

Where do we go from here?

How do we disseminate ephemeral and time-based work with a view to future audiences, readership and legacy.

The Bullet in the Brick

Unlike the North King Street Massacre, the story of Francis Sheehy Skeffington's death is a well known story in Ireland.

He and two other journalists were murdered at Portobello Barracks by firing squad on the morning of Wednesday 26th April, two days after the Rising in Dublin began in 1916, and one day after he was arrested on the streets while he was out pleading for calm. He was shot on the order of Captain John Bowen-Colthurst, a British Army veteran who had served in the Boer War in Africa, and afterwards in India, and on the Front in World War I. He had already randomly shot and killed two men on the streets of Dublin the day before.

He ordered Sheehy Skeffington's body be hastily buried on the grounds, and lied to his wife Hanna when she arrived at the barracks looking for her husband. He knew that he had acted illegally and could be hung, and reported it to his superiors. The crime was covered up, Bowen-Colthurst was court martialled, found guilty but insane, went to Canada, was declared un-insane within a few years and lived out his life there on his military pension.

This brick was sent by a man called McLoughlin to Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington in 1935, nineteen years after the murder of her husband, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, with the explanation of how a brick with a bullet that passed through her husband's body came to be in his possession; that he had met a frightened bricklayer leaving the barracks in the days after the murder, who told him that he and his fellow workers had been taken there at bayonet point and ordered to replace the bricks in the wall which had bullets in them. The section he had worked on was where Francis Sheehy Skeffington had been shot. The man had just found that he had accidentally taken a brick with a bullet out with him in his basket, and was terrified of what would happen to him if caught, having been threatened with death by the soldiers.

McLoughlin ended his letter to Hanna with "I have kept it in my house ever since.

Although I knew you were the one with the greatest right to it I could not bring myself to offer such a ghastly memento and so rake up wounds which will never be forgotten."

Such a stereotypical story of British brutality and colonial oppression, which in Ireland is never forgotten.

Except that Captain John Bowen-Colthurst was an Irishman from Dripsey in Co. Cork, and had served with the Royal Irish Rifles for many years. He was in Dublin at the time of the Rising as he had been sent home from the front to recover from an injury after a disastrous decision which had left many of his men dead. After the murders at Portobello Barracks, he was reported to have been talking about the battle at Mons, and as 'half lying across the table with his head resting on his arm, and he

looked up occasionally and stared about the room, and then fell forward again with his head on his arm’.

His history in the British Army reveals him to be a deeply unpleasant man. His actions at Portobello Barracks reveal he was also suffering from PTSD.

It’s complicated. As all Irish history is, even when it’s supposed to be a simple case of romantic heroes standing up and fighting their oppressors.

The brick is part of the collections of the National Museum of Ireland, labelled simply as ‘brick with bullet which killed Francis Sheehy Skeffington’. But at first the story didn’t sit right with me. How did the brick come to be in the museum? I’d seen the wall it was supposed to have come from and there was no sign of missing bricks. I was intrigued, I researched, and studied it, I brought it to Garda Ballistics for confirmation that it was what it was said to be, we micro-scoped and x-rayed it to find out everything we could about it physically, and eventually I found the story behind it and wrote it up in a blog post. It became The Bullet in the Brick – telling the story of the murder of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington and the madness of Captain Bowen-Colthurst in 1916.

Since that initial blog post and subsequent exhibition, the brick has gone on to find fame in national newspapers and the national broadcaster, it’s been the subject of PhD studies, it’s a study lesson in the Senior Cycle of the Leaving Certificate School Examinations, and just a few days ago.....

I discovered that it’s now also a folk song by a band called The Spook of the Thirteenth Lock – google it and you can sing along to the story of The Bullet in the Brick.

The object found a life of its own after I put it out there – I babied it from its store cupboard into the public domain, and after that it belonged to everyone. It was shared and reinterpreted and shared again, by academics and by artists, continuing the story of the brick beyond its original context.

Objects like this and the statements of the North King Street Massacre have a power to reveal the tiny moments that were otherwise unrecorded, and the details that were forgotten as the story became legend and certain facts did not fit the brand.

That can be the graphic visualisation of the passage of the bullet from gun barrel through the mass of Francis’ body, which slowed its velocity and interrupted its trajectory, leading to it slowing and spinning in such a way that when it hit the wall it did so at an angle and became embedded and deformed in a shallow hole on the surface.

Or it’s the image Hanna at the barracks gate with her sister, demanding to know what happened to Francis.

Or it’s Bowen-Colthurst in a state of nervous breakdown, muttering about the Battle of Mons and staring into space.

These images and understandings change the story by adding nuance; layers of details that add complexity and evoke feelings of empathy.

These very human details make a connection to the people who lived through these events – and are what artists' work such as *These Rooms* bring directly to people, whether through its performance or through the artwork in the Tate Exchange.

The North King Street Massacre is not very widely known, and when spoken of it is reduced to a good vs bad stereotype - the murdered Irish as the victims of the British Forces. *These Rooms*, through its two versions, explores the hidden details behind the event – it looks at all participants beyond their stereotype and lays them bare, not for judgement but for understanding of who they are within the exploration of what is happening around them.

The works of art created in Ireland's decade of centenaries period have been characterised by this exploration of the human being, and are very well received by the public. 2016 was dreaded by those who feared its hijacking for populist purposes – this didn't happen, and was in large part due to the nature of the commemorations, a frank, bottom-up discussion of human experience.

The Irish public proved themselves more capable of mature debate about the event than they were given credit for. It was a resounding success, and gave us hope for the next event marked by the Decade.

So when we ask the question 'What happens next? Where do we go from here?' – for me it's facing the challenge of talking about the Irish War of Independence – two and a half years of conflict between Ireland and Britain, in which about 1500 people died.

When we explored 1916, Anglo-Irish relations were probably at the highest they had ever been. This, sadly, is no longer the case.

Now, in the age of populism and the rise of ethno-nationalism across the world, and in particular, with the consequences of Brexit hanging over us all, we will be talking about the birth of our State – which we are proud of, but can't and shouldn't ignore the fact that it was also born in violence perpetrated by both sides. There will be some unpleasant truths to be faced by everyone.

The images and stories that we will be confronted with were designed to be emotive and provoking then, and could easily now be taken at face value and become flat and course; tools to easily manipulate public opinion.

We will need to discuss the tit for tat destruction, murder of IRA, civilians, police and soldiers, the role women played in the conflict, and of course, how they were punished by both sides for being seen with the wrong people.

So it becomes even more important in this political environment that this history is presented and explored with the humanity, balance and truth-telling that is characteristic of Anú's work. It will be this work that becomes legacy, as it is shared and understood and re-interpreted by the people who experience it.