

# Memories of Empire: The imprint of the imperial past compared

Symposium, University of Sydney  
4-5 December 2009

Throughout the world, problems arising from the imperial past continue to occupy centre stage in public debate and political controversy. The legacies of colonialism in metropolitan Europe – the connection between present-day problems and the imperial inheritance, and the need to come to terms with the memory of empire – are now major issues in the public forum as well as in academic circles. Whether it be debates about head scarves in French schools, an apology for slavery in Britain, the contested commemoration of imperial wars in Ireland, or the reconciliation process in South Africa and Australia, the memory of empire remains ever-present. Often these debates are sparked by political issues – the French parliament’s move to mandate the teaching of the ‘positive’ aspects of colonial history in schools in 2005, or the Belgian Parliamentary inquiry in 2001 into the death of Patrice Lumumba. On other occasions it is generated by anniversaries. The year 2004, for example, witnessed the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the French withdrawal from Indochina, a suit against the German government on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Herero war, and the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ‘carnation revolution’ which brought an end to Portugal’s wars of decolonisation. Often, these events are marked by the rhetoric of recrimination and rival interpretations of the imperial legacy.

The study of the politics and culture of memory and forgetting is now a well-established field in its own right, spanning historiography, literature, anniversaries, popular culture, museums, monuments and other *lieux de mémoire*. Since the early 1990s, scholars across Europe have echoed Benjamin Stora’s attempt to lay bare the ‘secrets’, ‘silence’, ‘the unsaid’, and intentional ‘forgetting’ (*oubli*) embedded in the post-imperial landscape. Despite literally hundreds of works documenting France’s wars of decolonisation, Stora identified a ‘loss of consciousness’ when it came to the troubling record of the end of empire. His work has its counterparts in virtually all of the former imperial states of Western Europe, as witnessed, for example, by Caroline Elkins’s study of the silences in the archival record of the ‘brutal end of empire in Kenya’, or Alessandro Triulzi’s claim that the ‘long-standing failure of Italian public memory to come to terms with its colonial past may soon be over’. One current major Dutch research project bears the title: ‘Bringing history home: postcolonial identity politics in the Netherlands’ – implying that popular historical awareness of imperialism has, until recently, been kept at a distance. In a similar vein, the 2001 Parliamentary inquiry into Belgium’s role in the violence that attended decolonisation in the Congo concluded that the Belgian population suffers from an “unaccepted past”.

What is striking, however, is the relative absence of any research framework that might compare this disparate imprint of empire. This symposium aims to make a start towards that goal, examining the complex and ever-changing contexts that have shaped private and public memory, with a view to gaining a broader, global perspective on the subject.

The Symposium is a collaborative effort between the University of Sydney, University College Dublin, the Australian Academy for the Humanities and the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. It will be attended by invited speakers from abroad, research staff at Sydney University, and a team of Irish and Australian scholars visiting Sydney as part of a related project on ‘Memory and the uses of the Past’.

## **Programme:**

### **Friday 4 Dec:**

2.00-2.30 Introduction, Robert Aldrich and Stuart Ward

2.30-4.00pm: Caroline Elkins, Harvard University: 'Reflections on *Britain's Gulag*: An Anatomy of the Critiques'

4-4.30 Coffee

4.30-6pm: Sebastian Conrad, European University Institute: 'Empire in the Historical Imagination of Post-war Japan'

6.30pm: Reception and dinner at the Sugaroom

### **Saturday 5 Dec:**

#### 9.30-11: The deliverance from empire

Chair: Mark Finnane, Griffith University

Roisín Higgins, Boston College Ireland, "'What to do with their lovely past?': The difficulty of remembering the Easter Rising'

James Curran, University of Sydney, 'Australia's Forgotten Empire: The difficulty of remembering the Fall of Singapore'.

11-11.30 coffee

#### 11.30-1pm: German colonial memory, past and present

Chair: Robert Gerwarth, University College Dublin

Andreas Eckert, Humboldt University, 'A traumatic past? How German colonialism is remembered in Namibia and Tanzania'.

Dirk Moses, University of Sydney, 'Memories of Empire in the Nazi Imaginary'.

1-2 pm Lunch

#### 2-3.30: Asian and Pacific contexts

Chair: Kirsten McKenzie, University of Sydney

David Goodman & Yixu Lu, University of Sydney: 'A German Architect in China: Walther Frey, 1905-1937'

Liz Rechniewski, University of Sydney: "'L'indigénat": Past Practices and Present Politics'

3.30-4pm coffee

#### 4-5.30pm: Remembering and forgetting imperial wars

Chair: Katie Holmes, La Trobe University

Mark McKenna, University of Sydney: 'Shedding the Empire: The remaking of Anzac day in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Australia'.

Dominic Bryan, Queen's University Belfast: 'Forget 1690, Remember the Somme: Ulster Loyalist Battles in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'.

5.30-6pm: Concluding remarks: Robert Aldrich and Stuart Ward