
Living Inside: Displaying difficult subjects and working with academic institutions

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Living Inside: Six voices from the history of Irish prison reform was an exhibition at Kilmainham Gaol from February to June 2019. Forming part of a five-year Wellcome Trust-funded project, 'Prisoners, Medical Care and Entitlement to Health in England and Ireland, 1850–2000', it was curated by UCD Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Dr Oisín Wall and co-curated by the project's Principal Investigator, Associate Professor Catherine Cox of the UCD Centre for the History of Medicine in Ireland, and by visual artist Dr. Sinead McCann. This article discusses the Kilmainham Gaol Museum's motivation for engaging with the project and how the challenge of presenting the difficult subject of recent prisoners' histories shaped the exhibition. The article will also discuss how museum partnerships with third-level educational institutions can enable visitors to engage with the latest academic research in a stimulating way.

Founded in 1796, Kilmainham Gaol is among the earliest modern prisons in Ireland, with its 1862 East Wing reflecting nineteenth century ideas on prison reform that continue to cast a long shadow. The Gaol was also a central location for the struggle for Irish independence between 1916 and 1921. Over the last two decades, the Museum has sought to interpret its resulting iconic significance by interweaving this with other stories, to provide a long view on the Gaol's position in Irish social and penal history. This has included revealing the site as a place where criminal prisoners have been incarcerated. As a result, it now offers unique

and at times uncomfortable insights into poverty, social exclusion and transgressive behaviour in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Although the Museum's particular remit is to focus on the period pre-dating the 1924 closure of the Gaol, its Exhibition Policy explicitly recognises its 'unique position within the Irish museum landscape as a space where members of this extremely marginalised group can tell their story'.¹ The purpose of this policy is to develop the Museum as a space where people can reflect on contemporary as well as on historical prisoners' lives. To that end, it has partnered over several years with the Irish Prison Education Service to host exhibitions of art created by both current and former prisoners.

Living Inside was an unprecedented opportunity to build on this work, linking historical and recent prisoner experience through the sustained, rigorous and sensitive scholarship delivered by Catherine Cox and her team. As their partner, the Museum provided expertise on object display, conservation, inter-museum loans and exhibition logistics. Most importantly for Cox's 'Prisoners, Medical Care and Entitlement' project, the Museum provided space for public impact, attracting, as it transpired, approximately sixty thousand visitors while the exhibition was in place. Although the Museum was initially cautious about hosting an exhibition produced by academics accustomed to writing for fellow



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scholars, its concerns were quickly dispelled as the exhibition planning process got underway: it was clear that the UCD team both shared Museum staff commitment to producing a challenging exhibition and had a wealth of prior project experience in successfully engaging diverse participants. A former curator at London's Science Museum, Oisín Wall's accessible writing style was complemented by masterful exhibition planning by Ann Scroope² and graphic design by Wendy Williams.

The project team were confronted with three challenges concerning the interpretation of the complex subject of recent prison history. Firstly, stemming from the last two decades of revelations resulting from both a growing openness to discourse and from the state's Commissions of Inquiry, the Irish public is particularly aware of and sensitive to a history of institutional abuse that has impacted prisoners' lives.³ Secondly, the theme is inter-connected with a wide range of other potentially sensitive topics, including for

example suicide, self-harm, crime, drugs, and the transmission of diseases including HIV.

The third concern arose from the potential for a confrontational audience reaction that might result from the comparisons that the exhibition would draw between historical and contemporary prisoners. While Kilmainham Gaol is treated as an historic artefact, the nearby Mountjoy Prison, which opened twelve years earlier than the East Wing (in 1850) and where similar disciplinary practices were adopted, still operates and is one of the largest prisons within the state. As in the nineteenth century, the majority of the contemporary prison population comes from the most socially deprived sections of society; many struggle with mental health and addiction issues; and the prison system's ability to reform or rehabilitate remains questionable. Despite these comparisons, visitors to Kilmainham Gaol do not often empathise with contemporary prisoners in the same way as they do with historical figures. While they may feel compassion, for example, for those imprisoned as a result of theft during the Famine or for the executed leaders of the Easter Rising, that compassion may not be extended to victims of modern-day social problems such as those mentioned above.



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Focusing on these three challenges when selecting the core exhibition message, the team settled on a foundational idea: that visitors should leave the exhibition knowing that prisoners are human. The resulting exhibition content centred on Wall's research on the Prisoners' Rights Organisation (PRO) which campaigned for prison reform during the 1970s and 1980s. Part of the Organisation's focus was to shift public opinion by moving away from representing prisoners as violent and animalistic, towards enabling their re-conception as normal people, with human rights, whose lives had been shaped by difficult situations. PRO smuggled out prisoners' letters highlighting the conditions in which they were living; held press conferences with prisoners' families; supported and publicised court cases taken by prisoners against the state; and took part in, and publicised the reports of, coroners' inquests when prisoners had died. As a result of the PRO campaign, by the end of the 1970s Irish discourse on prisoners had been transformed.⁴

During planning meetings, the project team decided that the exhibition would reflect PRO's approach, by exploring important events in prison history through the stories of individuals. After much discussion the content was winnowed down to the stories of six people whose lives had been entwined with the history of prison reform in Ireland. These were Danny Redmond, a prisoner whose campaign for basic human rights had led to his spending years in military custody in the Curragh Camp; Karl Crawley, a prisoner with severe mental health issues, who petitioned the European Commission on Human Rights alleging that his treatment in the Irish prison system amounted to torture; Derek Cummins, the first person to die of AIDS in the Irish prison system; Margaret Gaj, a well-known restaurant-owner sentenced to a year in prison for campaigning for better healthcare for prisoners; Anne Costello, who has taught in Mountjoy Prison since the 1980s; and Seán Reynolds, a prison officer in Mountjoy from the 1970s to the 2000s.

The team used these human stories and the exhibition's subjects' relatable experiences to convey historically significant events. Each was illustrated with contextual and portrait photographs and by objects conveying the ordinary



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aspects of prison life. Narrative text included a poem written by a dying prisoner; and there were oral history accounts provided by subjects and their friends. Through their experiences the exhibition explored how the prison system has changed; improvements and mistakes that have been made; and the very real effect that these have had on people's lives.

If the core message of the exhibition – that prisoners are human – revealed a pre-conception on the part of the project team that the audience's attitudes to contemporary prisoners would be negative, it appears to have been apposite. Of over 800 respondents who returned feedback forms, 79% said that the exhibition had changed the way that they thought about the treatment of prisoners. In response to a question concerning how the exhibition had made them think differently about prisoners themselves, visitors clearly conveyed the impact of the exhibition's emphasis. Their answers echoed the words of

Danny Redmond: 'The most frustrating aspect of our few demands is that they are basic human rights, nothing more.'⁵ They included:

I found it engaging because prisoners are human.

Prisoners are human and they deserve to be treated like that.

Prisoners are people too + are entitled to Human rights.⁶

Conclusion

This article has described a recent exhibition in Kilmainham Gaol, made possible by rigorous academic research undertaken by UCD, that has contributed to the Museum's delivery on its commitment to enabling prisoners and others affected by the Irish penal system to tell their own stories. It has furthermore helped the Museum to fulfil its aim of developing the Gaol's interpretation to both include and extend beyond the period of the Easter Rising, War of Independence and Irish Civil War. Through its location within the site, *Living Inside* successfully linked historical prisoner experiences with those of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; and did so in a way that challenged

visitor preconceptions about contemporary prisoner identities.

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Notes

1. 'Museum Exhibition Policy'. 2018. Dublin: Kilmainham Gaol.
2. www.scroope.com
3. Pine, Emilie. 2011. *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 20–43.
4. Wall, Oisín. 2019. 'Embarrassing the State': The "Ordinary" Prisoner Right Movement in Ireland, 1972–6' *o (o)*: 1–23.
5. Anon. 1973. 'Letter from Portlaoise – Hoping for a New Deal'. *Evening Herald*, 8 September 1973.
6. Anon. 2019. *Living Inside* Comment Cards. Dublin: Kilmainham Gaol Museum. Unpublished.