Damian Shiels discusses the subtle signatures of events that took place ninety years ago in one of Dublin City's best-known recreation areas.

The archaeology of insurrection: St Stephen's Green, 1916

Ireland was affected by a number of conflicts in the twentieth century. Each has left a trace on the landscape today, although their full archaeological potential has yet to be realised. Training trenches were excavated by Irish regiments prior to their departure for the front in World War I. Coast-watch stations and air-raid shelters were constructed to defend the Free State during the Emergency. In more recent times, the troubles in Northern Ireland saw the establishment of numerous border stations and observation posts.

The traces of actual fighting in the island during the century are harder to identify. The fast-moving actions that took place during the War of Independence, and to a lesser extent the Civil War, do not lend themselves easily to archaeological investigation. Traces of the hostilities are echoed in buildings such as former RIC barracks, and it may also be possible to identify sites such as road-trenches dug by the IRA. Areas where concentrated engagements took place are few and far between, although there may be profit in exploring the remains of 'conflict landscapes' where they exist. Possible candidates might include Ballinalee, Co. Longford, where heavy fighting engulfed a number of buildings and the principal road junction over a protracted period during the War of Independence. Another such example is the 1916 Rising, particularly the principal zone of fighting, Dublin city centre.

St Stephen's Green

The fighting in Dublin during Easter Week 1916 was extremely ferocious. By the time of the surrender, much of the core of the city had been destroyed, principally owing to the intense artillery fire brought to bear on the republican positions. Today, with the damage repaired, only tantalising glimpses of these events remain, such as the bullet holes in the O'Connell Monument at the base of O'Connell Street. The one area that did not require rebuilding or redevelopment remains much as it was in April 1916—St Stephen's Green. Many European capitals have been ravaged by urban warfare, some repeatedly. It is rare indeed to find one of the scenes of heaviest fighting untouched by subsequent development, never mind largely greenfield. Nevertheless, this is the case with the positions of the St Stephen's Green garrison in April 1916.

At about 12.15pm on 24 April 1916, about 100 men and women under the command of Commandant Michael Mallin, principally from the Irish Citizen Army, took control of St Stephen's Green. Civilians were escorted from the park, and any British servicemen taken prisoner. The gates were closed, and the process of barricading key routes began. Either through oversight or lack of troops, the tall buildings to the north of the Green were not secured. Consequently, British machine-guns were able to move into position here on the night of 24/25 April. The subsequent hail of fire poured into the St Stephen's Green garrison the following morning forced them from their positions and into the Royal College of Surgeons, where they were to remain until their surrender later in the week.

Opposite page: **Machine-gun damage on the Royal Dublin Fusiliers Memorial Arch (beneath inscription 'Laings Nek').**
Above: **Superintendent's House, beside which a Citizen Army trench was positioned.**
Below: **The south-east entrance to the Park as it appears today.**

In all, the republicans spent less than 24 hours holding the Green itself. Although this presents a very short period of time for an archaeological footprint to be laid down, there remains a strong possibility that traces of the fighting survive. The most immediate scars of the fighting that remain clearly visible are on the Royal Dublin Fusiliers Memorial Arch, where numerous pock-marks on the stonework represent British machine-gun fire. This damage most likely occurred as the machine-gun traversed to engage Mallin's forces when they had retired to the Royal College of Surgeons.

Archaeological potential

There are two principal archaeological signatures that may survive from the fighting in the Green. The first is the bullets, both those of the British machine-

Above: **'We serve neither king nor kaiser'. The Irish Citizen Army parading outside Liberty Hall in 1915.**

Right: **An aerial view of St Stephen's Green taken by the OPW in 1972.**

guns and those of the Citizen Army defenders. The second is the negative features created by the insurgents while fortifying the Green, in particular the trenches at the gates.

There is a strong possibility that significant numbers of bullets, particularly those fired by the British, remain *in situ* within the confines of the park. The angle at which the machine-guns were fired (pitched downwards from the upper floors to fire into the Green) would have driven bullets into the soil. This, coupled with a rate of fire of 550 rounds per minute for the standard British light machine-gun of the day, the Lewis, increases the likelihood that traces of the arcs of fire of the guns survive in some form. In addition to the British fire, there is also a lesser potential for the recovery of rounds used by the Citizen Army. In many cases it should be possible to differentiate between the ammunition of the two sides as different weapons were generally employed. Although it seems likely that the Citizen Army fired relatively few bullets during their time in the Green, cartridges may have been abandoned when the decision was taken to relocate to the Royal College of Surgeons. That at least some bullets survive within the Green is confirmed by the fact that workers in the park have occasionally come across them over the years.

It is known that when Commandant Mallin secured St Stephen's Green on 24 April he moved to entrench his men in key areas of the park. Something of the location and character of these works has come down to us through the accounts of eyewitnesses and participants. Liam Ó Briain, who took part in the Rising and recorded his experiences in the 1966 edition of *The Capuchin Annual*, recalled:

> 'At one of the main gates facing Earlsfort Terrace and Lower Leeson Street, the men were set to dig trenches; two trenches, one on either side of the gate.'

The trenches appear to have been planned well in advance, as Ó Briain mentions that pickaxes were used to dig them. He continues:

> 'Bob de Coeur had given me a pickaxe and told me to "fall in" and start digging. He had about twenty men there who were digging a trench on either side of the gate. The same thing was going on at the other gates. I dug away manfully until after six or seven o'clock.'

Ó Briain later makes reference to the fact that his trench was some 3ft in depth. Further information on the location and functions of the trenches are apparent from the report given by the then Superintendent of St Stephen's Green to the Board of Works following the Rising. Living in the Superintendent's House in the south-west of the park, he closely

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witnessed events, stating that the 'Sinn Fein Army' were 'digging trenches in the borders and would not allow the people out by the Gate close to my house'. He noticed 30 men with rifles digging trenches on each side of the gate. He remarks that they took cushions and rugs to make themselves comfortable in the trenches, and that on 30 April 'the last dead Sinn Feiner was taken out of the trench near Merrion Row by a corporation official'.

The possibility that archaeological traces of these trenches survive must be considered. Although in some cases the probable locations of the trenches may now be under tarmacadam, particularly in the north-east and south-east corners of the park, those near the Superintendent's House may be more accessible. In addition to this, the present-day foreman of the park has remarked that relatively little landscaping has taken place over the intervening years and has noted that the topsoil in many areas is not excessively deep, increasing the likelihood that the Citizen Army left an identifiable mark on the subsoil.

Archaeological investigation

If St Stephen's Green was to be archaeologically investigated for traces of the 1916 fighting, a number of possible strategies might be employed. To recover bullets from the area, a licensed metal-detector survey should be carried out. As the park has remained in constant use, it is to be expected that there is a large amount of metal present. If this proved to be the case, discrimination for lead-based metals could be considered. A systematic approach to recording and recovery could reveal the surviving pattern of bullets in the Green. In addition to this, geophysical prospection may help to reveal traces of the trenches dug in 1916, particularly in the vicinity of the Superintendent's House. A survey of areas towards the centre of the park may uncover other defences excavated by the Citizen Army. Although tarmacadam may interfere with some of the other trenches in the Green, archaeological remains may yet be encased beneath the surface. Consideration could be given to the potential value of ground-penetrating radar equipment in these instances.

Relevance of the archaeological remains

Though much is known about the events of 1916, there are still many unanswered questions. As regards the trenches, it is known that a number of officers and men on the republican side attended military tactics lectures before the Rising. Did these inform the construction of the trenches? What form did they take? It would be interesting to explore how 'professionally' they were constructed, particularly when one considers that Mallin was an ex-British army soldier and would have had experience of 'digging in'. Another important question is where the trenches were sited. Were they parallel to the gates? Were they particularly vulnerable to the British fire that forced the men out of the park so quickly on 25 April? Were other trenches dug anywhere in the park? The recovery of bullets may help to reveal any pattern to the British fire, such as its form and intensity; the latter may help to indicate defensive positions.

Conclusion

The Republic of Ireland has a great deal of potential when it comes to conflict archaeology, and much can be learned from exploring our twentieth-century sites. Similar investigations, particularly in Britain, continue to uncover new and extremely relevant information. The need for such work to be carried out in this country is all the more vital as many of these sites remain unrecognised and under threat owing to their extremely low archaeological profile. St Stephen's Green is just one example of this, a site that may yet open a window on the brief but monumental events of Easter Week 1916.

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