

ABSTRACT

Webs of Identity and Memory: Commemorative Artwork in Britain, Ireland, and the Dominions, 1700-2015

The former British Empire is a rich landscape filled with monuments and vestiges of monuments that express a variety of complex identities and compelling narratives. As embodiments of empire, the monuments that populate the now independent nations of Ireland and the former Dominions (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa) not only tell stories of the imperial past; they also continue to stimulate collective memories, some of celebratory commemoration and others of postcolonial discontent. Hence, through the study of monuments, we can see the constant negotiation and renegotiation of imperial and post-imperial relationships among Ireland, the Dominions, and the imperial center. This dissertation examines the erection and “lives” of monumental art—defined here as statues, cenotaphs, memorial arches, and other forms of sculpture—in Ireland and the Dominions from the early eighteenth to the early twenty-first century. This project suggests that examining the history of such works in Ireland and the Dominions challenges and complicates historiographical narratives positing that colonial nationalist and independence movements were straightforwardly oppositional to empire.

Specifically, I use the concepts of imperial webs to explore and assess how monumental artworks functioned as nodes: they illustrate both the “horizontal” connections linking colonies and colonial sites and the “vertical” connections between Britain and its colonies. In addition to illustrating the circuits of movement and exchange that knit the empire together, the monuments also demonstrate how colonial and postcolonial groups used monumental artwork to express challenges to the imperial unity and their creative responses to dealing with controversial or “outmoded” statues. Examining the erection, migration, and destruction of such works thus presents an ideal way to explore the complexities involved in commemorating the imperial past. Moreover, understanding how these commemorative imperial works were addressed may suggest some ways that we might approach controversial monuments in the present day.