Reframing "the most holy spot in Ireland": an analysis of the narratives from and around Kilmainham Gaol

by Elena Ogliari

Uncover all ye who enter here
(*The Bastille of Ireland*, 1982)

ABSTRACT: Prisons play a prominent role in Irish imagination and collective memory, because their wings and cells bore witness to many turning points in the country's recent history. Kilmainham Gaol, often called 'the Bastille of Ireland', is no exception: from 1796 to its closure in 1924, it held the leaders of nineteenth-century agrarian and nationalist revolts as well as the Easter Rising rebels in 1916. Given the Gaol's importance in nationalist history, it has been argued that a specific narrative came to be constructed around it by its restorers: one aimed at elevating the Gaol to a symbol of the separatist struggle, and which deliberately downplayed the fact that the prison had been a place of detention also for non-political prisoners and the opponents of the Free State. Scholars contend that this narrative long dominated over stories of ordinary penal history, and, only recently, brief mentions of 'ordinary' prisoners and the Civil War have entered the dominant narrative. My article questions these assumptions and is divided into two parts to outline such 'reframing' of Kilmainham Gaol: first, drawing on archival documents, I discuss the intention of the authorities to redesign Ireland's past as a monolithic history of struggle against the enemies of the nation in their narrative of the Gaol, and I argue for the need to consider their reasons to do so; second, I resort to Witcomb's methodological approach to highlight how today's curators respond to the representational challenges posed by the Gaol and aim at incorporating into the narrative of the site the dissonant voices of those who had been previously neglected.

KEY WORDS: Kilmainham Gaol; competing narratives; curatorial choices; reframing; Irish nationalism; representational challenges

COMPETING VOICES AT KILMAINHAM GAOL[1]

Standing solemnly across the road from Kilmainham Gaol is *Proclamation* by Rowan Gillespie, a bronze monument formed by fourteen blindfolded statues that are reminiscent of Alberto Giacometti's gaunt giants. Each statue has a verdict and an execution order engraved into its pedestal, and the figures' torsos are riddled with bullet holes to represent their way of death in front of a firing squad: these eerie creations are meant to honour the leaders of the Easter Rising who were executed in the prison visible in the background (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1. *Proclamation* depicts the seven signatories of the *Forógra na Poblachta* and the other rebels executed at Kilmainham Goal, of which we see the main entrance in the background. Author's collection.

Gillespie's monument points to the historical events Kilmainham Gaol is commonly associated with: the executions of the Easter Rising rebels soon after the revolt, an aftermath of violence that contributed to the 'framing' of the prison as a sacred place of Irish republicanism. It has been argued that the projection of the Gaol as Ireland's "Calvary" informed the dominant narrative around the prison for a long time, as it was promoted by the Kilmainham Jail Restoration Society (hereafter 'Restoration Society'), the group of volunteers responsible for the restoration and musealisation of

---

[1] Nowadays, the jail is mostly referred to in academic and official literature by an older variation of the word 'jail', that is 'gaol'. This is due to the decision taken by the curator of the prison museum in the late 1980s to differentiate Kilmainham from other functioning jails in the country (O'Dwyer 121). When not quoting primary sources that feature the word 'jail', the older variation of the word is always used.

the site between the late 1950s and 1986, when these tasks were handled to the Office of Public Works.[2] In the present article, I intend to question such a narrative, investigate its origins, and pinpoint the alterations that have been made to it throughout the last decades. This first implies, as suggested by Gillespie's monument, going back to the year 1916.

Except for Roger Casement and Thomas Kent, all the 1916 leaders met their death in the Stonebreakers' Yard, on the northwest corner of Kilmainham Gaol, between 3 and 12 May. The last to be executed was James Connolly, who had been wounded in the revolt and then taken on a stretcher to face the platoon: it was his execution in particular that produced a "conversion moment" in public opinion (English 277). The Easter Rising generated great human and financial costs for Irish people, who did not sympathise with Patrick Pearse and comrades at first: yet these rebels became heroes to emulate once their lives had been sacrificed and their writings propagating the myth of sacrificial renewal had circulated widely (Kearney 211-214).

Kilmainham Gaol was the epicentre of the conversion. From his cell there, on the eve of his execution, Pearse wrote a farewell letter and a poem to his mother: the latter, titled "A Mother Speaks", is written from the point of view of a woman about to lose her son, who identifies himself with Christ "gone forth to die for men" to foster the regeneration of Ireland; the letter likewise dwells on the notion of sacrifice for one's own country, with Pearse stating that he was about "to die a soldier's death for Ireland and for freedom" and that was like "a sacrifice which God asked of [him]" (qtd. in Augusteijn 26; 321). These last documents, soon publicised together with the writings of the other rebels executed in the Stonebreakers' Yard, contributed to defining the ideal of sacrificial martyrdom for future generations spurring them to conclude the "unfinished business" of Pearse and acolytes (MacDonagh 1-13); the writings contained promissory words that put forward a redemptive, teleological historical vision, as embedded there was the notion that history worked "not by linear progression but a process of accretion, when one violent outbreak is laid on top of another" and, when the baleful climax is reached, providential deliverance is assured (McBride 2; 35). Therefore, the bloody aftermath of the Rising at Kilmainham Gaol, aptly reframed by the words and deeds of the rebels, had a dramatic effect on Irish history, for it demonstrated "the ideals of sacrificial nationalism", generating pathos among the Irish and giving impetus to the fight for national self-determination (Reynolds 114). The Irish War of Independence followed in 1919 and ultimately led to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922.

"Everything in Ireland has either taken place before Easter Week or after Easter Week", playwright Lennox Robinson remarked in 1918 (qtd. in Ruczaj 414), and one may paraphrase him to refer to the shifts in people's perception of Kilmainham Gaol before and after those fateful days. From a place of shame where nineteenth-century convicts had toiled from dawn to sunset, the Stonebreakers' Yard became the "holy spot" of the

---

rebels' martyrdom, a monument of national—and nationalist—significance. Immortalised in the years to come, the rebels' deaths transformed a place of confinement into a powerful symbol of political freedom (Cooke, *History* 1).

Such importance of Kilmainham Gaol in national(ist) history was further secured by the fact that many of the insurgents in Pearse's republican pantheon had been imprisoned there. Starting with Henry Joy McCracken in 1796 and throughout the following decades, Kilmainham held members of the Society of United Irishmen in 1798, Young Irelanders in the 1840s, Fenians and Land agitators, the Invincibles, Charles Stuart Parnell in the second half of the nineteenth century, and Éamon de Valera in 1916 and the 1920s. Up to its closure in 1924, the Gaol had been "a political seismograph, recording most of the significant tremors in the often turbulent relations between Ireland and Great Britain" and in the long struggle for independence (Cooke, *History* 1).

But there is more to the history of Kilmainham Gaol than these tales of political imprisonment. Although it is indissolubly linked in the public mind with nationalist history and the 1916 rebellion, its old courtroom, yards, and wings bore witness, most of all, to the traumatic lives of ordinary prisoners. The Gaol gives us a unique insight into the Irish society of the nineteenth century, for instance into the pervasive poverty afflicting it: during the Great Famine of 1845-1852, it acted "as a barometer of desperation as the disaster grew", because many Irish people deliberately committed petty crimes to be incarcerated and obtain "a meagre but life-saving prison diet" (*KGM* "The Great Famine").[3] Moreover, that half of the convicts at this time were females reveals that women were the most likely to get 'entrapped' into an endless cycle of imprisonment and releases, for female common crimes such as prostitution turned them into pariahs—outcasts of Irish society—jeopardising their chances at an alternative to a life of crime. Instead, another facet of Irish social history is highlighted if we consider that, in the nineteenth century, the prison was also a large 'collection gaol' for the forceful transportation of convicts to Australia (Casella 454). There are, thus, "competing voices" resounding behind the walls of Kilmainham Gaol, because the voices of the political prisoners vie for our attention with those of "the unknown thousands imprisoned here for stealing potatoes or rustling geese, for petty acts and foul ones, for acts of survival rather than resistance" (O'Toole 13).

Yet, notwithstanding the many narratives that can be heard from and about Kilmainham Gaol, several scholars contend that just a very specific, nationalist narrative had long dominated over the others. Places "can have many stories", reads a panel in a temporary exhibition at the Gaol, and "what they mean depends on which one we choose to tell" (*RRR* "A campaigner's medal"). According to Eric Zuelow, the chosen story has tendentially emphasised Ireland's nineteenth- and twentieth-century national struggle for independence, overshadowing the micro-histories of ordinary experience and the meditation over the prison experience itself; moreover, before 1986, "a strong

---

[3] For the sake of brevity, in parenthetical quotations, Kilmainham Gaol Museum and the exhibition titled *Recycle, Re-purpose, Re-imagine: Transforming Objects in Kilmainham Gaol* are abbreviated into the acronyms *KGM* and *RRR*. When available, the title of the specific panel is provided between quotation marks.

desire to avoid all controversy" spurred its restorers to present Irish history through the filter of the Gaol as a "unified struggle for liberty and prison", and mentions to the function of the jail during the Civil War as a place of confinement for Republicans were omitted (Zuelow, *Making* 137). The recent inclusion in the narrative of Kilmainham of references to ordinary prisoners and the Civil War has not altered the status quo, thereby "the story remains overwhelmingly nationalist in its tone" (Zuelow, "Enshrining" 186). Eleanor Casella appears to share Zuelow's view when she states that the tour and museum at Kilmainham Gaol focus on "the famous political prisoners of Ireland's agrarian and nationalist uprisings" (459). Historians Thomas Cauvin and Ciaran O'Neill venture to say that institutions like the National Museum of Ireland and Kilmainham Goal are "all […] vying for (arguably) the same nationalist 'green dollar'" (820). To an extent, their polemical remark echoes that uttered by Seamus Deane almost twenty years earlier, when he decried the repackaging of Ireland for overseas tourists and that the Gaol was presented as "the exotic debris thrown up by the convulsions of a history from which we have now escaped into a genial depthlessness" (qtd. in McBride 3-4). Considered together, these observations form a sharp critique aimed at questioning the projection of the prison as the symbol of the tradition of militant and constitutional nationalism from its opening to the Irish War of Independence, perhaps in the attempt to stir the curiosity of overseas tourists.

Nonetheless, other scholars acknowledge the institution's efforts in recent years to shed light on the fact that, as a county gaol, Kilmainham held thousands of ordinary prisoners as well as political prisoners whose stories have been deliberately forgotten because their narrative did not fit in the "unified narrative" of nationalist struggle criticised by Zuelow. In a recent article (2019), Laura McAtackney observes that the site's "meaning and significance have been altered", because, since Pat Cooke's tenure as Director in the 1990s, the focus on custodianship has no longer been on maintaining a "monument to dead republicans". This allowed "the narratives of the site to be opened up" to include those of ordinary prisoners and women prisoners of the Civil War, and, in turn, custodians are "more receptive to including them in the narratives of the site" and the public "open to digesting their stories as meaningful" (McAtackney, "Interventions" 120-135). Incidentally, McAtackney's observations go in line with what Pat Cooke himself has written about the numerous initiatives and art projects undertaken during his tenure to attach new meanings to the Gaol's spaces (cf. Cooke, "Art" and *Politics*).

My objective is to question all these assumptions to outline the 'framing' and 'reframing' of the Gaol throughout the decades. As a matter of fact, I do share McAtackney's view that different narratives alternated around *and* from Kilmainham Gaol, and I also believe that, from time to time, these alternating narratives reflected new emerging needs and interests of Irish society at large.

Scholars in the field of Heritage Studies have often highlighted that the collections displayed in museums and tours delivered at historic sites are shaped not only as the result of professional strivings, but also in relation to contemporary political agendas and the social, cultural needs of a community (Lindstrand and Insulander 30). Heritage practitioners need to listen to the community's views of the site's significance (Logan and Reeves 2)—views that might change throughout time as, I am about to argue,

happened in the case of Kilmainham Gaol. My argument is rooted in the awareness of the transformative significance of some historical events and phenomena on Irish society, which then led to shifts in the ways of viewing and representing Kilmainham Gaol: I here refer not so much to the Easter Rising and the ensuing conflicts as to the outbreaks of the Troubles in 1969, the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, and the modernisation of the country. These turning points in contemporary Irish history (Hachey) made people question the tenets of the militant nationalism embodied by Patrick Pearse and aroused interest in previously neglected facets of Ireland's past. Therefore, in the remainder of the article, I delineate how the "unified narrative" of Kilmainham Gaol has been replaced by one that acknowledges the (re)presentational challenges posed by the site itself, which has "opened up" to stories, often and for a long time, 'belittled' or 'expunged' from the great narrative of the nation. Tiny cracks have crossed that monolithic narrative throughout the decades, but it is only in the last few years that these have opened into large gaps: to show this, I have decided to outline the process of 'framing' and 'reframing' of Kilmainham Gaol by proceeding in chronological order.

In the first section, I discuss the initiatives of the Restoration Society to develop and present the historic building to visitors as a national monument to Ireland's patriotic dead. Careful notice is paid to the selection of sites in the Gaol being displayed and the narrative chosen to accompany them. To do so, I refer to various sources of the time that are preserved in the archives at Kilmainham and at the National Library of Ireland, including promotional booklets published by the Restoration Society to raise funds, minutes of meetings, and records of the commemorations held onsite since 1923. These primary sources give us insight into public and government sentiments towards Kilmainham Gaol as well as into the reasons underlying certain curatorial choices that made the prison "an eloquent monument to […] patriotism and self-sacrifice" (Cooke, *History* 20). My contention is that such narrative and 'projection' of Kilmainham Gaol are also the results of the efforts of the Restoration Society to overcome the (re)presentational challenges posed by the historic site itself; as Zuelow noted, the Restoration Society *did* try to reduce controversy and found shelter in the legacy of a tradition that was widely recognised—that of Patrick Pearse along with his monological vision of Irish history.

Nowadays, this and other challenges confront the curators, including the imperatives to respond to the evolving interests and needs of Irish society, and provide a multifaceted view of Kilmainham and the historical events that occurred there by retrieving from oblivion the stories of ordinary prisoners, which may also complicate received interpretations of seminal events such as the Great Famine or the Civil War. To investigate how the museum and the guides try to respond to these exigencies I opted for the methodology outlined by scholar Andrea Witcomb, in which fieldwork is integrated with the critical instruments of multimodal analysis. First, I spent time in the spaces and museum of the Gaol, photographing individual displays, taking video recordings of multimedia installations, and making notes of particular moments that arrested my attention, so that this documentary material would later assist me in accessing particular details of the place and its exhibitions, such as the layout, use of

Altre **Modernità** / *Otras* **Modernidades** / *Autres* **Modernités** / *Other* **Modernities**
....

Università degli Studi di Milano

language, and the interplay between several media (Witcomb 206). This method enabled me to grasp how the 'reframing' of Kilmainham gaol is dealt with through the interplay between verbal texts, images, and the choice and combination of artefacts (Lindstrand and Insulander 31). It also drew my attention to the centrality attributed to an "intangible cultural heritage" (Naguib 2180) of life stories in conveying a more nuanced image of Kilmainham Gaol and the major events that unfolded behind its walls.

KILMAINHAM BECOMES A "CALVARY"

Although its associations with the major figures of Irish nationalism assured Kilmainham Gaol historic importance, the building was allowed to fall into disrepair in the late 1920s. Three decades later, whoever stepped into the prison's perimeter was confronted by an appalling vision of the building completely overgrown with shrubs, trees, and matted undergrowth: in the words of an eyewitness, the floor was "a foot deep in bird-droppings and a lavish growth of ferns, weeds, and even young trees were flourishing there" (KJRS, *Bastille* 17; cf. Egan). Indeed, once the last Republican prisoners had been evacuated in the early months of 1924, care of the Gaol reverted to the General Prison Board of Ireland, which did not need it at the time: so, the site was abandoned and never again used as a place of detention (O'Dwyer 13).

There was little desire to preserve the site at this stage, as it was widely viewed as a place of oppression and suffering, though it was considered by some to be a monument to the struggle for independence (*KGM* "Ruin and Restoration"). Ferns and other plants continued growing inside and around the building until a group of dedicated volunteers headed by Lorcan Leonard set out to renovate it. They were carpenters and electricians, young and old, with either strong or no connection whatsoever to the Gaol. They began the restoration works in May 1960 and, up to 1966, when the Gaol could be opened to the public,[4] they made every effort to recruit new volunteers and raise funds for their projects: evidence is contained in a multitude of ephemera that also prove that many volunteers believed that Kilmainham Goal enshrined the memories of those who were held or died there for their nationalist ideals.

For instance, in the 1958 poster appealing for help to restore and open the Gaol as a museum (see fig. 2), the focus is entirely on "the dead who died for Ireland", who

---

[4] The volunteers made every effort to open Kilmainham Gaol by 1966 so as to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising. Éamon de Valera, President of the Republic and last survivor of 1916, officially inaugurated the Kilmainham Gaol Historical Museum on 10 April, and, it is worth mentioning, delivered a speech that denoted his intention to employ collective remembrance as a tool in constructing a specific national identity. To the crowd attending the ceremony—and, implicitly, to all Irish citizens— he presented a coherent vision of Irish history for which the conquest of freedom was understood as an inevitable historical evolution. Even though the site was fraught with contested legacies vying for representation, de Valera selected the Easter Rising as *the* event to commemorate (O'Malley-Younger 456; Laird) and placed the work of volunteers in the broad context of actions for the nation: he stated that their labour had transformed a ruined site into a place from which everyone could "draw inspiration" and recall Ireland's "great past […] as the men of 1916 wanted it" (de Valera).

should be honoured by turning the Gaol into a monument to their memory. Emblematically, the same notions and rhetoric are reiterated in two assertions by Lorcan Leonard, the leader of the Society. "If Kilmainham is saved Ireland is saved, and out of our poor efforts at least the children of the future will say we preserved the history of Ireland" for "Kilmainham is the Calvary of Republicanism in Ireland", he declared at the time, conflating the nationalist history of the Gaol with that of whole Ireland (qtd. in McCarthy 182). On another occasion, Leonard added that he wanted to turn the site into a "Museum […] to elevate that weed-grown, debris-strewn yard […] to the most holy spot in Ireland" (Leonard).

These statements resound with sacramental rhetoric and imagery, demonstrating the influence of Pearse's thinking and writing on the members of the society: the prison, especially the Stonebreakers' Yard, is sacralised by being termed explicitly as a Calvary, and, implicitly, by comparing the Easter Rising rebels with Christ or martyrs—i.e. the idea that "these men died for us". At the same time, through the image chain of Calvary, martyrdom, and salvation, these assertions suggest that the Restoration Society conceived its work as a mission, whereby the 'unfinished business' to be carried out is now the defence of nationalist past from oblivion.
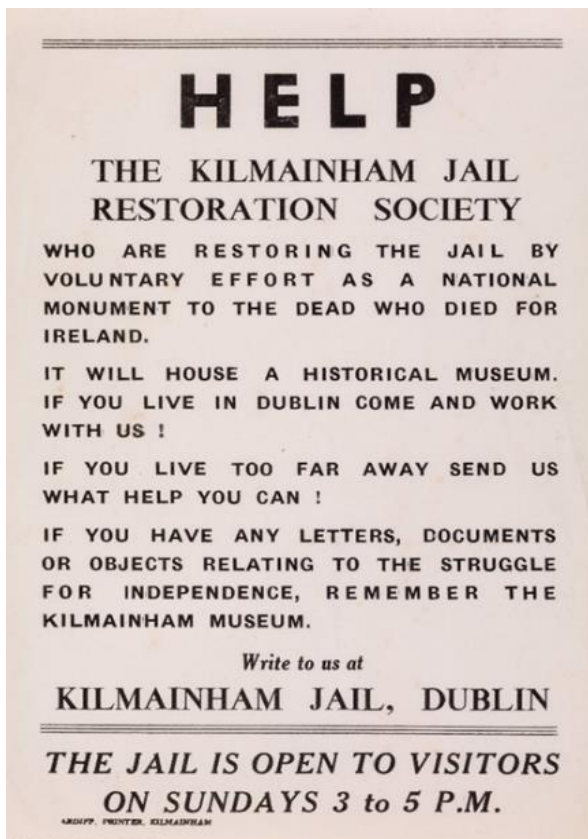

Fig. 2. The flyer released by the Restoration Society in 1958. Courtesy Kilmainham Gaol Museum/OPW (KMGLM.2015.0680).

Leonard's and the volunteers' stated objectives were to save the building from destruction and maintain it as "a Historical Museum" (Leonard; KJRS, *Bastille* 19), where to retrace the history of the country, which—I will argue—coincided not merely with the history of Irish nationalism but with a restrictedly sanitised version of it. And since musealisation is inherently selective (Aykaç 160), evidence of my latter claim lies in the selection of materials, spaces, and narratives chosen to be presented to visitors in the years of the Restoration Society's mandates at Kilmainham Gaol.

The Society's Museum Committee, formally constituted in 1962 to collect museum material and arrange for its preservation and exhibition in the spaces of the Gaol, decided to hang on to certain memories, and not to others, when selecting the artefacts to put on display (cf. Arnold-de Simine 26). First of all, they launched public appeals for donations of material "relating to the struggle for independence" preferably, but not exclusively, from the years 1796-1924 (O'Dwyer 61), further proving that their interest lay in the political history of the Gaol, rather than the penal one. As Sharon MacDonald observes, in many ways, museums and musealised historic sites are institutions of recognition and identity, because, when selecting certain objects for official safe-keeping for posterity and public display, only some narratives or some identities are recognised and affirmed (4): in the case of Kilmainham Gaol, the 'voices' and lives of those prisoners who did not fit in the grand narrative of Ireland's struggle for independence, as seen *through* the prison, were marginalized or excluded from it.

Particularly telling in this regard are the promotional guidebooks published by the Restoration Society since the 1960s, which are indicative of how tours were conducted at the time. Take for instance *Ghosts of Kilmainham*, released in 1963 to raise funds for the "preservation of this monument to Ireland's glorious past" (54). The ghosts of the title are the "many Irish patriots" who still haunt the place and demand to be remembered: "Should not every Irish boy and girl, every Irish man and woman, be grateful for the preservation of this monument to Ireland's glorious past, haunt of the ghosts of so many Irish patriots?" (KJRS, *Ghosts* 54). The booklet is prefaced by Arthur M. Forrester's ballad "The Felons of Our Land", which extols those who rose up against the British and, for this reason, "sleep in dungeons deep / Or flee, outlawed and banned" or "in the convict's dreary cell / Have found a living tomb" (unnumbered page before no. 1). Consistently with such an overtly patriotic premise, Irish history as seen from Kilmainham is presented as a sequence of rebellions since 1796, when the prison "received its first political prisoners", up to the War of Independence. A recurring theme is the ill-treatment of the rebels by the British, which reinforces the impression of an oppressed people in endless revolt: for example, it is said that Michael Davitt "was released after eight years of barbarous ill-treatment in various English jails" (29), while Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa "suffered unspeakable torture for six long years in various English convict prisons" (26). Anne Devlin and Robert Emmett were no luckier. Here, we have another instance of the influential purport of Pearse's retelling of history, in which he commended his predecessors who had advocated open rebellion and inspired the following generations through their self-sacrificing effort (Cooke, *History* 19).

The doctrine of an undying nationalist tradition informs also other guidebooks published by the Restoration Society, such as *The Bastille of Ireland* of 1961, which underwent several revisions until 1982. Its incipit is striking:

> the crime of patriotism has been expiated by many Irishmen in the cells of Kilmainham or in one or other of its execution places. With the exception of Dublin Castle itself, no institution has been more continuously devoted to the eradication of patriotism or to the punishment of those whose crime it was to love their country above themselves. (3)

Then, the narrative unfolds as a list of "the countless dead who suffered here for Ireland" (3), starting with Henry Joy McCracken in December 1796, "possibly the very first of that long procession of patriots to know the dark cells of Kilmainham" (4).

An elegiac mode intrudes the pages of these documents, increasingly so as the death toll recorded in the book mounted. Nevertheless, more interesting within the scope of this article is "the writerly tacitness" (McLoughlin 17) about the Great Famine and the Civil War. *The Bastille* provides no mention of the former, but hardly can we state if silence is here a response to unspeakable trauma, for *Ghosts* does mention the Great Famine through remarks, however, which convey no impression of grief and pain. The 'Black '47' is presented as the year when British *mis*rule reached its nadir to provide readers and visitors to the Gaol with a further instance of why the struggle to overthrow the British yoke was a legitimate war. "Corn crops flourished, but were exported to England, while the Irish people starved" so, from the pages of the *Nation*, Thomas Davis strove to "rouse the Irish people from their slavery" (18).

Equally significant is the studied laconicism that structures the pages dealing with Kilmainham Gaol at the time of the Civil War. In *The Bastille*, there is mention of the Republicans imprisoned and executed there, but the relevant passage ends with what might be defined as a 'note of reconciliation' suggesting that the internecine bloodshed of the conflict bears no connection with the present: "permission", we are informed, "was later given by the Free State government to have their bodies exhumed and given to their relatives for burial elsewhere" (15-16). The authors of *Ghosts* likewise reluctantly address the subject; they recall that during the war "former comrades found themselves fighting against each other" only to suggest that the Irish should not dwell on these memories but move on: "The Civil War chapter in our history is now closed" (54).

As McAtackney writes, "in post-conflict contexts, prisons are some of the most difficult security infrastructure for the state and the public to deal with" ("Archaeology" 4). In the post-war years, Kilmainham Gaol was no exception. The lacunae in the booklets are as telling as two other absences concerning the Restoration Society's treatment of the Civil War: first, we know from a former guide at the Gaol that, in 1982, the Society "still encouraged to avoid discussing the Civil War" (O'Sullivan), for they had promised to the government, many years earlier, that "in order to preserve unity of purpose nothing relating to events after 1921 would be introduced into any activity, publicity or statements in connection with Kilmainham" (Leonard). Second, catalogues in the archives give us plenty of information about the donations to the Gaol in the

earliest decades: many of the donated items dated to or were connected with the Civil War—the Restoration Society decided to store that material, but not to display it. Related material was first displayed in 2022 in the special exhibitions marking the centenary of the conflict: the past years must have added a "balm to the Civil War wounds" (O'Sullivan).

'Wounds' is a keyword here. In the silence surrounding the narrative of the events after 1921, we may grasp the difficulties of the first restorers in dealing with a contentious subject that still evoked painful memories. This might explain why the chosen "unified" narrative of the Gaol revolved around the tales of the 1916 Rising and the nationalist/Republican tradition. The volunteers who restored Kilmainham in the 1960s shared an equivocal belief in the nobility of the physical force tradition, which also constituted a 'common ground' between the different sides of the Civil War: both the Treaty and Anti-Treaty factions believed to have inherited the mission of the 1916 rebels and to uphold their values (Clark 1-17). Therefore, bitter personal memories and sufferings gradually faded into the idea of a greater nationalist tradition, and the men and women who first found good reasons to allow Kilmainham Gaol to fall into ruin set out to restore it and constructed a narrative that overcame many of the representational challenges posed by the history of the site (Cooke, *History* 20; 40).

These challenges, along with new others, still confront the curators and guides of Kilmainham Gaol, but, instead of being evaded, they are dealt with in a way that aims at showing the complexity of narrating contentious heritages such as the Gaol (cf. Logan and Reeves). This is the focus of the next section.

INDIVIDUAL STORIES TO RESTORE COMPLEXITY

Nowadays, the visit to Kilmainham Gaol begins with a guided tour through the spaces of the prison and ends with the visitor following a semi-structured path through the rooms and three floors of the museum—this was built in the 1990s within the jail perimeter in a style that architecturally recalls that of the old buildings. From the courthouse, visitors walk along corridors that used to be overcrowded, cross the Eastern Wing, and then reach the Stonebreakers' Yard and the spot where, in 1922, four anti-Treaty Volunteers were shot by the National Army. Mirror-like, the path inside the museum winds from the first floor dedicated to the penal history of and prison experience at Kilmainham Gaol (particularly in the nineteenth century), through the second one focused on political imprisonment, and culminates in the attic where films that retrace the restoration process alternate with rooms allocated for temporary exhibitions. Thus designed as divided up into two 'stages' that complement each other, the visiting experience invites the tourist to pay considerable attention, at first, to the architecture of confinement and to the physical conditions that the inmates endured (McCorkel and DalCortivo 64). In particular, if during the visit to the internal spaces of the prison there is an attempt to involve visitors by appealing to their emotions— mainly indignation, fear, and empathy—, the itinerary across the museum rooms gives them time to reflect and elaborate such emotions, possibly soliciting visitors to draw

more 'generalised' conclusions about the role of prisons in society and the way of administering criminal justice.

Museumgoers are invited to explore the contradictions of competing criminal justice ideologies. First opened in 1796, Kilmainham Goal was often renovated in the subsequent years according to evolving assumptions about how prison architecture and design could assist the 'spiritual reform' of convicts. In the eighteenth century, for instance, "gloom and the exclusion of the rays of the sun were associated with punishment": therefore, in the old buildings, there were no windows, which were to be introduced at the beginning of the following century by the Board of Superintendence "to remedy, as far as possible, the gloom of the prison" (*KGM* "Swiss Windows for Kilmainham"). This was the first of a long chain of changes that reached its climax during the Victorian Age, when authorities and common people "placed great faith in the power of prison to reform offenders, and regarded prison architecture and design as critical to the process" (*KGM* "The Victorian Prison"). At this time, new wings and features were added to Kilmainham to modernise it after the example of Pentonville, the model for all Victorian prisons, which had been completed in 1842. As explained by both the tour guides and a relevant panel in the museum, "the two great principles underlying all modern prison architecture are separation and inspection" (*KGM* "Separate Confinement"); often, Victorian prison reformers advocated for single-celling to redeem inmates, for single cells prevented noxious social interactions among convicts and encouraged silent contemplation behind locked doors.

At Kilmainham, this resulted in the construction of a Panopticon-looking wing, which combined "separate confinement with the greatest possible level of inspection of prison staff" (*KGM* "The Victorian Prison"): the Eastern Wing added in 1862 is indeed a space that enforced discipline and, ideally, self-centred meditation through surveillance and isolation, for it had a central vantage point from which inmates could be constantly watched, and from which they felt they were always be scrutinised (see fig. 3). During the tour, today's visitors are invited to gaze through the peephole cut into each door and then to step into the cell: from observers, visitors become the observed, feeling on themselves the power of an architecture designed as a tool of corporeal and psychological control—i.e. they feel the anxiety caused by being subject to the institutional, all-seeing gaze (Jarrin 49-59). And, when one learns during the museum visit that such architecture was geared to promoting behavioural and spiritual change, questions may arise about this form of administering punishment as well as the unbalanced relation between institutional state power and its most vulnerable citizens.

Fig. 3. The Eastern Wing added to the Gaol in 1862. Author's collection.

The contradictions and faults of penal systems which were deemed progressive are further highlighted when the narratives provided by the guides and the museum exhibits focus on the hardships experienced by convicts. The story of continued improvement put forward by authorities and prison reformers is belied by repeated tales and proofs of overcrowding and poor sanitary conditions. McCorkel and DalCortivo rightly observe that the source of overcrowding is one of the predominant themes that tour guides discuss as they accompany visitors into the "dark, cramp quarters of the west wing" (65), and that source is often identified with poverty, desperation, and the lack of chances to avoid a life of imprisonment. Emblematically, the nadir in overcrowding was reached during the years of the Great Famine, which pushed starving people to turn into petty criminals to get food and shelter at Kilmainham. The page of the prison register from the so-called 'Black '47' gives us details about the crimes people were imprisoned for: a man jailed for having three geese he could not account for, a young shoemaker for "breaking a window and stealing bread thereout", another for having "bread and butter" in his possession which had been stolen (*KGM* register; see also McCann 39).

From these pieces of historical evidence and the guides' explanations there emerges a narrative of Kilmainham Gaol that differs sharply from the one put forward by the Restoration Society. In the booklets I have already examined, the Great Famine was mentioned to point out the fallacies and brutality of British rule in Ireland, so as to provide further legitimisation to the nationalist struggle. In this case, instead, the focus is on the people trying to survive, of whom we know names and age, and on providing context to their crimes. Efforts to contextualise the crimes of ordinary prisoners and to humanise them by fleshing out their lives as far as possible are the underlying principles of this stage of the visiting experience. Through 'dialogic' use of objects, official

documents, photographs, and explanatory panels (cf. Witcomb), visitors get to know something about the people who ended up at Kilmainham Gaol for non-political crimes. Often, marginalisation from society and poverty are posited as the main causes of these people's imprisonment and, by extension, of the Gaol's frequent overcrowding. In this regard, I have already mentioned that the high rate of female offenders was related to the social stigma they bore, so, now, I would like to focus on the display devoted to mugshots (see fig. 4).

Visitors find it on the first floor of the exhibition: it features the replica of a camera for recording offenders introduced at Kilmainham in the early 1860s, a panel with a brief explanation, and—projected onto the wall—a series of *actual* mugshots taken in the nineteenth century. For sure, this is another instance of how the practice of surveillance, so acutely felt in the Eastern Wing, became pervasive during the Victorian Age. Interestingly, the visitor is also invited to ponder how this practice does not belong exclusively to the past but has evolved throughout time: as the panel reads, it was "reinforced by the introduction of fingerprinting in the 1890s, and revolutionised in our age by the development of the remote-controlled security video camera" (*KGM* "The Mugshot"). Here, questions are raised not only on past forms of administering criminal justice, but on how the principle of inspection now informs society at large.

Fig. 4. This display case shows how inmates were identified starting in the 1860s. Author's collection.

But there is more to be said about this display case, for the mugshots projected onto the wall are tangible materials evoking the intangible heritage of the prisoners' personal stories—or, at least, what of them unfolded at Kilmainham—as each photo is accompanied by a set of information relating the name, age, occupation of the convict and the crime he/she was imprisoned for. This "intangible cultural heritage" (Naguib

2180) conjures narratives of lives of hardships and marginalisation, which left visible marks on the prematurely-aged faces of the photographed and pushed them to commit crimes such as housebreaking, vagrancy, and prostitution. These are the stories of the most vulnerable in society, which could not fit in the grandiose narrative of Kilmainham Gaol as a sacred place: here, the prison is a place evoking shame and humiliation.

Two conclusions might be drawn in this regard: first, the contemporary centrality of the site's penal history may be ascribed to changes in the Irish community's needs and interests if we accept Fiona McCann's argument that recent appalling discoveries concerning places of confinement in Ireland—such as Catherine Corless' findings about the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam—have elicited interest in discovering more about these institutions and their potentially abusive practices (1-2). Second, what needs to be underscored is that the emphasis on personal, multifarious stories of ordinary people allows for the problematisation of certain assumptions: the misfortunes of these convicts are not easily and unquestionably attributed to British misrule, but inserted into a narrative that foregrounds the major social issues of nineteenth-century Ireland as well as the predominant beliefs in the field of criminal justice.

And I believe it to be significant that, as I am about to show, the display of multiple subjective experiences regarding the 'same history' is central also to the part of the visit devoted to political prisoners, where the emphasis on the 'personal dimension' helps complicate received and sanitised interpretations of past events such as the Easter Rising and the Civil War. The curatorial and design choices that characterize the museal spaces on the second floor are geared to assisting to this end. As Laurajane Smith remarks (459-460), materiality is not the only factor that enables visitors to receive information in a museum, for the museum design can lead visitors to a particular understanding of a contested past: it is the case with the exhibition devoted to political prisoners, for one approaches it after visiting the section on nineteenth-century prison experiences and is soon 'confronted' with testimonies and materials that point to the repercussions of the above-mentioned cataclysmic events on the lives of ordinary people and the entire community. The exhibit's layout is characterised by a degree of non-linearity for there are no neat rows nor rigidly straight and restrained layouts (cf. Witcomb 208), but the recurrent juxtaposition of displays and materials that "not only allow the story to be told, but also embody the contradictions of events" (Hennes 137).

The starting point should be the panel "The Rebel Tradition", which discusses Pearse's vision of Irish history as a sequence of nationalist aspirations and self-sacrifices to point out that such tradition has then been challenged by historians since the 1970s, when the outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland made people question the main tenets of militant republicanism. Still, the inscription on the panel ends reminding us that "an understanding of the tradition of Irish nationalism and Republicanism" is vital to developing "fresh perspectives" on Ireland's recent history and, to an extent, this passage of self-reflexivity on the curators' part is revealing of what they want to achieve—not to show just one narrative, but let visitors have their informed opinion on these events by displaying the complexity of the time.

Hence, the section on the Easter Rising is 'introduced' by William Butler Yeats's "Easter, 1916", specifically the lines "All changed, changed utterly / A terrible beauty is

born" (*KGM* "All Changed Utterly"). In this poem, Yeats confesses astonishment at the destruction brought onto Dublin, on how such ordinary men as Connolly and Pearse had been transformed by sacrifice, and, in the fourth stanza, advances the idea that the significance of the Rebels' deeds was not buried with their bones "but flows eternally from their graves and nourishes all those subsequent generations of martyrs who sacrifice themselves for an 'enduring nation'" (Kearney 216-217). At the same time, the oxymoron "terrible beauty", with all its intrinsic contradictions, eschews any exalted celebration of the rebels and eludes the historical judgment on their actions. That Yeats's lines were chosen to open the section on the Rising seems an indication of the desire to overcome the hagiographic mode that often characterises the representation of the event.[5] The lines thus function as a form of mentoring through the display cases on the Rising and its aftermath: these are sections that simultaneously show how hundreds of young would later form "a closely-bonded group [determined] to achieve the Republic" announced in the Proclamation and how this 'great narrative' included or overshadowed a multitude of minor, and often tragic, ones.

Exemplary is the story of May Gibney, who carried dispatches between IRA units during the War of Independence and was a prisoner in Kilmainham during the Civil War; importantly, visitors do not learn only about her life of activism, for they are informed that May was engaged to be married to Dick McKee, a senior member of the Dublin Brigade of the IRA, when he was shot in 1920. The case devoted to her contains a portrait of May proudly wearing her Cumann na mBan uniform[6] as well as the gold ring she received in memory of her fiancé and his friend Peadar: the story of nationalist struggle to be celebrated at the national level is thus exposed also as the story of a personal tragedy for its protagonists. Likewise, of the leaders of the Rising, the curators put on display not only the memorabilia commemorating them, but what they possessed or wrote on the eve of their execution. For example, Michael Mallin's farewell letter from the Gaol to his wife and children is not loaded with the rhetoric of self-sacrifice so typical of Pearse's, for the commandant mainly voices his sadness at the idea that he would not see his family before dying.

Nor are the stories of the 'minor characters' in the narrative of the Easter Rising neglected. A whole case is devoted to the memory of the innocent casualties of the rebellion, to postcards depicting Dublin's ravaged city-centre, and to documents that highlight ordinary people's difficulties in the aftermath. Take for instance Sarah Caffrey's application form to the Rebellion Committee Personal Injuries; she writes that she was standing outside her home on 25 April, 1916, with her baby Christina in her arms, when she was shot in the hand and the bullet penetrated her child's back: Sarah survived but could not work for six months, while the child died. Sarah thus asks for compensation.

And analogous juxtapositions of public and private stories, celebratory or tragic, of people 'for' or of people 'against' a cause, can be found also in the sections devoted to the Civil War and the Gaol's function at the time. Silence is no longer imposed on the

---

[5] I wish to thank Prof. Carla Pomarè for pointing this out to me during a private conversation.
[6] Cumann na mBan is a republican women's paramilitary organisation founded in 1914. Its members were active in the War of Independence and took the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War.

subject, and it is explicitly stated that "the government used Kilmainham as a place of detention for Republican prisoners" and that the first four of the seventy-seven Republicans executed during the internecine conflict were shot there on 17 November, 1922 (*KGM* "The Civil War"). The museum does not take sides validating the goals of either the Republicans or the Free State. Instead, it aims to show the complexity of a period when former allies turned into enemies, its tragic consequences, and how Kilmainham Gaol was again the epicentre of a turning point in Irish history; for, "now, the guards were no longer British soldiers but Free State troops, many of them former comrades of the men they were guarding" (*KGM* "The Civil War").

Artefacts and materials are here mobilized in such a way to shed light on the tragic contradictions informing the War. One of the cases preserves the handmade programme for the commemorations of the Easter Rising held, in 1923, by Republican women prisoners (*Programme*). Writer Dorothy Macardle, then an inmate, said that like her companions she felt a sense of "accumulated tragedy" at Kilmainham Gaol, where the 1916 leaders were executed, but also pride for they were upholding the legacy of the Rising (Smith 42). Yet, as one learns proceeding through the tour, also the supporters and the authorities of the Free State considered themselves as the true heirs of Patrick Pearse and fellow-comrades. The whole section on the Civil War conveys impressions of a time marked by complexity, uncertainty, when things were neither black nor white. This impression is further impressed on the visitor's mind by another excerpt from Yeats's poetry, this time from the sixth section of "Meditations in Time of Civil War", which I quote below:

> We are closed in, and the key is turned
> On our uncertainty; somewhere
> A man is killed, or a house burned,
> Yet no clear fact to be discerned:
> Come build in the empty house of the stare. (*KGM*)

With images of creative domesticity and yearnings for tenderness as opposed to those of enmity and violence, Yeats captured his unease, the complexity of his time and the representational challenges it posed. And 'complexity' and 'challenges' are apt keywords for the contemporary reframing of Kilmainham Gaol: the curators have tried to advance a multifaceted narrative of the prison, as a place of shame and glory, where penal history merges with the history of Irish nationalism, and where the stories of the most vulnerable are now retrieved to complement those of outcast made into heroes through imprisonment and death.

WORKS CITED

Arnold-de Simine, Silke. *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia*. Palgrave, 2013.

Augusteijn, Joost. *Patrick Pearse: The Making of a Revolutionary*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Aykaç, Pinar. "Musealisation as a Strategy for the Reconstruction of an Idealised Ottoman Past: Istanbul's Sultanahmet District as a 'Museum-quarter'." *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2019, pp. 160-177.

Casella, Eleanor C. "Prisoner of His Majesty: Postcoloniality and the Archaeology of British Penal Transportation." *World Archaeology*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2005, pp. 453-467.

Cauvin, Thomas, and Ciaran O'Neill. "Negotiating Public History in the Republic of Ireland: Collaborative, Applied and Usable Practices for the Profession." *Historical Research: the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, vol. 90, no. 250, 2017, pp. 810-828.

Clark, Gemma. *Everyday Violence in the Irish Civil War*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Cooke, Pat. *A History of Kilmainham Gaol 1796-1924*. Office of Public Works, 1995.

---. "Art and Kilmainham Gaol: Negotiating Art's Critical Intervention in the Heritage Site." *Art and Archaeology*, 2014, pp. 83-97.

---. *The Politics and Polemics of Culture in Ireland, 1800-2010*. Routledge, 2021.

De Valera, Éamon. "Speech at the opening of the Kilmainham Gaol Historical Museum". 10 April 1966. https://www.storiesfrom1916.ie/. Accessed 14 Jan. 2022.

Egan, Sean. "Kilmainham Gaol A Labour Of Love 1963." *RTÉ News*, 14 May 1963. https://www.rte.ie/archives/2018/0430/959230-kilmainham-gaol-restoration/. Accessed 9 Sept. 2021.

English, Richard. *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland*. Macmillan, 2008.

Hachey, Thomas E. *Turning Points in Twentieth Century Irish History*. Irish Academic Press, 2011.

Hennes, Tom. "Remembering and Disremembering: A Museum Perspective." *Curator*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2012, pp. 129-138.

Jarrin, Casey A. "The Prison Gallery: Exhibit Collaboration Between Kilmainham Gaol and Alcatraz." *Irish Studies: Geographies and Genders*, edited by Marti D. Lee and Ed Madden, Cambridge Scholars, 2008, pp. 49-59.

Kearney, Richard. *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*. Manchester University Press, 1988.

KJRS [Kilmainham Jail Restoration Society]. *Ghosts of Kilmainham*. Kilmainham Jail Restoration Society, 1963.

---. *Kilmainham: the Bastille of Ireland*. Kilmainham Jail Restoration Society, 1982.

Laird, Heather. *Commemorations*. Cork University Press, 2018.

Leonard, Lorcan. Letter to Sean Dowling, Chairman of the Association of the Old IRA, 9 June 1958.

Lindstrand, Fredrik, and Eva Insulander. "Setting the Ground for Engagement – Multimodal Perspectives on Exhibition Design." *Designs for Learning*, vol. 5, no. 1-2, 2012, pp. 30-49.

Logan, William S., and Keir Reeves. *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'*. Routledge, 2009.

MacDonagh, Oliver. *States of Mind. A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict 1780-1980*. Allen & Unwin, 1983.

MacDonald, Sharon. *A Companion to Museum Studies*. Blackwell, 2006.

McAtackney, Laura. *An Archaeology of the Troubles: The Dark Heritage of Long Kesh/Maze Prison*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

---. "Material and Intangible Interventions as Future-Making Heritage at Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin." *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2019, pp. 120-135.

McBride, Ian R. *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

McCann, Fiona. *The Carceral Network in Ireland: History, Agency and Resistance*. Palgrave, 2020.

McCarthy, Mark. *Ireland's 1916 Rising: Explorations of History-making, Commemoration & Heritage in Modern Times*. Routledge, 2016.

McCorkel, Jill, and Anna DalCortivo. "Prison Tourism in the Age of Mass Incarceration." *Contexts*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2018, pp. 63-65..

McLoughlin, Kate. *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Naguib, Saphinaz-Amal. "Museums, Diasporas and the Sustainability of Intangible Cultural Heritage." *Sustainability*, vol. 5, no. 5, 2013, pp. 2178-2190.

O'Dwyer, Rory. *The Bastille of Ireland. Kilmainham Gaol: From Ruin to Restoration*. History Press Ireland, 2010.

O'Malley-Younger, Alison. "A Terrible Beauty is Bought: 1916, Commemoration and Commodification." *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2016, pp. 455-467.

O'Sullivan, Niamh. *Every Dark Hour: A History of Kilmainham Jail*, foreword by Sinéad McCoole, Liberties Press, 2007.

O'Toole, Fintan. "In A State." *In a State. An Exhibition in Kilmainham Gaol on National Identity*, edited by Jobst Graeve, Dublin Project Press, 1991.

Programme of commemoration held by Republican Women Prisoners of War in Kilmainham on April 24 1923. Kilmainham Gaol Archives, KMGLM 2015.0086.

Reynolds, Paige. *Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Ruczaj, Maciej. "Liturgy of Nation-Formation: Patrick Pearse and the Theological Background of the Easter Rising of 1916: Liturgy of Nation-Formation." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2013, pp. 412-428.

Smith, Laurajane. "Theorizing Heritage and Museum Visiting." *The International Handbook of Museum Studies: Museum Theory*, edited by Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message, John Wiley & Sons, 2015, pp. 459-484.

Smith, Nadia Clare. *Dorothy Macardle: A Life*. Woodfield Press, 2007.

Witcomb, Andrea. "Beyond Sentimentality and Glorification: Using a History of Emotions to Deal with the Horror of War." *Memory, Place and Identity: Commemoration and Remembrance of War and Conflict*, edited by Danielle Drozdzewski *et al.*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 205-220.

Zuelow, Eric. "Enshrining Ireland's Nationalist History Inside Prison Walls: The Restoration of Kilmainham Jail." *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2004, pp. 180-201.

---. *Making Ireland Irish: Tourism and National Identity since the Irish Civil War.* Syracuse University Press, 2009.

Elena Ogliari holds a PhD in Literary and Cultural Studies from the University of Milan and is now a Junior post-doctoral fellow at the University of Eastern Piedmont. She pursues research interests in Ireland's geographies of remembrance and has started a project on the definition of national culture and identity in the periodical literature of post-Independence Ireland. Among her recent publications: the monograph *Birth of an Independent Ireland* (2020) and articles on the Tailteann Games, Dorothy Macardle, and the ideological use of laughter in the revolutionary years.

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3494-1821

elena.ogliari@uniupo.it