

Kilmainham Gaol: Interpreting Irish nationalism and Republicanism

by Pat Cooke

Turning bondage into freedom: 1796-1924

Kilmainham Gaol might well be either a dilapidated ruin or still a functioning prison if it were not for its extraordinary history. Through an uncanny series of coincidences, leading players in the key episodes of armed opposition to British rule in Ireland, the rebellions of 1798, 1803, 1848, 1867 and 1916, were fated to spend time or die within its walls. This sequence of rebellions, culminating in the War of Independence of 1919-21 and the Civil War of 1922-24, constitute the spine of the Irish nationalist and Republican tradition, and ensure Kilmainham's place as the 'Bastille of Ireland', perhaps the most important Irish monument of the modern period.

Yet it was this very history that saw the Gaol consigned to closure, neglect and ruin for over thirty years. During the Civil War of 1922-24, in a yard not far from where fourteen of the leaders of the 1916 Rising had been executed, four young Republican prisoners were shot by fellow-Irishmen of the Free State army in November 1922. Both sides in the Civil War claimed legitimacy from the 1916 Rising. The close juxtaposition of these places of execution within the one building were a source of deep discomfort for the Free State government. It decided to close the Gaol down. Kilmainham's final prisoner was to be its own history. For thirty odd years its doors remained locked, its yards and corridors abandoned to the elements and the thousands of pigeons who made their home there.

But throughout the years of dilapidation that history was carbonising in the imaginations of the revolutionary generation of 1916-24 into a crystalline symbol of the Irish nationalist struggle for independence. Despite the 'unfinished business' of Northern Ireland, the Southern twenty-six county Republic seemed indeed to have achieved the substance of independence (it was declared a Republic in 1949). The bitterness of the Civil War was gradually abating, allowing a perspective to emerge in which all those who had fought for independence could see Kilmainham as the place where the nationalist struggle was most dramatically and summarily represented.

The Kilmainham Gaol Restoration Society was founded in 1960, and set as its ambitious initial goal the restoration of the Gaol to a condition where it could play a central part in the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the 1916 Rising in 1966. Prominent among the men and women who led this massive voluntary undertaking were veterans of the period 1916-24. Driven by a passionate and

patriotic voluntarism, which saw hundreds of men and women give up their spare time to retrieve lovingly this unlovely building from the elements, they achieved their ambition when the President of Ireland, Eamon de Valera, opened their new exhibition in the East wing of the Gaol at Easter 1966. By one of those uncanny coincidences which account for Kilmainham's density of historical association, de Valera had been the very last Republican prisoner released from here in 1924.

Confronting history: 1966-86

The 1966 anniversary marked the apotheosis of the Republican tradition as an object of uninhibited celebration for the majority of Irish people. Almost forty years on, the newspaper and television archive footage of the ceremonies now convey a mood of poignant, Prelapsarian complacency. However, only three years later, in 1969, the North exploded, shattering once and for all any comfortable consensus about the meaning of nationalism and the nature of republicanism that had prevailed in those Easter celebrations.

Inevitably, Irish historical studies were engulfed in the wave of genuine soul-searching and re-evaluation that the Provisional IRA's remorseless campaign of bombing and shooting soon engendered. A landmark was Conor Cruise O'Brien's *States of Ireland*, which appeared in 1974. Here O'Brien, a distinguished historian and at the time a minister in the Republic's government, re-examined his conscience about the nature of modern Irish history. He concluded that the Republican idea of tradition was a pernicious mythology lending unwarranted credibility to the violent campaign of the Provisional IRA in the North. The example of the 1916 Rising, he was now convinced, suggested that the objective of uniting the six counties of Northern Ireland with the twenty-six country Republic could only be achieved through violent struggle by a determined minority. There was no way to discourage this conclusion 'within the framework of a cult of 1916,' supported by the sympathetic ambivalence of the broad mass of the nationalist population. [O'Brien, 150] Moreover, O'Brien was now convinced that the studied detachment of historical discourse could end up inadvertently facilitating the pernicious ambivalence that allowed the cult to thrive. The putative scientific rigour claimed by the historian for his work did not dispense him 'from any need to identify his own point of view, or the factors which may have conditioned it'. [O'Brien, 17]

When other historians and commentators, including F.S.L. Lyons, Ruth Dudley Edwards, and R. F. Foster, joined in the critique of nationalism, it took on, at times, the character of an evangelical mission, branded pejoratively by its opponents (with a capital R) as 'Revisionism'. The debate was by no means confined to the academies; it raged in books, in newspapers, on television,

ensuring that the population of the Republic could not escape the questions and challenges it posed.

It was against the background of this unfolding debate, and the deadly roller-coaster of the Northern conflict, that I became curator of Kilmainham Gaol in 1986. My first impression, however, was that the Gaol seemed to have successfully deflected the clamour of the historical debate raging beyond its formidable, thirty-foot high walls. Most of the voluntary guides who had conducted visitors around the building were proud and unapologetic nationalists and republicans. The exhibition, which had stood more or less unaltered since 1966, left no doubt as to the nature of the building as a shrine to patriotic sacrifice, and ringingly endorsed the tradition of physical force resistance to British Rule in Ireland. The defiant tone of this interpretation was caught succinctly in a laconic caption to one of the objects on display: 'Landmine. Used against British Forces, West Cork, 1920. Failed to go off.'

However, as a result of the questions posed almost daily by the spectacle of political violence in the North, the tacit sympathy of the Irish people for this view of their political inheritance could no longer be taken for granted. Under the stresses of the revisionist debate, there was a real possibility that Kilmainham's status as a monument would be attenuated to that of a sub-cultural shrine where only indefatigable republicans would come to renew their faith. There was evidence, particularly in the increasingly low-key approach being taken to celebrations each April of the anniversary of the 1916 rising, that a growing number of Irish people were becoming hostile to or apathetic towards the problems presented by nationalism and republicanism. The challenge that faced the state heritage agency, for whom I worked, was to ensure that Kilmainham remained inclusive in its appeal and central to a consideration of the core issues of modern Irish history. In our favour was one inescapable reality about the Gaol: here the nationalist and republican ideology could be encountered in a distinctive, intense and authentic form; here that tradition had found its ineluctable *sense of place*.

One thing seemed clear, therefore, at the outset: the only valid strategy would be one that forged access and sought inclusiveness and engagement: Kilmainham would have to embrace the spirit of questioning, uncertainty and exploration that characterised the evolving mood of Irish society itself. Instead of the *explication* that had hitherto informed the site's interpretation, a spirit of *exploration* of themes, issues and meanings would have to be introduced.

Seeing history: Art and interpretation

However the practical means of pursuing this goal were by no means immediately obvious. But when I was approached in 1989 by Brian Hand, a

young Irish artist burning with an idea for an installation in Kilmainham, it soon became clear that art and artists could play a major role in forging that spirit of experimentation and exploration.

The essential freshness of Hand's approach lay in his capacity to see through the Gaol's overt nationalist symbolism and visualise it in a radically new way. What he saw was simply what was there: an empty prison, a building capable of an aesthetic and philosophical interpretation that complemented, and substantially modified, its political iconography. Architecturally, Kilmainham is part of a generic penological tradition spanning the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What is typical about the building is the way it expresses a rationalist, utilitarian faith in the technological capacity of architecture to engineer virtue in humanity, a faith shared widely by governments in Europe and America in the nineteenth century. Kilmainham, in other words, could be read in a way that transcended its purely nationalist symbolism and be seen as part of a wider European tradition of thinking on crime and punishment.

With sponsorship from the Irish Arts Council, Brian took up a six months residency in the Gaol. The exhibition took the form of a set of installations in the cells of the Gaol's east wing. This wing had been added in the 1850s at the height of the Victorian enthusiasm for building prisons on the Pentonville model. Hand's installation raised issues of power and control through visibility, making connections with the all-seeing eye of the Masonic tradition, and Jeremy Bentham's radical idea of the prison as exemplified in his Panopticon, which placed the governor and his staff in the role of

unobserved observers. Elements of the exhibition were positioned within the open space of the wing. In this way the installation acquired a subversive quality through the way it surrounded and inter-wove visually with the unaltered 1966 exhibition occupying the open floor of the wing. Many visitors were disconcerted by the juxtaposition. Kilmainham, after all, was a place which had hitherto been presented, by means of the guided tour and the exhibition, in terms of a prescriptive nationalist narrative and a selective and pre-determined set of meanings. By raising the penological dimension of its history in visually complex terms that contrasted heavily with the conventional museum display of the main exhibition, Hand's installation raised the possibility that the history of this building was more complex and multi-layered than hitherto presented.

It also brought to light for the first time a major area of invisibility in the Gaol's own history. Hitherto the interpretation had concentrated almost exclusively on the story of the nameable heroes and their struggle for Irish



Figure 1 The East Wing

freedom. It was almost as if the Gaol existed purely as a kind of backdrop to the drama of their courage, the Golgotha of their sacrifice. But here, after all, was the County of Dublin Gaol, which had been built with the intention of containing and subjecting to reform the common people convicted before the law. When we looked into this history we soon discovered that two remarkable episodes in the social history of modern Ireland were reflected in the story of Kilmainham's common convicts. Over 6,000 inmates of Kilmainham had been transported to Australia in the early nineteenth century. At the height of the Great Famine in the late 1840s the annual number of prisoners climbed from an average annual total of about seven hundred to over 9,000 in 1850, reflecting the desperation of people who sought imprisonment for the life-giving fare of a paltry prison ration. When we later came to design a new exhibition on the Gaol's history the decision to give prominence to the story of the common prisoners amounted to an exercise in revisionism: the tempering of the place's heroic symbolism by highlighting the fate of ordinary men and women convicts as a significant strand in its history.

The most important consequence of the Hand exhibition was that it sent out a message to the artistic community at large that possibilities of access and engagement existed at Kilmainham Gaol and were welcomed. Over the coming years the Gaol became the scene of sporadic, unprogrammed artistic happenings. These ranged from a staging of Shakespeare's 'Tempest' and Handel's opera 'Tancred', to acting as venue for the annual Sculpture in Context show (1998) and Beckett's play 'Catastrophe' (1999). We also, in association with the Irish Prison Education Service, have developed a series of annual art-shows displaying work produced by prisoners in jails throughout Ireland. This tapping into the profoundly moral implications of Kilmainham as a prison has helped to break down the illusory barrier between heritage and contemporary life. Virtually all of the issues surrounding imprisonment can be encountered in Kilmainham's history as a penal institution, including capital punishment.

Perhaps the single most important artistic event to-date was a major art show entitled 'In a State' which was held in the Gaol during the summer of 1991, the year Dublin was chosen as European Cultural Capital. The show involved specially commissioned work from twenty one leading Irish artists from north and south of the border, and from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds. In his preface to the exhibition catalogue, Fintan O'Toole wrote of how Ireland was a country with 'an unpredictable past'. Artists, he pointed out, 'exist in constant



Figure 2 The Hand Exhibition

tension between heritage and culture, between the forms and feelings that they inherit from tradition and the living confrontations with change that they have to create themselves'. [O'Toole, 14] Kilmainham Gaol was a place of heritage attempting to become a cultural space, its history an anxious ingredient in contemporary Irish consciousness.

Once this pattern of artistic intervention became established, it played a vital role in shaping new audiences for Kilmainham and in creating a confidence that the heritage of nationalism and republicanism could be questioned on its most hallowed ground. From a starting base of 14,000 visitors in 1986 the visitor numbers climbed steadily through the nineties until, over the past three years, we have consistently achieved annual visitor numbers in the 100,000-110,000 range.

Identifying difference: the sense of place

Part of Kilmainham's complexity as a cultural space is that it is a monument containing a museum. As a building, its history is specific: men and women were imprisoned *here*; Patrick Pearse spent his last hour writing a letter to his mother in *this* cell; men were shot here-- in *this* yard-- against *that* wall over there. In such places people talk more readily of ghosts than in conventional museums. The stories they have to tell are



Figure 3 Exercise Yard

particular, atmospheric, emotive, tendentious, exclusive. Perhaps this is how places manage to convey differences of culture and ideology far more powerfully than is capable of being articulated through museum collections and presentations of a synoptic kind--of the kind found, for example, in national museums. The distance between places gives a palpable physical dimension to cultural difference—it is the actual distance between two points on a map: identity as circumscribed by domain, territory, geography.

Thus to travel, in either direction, between Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin and, for example, Mount Stewart, Co. Down, home of the Londonderry family¹, is to experience more than the abstract sense of the difference between nationalism and unionism: it is a journey in real time between focal points of two opposing tribal identities. Travelling to or between such historic sites involves, if not always an acceptance, at least a recognition of their self-validating and often mutually intractable identities as places. Kilmainham remains a place crystallising the

¹ The Londonderry (Stewart) family were landed magnates from County Down in Northern Ireland. The family initially acquired lands in the seventeenth century plantation of Ulster. One of the family, Viscount Castlereagh (1769-1822), was Chief Secretary for Ireland 1798-1801 and British foreign secretary, 1812-22. The seventh Marquis Charles Stewart (1878-1949) was chairman of the Ulster Unionist Council during the Home Rule crisis of 1912-14, and later a Minister of Education in the Six County Unionist Government.

tradition of nationalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, while Mount Stewart retains its high unionist symbolism.

It is Kilmainham's, symbolic resonance that explains the organic nature of the collection it houses. It would not now possess one of the best collections of nationalist/republican memorabilia in the country if those who donated this material had not perceived Kilmainham as a fitting reliquary. This is the yard where Joseph Plunkett was executed on 4 May, 1916, and here are the spectacles he took from his brow as one of his last earthly acts before facing a firing squad. The objects, and the space which contains them, work together to form a powerful matrix of testimony and belief.

So there was a central paradox at work in Kilmainham: its value as a place where real and hard questions could be meaningfully asked about difficult and unresolved issues of Irish identity depended on the visitor's fully appreciating its nature as a shrine. With its powerful and authentic stories and associations, the Gaol experience offered no simple dialectical solutions to such questions. It is one thing to describe nationalist passion as a form of delusion in a discursive essay; it is another thing to stand on the spot where a man was shot by firing squad and say to yourself: 'this man died for a delusion'. If you stand there, you are confronted less by an idea, than by the meaning of an individual life and its extinction. The situation is more palpably tragic, less glibly amenable to deconstructive analysis.

This complex of issues had to be confronted strategically when in 1992 we set out to replace the 1966 exhibition with a major new exhibition in a purpose-built exhibition space within the Gaol's walls. As the person responsible for initiating this process, I saw it as essential that the values guiding the selection of objects and the exhibition design be exposed to rigorous analysis and discussion. A museum advisory group, consisting of three distinguished Irish academics, the curator of the Museum of Religion in Glasgow Mark O'Neill, the architect, designer, three of our guide staff, and myself met on two occasions to define the guiding principles of the exhibition. The first meeting took place in October 1994, just after the declaration of a cease-fire by the Provisional IRA. The discussions were taped and transcribed. Each participant was then given an opportunity to contribute towards a statement of principles that would constitute the core values of the exhibition.

The fundamental question was soon enough identified: against the background of the revisionist debate, should the treatment take a consciously problematising approach to the presentation of nationalism, or to what extent should the telling of the story remain faithful to those venerational impulses that had ensured Kilmainham's status as a monument in the first place?

Mark O'Neill put the case for accentuating the emotive dimension of the Gaol's history very well:

Can I say something about individuals and heroes, because I know the current historical trend is to question all of this. But I think you have to give the heroic, and do it in a really emotional way. The intense emotional attachment to the hero is done in story and song, and I think you have to use the great tradition of lament, and do it explicitly and consciously. I would do a shrine room with the candles and music, the works! What you do with that emotion when you arouse it is another big question, and you can question it after, but people have a right to expect it, they come to this place to have that feeling, and if...all you give them is a bit of cerebral challenging, a half-hour TV documentary [it's not enough]. The feelings are legitimate, they're part of the culture. Just because you don't agree with them doesn't mean they don't have them. So let them have them, let them mourn their heroes.

He was emphatic that 'The exhibition has to be a moral and sensory statement as well, to enable people to have feelings, and thoughts about feelings. If it is not a sensory and emotional experience you won't create the effective receptivity to new ideas. If somebody is moved, they'll listen.'

The discussion then moved on to the central issue of whether the exhibition should, following the revisionist argument, seek to problematise its subject. Here the key contribution came from Kevin Whelan, now Director of the Keough Notre Dame Centre, Dublin, when he insisted that 'there is now for the first time a generation who are fundamentally illiterate about these issues...They haven't a clue about a traditional nationalist narrative. So if you talk about confronting them, or problematising a nationalist narrative, you're talking about something which is irrelevant, because you're talking about a generation that has no knowledge of that tradition.' But was this anything more than mere assertion? We decided to test it. One Saturday afternoon we dipped into our audio-visual budget for the exhibition to send a camera crew out onto the busiest shopping street in Dublin to ask a random sampling of people of varying ages the following question: 'Can you name the seven signatories to the 1916 Proclamation of Independence?' Only one person named all seven, most only got as far as two or three. Back in 1966 the names of the seven signatories were hallowed names on the lips of most of the population. The Proclamation, reproduced in poster-size, was in itself a national icon and hung in many homes. The story of the leaders and their sacrifice was taught religiously in most schools; the post office even produced a set of stamps featuring portraits of each. Now, in 1994, only one young man could name them, and even men in their fifties and sixties struggled

to recollect. (An edited version of this vox-pop was subsequently incorporated into the final section of the exhibition.)

While this exercise may not have been strictly scientific, it provided sufficient basis to define the main thrust of the exhibition: it would strive to reveal the tradition of Irish nationalism and republicanism *in* its own terms— if not *on* its own terms—to an audience who were no longer familiar with them. For how are we to understand the power of a tradition or an ideology unless we understand its emotional content? George Orwell wrote in 1941 that ‘The energy that actually shapes the world springs from emotions—racial pride, leader-worship, religious belief, love of war—which liberal intellectuals mechanically write off as anachronisms, and which they have usually destroyed so completely in themselves as to have lost all power of action.’ [Orwell, 168]

The interesting thing here was how all of us, both curators trained as historians and practicing academic historians, felt the academic approach to history to be inadequate in the three-dimensional context of historic space. We cannot presume, outside the elite environment of the lecture hall, upon the effectiveness of the problematising approach to history. That which the academic mind finds fascinating is all too easily perceived by the non-initiated as a dialectical handful of dust, a suspension of value, resolution and catharsis—the very elements we associate, not with a scholarly, but with a dramatic or artistic approach to truth. The mediation of history in a popular context requires, in other words, a more imaginative approach than a purely dialectical method is capable of delivering.

But was there not a danger that this more emotive approach to the subject might result, however inadvertently, in a modernised version of that nationalist cult which O’Brien had identified as a pernicious feature of Irish nationalist culture in the seventies? The answer lay partly in an objection to the implicitly patronising nature of the proposition: that ordinary people, lacking the critical intellectual apparatus of the trained historian, remained vulnerable to ideological manipulation in a way that required the patrician vigilance of historians to moderate. Against this it could be argued that Ireland had moved on a lot in the intervening twenty years: it was now a far more secularised and better educated society than in the seventies. It was now possible to trust people to make their own sense of their own history.

Emotion and perspective: the new exhibition

Yet there was no room for complacency. Even as Mark O’Neill called for an exhibition that dealt honestly with the emotional content of history, he nevertheless cautioned that ‘you have to take responsibility for every emotion you create.’ Having decided on a non-deconstructive approach to the nationalist

and republican tradition, it was necessary to provide a means by which the visitor could find some reflective distance from the subject. We decided that we would seek to achieve this not through a problematising narrative but through the formal structure of the exhibition itself.

Our guide here was David Brett, who in his book 'The Construction of Heritage' offered the first substantial critique of the effects of the heritage industry in Ireland. Brett insists that the meaning of a heritage experience is inextricably bound up with the way it is spatially deployed. He calls this *narrative topology*, which he defines as 'the arrangement of spaces and the connections between them such that they set up, suggest or assert relationships between whatever is displayed in those spaces.' He applied this analytical tool with particular trenchancy to the Ulster American Folk Park in Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland. He found the rigid linear pattern in which the elements of the experience are laid out coercive. The visitor is not offered the opportunity of stepping outside the physically rigid structuring of the narrative in a way that would afford a critical perspective on what happens to be a tendentious presentation of history (the Ulster Presbyterian experience of emigration to America, with little reference to the Catholic Irish experience). He proposes a much freer flow pattern within heritage spaces, of 'confronting the visitor with alternative possibilities'; in this way it is the visitors who 'create the integration and integrity of the experience'[Brett, 163].



Figure 4 The new exhibition

The non-directive requirements implicit in this approach led to a specific direction to the designer that the exhibition was to take a free-form modular approach which avoided the chronological time-tunnel formula typical of so many historical displays. The new exhibition at Kilmainham allows visitors to move freely amongst the various themes and display structures; elements seen earlier can be re-visited, and there is no requirement to start at any particular point in the chronology. The second floor of the exhibition building is a viewing platform entirely free of exhibition, from which one can look down upon the main section of the exhibition on the first floor, dealing with the critical 1916-24 period. The intention behind these spatial deployments is to place the visitor in a position to exercise a distancing perspective over the structure and content of the exhibition he or she has just experienced at close quarters, while attempting to make transparent the formal processes by which the exhibition team exercised its value judgments.

Does it succeed? In the visitor exit surveys we have carried out specifically

on the exhibition many visitors have complained about inadequate sign-posting and a feeling of disorientation. This we have attempted to address by introducing additional elements of sign-post at critical points. We are determined, however, to keep faith as far as is feasible with the non-directive structure as it constitutes a core interpretative value directed at reinforcing the imaginative sovereignty of the visitor. Against that, the feedback to the emotional candor of the exhibition style has been overwhelmingly positive. The majority of visitors leave Kilmainham moved or impressed in some way.

Conclusion

What all of this amounts to is not so much a series of achievements as experimental elements in an unfolding process. The role of artistic intervention, temporary exhibitions and the general preparedness to entertain other forms of engagement with the meaning of the place is to sustain an alert spirit of experimentation as the essence of the site's interpretation. Only if Kilmainham Gaol remains a place driven by a spirit of experimentation can it remain inclusively engaged with the evolving exploration of identity and difference in Ireland.