Policy Review: a review of museum decolonisation policy across the island of Ireland

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Abstract

There is currently no explicit decolonisation policy concerning Irish museums. This review provides an overview of current decolonial work scholarship and professional museum work in museums across the island of Ireland. Irish museums hold tangible and intangible testimony of how Irish people were involved in the violence of empire-making. Ireland's legacy in British empire building is challenging and often ignored by historians because Ireland was also a victim of colonialism. Ireland's complex entanglement with empire-making is perhaps one reason why there are no explicit policies concerning the decolonisation of museums in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. Instead, efforts to decolonise are written within broader policies concerning inclusion and diversity or only considered in temporary exhibitions. This review article explores recent academic scholarship and endeavours related to professional museum practice to understand current decolonial activity in the Irish museum sector. The review advocates for more decolonial work and policy-making that considers the nuances of Ireland and the British Empire. However, I acknowledge the numerous barriers to a genuine decolonising of the museum stem from a reliance on precarious, low-paid or volunteer staff that results in ethnic minorities and working-class people being excluded from entering museum work and a lack of funding in the sector. Still, this review article recognises that despite the lack of job security, staff diversity and funding, museum professionals and academics are conducting rigorous research concerning Ireland and colonialism.

Keywords: museum decolonisation; Ireland; Northern Ireland; empire.

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Introduction

For several years decolonising the museum has been a hot topic. The traditional museum, which grew out of the European Enlightenment, became defined as an institution of progress and knowledge, which placed it in a position of trust and civic power (Hein, 2011, p.344; Mason, 2011, p.23; Crooke, 2018; Bennett, 1995, p.97). Moreover, the museum was considered neutral and apolitical. Beginning in the late 1990s and gaining ground in the 2000s, the museum's role shifted from object-focused to being an audience-focused organisation that strived to be 'more socially inclusive' of its visitors (Marstine, 2011; Macdonald, 2011, p.1). This well-meaning exercise side-stepped any reflection on museum's functional and dubious involvement in empire-making. Subsequently, criticism of colonial activity has become louder and more mainstream in recent decades, resulting in the myth of neutrality being debated and debunked (Pal, 2001, p.21; Janes and Sandell, 2019, p.8).

Western museums were a tool or 'weapon' of colonial conquest and empire-making (Hicks, 2020, p.9). The most apparent and tangible legacy of imperialism is museums' ethnographic or world collections. These objects were often acquired through violent means and displayed in Western museums as curiosities in ways that were sometimes a means to ridicule colonised peoples (Thomas, 1991, p.143; MacKenzie, 2010, p.1). Additionally, there are more subtle colonial inheritances, such as the domineering architecture of museum buildings, Western intellectual frameworks used to create exhibitions and the absence of non-Western knowledge systems (Preziosi and Fargo, 2012; Tzortzi, 2015, p.11; Bennett, 2012, p.11).

In recognition of past and present practices, the contemporary museum that seeks to be inclusive and diverse must consider decolonising methods. Bodies such as the UK's Museums Association (MA), have written a series of documents and articles related to decolonising the museum (Museum Association, 2023). The outputs of the MA, particularly their ten-point 'Decolonising Principles', have influenced museums on the island of Ireland, as evident by events supported by the all-island body, the Irish Museum Association (IMA) and work occurring in Irish and Northern Irish academia and museums.

No museum on the island of Ireland or the IMA has produced a direct decolonisation policy that considers the island's complicated role in colonial activity. This poses a methodological challenge when reviewing policy because there is not a single, overarching policy in place. As a response to the lack of policy, this review will highlight some contemporary scholarship that examines Ireland's role in the Empire making to try to understand why no direct policy concerning the decolonisation of Ireland's museums is currently available. It argues that the legacy of the British Empire in Ireland is complex and often denied within the Irish historical narrative. However, even with research recognising this, the primary reason for the absence of policy resides in reliance on precarious, low paid or volunteer staff, which results in ethnic minorities and working-class people being excluded from entering museum work and a lack of funding in the Irish museum sector. The result of a lack of job security and diversity means that it is challenging to develop and embed a decolonisation policy because decolonial activity requires continuous assessment and commitment.

Ireland and empire

Ireland and the Irish were victims of colonialism. The study of Ireland and its entanglement in the British Empire making has received recent scholarly attention. As historian Ian McBride explains, 'Empire has usually been portrayed as something that was done to Ireland' (McBride in Nic Dháibhéid et al., 2021, 307). Indeed, some Irish people were involved in Empire building, and Irish towns benefited economically from various colonial exploits (O'Donnabháin: 2023). Thus, the challenge resides in Ireland being 'both colonised and coloniser' (Nic Dháibhéid et al., 2021, p. 303).

Irish museums hold tangible and intangible evidence of how Irish people were involved in the violence of empire-making. The National Museum of Ireland (NMI) have over '12,000 artefacts

from Africa, the Americas and the Pacific', and the National Museum of Northern Ireland (NMNI) has 'approximately 4,500 items from the Americans, Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Artic' (McEvansoneya, 2015, 157; Inclusive World Histories Exhibition (NMNI), 2023). Many of these

objects were acquired through violent stealing by Irish men who served in British regiments during overseas campaigns (Whitty, 2022). Currently, most of these artefacts are in storage rather than on display. In the Republic of Ireland context, McEvansoneya (2015) explains that in 1922 with the formation of the Irish Free State, Irish museums no longer wanted to display non-Irish material acquired by punitive colonial methods to distance Ireland from British imperialism and thus 'turning booty into a burden'. From that point on, aspects of Irish archaeological collections were proudly displayed in NMI as a method to establish political ideas concerning Irish cultural identity (Crooke, 2000, 1). This shift in displaying global material culture is significant when considering Irish attitudes to the British Empire, and how Irish history has been presented and taught.

Evidence of Irish involvement in violent empire-making is also present in Irish and Northern Irish museums in a range of covert and intangible ways. To a large degree, colonialism continues to influence and shape the intellectual framework employed in contemporary museum practices (Ohlemeyer, 2021, p.306). As McBride states, 'decolonising history' requires 'confronting structural blindness'; in other words, to decolonise, museum staff need to go beyond 'Eurocentric narrative and concepts that have confined our understanding of the past' and 'enabled Western (people) to ignore the injustices, exploitation and destruction caused by empire' (McBride in in Nic Dháibhéid et al., 2021, p.306) Donal Hassett urges researchers to 'pay attention as much to scholarship produced in Cape Town, Cairo, Delhi and Daker as (they do) to research from the former colonial metropole' (Hassett, 2021, p.310).

Tackling racism is a crucial incentive for active decolonising work in Irish museums. Examining uncomfortable histories in institutions that influence national identity and memory is especially important. Today, Ireland is a multicultural society with increasing levels of immigration to the island. For the contemporary museum on the island of Ireland, it is essential to probe their role in Empire making and the legacy of their imperial past, especially with the rise of far-right activity and racially motivated attacks (Onoh, 2021; Askew, 2023, p.2023). As contemporary archaeologist Laura McAtackney asserts, we 'must explicitly engage with our contemporary as well as historic context… how we think about Irish history need to broaden' (McAtackney in Nic Dháibhéid et al., 2021, p.312).

Research in academia

In academic circles, particularly in disciplines such as history, anthropology, archaeology, and museum studies, interrogation of Ireland's role in the British Empire is having a 'reckoning of its own' (Nic Dháibhéid et al., 2021, p.305). Many academic projects concerning colonisation, Empire, and Ireland are ongoing, such as Trinity's two-year Colonial Legacies project (TCL, 2023). Some recent or forthcoming publications consider Irish museums and Empire, such as Rachel Hand's chapter 'Museums and Empire: Reconnecting Uncomfortable Colonial Histories', and an edited anthology dedicated *to Museums, Empire, Colonialism: Identities, Memory, and Legacies in Ireland* (Hand, 2023; Widdis, Reisz and Bryan, forthcoming). In 2022, Queen's University Belfast academics organised a conference in the Ulster Museum entitled, 'Ireland, Museums, Empire, Colonialism'. The conference speakers included many museum professionals and scholars working in the sector in the Republic of Ireland. Debate, discussion and research concerning Ireland and colonialism also occur beyond Ireland. For instance, Radboud University in the

Netherlands held the 'Colonising and Decolonising the Irish Nineteenth Century' conference in June 2023.

Decolonisation of museums policy in Ireland and Northern Ireland

The previously mentioned UK Museums Association has published several documents detailing how to support decolonisation in museums. These documents may be influential and perhaps used in Irish museums, but nothing explicitly reflects Irish collections, collecting practices, or Ireland's role in Empire building. The National Museum of Ireland NMI has no explicit decolonisation policy, and much of its ethnographic collection remains in storage. There is, however, some decolonising work happening in the museum. For example, the appointment of a Curator of World Culture/Ethnography in 2022 and a 'Decolonising the Catalogues' event held in association with the IMA in 2021 (IMA, 2021). Moreover, the National Gallery of Ireland's 'John Barry Brown and Petronella Brown Fellowship' call for provenance research that addresses 'issues around historical exploitation and discrimination', which could encompass some decolonising work. However, the call is wide-ranging and does not specifically call for decolonising research. Finally, in June 2023, three staff members (including the author) established the National Museum of Ireland's 'Sensitive Histories Working Group'. Although it is too early to measure any outcomes, the group aims to scrutinise racist or derogatory practices or language within the historical Museum collections and databases, ensuring that they are actively working towards genuine inclusivity.

The National Museum Northern Ireland seems to have a proactive response to the decolonial turn. Indeed, the issue of decolonisation appears to be more substantially addressed in the Ulster Museum in Northern Ireland than any National Museum in the Republic of Ireland. NMNI established an 'Inclusive Global Histories' section on their website and curated a temporary exhibition in the Ulster Museum until 31 March 2024. Museum academic Briony Widdis writes, 'the exhibition indicates an institutional commitment to decolonisation and confronting contemporary racism' (Widdis, 2022). NMNI's website states, 'At National Museums NI, we are committed to decolonising our museums and collections' (NMNI, 2023). The content conveys openness and transparency to work with communities and re-assess their traditional approach to global collections. The museum also highlights the complexities of the Empire in the Irish context, particularly the Northern Irish context. The language treads softly around the 'concepts of "British" and "Irish"' (NMNI, 2023), acknowledging the challenge of discussing colonialism in Belfast. Although the website text explains the debate of whether Ireland was a colony, it does not ask whether Northern Ireland continues to be a colony of Britain, perhaps anticipating this question as too incendiary to include on the website or exhibition content.

Printed on the wall at the entrance to the 'Inclusive Global Histories' gallery, the Ulster Museum sets out clear commitments that they strive to achieve and uphold. The commitments begin with 'we will', 'we acknowledge', and 'we believe', underscoring an ongoing promise to work towards more inclusive museological practice. The museum's commitment encompasses an admission to 'understand the ways in which colonialism is rooted in our collections and our sites', which includes interrogating the 'language we use to document them and the ways in which we interpret them for the public'. (NMNI, 2023). Re-visiting language used to describe objects and cultures is a vital aspect of decolonising, as museums in the past have used offensive, racist and demeaning

language to describe their collections. It is commendable that NMNI, an organisation that's location comes with contested identities, is publishing content related to active and continuing decolonisation.

Barriers to decolonisation on the Island of Ireland

Several barriers exist to decolonial action and policy-making in Irish and Northern Irish museums. Decolonial work and policy implementation may be considered too significant a promise for Irish or Northern Irish museums, given the island's complicated relationship with colonisation. Decolonising public institutions requires a lengthy process of 'unlearning' deeply engrained national narratives that museums have supported and disseminated throughout the island for decades (Lopez, 2021, p.35; Crooke, 2001). Obstacles to decolonisation often relate to the contagion effect of a lack of funding in the sector. Formulating educational resources and exhibition plans considering decolonisation would take substantial time, resources and money. Adequate budgets to cover costs in museums have been overstretched for years, with funding for the sector in Northern Ireland being cut again by 5% for 2023-2024 (Kendall Adams, 2023).

Related to budget constraints but also an issue of top-down decision-making and resource priorities, many museums rely on volunteers or hire staff on temporary contracts for specific projects. With paid work, many well-qualified early-career museum professionals (including this author) rely on precarious temporary contracts without pensions, adequate maternity leave or sick pay. As previously stated, mainstream scholarship has only recently begun to untangle European museums complicity in colonial projects. Consequently, those who have studied and embrace decolonial work tend to be younger members of the museum workforce. Therefore, research created by those doing decolonial work in the sector may be lost when contracts end. As such, decolonial work is not sustainable and does not become an embedded culture of practice in those institutions. There are additional systemic problems when museum professionals rely on volunteer communities to do the decolonial work for their exhibitions. For instance, NMNI state that museum professionals work with different community groups to inform their 'Inclusive Global Histories' temporary exhibition. Such approaches, however, may only lead to short-term community engagement or tokenistic 'box ticking' exercises rather than contributing to meaningful, long-term change for underrepresented people in society (Shaikh, 2001, p.99). Additionally, by the time consultation takes place, the theme and concept of an exhibition have often already been decided by museum staff. Therefore, the control is firmly in the hands of curators, with the community only having a superficial or secondary role in the decision-making process (Lynch & Alberti, 2010, p.14). Moreover, the museum can deflect accountability for the exhibition if they consult with community groups. Bernadette Lynch and Samuel Alberti, who worked on Manchester Museum's temporary exhibition Myths about Race (2007-2009), stated that in their experience, 'encounters between museum professionals and external individuals, particularly those from Diaspora communities, still bears traces of *coloniser meeting colonised'* (Lynch & Alberti, 2010, *emphasis in the original text*). In other words, the exhibition outcome is in the hands of museum staff, and ultimately the power remains with the institution of the museum itself.

Towards a policy for decolonisation of Irish and Northern Irish Museums

The labour of policy writing and implementation often goes unrecorded and the outcome of policy can operate 'as a specific manifestation of aspirational thinking' (O'Brien, 2022, p.60). Although there is no direct policy concerning the decolonisation of Irish museums, this review has highlighted that many decolonial projects and events are occurring across the island of Ireland. If a policy encompasses the island of Ireland, museum professionals or academics may agree on a consensus for decolonial work to create a single policy or perhaps a body such as the IMA could produce a policy that its members adhere to. However, there has been recognition that museums are not neutral, and more effort is made to be visitor and audience focused. Some of this audience-centric work has attempted to be more inclusive and challenge colonial legacies.

The activities outlined in this review may lead to the creation of policy concerning the decolonisation of museums across the island of Ireland. However, the decolonisation of Irish museum policy should not simply mirror the Museums Association UK's policies. Museums across the island of Ireland, particularly national museums, require further research and acknowledgement of their complicity in violent colonial projects. More broadly, systematic change is required for true decolonisation and this process is ultimately slow and challenging. To decolonise museums on the island of Ireland, reconciliation of Ireland as both a victim of exploitative colonialism and recognition of Irish peoples' complicity in violent colonial projects needs to be addressed beyond museums, for example, in mainstream media and the school curriculum. Additionally, the work involved to decolonise needs various skill sets and a diverse workforce who receive adequate remuneration and secure contracts for their labour. Furthermore, staff, mainly younger people working in the sector from contract to contract, often feel they need to comply with the institutional status quo, and, therefore, are unable to contribute or sustain positive decolonial change while in their short-term post. The solution cannot rely on short-term project-based work because that will not deliver meaningful change.

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