PLATforMS OF RECONCILIATION? ISSUES IN THE MANAGEMENT OF BATTLEFIELD HERITAGE IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

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ABSTRACT

Although the battlefields of the Boyne (1690) and Aughrim (1691) are situated in the Republic of Ireland they are revered iconic landscapes embodying the religious and cultural identity of the Orange Order and Unionists in Northern Ireland. This paper looks at how these battlefields have been appropriated by some, or actively ignored by others, to reflect a cultural and religious identity and, how they have come to be ever more relevant in a modern political environment with the efforts of reconciliation between the north and south of Ireland.

Introduction

Battlefields have long been part of the tourist trail, regarded as relics of a stormy past where battles are often magnificently re-enacted for a public who marvel at the carefully orchestrated cavalry charges or the heaving ranks in the pike push. The crowd enjoys the spectacle removed from the violence, not a drop of blood spilt to spoil the day. However without the prospect of a re-enactment display or warm interpretive centre visitors often leave the battlefield disappointed at the lack of anticipated ambience. It’s just a field, isn’t it? For many in Britain this is the case, with the battlefield landscape holding little or no meaning and the aggressive origin of the conflict long forgotten. However, there exists a small number of battlefields in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland which still possess the power to induce strong political feeling. They have not become relics of a turbulent past but remain politically relevant and potentially volatile.

The Battles of the Boyne, Co Meath (1690) and Aughrim, Co Galway, (1691) are battlefields that have come to be revered as iconic landscapes emblematic of a select cultural and religious identity. The landscape and legacy of these battlefields is a fundamental element of the Orange Order tradition, with imagery of the battles featuring extensively on parade banners, painted murals and in marching songs. The 12th of July, the date of the Williamite victories at both the Boyne and Aughrim, has become a public holiday in Northern Ireland, and is commemorated extensively with a series of parades, bonfires and festive gatherings. However, the same sentiment is not shared by the majority of those living in the Republic of Ireland, the actual guardian

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of these battlefield landscapes. This paper will discuss the conflicting experiences and relationship the people of Ireland have with their battlefield heritage and why these landscapes have been either appropriated or actively ignored in the formation of a cultural, religious or political identity. Firstly it will explore the formation of the Orange Order and the appropriation and use of imagery of the battlefield landscapes of the Boyne and Aughrim to establish a legitimate link to the past in the formation of an identity. It will also consider the development of national identity within the Republic of Ireland, which has been heavily influenced by a perceived Celtic ancestry, and one that encourages at some level the rejection of a past associated with ‘English’ or ‘Protestant’ oppression.

Recently the battlefield of the Boyne fell under the spotlight of the world media as it was chosen as the place to publicly display the growing political friendship between the North and South after the formation of the first Northern Ireland assembly since its suspension in 2002. On the very site which has come to embody so much conflict in Ireland the first official meeting of Democratic Unionist Party leader, Ian Paisley, and the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, was staged on 11 May 2007. Crucially, this paper will assess the use of battlefield landscapes in modern politics in Ireland and what possible affect or influence this may have on the management of these battlefields as nationally and internationally important heritage landscapes. It is intended that this paper will stimulate much needed debate about issues raised and open up a subject which for many years been deeply buried to avoid provocation or upset in what many would still consider to be a delicate political environment. It is necessary before these issues can be addressed to provide a brief background of the Orange Order and the formation of national identity in the Republic of Ireland.

Orangeism and Celtic Identity in Ireland

Anyone witnessing for the first time an Orange Parade during the marching season in Belfast, would be instinctively impressed by the scale of the event. The forceful rhythm of the Lambeg drum and the steady ranks of flutes, sashes and bowler hats portray an image of self-assuredness in an unpredictable environment; it is an image of a constant and unchanging force and one that is steeped in history and tradition. Orangeism is not restricted to the towns and cities of Northern Ireland; it spread to other cities across Britain with the movement of migrant workers to the industrial centres of Glasgow and Liverpool from the 19th century, as well as further a field to Canada and Australia where many lodges still thrive (Marshall 1996: 11). Ritual and