Preface

When I set out on the British Academy Post-Doctoral Fellowship from which this monograph emerged, I was ill-prepared for an expedition which led me away from established theories of cultural memory to mucky boots and the study of alternative histories. This study is testimony to a research process that is guided by curiosity rather than by pre-formulated ideas. The research is framed by a desire to examine the 'workings of cultural memory': how texts contribute to a cultural memory which humans utilise to create and experience a spatio-temporal collective identity. Yet, as time went on, I realised that researching memory in medieval Ireland also changed my own perception on current issues, and that in turn many of these modern matters echo concerns also raised in medieval Irish texts.

I also became more and more interested in what humans do with their memories, and what memories do to us, topics that have also dominated recent public debates. During the writing of this book, questions about the appropriation of the past in modern society and culture have come to the forefront in public discourse. News footage has shown people on the streets of London either protecting or seeking to displace statutes of figures associated with colonialism and slavery. Their actions have generated a long-overdue public debate on questions of remembrance, forgetting, and retribution: whose past is it, and who has the right to decide about its future remembrance? Which parts of the past have been forgotten, and for what reason(s)? Who shaped or shapes the knowledge of the past? Whose obligation – or in whose power – was or is it to preserve and communicate the past to others? And what cultural and individual perspectives make it possible to remember an event completely differently? All of these questions destabilise *the* past and place much greater emphasis on our access to, and the communication of, knowledge about times gone by. They also touch on the complex relationship between memory and forgetting discussed in chapter four.

Agency, ownership, and communication of memory therefore emerge as prevalent topics in twenty-first-century public discourse. They have also been explored in the cultural output of this century. In the dystopian Series *Black Mirror* (2011–2019), for example, memory implants allow humans to re-view and hence to over-analyse their experiences. This leads to the break-down of relationships, suggesting that forgetting is a prerequisite for human interactions (*The Entire History of You*, S1 E3). In another episode, an Icelandic insurance worker accidentally uncovers a murder while harvesting the memories of a minor traffic accident through a device projecting personal memories onto a screen. Her investigation into the case eventually leads to the death of her whole immediate family (*Crocodile*, S4 E3). The message of these episodes is clear and poignant: memories hold

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110799132-202

power. And they have consequences. Modern culture therefore invites us to consider that personal memories are not always private and that they can have a social or cultural impact; a thought that also appears in medieval Irish literature and which I explore in the third chapter.

The third main topic of this study – memory and landscape – emerged from a more profane observation while walking a friend's neurotic Golden Retriever in a South Dublin suburb. Although we were separated only by the length of a leash, our experience of the places and spaces through which we passed differed widely. Most obviously, Goose the Golden Retriever would pick up scents and criss cross the carpark or the nearby field in a frantic attempt to 'read today's newspaper', with no regard for puddles, hedges or passers-by. I found both the carpark and the field exceedingly boring simply because there was nothing so see, and I could not engage with the landscape of smells that must have populated it for Goose. I saw the danger of speeding cars and bicycles shooting past us while she remained oblivious to these hazards, instead trying to chase yet another imaginary cat across the road. In short, our sensory engagement with, and reactions to places in our suburb differed vastly.

This may be expected across species, but it made me wonder whether even humans show different reactions to their environment depending on their knowledge of it and previous experiences of it. I began observing how my husband, my friends and colleagues experience places which we 'share', and how we are influenced in this, not just by our personality and outlook, but also by our knowledge of cultural history. The different experiences this revealed echo the diverse angles on the intersection between landscapes and memory in medieval Irish literature. Although this topic only takes up a small part of this book (chapter two), the idea that both the past and the landscape, as well as temporal and spatial orientation, are relative and fluid permeates most pages.

This monograph, selective in its focus as any single-author study must be, marks the beginning of a discussion rather than its endpoint. Over the past five years researching and writing this book has been comparable to driving along an Irish country road without Google maps. The journey was full of unexpected twists and turns that, a moment or a month later, afforded unanticipated yet exciting views of a new stretch of land. The work took a lot longer to emerge than originally planned: a pandemic and a relocation to Switzerland made access to libraries and exchange with much valued colleagues difficult. Starting a new career in the sustainability sector and opening a restaurant meant that in the past two years I could only work on this book on and off. However, the pronounced focus on the future of our planet that this shift in careers entailed ultimately enriched my understanding of the past.

The primary driving force behind this research journey was my colleagues at the University of Glasgow (Celticists, Archaeologists, Onomasticians, Historians, and Literary Critics, if they must be put into disciplinary confinement), who patiently introduced me to their own research and provided valuable coordinates for navigating new terrain. Among them are Katherine Forsyth, Sheila Kidd, Kate Mathis, Simon Taylor, Thomas Owen Clancy, Sìm Innes, Stephen Harrison, Alasdair C. Whyte and Stephen Driscoll, as well as Aris Palyvos, Anouk Busset, Sofia Evemalm, Viktoria Marker and Cynthia Thickpenny. Without them, the focus of this book would have been much narrower, and the analysis much poorer for it.

To them, and above all to my mentor, Geraldine Parsons, I offer my heartfelt thanks for their support and friendship. Thanks are also due to others who have provided inspiration, companionship, and constructive criticism over the years: Kay Muhr, Liam Ó hAisibéil, Emily Lethbridge, Jürg Glauser, Lena Rohrbach, Helen Imhoff and Nora Kauffeldt. Erich Poppe and Joseph Nagy provided valuable feedback that alerted me to necessary emendations and omissions and helped to finally complete this monograph. Any remaining errors are, as always, my own. The editors of the Memory and the Medieval North Series I thank for their patience and for including this study in their series and the staff at De Gruyter, especially Dominika Herbst and Robert Forke, for their expert guidance. Martina Maher deserves thanks for reading the entire manuscript and offering many helpful suggestions for improval. The research on which this book was based took shape during a British Academy Post-Doctoral fellowship at the Universtiy of Glasgow and I am immensely grateful to the British Academy for their support. My interest in cultural memory emerged from a previous post-doctoral project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and conducted at Trinity College Dublin, which in many ways paved the way for the current monograph. I am no less indebted to my husband for his support over the past decade and for the many happy memories we continue to make together.

This book is a journey of discovery through the landscapes of early Irish texts, and it promotes research that is open to dialogues and guided by curiosity. It is unlikely that 'a culture's cultural memory' will ever be fully grasped – too fluid are both cultures and their memories, and too limited are our perspectives as modern researchers. Yet, whatever progress we make in understanding how cultures, societies, or groups use the past to legitimise and experience a particular present (and plan for an anticipated future) will help us understand some of the fundamental coordinates of what it means to be human.

In memory of Vital Künzler (1984–2018) and Bobby Durnam (1974–2020).
In future memory of John Griffiths. Viva GSP