



## Casting a cold eye on 1916 (and 1966)

Published in [Issue 1 \(January/February 2016\)](#), [Letters](#), [Volume 24](#)

Sir,—Dennis Kennedy, in casting a cold eye (HI 23.5, Sept./Oct. 2015, Platform, pp 10–11) on celebrating the centennial of 1916, asks: ‘But how does a country, or a government, celebrate 1916 without glorifying bloodshed?’ There is always a fear that, in the very act of honouring the courage and self-sacrificing determination of a people who fight to throw off the yoke of their oppressor, we wind up celebrating and promoting guns and gunpowder as laudable means to resolve human conflict.

SWilliam James of Harvard addressed this same issue of how to honour ‘the men who do brave deeds’ in his oration on the Boston Common on 31 May 1897 at the dedication of the monument commemorating Col. Robert Gould Shaw, who, aged 25, led the first all-black regiment in our Civil War. Standing before the bronze relief, which had been created by Irish-born sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, James said:

‘War has been much praised and celebrated among us of late as a school of manly virtue; but it is easy to exaggerate upon this point. Ages ago, war was the gory cradle of mankind, the grim-featured nurse that alone could train our savage progenitors into some semblance of social virtue, teach them to be faithful one to another, and force them to sink their selfishness in wider tribal ends. War still excels in this prerogative; and whether it be paid in years of service, in treasure, or in life-blood, the war tax is still the only tax that men ungrudgingly will pay. How could it be otherwise, when the survivors of one successful massacre after another are the beings from whose loins we and all our contemporary races spring? Man is once for all a fighting animal; centuries of peaceful history could not breed the battle-instinct out of us; and our pugnacity is the virtue least in need of reinforcement by reflection, least in need of orator’s or poet’s help.’

Another partial answer to the question of how to celebrate 1916 can be found in the acceptance speech of W.B. Yeats when he received the Nobel Prize for Literature on 15 December 1923:

‘The modern literature of Ireland, and indeed all that stir of thought which prepared for the Anglo-Irish War, began when Parnell fell from power in 1891. A disillusioned and embittered

Ireland turned away from parliamentary politics; an event was conceived and the race began, as I think, to be troubled by that event's long gestation.'

And then Yeats reviews the accomplishments of the Gaelic Revival and the Irish Literary Revival, which played such a vibrant role in the lives and politics of the people. Perhaps we do need the help of the poet and orator to answer the question of how to celebrate the centennial of the Rising.

Because of our American Revolutionary War, the people were no longer subjects of the British Empire but became citizens of their own country with certain inalienable rights, which were articulated in our Declaration of Independence and enshrined in our Constitution and Bill of Rights. Although our founding fathers who formed and shaped our new nation had asserted in 1776 that 'we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal', it has taken several hundred years to extend those rights to all of our citizens, women, Afro-Americans, Native Indians and others. We still struggle to keep separate Church and State and to balance individual choice with the common good. However imperfect our nation and its structures, no American citizen would ever question the motivation or actions of those rebel Yankees whose fight for independence created a new nation.

Thus I find astonishing Dennis Kennedy's conclusion: 'It would be far better to celebrate the emergence of Ireland from that state "formed and shaped" by the Rising, and to acknowledge that, however brave the rebels were, they were misguided and their actions harmed the island, and still do'. Irish Alzheimer's, goes the joke, is to forget everything but the grudges. As an American of Irish descent, I would say that Kennedy's dismissive conclusion about the 1916 Rising raises whingeing and be-grudgery to new heights.—Yours etc.,

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