
fathers; for we ourselves are of  
yesterday and are transient; our days  
on earth are a shadow.  
Will they not speak to you  
and teach you and pour out the  
wisdom of their hearts?*

The last sentence is a rhetorical question which we might contemplate. Will the older generations speak to us, and will we learn from their experience? Sometimes we do, and sometimes we do not. Most often perhaps, in modern society as the speed of change increases, like teenagers preoccupied with our immediate selves, we forget to ask if those who went before us had any experience at all. And if they had, we see it as past and gone and nothing to do with us, of interest only to show how detached we are from our parents.

Of course we learn that this is wrong, or some of us do. Those who work in regional museums and study history are observing the unchanging nature of humanity in the face of different challenges. We know that human beings did, and do, need food and shelter, they want love and security, and assurance in the face of death. If they have the chance they may adventure, and they will certainly use power of various kinds to get what they want. Our responsibility is to deny one particular division. There is one division which does not exist in any society. That is the division between the past and the present. It may be, as somebody said, that *the past is a foreign country*. But if it is, it is the country from which we have

come. It is our responsibility to show that the past has made the present, and so, in the present, we will influence the future. We need not be trapped by our past. We need to review it, to learn from it, and to go on. It is surprising how many museums ignore their duty to show how the past and the present are connected. We enter this type of museum from the real world and we see objects presented as curiosities without any explanation of the historical processes they represent, and we return to the real world with a sense of detachment from the past, rather than a connection to it. Such museums are actually doing the opposite of what is required.

I come from Ireland and have been born and raised on the westernmost fringe of Europe. So far west that we used to say that the next parish was in New York or Boston, rather than thinking of any connection with Europe. And indeed in my country childhood in the west of Ireland I knew people who had returned home after being domestic servants in Boston and garage mechanics in New York, or from racing horses in Virginia, and riding on cattle drives from Texas. I met missionaries who worked in Africa, South America, India, China, and Japan. But nobody had been to Germany or Spain, and certainly not to Austria or Slovenia. As I am a stranger in Middle Europe, I hesitate to say anything about divisions in other people's societies. We have divisions in Ireland which sometimes reach the news headlines of the world, which are expressed in a political border across our island and, more immediately, have spread injury, death, and tragedy, throughout our small community. But we must approach, for example, the Balkan region with humility and a realization that the forces of history can whip up storms which it is insulting to explain in simple terms. And although we are confident about

the work of museums, we must also recognise their limitations. They are only able to function where there is some possibility of relaxed dialogue. In a war they can only hope to survive, like everybody else. It seems clear that, for instance, in the middle of the massacres in Rwanda, and many other places, museums were rather beside the immediate point. And so while we might make large claims for regional museums we must do so with humility. We have just one task among many. Here are conclusions which may seem insensitive or unrealistic in one's world.

But there is another sense in which we are not strangers to each other, and in which we talk a common language. We are all concerned with the task of regional museums. It is to enable people to put themselves in a time and place they can understand. To understand the forces which have affected their own lives on a human scale, and which can be understood in a personal way. These forces can be historical or environmental or spiritual, good, bad, or unreasonable. But to put ourselves securely in our own context we need to be able to see the marks of what has gone before. For a simple illustration of this we need only look at what happens to people who are placed in large complexes of houses or apartments designed without regard for the historical continuity of either the people or the environment. The evolution of a community in these circumstances can be very difficult, and social problems multiply. So it is for society as a whole. A society which does not know its history is like a person with no memory. And memory is for using to live, like sight and touch and feeling. It is amazing to see that so many privileged people do not use their gifts. Helen Keller, who was blind and deaf, wrote:

*I have walked with people whose eyes are full of light, but who see nothing in wood, sea or sky, nothing in the city streets, nothing in books. What a witless masquerade is this seeing! It were better far to sail for ever in the night of blindness, with sense and feeling and mind, than to be thus content with the mere act of seeing. They have the sunset, the morning skies, the purple of the distant hills, yet their souls voyage through this enchanted world with a barren stare.*

Museums should encourage both memory and observation. And if an essential task of museums in our world is to help people to come to terms with their own places, that surely puts regional museums, above all others, in a leading position, with great responsibilities. Regional museums, which are probably the most widespread type of museum in the world, do not always realize how important they can be. Their

job is not to show the past as a curiosity, which many do, but to acknowledge, celebrate, or condemn it as the only explanation they have for the present. In Ireland, our past has led to repeated violence between us and our neighbours in Great Britain, and between people in Ireland who attached themselves to manifestations of what they believe to be either "Irish" or "British" identity. Other factors are used as marks to separate one group, "our side", from another group, "the other side". These marks can be taken from religion, or music, or language, or many other social and cultural signs. And they serve to create division and suspicion. And this is no mere academic disagreement; it results in scarred, ruined, despairing, dead people. And, even then, the most deep rooted division is not in the open, but lies in human minds and hearts. And what regional museums must do is explain why this all came about. Problems discussed on a large scale become anonymous, and hard to relate to personal situations. But if we can show how our own town or district came to be the way it is, then we have a better chance of understanding why we might differ from our neighbours, and also how similar we might be.

One other thing must be made clear about the work of regional museums in understanding their own places. We must not give the impression that we are sealed away in boxes, separate from our neighbours. There are bridges across the divisions, for example, between us and other countries. And just as a person locates him or her self by reference to what is around about, so a community is located by its relationship to other communities. Everywhere has international links of some kind, and we need to refer to them if we are to see a full picture.

The example of Down County Museum could illustrate these ideas. First of all, Down is one of the six north eastern counties of Ireland which form the state of Northern Ireland, which is ruled from London. The other twenty-six counties make up the Republic of Ireland which has its government in Dublin. This political situation is less than eighty years old. Before 1920, Ireland was one country which had existed under various phases of British domination since it was invaded from Britain in the twelfth century. In the intervening centuries many people came to Ireland from Britain. The Protestant Reformation did not convert Ireland and most of the Irish remained Roman Catholic in religion. But after the Reformation, the Protestants of Ireland, about a quarter of the population, were regarded, and often regarded themselves, as representatives of the British interest in Ireland. Most



*Regional museums can relate to other regions as well as their towns. Here the Groupe Folklorique de l'Assemblée du Vieux Lisieux from Normandy perform at Down County Museum.*

of the Protestants were in the north of Ireland and so, when the rest of the country became independent in the 1920s, the area where British feeling was in the majority remained as part of the United Kingdom. But the division remained within Northern Ireland, and within County Down. And this division is not merely theoretical or casual, but has harshly touched almost everyone in our society. When my elder daughter was six, her teacher's husband was shot dead in the street. When my secretary was nineteen, her family was dispersed when their home was destroyed by some neighbours. Six weeks ago, my wife and younger daughter were showered by glass and debris from an explosion which could easily have killed them. Over 3000 people have been killed in politically related violence in Northern Ireland in the last twenty-five years.

Any regional museum, wherever it is, will know that its situation is not as simple as it seems at first sight. In County Down, most people lead normal peaceful lives. Not all Roman Catholics feel Irish, not all Protestants feel British. Those who do feel British have, in fact, been shaped by their environment and are as recognisably Irish as anybody else on the island. Those who feel Irish speak the English language and generally have very limited knowledge of Irish history and culture. The political division between Irish and British has encouraged people to regard themselves as divided into two groups. The attitude of the Catholic Church in claiming the children of families where one parent is not a Catholic has encouraged a very low level of intermarriage. An Irish journalist reporting from Sarajevo said that intermarriage between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims reached 50% in some places. In large areas of northern Ireland intermarriage between Roman Catholics and

Protestants is non-existent, or very low indeed. Must we, in Ireland, or anywhere else, accept a division into only two parts – a recipe for confrontation? Of course not. We have old and young, men and women, rich and poor, town and country, mountain and coast, art and science, stupid and clever, saints and sinners.

It is the particular privilege of regional museums to explore the variety and complexity of their own communities, and their relationship to their particular environment, and to challenge all simplistic notions which reduce people to categories in which they have no choice. Following that basic philosophical contention, a regional museum should be a political institution. We must always contemplate alternative visions. We may not take party political sides but if we say what we should know, then we must not be afraid to promote the moral and civic guidance which results.

The example of Cozumel in Mexico, where the ICOM International Committee for Regional Museums held its 1993 conference, is a case in point. Cozumel is a coral island with a natural covering of tropical forest which supports its own varied ecosystem. Cozumel is on the main route of Caribbean tourism, with sun and sand and cruise ships and pressure for hotels which will bring jobs. But if more hotels drill for the ground water of the island to supply their bathrooms, then the delicate water table will be destroyed, and so will Cozumel and its environment. Cozumel Museum has mounted exhibitions which tell everybody that fact. This may not seem to be very controversial to us here and now, but it is in Cozumel, and it provides an example of a museum coming down clearly on one side of a political debate, despite the pressure to behave like a museum and be irrelevant.

# ■ Qualité, objectivité et intégrité de l'interprétation de l'histoire dans les musées

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Museums need to help people to remember things of importance, which made us the way we are. And these are not always simple, or cheerful, or uplifting. And this is where we need to maintain a healthy suspicion of tourism, with which we may otherwise be properly linked. Tourism has a tendency to want warmth and happiness, to recall times that were simple and unworried. Some tourism, in my experience, may wish to falsify or be too simple about the past. That cannot be consistent with the purpose of a museum which wants to show how its region really came to be. An important person in Irish tourism once said that the purpose of our museums was to show the best of Ireland, and to make our visitors feel happy. He was answered by the director of the Kilmainham Gaol Museum in Dublin, a prison in which generations of the criminal, the poor, the sick, and the politically rebellious were imprisoned and executed. *In this case, said its director, if happiness was the predominant feeling of a visitor leaving the museum it would have failed in its purpose. We do indeed want to show the best of Ireland, and we do hope our visitors will be enriched by the experience. But we do not want to insult either their emotions or their intelligence.* So there is a possible division between museums and tourism of which we need to be aware. It is possible to be popular by always giving a message which people will warm to, but it is not possible to be truthful.

This theme of museums in divided societies, influenced by a particular space and time, has been treated with a fairly narrow focus. There are many more divisions than those to which I have referred. Some of them reflect man's inhumanity to man. Others simply celebrate our varied humanity. Understanding does not always bring agreement, nor should it. Agreement is not our aim, but informed respect. The effects of division are often cruel and tragic, but if we can turn this round and see the enrichment which we may get from different views we may be of some small help to the world. It is the first job of a regional museum to introduce a community to itself. In doing so, we will reveal many differences. But we learn from difference, from contrast and comparison. And we sometimes find that we love those from whom we differ much. ■

\* This article is based on a talk first given at the Museum für Volkskultur in Schloss Porcia, Spittal-an-der-Drau, Carinthia, Austria, during the 1994 ICR Conference, held in Austria and Slovenia on the subject of *Museums in divided societies*. It has previously been published in the Proceedings of that conference. (Ljubljana 1995).

## Summary

**We must not be complacent about the demand for objectivity in exhibitions, as expressed in ICOM's Code of Professional Ethics. Exhibitions are interpretations of historic situations as well as of historical facts. When this is examined closely many obstacles to objectivity become evident. In this article we discuss the hindrances, with examples. Initial barriers involve the different backgrounds and associations of the exhibition designers. These can only represent an interpretation of the current level of discussion and research, but this cannot be absolute truth. An important obstacle is the obvious effect of time and society on the survival of material objects. Poor people, or those who belong to small fringe groups, usually leave comparatively little behind. Much more survives from the assets of the rich, and therefore this can easily give a bias to our knowledge and understanding, and so to the objectivity of exhibitions. And because fringe groups are normally interpreted by people who do not belong to the groups, the view from outside should also be carefully analysed. We also have to remember the problems inherent in different levels of education and experience of life. Children nowadays have only a slight concept of the circumstances of their grandparents. As a result they can have difficulties in grasping the essential point of an exhibition, which an older person might find obvious. An example of this might be the factors surrounding an exhibition on the radical change in agriculture due to mechanisation, where three days' hard work in the fields may have been replaced by two hours of work which has little physical strain. Lastly, if we are true to the overriding significance of the object, we must realize that for some people, the same object can awaken quite different associations, among designers as well as visitors. Resultant different interpretations should make us ponder the possibility of complete objectivity.**

Le § 2.8 du Code de déontologie professionnelle de l'ICOM engage les musées à s'efforcer de s'assurer que les informations données dans les présentations et les expositions sont honnêtes et objectives et qu'elles ne perpétuent pas de mythes ou de stéréotypes. À première vue, cet article semble simplement faire état d'une notion qui va de soi, de quelque chose de tout-à-fait naturel, si bien qu'on est facilement tenté de ne pas lui prêter une grande attention. Dans le quotidien, toutefois, ce n'est pas toujours aussi naturel que cela. Pas davantage que l'histoire, les musées ne peuvent prétendre, par le biais de leurs expositions, à une objectivité absolue. Dans un cas comme dans l'autre, seule une partie des contextes d'origine a été transmise, si bien que les objets et les événements requièrent une interprétation. Alors que l'histoire a conscience de sa subjectivité, en muséologie, l'approche d'un examen autocritique n'a commencé à transparaître que depuis très peu de temps<sup>1</sup>.

Les objets présentés dans une exposition racontent souvent une toute autre histoire que les sources écrites. Alors que l'interprétation de l'histoire est le produit d'une réflexion rationnelle, bien que subjective et parfois issue de sources au caractère tendancieux, les objets reflètent plutôt les conditions générales du quotidien, comme les objets d'usage courant, ou représentent des sublimations religieuses ou idéologiques, comme les tableaux dans le domaine de la

peinture. Il est donc extrêmement difficile de représenter l'histoire dans les musées. Des événements historiques importants, tels que la Révolution française, qui ont sans nul doute entraîné un changement radical dans la vie de toute une époque, peuvent être évoqués à l'aide d'objets, mais de façon très morcelée, et des événements comme le tremblement de terre de Ljubljana, d'influence décisive sur le destin des habitants de cette ville, ne peuvent être représentés que sous forme d'extraits. Pour améliorer la compréhension, on ne pourra se passer du "bâti d'idées", à savoir des textes explicatifs.

L'arrière-plan idéologique et religieux rend encore plus difficile la compréhension d'une exposition illustrant un thème historique. Citons en exemple la Guerre des paysans. En Allemagne, avant la réunification, chacun des deux États allemands avait donné une interprétation différente de cette révolte qui eut lieu au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Pour l'Allemagne de l'Ouest, la Guerre des paysans correspondait à une volonté de rétablir la situation antérieure, cette approche étant une conséquence d'une part, des prédications de la Réformation de Luther, et d'autre part, de la combinaison fortuite entre de mauvaises récoltes et d'impôts lourds exigés surtout des paysans. En Allemagne de l'Est, par contre, ces événements étaient vus comme une grande action révolutionnaire des couches sociales inférieures. Après le démantèlement du bloc de l'Est, on s'est