

Forgetful Remembrance: Social Forgetting and Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster. By Guy Beiner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Pp. 736. Hardback, \$54.95.

In this well-researched and extensive work, Guy Beiner seeks to introduce a new methodology for understanding the function of memory in history and society. Approaching memory studies from an angle often neglected by historians, Beiner examines the phenomenon of social forgetting rather than remembering. Beiner explains this process as, “what happens behind the scenes when communities try, or profess to try, to forget discomfiting historical episodes, but actually retain muted recollections.” (27) To understand how social forgetting functions, Beiner returns to a familiar subject, the United Irishman Uprising of 1798, as he has written on the event and the commemoration of it before.¹ Focusing on the memory of the 1798 Uprising that took place in the northern Irish province of Ulster, Beiner argues that society’s memory of the event generates “a cycle of decommemorating, re-commemorating, and restored forgetting” (606), over the two hundred years since the Uprising. He specifically chose a micro-history of this Uprising because it allows for a study unrestricted by time, through which he is able to fully explore the memory of the Uprising as it evolves.

For historians outside of the Irish academy, this study’s strengths lie in its theoretical framework and Beiner’s approaches to theory. The historiography of the field of memory studies in the introduction is extensive. Beiner discusses the major works in the field of memory studies from Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora.² He also explores how other fields have approached memory. He places cognitive science and psychoanalysis into a larger academic discussion of memory studies, proving their utility in social and cultural analysis. Beiner’s expert synthesis of these fields allows him to build a new theoretical means of analysing memory and forgetting. This book’s examination of forgetting is something that other academics have not fully explored before. As such, Beiner’s work advocates for a new theoretical approach to memory studies that ensures remembering and forgetting are given equal attention by scholars.

The majority of the book is, as Beiner calls it, “an exploration of how an episode in provincial history, in a peripheral corner of Europe, was paradoxically both forgotten and remembered locally,” (xvii). Beiner views his study as an extension of the work of Ian McBride, Oona Frawley, and ATQ Stewart in Irish history and memory (39-42).³ The book moves chronologically beginning with the lead-up to the Uprising where Beiner presents the unique notion of “pre-forgetting”. The act of forgetting, like remembering, is pre-meditated on past experiences and those seeking to ensure something is remembered experience anxiety that society will forget rather than remember. Commemorative rituals and narratives, such as wearing badges or writing poems for the unjust killings of United Irishmen before the Uprising, are therefore constructed to try and stop “pre-forgetting” from occurring by providing templates for remembrance (88). The book moves on through the later decades after the Uprising where social forgetting took place and tensions arose between attempts to remember the event and

¹ Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007).

² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, translated by Lewis A. Cosner, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, translated by Arthur Gold Hammer, three volumes, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

³ Ian McBride, ed., *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Oona Frawley, ed., *Memory Ireland*, four volumes, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011-14); ATQ Stewart, *The Shape of Irish History*, (Belfast: Blackstaff, 2001).

those wishing to suppress memories of the event. Beiner tracks how loyalist, and later unionist, communities tried to silence the memory of their participation in the Uprising during the 19th century and into the 20th century as it challenged their notions of group identity.

In order to examine the remembrance of the Uprising in these communities, Beiner uses “vernacular historiography” to find silenced or repressed memories. Using wide-spread archival research, he analyses the remaining cultural artifacts, documents, and family stories about the Uprising to track the shifts of remembering and forgetting by the society. It is through the vernacular histories and stories that Beiner sees the cycle of social forgetting: a process of forgetting, resistance to remembering, remembrance restored, and leading back to forgetting. The cycle is one that can be seen operating through generations with important dates (such as anniversaries) and political conditions impacting the public expression of the Uprising. In all of this, the private remembrance of the Uprising was maintained. Beiner also examines the importance of the historian in the cycle of social forgetting. The action of historians and written histories are a means by which social forgetting is undertaken and reinforced, but also a means by which memory can be restored. Using vernacular history, Beiner hopes to reassess our understanding of how history, memory and stories all intersect.

In his conclusion, Beiner briefly moves away from Irish history to briefly examine other potential examples of social forgetting taking place mainly across Europe. Beiner suggests that his theoretical ideas, along with methodology of a long micro-history can be applied to episodes of local history such as the memory of communism in Eastern and Central Europe, the Spanish Civil War and Franco’s regime, or the Armenian Genocide in Turkey. Proposing the cycle of forgetting as a framework to widely apply across historical events, *Forgetful Remembrance* expands beyond a specialized case study in Irish history.

While the study is very comprehensive in its examination of social forgetting and the memory of the 1798 Uprising in Ulster, the intricacies that Beiner delves into may overwhelm those not well versed in memory studies or Irish history. The theory supporting Beiner’s analysis can be difficult to understand; he only has space to briefly explain the main points and relevance of the numerous scholars he cites. Those who are not familiar with the theory can easily follow Beiner’s vast number of footnotes to get up to speed, but there are so many it may bog the reader down. The same issue applies to the core of the book: while Irish historians will be able to keep up with his references to various Irish figures and events, those without a strong background could find themselves sinking in the material. As such, this book is clearly meant for those who have strong grasps of either memory studies or Irish history.

Beiner’s study of social forgetting in Ulster is by far one of the best studies of memory to have been published in recent years. His unique approach to how societies forget and remember their troubled past transcends the geographic borders of his study. As well, the micro-history he conducts over such a large time period serves as an example of how to research and present local history. This excellent work by such a skilled historian will no doubt become an important text in memory studies for years to come.

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