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The Bullet in the Brick: Mediating Death in the Museum

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Objects derive their historical weight from the place where they are displayed and the authenticity surrounding them. An object which has received considerable media attention in the ‘Proclaiming a Republic’ exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland is a portion of a brick in which is embedded a bullet, which passed through the body of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington when he was executed by firing squad during the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916. In an effort to hide evidence that the execution had taken place, Sheehy-Skeffington’s body was hastily buried by the British Army and all bricks from the wall where he was executed which contained bullets were removed and replaced. Some years later, the brick and an authenticating letter was sent to Sheehy-Skeffington’s wife who subsequently donated the item to the National Museum of Ireland in 1937. With its display in the National Museum of Ireland’s milestone exhibition which opened in 2016, the brick has become symbolic as a tangible link to the death of a principal activist in Ireland’s political history. By examining this artefact as example of acquisition, donation, preservation and exhibition, my paper demonstrates how ordinary objects can make significant contributions to fostering understandings of history when they are authenticated and mediated within museum environments. This paper will investigate the range of actions which take place in order to render ordinary objects as valuable material evidence of significant moments in history. I will examine further how objects associated with death are used as mediation devices which curators employ due to their historical significance, visual impact and emotional strength.