



14 Henrietta Street

Collecting Memory: 14 Henrietta Street and Oral History

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Introduction:

Writing in his landmark 1991 text, *Dublin Street Life and Lore: An Oral History*, Kevin C. Kearns lamented how:

Collectively, Dublin's numerous street types make up a valuable repository of what has been termed 'urban folklore'. They possess their own heritage, customs, traditions and city lifeways, comprising what local historian Éamonn MacThomáis calls Dublin's unique 'lore of the street'. Yet there is virtually no written record of Dublin's street figures and their lore in archival collections.¹

A Professor of Geography at the University of Northern Colorado, Kearns would make annual research trips to Ireland which have led to a wide variety of oral history publications exploring all from the urban village of Stoneybatter to the lives of Dublin's female street traders, along with a groundbreaking study of urban living, *Dublin Tenement Life: An Oral History* (Dublin, 1996). In September 2021, Kearns was awarded the Lord Mayor of Dublin Scroll, an honour rarely bestowed on one living outside of the city.

Much has thankfully changed since Kearns penned his battle cry, that 'this unique heritage deserves to be recorded and preserved for future generations of Dubliners.'² Today, the city of Dublin is home to a growing collection of oral history projects which seek to capture the historical experience of Dublin's people. This article will explore 14 Henrietta Street's oral history work, with focus on Your Tenement Memories, a project 'which aims to capture the living memories of tenement life in

¹ Kevin C. Kearns, *Dublin Street Life and Lore* (Dublin, 1991), 12.

² *Ibid.*, 14.



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Dublin.’³ A citywide initiative from Dublin City Council Culture Company, within the programming of the 14 Henrietta Street museum, this collaborative programme has engaged with communities across Dublin city and county since launching in early 2019.

Oral history has been especially important to museums focused on, or partially focused on, working class social history. In the case of the Tenement Museum in New York’s Lower East Side, Barbara W Sommer notes:

The Tenement Museum interprets working class and immigrant history, but much information about its two sites is not available through the written record. Oral history information is the foundation of its interpretation. Exhibit designers draw on the information for everything from describing families who were residents of the building to placing furniture in the exhibitions.⁴

At 14 Henrietta Street, such information has also shaped the guided tour and furnishing of the museum environment. On entering the building, the first artifact a visitor encounters is a framed religious image, belonging to a former resident family, hanging on the very same nail as it had in the 1950s. This information, brought to the attention of the museum in interviews with former resident Peter Brannigan, is an example of how the testimony of those who knew the building as a home, and not a museum, shapes it today.⁵

Drawing on interviews conducted with the tour guides of 14 Henrietta Street, this article will demonstrate the manner in which Your Tenement Memories influences the tour experience, as well as shaping programming and output more broadly.

³ Dublin City Council Culture Company, ‘Your Tenement Memories’, available at <https://www.dublincitycouncilculturecompany.ie/what-we-do/projects/your-tenement-memories> (Accessed 27 February 2022)

⁴ Barbara W Sommer, *Practicing Oral History in Historical Organizations* (New York, 2015), 123.

⁵ An audio recording of Donal Fallon in conversation with Peter Brannigan can be heard at <https://14henriettastreet.ie/ga/nuacht/teatime-talks/> (13 May 2020)



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Firstly, it will give an overview of the museum and the varied forms of engagement - historical and cultural - which shape it, before introducing the voices of guides who shared thoughts on oral history and its place in the museum.

14 Henrietta Street: Making a Museum:

Architectural authority Christine Casey has described Henrietta Street as ‘the finest Early Georgian street in Dublin’, and ‘of the first importance in setting new standards of scale and ornament in domestic architecture.’⁶ It was part of the vision of Luke Gardiner, a pioneering developer, who began the process of laying out the street in 1729. 14 Henrietta Street, built in the late 1740s, was first occupied by the Right Honorable Richard, Lord Viscount Molesworth and his second wife Mary Jenney Usher.

The street withstood the dramatic decline visited upon the Irish capital by the 1801 Act of Union, which stripped Dublin of parliamentary power, owing to the presence of the King’s Inns, Ireland’s oldest school of law, at the top of the street. This ensured a slower tumble downwards, as the former homes of the gentry became bureaucratic offices of the legal profession. This gradual decline is well documented by Dr. Tim Murtagh in a historical survey commissioned by the museum, *14 Henrietta Street: Grandeur and Decline 1800-1922*.⁷

Gradually, the landscape of the street shifted towards tenement living. In 1876, landlord Thomas Vance acquired number 14, installing nineteen tenement flats of one, three and four rooms. While other cities had high-quality and purpose-built tenements (a journalist in *The Times* recently wrote of how ‘there is no denying Scotland’s love affair with tenements’⁸), Dublin’s nineteenth century tenements grew

⁶ Christine Casey, *Dublin: The City Within the Grand and Royal Canals and the Circular Road with the Phoenix Park* (Yale, 2005), 193.

⁷ 14 Henrietta Street, ‘Our Books’. Available at <https://14henriettastreet.ie/about/our-books/> (Accessed 28 February 2022)

⁸ Gabriella Bennett, ‘The trouble with Scotland’s tenements and how to lower emissions’, *The Times*, 26 October 2021.



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in the shells of earlier aristocratic homes, a core part of their story and something which contributed towards the city's sometimes uneasy relationship with its eighteenth century architecture. Erika Hanna, in her study of urban change in the Dublin of the 1950s onwards, has written of how 'Georgian Ireland was left outside the lineage of Irish architecture', and viewed as something colonial.⁹

The final tenement residents left Henrietta Street only in the 1970s, by which time conservationists - in particular the historian, architect and preservationist Uinseann MacEoin - had begun the process of revitalising the street, in MacEoin's case leasing homes and studios to artists for nominal rents.¹⁰

The 2004 Henrietta Street Conservation Plan, an action of the Dublin City Heritage Plan and carried out in conjunction with the Heritage Trust, acknowledged such efforts to save the street, but also noted:

The struggle to maintain the houses in the appropriate condition places a sizeable burden on the property owners, one which has been met with heroic and remarkable commitment and steadfastness over the last thirty years.¹¹

The Conservation Plan identified 14 Henrietta Street as being at particular risk:

The current status – both physical and legal – of Nos. 3 & 14 give cause for great concern. Both buildings are in a very poor condition, both internally and externally.¹²

⁹ Erika Hanna, *Modern Dublin: Urban Change and the Irish Past, 1957-1973* (Oxford, 2013), 60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 158-160.

¹¹ *Henrietta Street Conservation Plan*, Dublin City Council (Dublin, 2004), 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.



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Following the purchase of the house, completed in 2008, a decade-long journey commenced to 'rescue, stabilise and conserve the house'.¹³ The conservation of the building, overseen by Shaffrey Architects, was recognised with a number of awards including the RIAI Irish Architecture Awards prize for Best Conservation/Restoration Project in 2018.

What kind of museum could occupy such a restored home? Which kind of artifacts - if any - could be placed within it to tell a story? Writing of historic house museums, preservation expert Laura C. Keim has noted:

House museums enable objects and narratives to co-exist in conversation, each enriching and contextualising the other, and fostering experiential learning through a variety of senses. Exploring the past through the material objects of everyday life connects us to the core of common human experience across time.¹⁴

Yet within 14 Henrietta Street there would be not one singular narrative, but a series of narratives, creating neither a Georgian townhouse museum or a tenement museum. Instead, the museum provides a journey through a Dublin home in its different ages.

Engaging with the past(s):

Despite a clear focus on these different narratives from the beginning, references to 14 Henrietta Street as 'the Tenement Museum' are plentiful in press coverage of the museum.¹⁵ While the focus of the museum is much broader in scope, each period of the history of the site offers unique approaches to interpretation and education.

¹³ 'Conservation and Restoration', 14 Henrietta Street. Available at:

<https://14henriettastreet.ie/about/conservation-and-restoration/> (Accessed 25 February 2022)

¹⁴ Laura C. Keim, 'Why Do Furnishings Matter? The Power of Furnishings in Historic House Museums' in Kenneth C. Turino, Max A. Van Balgooy (ed.), *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions*, 207-217, 209.

¹⁵ 'Everything you should know about Dublin's tenement museum, 14 Henrietta Street', *Irish Central*, 26 May 2021. 'Inside 14 Henrietta Street - Dublin's Tenement Museum', *Irish Independent*, 14 September 2018.



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Dr. Melanie Hayes, an architectural historian with a special interest in the ‘development of architectural culture and practice in the early Georgian period’, has researched the Georgian history of the home and its residents in detail, producing *14 Henrietta Street: Georgian Beginnings, 1750 - 1800* in conjunction with the museum, and *The Best Address in Town. Henrietta Street, Dublin and Its First Residents, 1720-80*, commissioned in conjunction with Dublin City Council Heritage Office. In addition to the prior mentioned research of Dr. Timothy Murtagh, this research has provided vital contextualization and historic knowledge which has shaped our understanding of the house.

Beyond historical engagement with the building, the museum has also encouraged creative engagement. In *Museum*, a book of eleven sonnets and accompanying photography, poet Paula Meehan and photographer Dragana Jurišić were invited to collaborate on work inspired by the house. Jurišić noted that ‘it was the walls of the house that fascinated me the most: with layer upon layer of old wallpaper or paint, pictures, graffiti, they were like secret maps inviting you to imagine the hundreds of destinies 14 Henrietta Street witnessed.’¹⁶

There is a growing body of research on the opportunities - and challenges - for museums in creative engagement. In *Museums and Galleries: Creative Engagement*, an intriguing report commissioned by the National Museum Directors' Conference in Britain, we read of how, ‘Museums and galleries, in common with many other major cultural institutions, traditionally offered the public – or a limited section of it – an exclusive version of art, culture or science.’¹⁷ Collaboration has offered great potential, in a wide variety of fields, to move beyond merely offering any ‘exclusive version’ of the past - Paula Meehan’s poetry is incorporated within the tour, vividly brought to life as we are invited to imagine the experiences of Mary Jenney Usher of the house in a reconstructed bedroom.

¹⁶ ‘Museum’, Gallery of Photography. Available at: <https://www.photobooks.site/product/museum-dragana-jurismic-paula-meehan/> (Accessed 27 February 2022)

¹⁷ National Museum Directors' Conference, 'Museum and Galleries: Creative Engagement' (London, 2004)



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Quickly, it became apparent that potential collaboration existed with the public who were attending tours of the museum, and for whom tenement Dublin was a lived reality.

Oral history:

Joe Kavanagh, Pat Garry and Sheila Robinson are three guides at 14 Henrietta Street, who agreed to individually discuss their engagement with museum visitors and the public on the Your Tenement Memories programme.

At the outset of each interview, I asked each if they had any familiarity with oral histories before their involvement in Your Tenement Memories, either as consumers and researchers or as active participants. Kavanagh made mention to *Hands*, a pioneering television programme by David Shaw-Smith filmed between 1978 and 1989 which documented craftspeople at work. ‘This was oral history, but in a visual form’ Kavanagh recalled, and a show which gave him a sense of the importance of stories of everyday people.¹⁸ Garry recounted the importance of storytelling and the oral tradition within his own household, and recalled a historian who was a formative influence in shaping his own interest in oral histories: ‘Éamonn MacThomáis is Dublin’s greatest ever gift, he was absolutely brilliant. I knew him before he ever did the television programmes. I was involved in the Liberties Festival and Éamonn MacThomáis, he almost single handedly made that festival.’¹⁹ MacThomáis, a popular Dublin historian who produced a variety of historical works and memoir, placed great emphasis on capturing the oral tradition. The manner in which MacThomáis utilised oral history in telling the history of places made a defining impact on Garry, shaping his own tours: ‘The story is absolutely what makes a site.’²⁰ Robinson’s experience was different, while she hadn’t a familiarity with the work of MacThomáis, Kearns or others, ‘I had done my own oral histories, in terms of family oral histories.’²¹

¹⁸ Interview with Joe Kavanagh, 14 Henrietta Street, 16 February 2022.

¹⁹ Interview with Pat Garry, 14 Henrietta Street, 16 February 2022.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Interview with Sheila Robinson, 14 Henrietta Street, 16 February 2022.



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Responses to the building:

Each was conscious of the ability of 14 Henrietta Street, as a physical place, to inspire memory and recollection amongst visitors. Kavanagh noted that this is not just personal memory, but also communal and inter-generational:

On the tours you have people who lived in tenements, and you have the children of people who lived in tenements, who are here out of curiosity. The people who lived in tenements will recount their stories but the children will recount the secondhand stories of their parents to you and it's all quite a living thing.²²

Kavanagh described traditionally shared places of the home as a place where visitors are often forthcoming with personal memoir: 'For me, I've found it's happened a lot in the staircase and the landings, because the staircase and landings in tenement dwellings they can bring back memories for people, and sometimes not the best memories.'²³

Garry emphasised his own personal response to the building on first entering it, recalling that, 'there's something about the house that just captures you, you become part of the house as soon as you walk in the door...the building took on a meaning for me that had never been taken on by a building before.'²⁴ To his mind, this is an experience that many others have too on entering. The frequent sharing of recollection, which can occur on any tour, makes the museum feel different to Garry from any other he has encountered:

²² Interview with Joe Kavanagh, 14 Henrietta Street, 16 February 2022.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Interview with Pat Garry, 14 Henrietta Street, 16 February 2022.



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It's a living museum for real people. It's not a museum in the sense that you store goods one on top of the other or something like that. This is a people's museum created for the stories of these people and by the stories of these people. It's not your typical museum.²⁵

Robinson, similarly to Garry, was taken by the physicality of the building on first entering it. To her, the contrast in its stairs - the opulence of the initial staircase and the crowded nature of the later staircase - which set her thinking of the duality of the site. It is a feeling that reaches its crescendo as the recreated tenement room known as 'Darkest Dublin':

The floor comes up and the ceiling comes down, you can feel that, people can't explain it but you can feel it. I felt that when I first came here, that it was a great physical space to move through.²⁶

Garry likewise recalled 'Darkest Dublin' as a room which tended to evoke strong feelings and a change in atmosphere. On a tour, a member of the public spoke of her own family's eviction from their room: 'She used a phrase I had never heard, which was 'No rent and out with went.' There was no grace period, and we don't realise the hardship that was there and how people suffered.'²⁷

Your Tenement Memories:

Interaction between guide and visitor introduced the museum to a number of people with stories which could inform the visitor experience. Architectural, political and social academic historical research is vital to understanding the people, but oral history recollection allows museums to tell personal stories. Garry spoke of the importance of stories 'not in the history books', which can often supplement the other research.²⁸

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Interview with Sheila Robinson, 14 Henrietta Street, 16 February 2022.

²⁷ Interview with Pat Garry, 14 Henrietta Street, 16 February 2022.

²⁸ Ibid.



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In early 2019, Dublin City Council Culture Company commenced a series of Your Tenement Memories roadshows, visiting community centres, libraries and other civic spaces in Dublin's suburbs.

Before commencing with the visits, plans were devised centering on identifying particular areas of Dublin which had strong connections to the tenement past. There was significant migration outwards from the city centre in the 1930s, when Crumlin (on Dublin's southside) and Cabra (on the northside) were the most significant suburban developments. Later suburban expansion came in the 1950s, when the city moved westwards, to places like Ballyfermot (colloquially known in Dublin then as *Bally-far-out*). These suburbs, and others, all posed unique questions. While some were physically closer to the city centre, the suburbs themselves were older. For others, the distance from the city was further, and families thus tended to engage with it less, but the experience of moving was a more present memory.

The museum devised a clear and simple methodology for workshops and conversations, utilising a memories form (with appropriate releases and protections) which enabled guides, with prior training in oral history gathering, to transcribe recollections of attendees. Later, some of these forms would lead to audio interviews of willing participants. A framework for ethnically and sensitively collecting histories, as well as the creation of a friendly, welcoming environment which put participants at ease, was vitally important to the roadshows. Wherever possible, contact was established with existing local history groups, while many libraries also had existing connections to local groups with interest in historical and heritage events.

Robinson noted that turnout, which varied from venue to venue, was shaped by a number of factors, but that 'it also depended on how that particular suburb had connections, still, with the tenements.'²⁹ In the case of Ballyfermot, a more recent suburb, the presence of a strong local history group who had programmed events

²⁹ Interview with Sheila Robinson, 14 Henrietta Street, 16 February 2022.



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themselves in the past on both oral history and the emergence of Dublin suburbia ensured a significant collective willingness to partake.

There were individual moments which remained with each guide who participated in the Your Tenement Memories roadshow. For Kavanagh, active in developing musical tours of both 14 Henrietta Street and Richmond Barracks, Inchicore, there was a special moment when a song, recalled by one interviewee, encouraged many in the room to collectively find their voice and join in.³⁰

Utilising Your Tenement Memories:

Transcribing Your Tenement Memories has provided the museum with interesting first hand insights into the folk memory of twentieth century Dublin. Themes and characters frequently emerged which were not initially considered in examining the social history of the period. Frequent references were made to Dublin street characters, such as the Garda Jim Branigan (recounted as ‘Lugs’ to generations of inner-city Dubliners who came to both fear and respect his paperwork-light approach to policing) and Thomas Dudley, a mid-twentieth century Dubliner affectionately known in the city as Bang Bang.

The playwright Dermot Bolger, whose play exploring Bang’s Bang’s life has been published by Dublin City Council Culture Company, has described how, ‘Bang Bang were the words he shouted – and were shouted back at him – whenever he jumped from the platforms of open-backed buses to open fire with the huge key he carried in his pocket.’³¹ Following Your Tenement Memories, 14 Henrietta Street invited Daniel Lambert - a young Dubliner who led the campaign for a memorial at the grave of Bang Bang - to partake in a Teatime Talk, the museum’s monthly scheduled talks and presentations, on Bang Bang. Future talks, including talks on the culinary history of the city and a talk exploring Dublin’s Jewish community, have also been programmed in recognition of the strong presence of these themes in our oral history collection.

³⁰ Interview with Joe Kavanagh, 14 Henrietta Street, 16 February 2022.

³¹ Comments by Dermot Bolger, Facebook, 12 December 2020.



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Your Tenement Memories stories have influenced tours of the museum, bringing personal detail that can help in our understanding of the space, while also appearing in print in *14 Henrietta Street: From Tenement to Suburbia* (Dublin, 2021), one of a trilogy of illustrated publications designed to tell the story of the house in an accessible way.

Conclusion:

The potential of such programmes to establish meaningful connections with individuals and groups is clear. In a piece for *History Workshop*, exploring her own work in oral history at India's Partition Museum at Amritsar, Priyanka Seshadri recently noted:

Oral history interviews rely on an 'active human relationship between historians and their sources'. These interactions encourage museums to maintain consistent and long-term relationships with the people they interview.³²

Your Tenement Memories, like all aspects of the work of the museum, encountered real challenges in the age of the pandemic. While no longer able to meet with individuals or conduct roadshows, the museum did shift its focus towards increased online content such as a four week course on the history of social housing in Dublin. The gradual return of the museum industry also allowed time to plan for future oral history outreach, identifying areas of the city which will undoubtedly have much to contribute to the tapestry of memory that is developing.

It should be noted, too, that the absence of direct memory does not mean there is no scope of oral history exploring the earlier periods of history examined in 14 Henrietta Street. Robinson recounted meeting two descendents of the Molesworth family on

³² Priyanka Seshadri, 'Listening to History: The Role of Oral Histories in Museum Collections', *History Workshop*, 17 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/listening-to-history/> (Accessed 25 February 2022)



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tours of the house. The Georgian residents of the street may not have known poverty, but as Robinson made clear, ‘they had lives too, they had their ups and downs, they were human beings.’³³ Interviewing the Molesworth family is beyond us, of course, but interviewing their descendents is not. Likewise, there is the possibility to explore the Georgian heritage of the street in oral history focused on preservation and conservation.

Establishing relationships is vital for museums, but so too is maintaining them. Oral history has allowed 14 Henrietta Street the privilege of learning from those for whom the tenements were home, and has allowed individuals and community groups to feel like active participants in a developing social history space.

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14 Henrietta Street is a social history museum of Dublin life, from one building’s Georgian beginnings to its tenement times. We connect the history of urban life over 300 years to the stories of the people who called this place home.

Find out more at 14henriettastreet.ie

³³ Interview with Sheila Robinson, 14 Henrietta Street, 16 February 2022.