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## "Our Barbed Wire Ivory Tower": Republican and Irish Republican Army Prison Writing, 1973-1999

Lachlan E. Whalen

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"OUR BARBED WIRE IVORY TOWER":  
REPUBLICAN AND IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY PRISON WRITING, 1973—  
1999

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Connecticut, 1991  
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This dissertation, submitted by Lachlan E. Whalen in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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Republican Army Prison Writing

Department English

Degree Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

A critique of the notion that both prisons and prison literature are monolithic entities, this dissertation demonstrates the shaping power of individual historical moment and physical conditions of confinement upon the literary production of political incarceration in the North of Ireland. Though the writings of political prisoners like Gerry Adams, Roseleen Walsh, and Bobby Sands are separated only by a matter of a few years, the marked difference in their works is testament to the impact of place and individual prison regime upon each author. The material is approached in an eclectic fashion, with attention paid to the Hegelian dialectic observable in the writings as well as to motifs reminiscent of Native American trickster stories. Because it is produced within a special matrix-- at once removed from the bounds of everyday society, yet also within the undiluted heart of that society as replicated in its disciplinary structure-- prison writing by its very nature is able to cast light upon subjects quite external to the physical prison cell, subjects that may be invisible to those outside.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Despite the recent rise in the popularity of post-colonial literature around the world, one needs to look no farther than the database of the Modern Language Association to witness academia's failure to address writings of political prisoners in a meaningful way. A search<sup>1</sup> of the MLA database (1990-present) reveals four hundred seventeen entries related to the topic of prison literature. For those concerned with resistance literature in general as a tradition of criticism, this at first sounds promising; however, it soon becomes apparent that the vast majority of these articles are more concerned with fictional or metaphorical incarceration (Dickens' *Dorrit* seems to feature prominently) than with the flesh-and-blood former denizens of Robbin Island.

Attempting to narrow the field to political prisoners produces more alarming results: from 1963 to the present, only fifty-one articles about or related to this topic were produced. Breaking down this statistic further, it is interesting to note that in the volatile years between 1963 and 1990 only seventeen articles were written, the remaining thirty-four appearing in the years since 1990. Throughout the decades in which apartheid was at its height, the war in Northern Ireland was at its fiercest, and the conflicts in Nicaragua and El Salvador were at their peak, literary critics remained virtually silent with regard to those authors imprisoned for political reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> Search conducted 18 January, 2001.



Though statistically the (still inadequate) number of articles written in the past ten years is double that written in the previous twenty-seven, little comfort can be taken in academia's cowardice in coming to a cause like that of Nelson Mandela at so late an hour. It is appalling that in some instances universities and the literary criticism spawned within them have lagged behind even multinational corporations in paying heed to human rights in general.<sup>2</sup> To illustrate, as a student at Boston University I was shocked to hear that my school was heavily invested in South African corporations even at as late a stage as 1988. In addition, this was at a time when political detentions were at an all-time high: J. U. Jacobs reports that between 12 June 1985 and September 1988 32,000 people were imprisoned in South Africa under Emergency regulations ("Confession" 115). Nor could it be claimed that the issue was one of little interest to the surrounding community: the city of Boston had passed binding legislation to divest all of its investments from South Africa in 1984 (Love 38).

Though perhaps more flagrant an example than most, the aforementioned case is symbolic of the slavish dependency of the modern academy as a whole on capitalist ideology: money to prop up a privileged facade of academic freedom was clearly more important than making a statement with regard to the literal freedom of black South Africans. With this in mind, it is not by chance that the (relative) explosion of articles about South African prison writing coincides with the demise of apartheid. The last eight political prisoners left Robbin Island on 25 May 1991 (Jacobs, "Narrating" 75): the literary critics have come to the situation only now that it is safe to do so. Their articles can

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<sup>2</sup>Nor can it be claimed that there was a lack of available prison writing, even in the early 1980s. Wole Soyenka's *The Man Died* (1972), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained* (1981) Naidoo's *Island in Chains* (1982), and Bobby Sands' *Skylark Sing Your Lonely Song* (1983) are only a few examples of prison literature from around the world in print at the time.

now be written about a time conveniently distant, and their corporate-sponsors-by-proxy can invest without guilt, or rather, without image-damaging publicity.<sup>3</sup>

It comes as no surprise that the writings of those imprisoned for their involvement (or alleged involvement) in armed campaigns are treated with wariness, and indeed, it is often difficult to find a critic who will explore the works of this sort of resistance writer at all.<sup>4</sup> A case in point is Bobby Sands. Despite international fame as an Irish Republican Army hunger striker elected to the British Parliament while in prison, and despite the existence of an extensive corpus of his prison writings, there is only one article about him listed in the MLA database. Furthermore, this article ("Bobby Sands: Ethnic Culture Hero and Sociopolitical Symbol" by Seamus Metress) is mainly a synopsis of the general impact of the 1980/1 hunger strikes, and merely reproduces one of Sands' poems to show Bobby's awareness of "the Irish struggle in an international context" (Metress 4). No further explication of the poem (or any other of Sands' writings) appears.

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<sup>3</sup> The latter may perhaps explain the notable absence of any mention of Northern Ireland in *The Oxford History of Prison* (1995). Despite the fact that thousands were interned or imprisoned by the British Government in POW camps, prison ships and in cellular confinement (the H Blocks mainly built to house POWs in this fashion), the book remains strangely silent in both its chronological examination of penal developments as well as in a chapter devoted entirely to political detention.

<sup>4</sup> Moral opposition to any form of violence is of course, understandable and in most cases, praiseworthy. Yet opposition to armed struggle should not mean wholesale refusal to engage with its literary production. One does not need to agree with a viewpoint in order to comment on it. This is certainly the stance of respected non-governmental human rights organizations such as Amnesty International. While recognizing the fact of politically-motivated incarceration in general, Amnesty makes a distinction between what it terms "prisoners of conscience" and prisoners who may have engaged in violent political acts. Aid is offered to both: the organization demands unconditional release for the former and fair trials for the latter. Furthermore, it must be remembered that it is often the refusal of the privileged to engage in meaningful dialogue with those of disparate views that *leads* to armed struggles in the first place (whether or not one considers this justified), as was the case in the present incarnation of "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland. Finally, one must beware of opportunistic invocations of a "non-violent" stance: is there not hypocrisy in a state that decries "the men of violence" while gunning down unarmed civil rights protestors (as was seen in the Bloody Sunday massacre in Northern Ireland)? When a "non-violent" ideology is used to repress (through inaction or otherwise), the sincerity of that ideology must be called into question.

Yet, perhaps critical silence with regard to resistance writers like Sands is something of a blessing in disguise to the works themselves; for, when these authors *are* examined they are frequently rejected as mere propagandists, writers whose scant artistic talents are tainted by militant political connections. Sometimes they are dismissed as common criminals and "terrorists" before their writings are actually examined. American playwright Herb Greer treats Bobby Sands in this fashion, arguing "The suicidal terrorists have reaped praise from many quarters, some predictable, others surprising, on the grounds that their 'sincerity' is somehow worthy of 'respect' and makes them 'right' in some way" (55). In the case of Sands and other Irish political prisoners, the British Government's censorship not only of the writings, but also of media coverage of "the Troubles" in general certainly was and is meant to encourage this view.

To judge writings without reading them would be comic—like the critics in Swift's satires, a familiarity with a work's table of contents alone apparently is deemed sufficient-- did it not so closely and tragically mirror the judicial system set up to deal with political offenders in Northern Ireland. Under the Diplock courts,<sup>5</sup> 80% of convictions come as a result of the testimony of a member of the Security Forces that the suspect had "confessed" to the crime in question. This conviction is handed down even though, in the words of David Lowry (barrister and law professor at Queen's University, Belfast), in "80% of these cases no other evidence of any sort is adduced" (4). In the same way that British courts judge a person suspected of political offenses, so too do literary critics often judge them and their writings on the uncorroborated testimony of others.

Even those who are supportive of resistance writers tend to oversimplify the cultural, historical, and political differences that shape these authors'

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<sup>5</sup> So named after their introduction by Lord Diplock. These juryless courts are not bound by the normal rules of evidence, as will be explained in further detail in Chapter Three.

experiences, indiscriminately linking writings from widely disparate backgrounds without contextualizing their struggles for freedom. Such an attitude is espoused by critics like Sheila Roberts, who writes that what she deems to be the

homogeneity of substance, tone, and mood of prison writing-- no matter the form-- comes from the physical conditions out of which prison literature springs being always similar. It makes little difference whether the author or protagonist be a felon, political dissenter or Joseph K: a prison is a prison. (Roberts 61)

This approach is mistaken on many levels: first and foremost, it assumes (as indeed is the stated intent of most penal systems) that a completely uniform state of disciplined existence within prison walls is possible and achievable, each prisoner experiencing incarceration both physically and mentally in the same fashion. In this model, the writer-prisoners are helpless victims of the panoptic eye, who whether knowingly or not, behave and write in entirely predictable ways due to unvarying institutional influences and practices.

Yet, to what extent are penal systems able to sustain a unified field of discipline in both temporal and spatial terms? In reality, a prison is not a static, unvaried enclosure, but one that is in constant flux, subject to internal and external stresses alike. Even in one historical moment, there actually may be several unlike prisons within one institution, each with different levels and foci of discipline and unique physical layout. Time brings institutional change as well, and the same prison may see multiple prison administrations within brief periods, often heralding alterations in the conditions experienced by one, some, or all of these "prisons within prisons."

Roberts' assumption quoted above also ignores the specificity of the individual experiencing prison: his/her race, gender, political affiliations, and

socio-economic background disappear. Yet to ignore these categories is to ignore the very method by which prisons segregate, classify, and regulate prisoners. Mirroring the political system that created them, Apartheid-era South African prisons separated white and black prisoners, feeding them different meals depending on their race (Breytenbach 147). Political offenders are often arrested, questioned, charged, and detained under special legislation of a sort not utilized to apprehend Roberts' non-political "felon," as is the case in Northern Ireland with the Special Powers Act and the Emergency Provisions Act. In this manner, even before the political prisoner is incarcerated, his/her experience differs from the average inmate.

Even those critics who recognize the importance of context often do little to provide much. For instance, although Barbara Harlow argues in her book *Resistance Literature*, that "what does distinguish the prison memoirs of political detainees, despite the monolithic uniformity of the prison itself, is the historical and cultural specificity of the collective strategies of political resistance of the detainees," the shotgun approach of the book undermines this important point (RL 124). In one slim volume of two hundred pages, Harlow attempts to explore resistance writing (including prison writing) from places as geographically and culturally distant as Kenya, Nicaragua, and Palestine.

The result is a scattered and necessarily surface-level examination, one which Harlow herself admits is the result of seemingly "arbitrary" editorial choices on her part (RL xvii). Does not this glancing examination and sound-bite approach do a disservice to the writings, writings that the authors endured great suffering and sometimes death to produce, writings which attempt to communicate those historical and cultural specificities of which Harlow admonishes us to be aware? Furthermore, in the above quote from Harlow we see again the erroneous assumption of a "monolithic uniformity" in prison

experience.<sup>6</sup> It is with these failings in mind that I have begun the present project.

Facetious footnotes aside, it is (admittedly, somewhat hypocritically) to Michel Foucault that I turn when setting the parameters of this discussion of prison literature. In his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault sets up his challenge to such accepted "defined unities" as literature or the *oeuvre* by stating that

I shall take as my starting-point whatever unities are already given. . . but I shall not place myself inside such dubious unities in order to study their internal configuration or their secret contradictions. I shall make use of them just long enough to ask myself what unities they form; by what right they can claim a field that specifies them in space and a continuity that individualizes them in time; according to what laws they are formed; against the background of which discursive events they stand out; and whether or not they are not in their accepted and quasi-institutional individuality, ultimately the surface effect of more firmly grounded unities. I shall accept the groupings that history suggests only to subject them at once to interrogation; to break them up and then to see whether they can be legitimately reformed; or whether other groupings should be made... (*Archaeology* 26)

Such rigor is essential when dealing with an accepted unity as amorphous as "prison literature" actually is. For example, when attempting to construct a definition of such a genre, does one include any works whose subject is

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<sup>6</sup>A perverse image of the Devil card from the Tarot comes to my mind here. In the post-*Discipline and Punish* deck the card depicts a crowd of literary critics with loose leashes around their necks, the ends of which are held by a satanically grinning Foucault. In true Tarot fashion, the "prisoners" could remove their leashes if they tried. In their reverence for Foucault, too many critics mistake his description of a theoretic panoptic system for the imperfect reality of actual incarceration; and in so doing, they engage in the sort of *a priori* acceptance of theories that Foucault explicitly seeks to combat in his philosophical inquiries.

disciplinary systems, whether produced by prisoners, warders, official state or judiciary organs, prison clergy, or free literary critics? Does one include only writings produced by an individual during physical incarceration, excluding writings about the prison experience produced after release? To what extent does the subject matter determine inclusion within the genre? Should Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Mallory's *Morte De Arthur*, the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, and the prison writings of Nelson Mandela be considered as a unity, as all of these works were produced during incarceration for (what at least today would be considered) political offences?

Yet even with such a commonality as described above, the creation of a sub-category of "political" prison writing further underscores the ambiguous "unity" of the genre as a whole. In what manner is a "political" offender differentiated from a "non-political" offender, especially when the state penal system does not categorize inmates in such terms (often, of course, for the state's own political reasons)? The United States, for instance, would publicly disavow the presence of any political prisoners in its jails even as American Indian Movement activist Leonard Peltier has languished for more than two decades in federal prison, convicted on evidence that the FBI has been accused of fabricating. In many cases, to accept a state's definition of political status is tantamount to accepting state propaganda at face value.

This, perhaps, is the best reason to study writings of political prisoners. In its purest form, prison writing presents a challenge not only to traditional literature and those who guard its borders jealously, but also to the societal structures that either encourage academia's isolation or co-opt it into slavish service of a corporate environment. Because it is produced within a special matrix—at once removed from the bounds of everyday society, yet also within the undiluted heart of that society as replicated in its disciplinary structure—

prison writing by its very nature is able to cast light upon subjects quite external to the physical prison cell, subjects that may be invisible to those outside. Indeed, jail literature might be considered to be a reverse panopticon, fragmenting the state's attempts to appear unassailably unified. The panopticon gazes into the cell, but the cell gazes back, unafraid.

In narrowing the confines of the present discussion, I tried to keep in mind not only the strengths, but especially the failures of previous inquiries into the unity of prison literature. First and foremost, I would like to question the supposed uniformity of the genre that Sheila Roberts argued above. Although similar themes do indeed appear in prison writing, I intend to show that it is in fact the *dissimilarities* between authors that prove even more striking. In addition, I hope to show the relation between physical (and to a certain extent, psychological) environment and literary production during incarceration. In the passages from Harlow and Roberts quoted above, the authors argue the correlation between prison space and thematic/formalistic elements in the writing produced within that space. I am in agreement with them that environment does indeed shape the words produced; however, I disagree with their uncritical acceptance of a monolithic prison environment. Apart from the reasons argued previously with regard to differing levels of discipline within the same prison, I intend to show that in most cases the outside world also intrudes into the experience of incarceration, both directly and indirectly: an outside world which varies according to its unique moment in space and time. It is the ingenuity of the prisoners that create this bridge to the outside, to their fellow prisoners, and to themselves; and in keeping these avenues of communication open they combat the monolith. The very act of writing fragments attempts at a unified field of discipline: those who remain silent and submit to this field are the ones



more likely to experience it in the same fashion. As Foucault rightly argues in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*,

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. (23)

One is never alone writing in prison, for in so doing an author plugs him/herself into a complex web of relations; from comrades and events inside and outside prison, to prison authors past and present, to a whole system of discourse. The writings produced by entering this network are as varied as the discrete elements making the network up, elements partially determined by the individual's position in a unique social, cultural, physical and historical matrix.

These factors were important in shaping the overall scope of this project: writings of Irish Republican prisoners-of-war from 1973 to the present. By dealing only with a relatively abbreviated time period within one geographical area, I seek to avoid the overly broad approach of works like Harlow's *Resistance Literature*. Indeed, the focus will be narrower still, for within those boundaries the majority of time will be spent examining a selection of works produced within one prison complex during a ten-year block of history.

In this core section, special attention will be paid to those writings literally written during incarceration, as opposed to those written in tranquil recollection, temporally and spatially removed from prison. Works produced in this fashion (in particular when the prison regime has forbidden literary production) are the quiddity of prison literature, for they provide to the outsider a raw, unedited glimpse into the reality of political imprisonment as the state exerts its power on the incarcerated body and mind.

The political prisoners like Gerry Adams and Bobby Sands covered in this section are skillful writers who produce work that is well-crafted, precise, and artistic which at the same time does not let itself be domesticated, de-politicized, or de-historicized. Written under almost unimaginable conditions and at great peril to themselves, these words smuggled out of the British prison known as Long Kesh are a record of the struggle to retain one's identity in the face of brutal repression, and are filled with humor, humanity and determination. This is truly literature of the first order, for not only was it superbly composed, but it was *lived* as well. Indeed, even though their writings are separated by a matter of a few years, the marked difference in the tone of these writers is testament to the impact of place and individual historic moment upon each of them. To cite an instance: while his surroundings in the Cages were harsh, Adams is generally able to maintain a relative distance from them; in contrast to this, the utterly inhuman conditions of the H-Blocks permeate Sands' every word.

These authors will, in the next section of this inquiry, be compared and contrasted with other examples of prison literature dealing with this same prison and time period. These will mainly be comprised of accounts composed after the fact and will include, as supplemental material, accounts of prison guards and priests associated with Long Kesh. Subsequent portions of the dissertation will move forward in time and to a new prison in order to show the changes that a new era in Irish history has wrought upon Republican prison writing.

While much of this introductory chapter might justifiably be described as a diatribe against literary critics, scolding the academic community is of course not the primary goal of this dissertation. Yet in order to move forward it is sometimes necessary to examine where one has been in order to understand the obstacles in one's path. As the preceding pages have demonstrated, prison literature faces an uphill battle on every front, not just in terms of achieving

actual publication but also in terms of distribution and acceptance outside of resistance movements and their sympathizers. As will be shown in the chapters that follow, this is not a new phenomenon but rather one whose roots can be traced back centuries, and one that finds its origins in a socioeconomic class whose interests are intimately tied up with imperialism of both a literary and political nature. As everyone in academia knows, for a variety of reasons the canon is slow to change, but sometimes its fixed nature is more intentional than on other occasions.

However, change can and does occur, but only if people are willing to fight for inclusion. This is a lesson the working class Catholics of the North of Ireland can teach us: they began their struggle without the right to vote, without access to decent housing, and against a political machine that seemed impossible to overcome. Yet in the last few years, remarkable improvements have been made, not just with regard to basic needs like housing, but with regard to access to political power: the first Catholic Lord Mayor of Belfast and power-sharing in the new Assembly are only two examples from the last years of the 1990s. This state of affairs—one which no one would have dreamed of in 1968—has only been achieved by struggle, sometimes within existing structures, sometimes outside them. There is value in each approach, and such eclecticism forms the basis of my methodology with regard to the general category of resistance literature and the subset of prison literature contained within that larger genre. I seek to practice the literary equivalent of the Republican tactic of seeking victory by the use of both Armalite and ballot box.

I do this because those who value resistance literature are caught in something of a double bind. On the one hand, we wonder why we should fight to ensure such vibrant works become part of a system in which perhaps they were never intended to be. On the other, without access to avenues of

dissemination of greater scope than the local, the impact of resistance literature necessarily remains local. What can be done to resolve this conundrum? As the current state of affairs in academia unsurprisingly leaves much to be desired with regard to attention paid to activist writing, should we—to borrow Benita Parry's phraseology—place imaginary incendiary devices<sup>7</sup> within the academy and simply walk away? Such an approach hinges on an acceptance of the view that the modern academy is inherently unable to be reformed, that it needs to be dismantled completely in order to start afresh. While there may be a certain temptation to view it thus on occasion, I—naively, perhaps—do not believe we must walk away from Omelas, at least on a permanent basis. Day trips may yet prove sufficient, for prison literature has the potential to illuminate other genres through its difference. That alone is a reason to include it, for indeed it may be exactly what is required to resuscitate an outdated canon. Pairing works of prison literature with works of traditional literature illuminates a subject by the manner in which the writings provide disparate context to one another.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, by promoting its readership in an academic circle, jail writing's message will be heard by (whether or not it will have a measurable impact on) a wider audience than it might in other circumstances.<sup>9</sup> The form of the canon is, after all, only a reflection of the prevailing attitudes and societal structures that are the true targets of resistance writing's critique. I see the canon as a yardstick by which one might get a rough idea of the degree of social justice and equality within the academy, not as a goal to be attained in and of itself.

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, the pacifists among my readers could bracket Parry's word choice and simply walk away, but what fun would that be?

<sup>8</sup> The *Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature* is a project with precisely this goal, as will be discussed in greater depth later.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Wilkinson has argued that with regard to what he defines as terrorism "There are certain danger spots within the university systems... and they are the *key* initial point of entry for most active terrorists" (qtd in Sluka 16-7). While the marked inactivity of the academic community argues against Wilkinson's perception, perhaps his overreaction has some basis in reality. There might just be an audience waiting to be discovered in the ivy-covered halls.

Yet, even as I say this, I simultaneously maintain that prison literature must be approached in a different manner than the traditional canon. While all academic pursuits require commitment, the study of prison literature requires commitment of a radically different sort: not uncritical acceptance of propaganda, but rather a willingness to engage in a sometimes painful analysis of one's own frame of reference and aesthetic expectations. One must be willing to confront the defenders of a rigid canon, not simply to reject them out of hand, but to examine and expose their failings (and one's own) and to demonstrate the deleterious effect that such rigidity has on the world outside the university, for the system will not change unless its weaknesses are pointed out and addressed. Perhaps more importantly, one must ignore the established boundaries on occasion, move beyond the Pale in order to bring some of that vital difference back. Passivity is not a trait that suits the study of prison literature well, as sometimes the critic must actively search out the text, venture into works not readily available or not yet published at all.

Jail writing is valuable not simply in relation to mainstream writing, but rather it deserves study first and foremost on its own merit, within its own unique context. Literature is not made great solely because it is examined in the splendid halls of prestigious colleges: indeed, the most powerful literature is that which is relevant to and lived *by* people within and without the university. In the North of Ireland the Felon's Writers' Group, Derry Frontline Theatre, the Springhill Community House Heritage Series publications, and the readings and performances that are an intrinsic part of the annual West Belfast Festival are all examples of literary groups based in communities determined to tell their own stories, their own truths, on their own terms. It is up to those to whom such unique writing *matters* to keep up with its demands and to aid it in any way possible, whether through dissemination by study and publication within the

confines of traditional academia, through activism in direct partnership with its authors, or by a combination of both approaches. It is not so much inclusion in the canon that should be the goal of resistance scholars, but rather critiqued literary distribution and—ultimately and ideally-- societal transformation.

## CHAPTER II

### BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

A brief historical overview is needed in order to appreciate fully the present state of affairs in the North of Ireland. It would be useless to discuss the writings of Irish prisoners of war without reference to the history which created the carceral system in Northern Ireland, for those works are bound to the individual prison regimes as tightly as a captive is bound by chains. However important a part armed resistance has played in recent times, this role is complemented by-- and indeed often superseded by-- the struggle for freedom from within prison walls.

In fact, this journey must begin at a point quite distant from the period that will be the primary focus of the present study. The reader must bear with me, as I do this for two reasons: first, simply to demonstrate the antiquity of this Anglo-Irish conflict. Far from being a spontaneous outbreak of apolitical criminal violence as often portrayed in contemporary media, the past thirty-two years of conflict are only the latest resumption of an eight hundred year-old campaign of resistance to British presence in Ireland. Attempts to de-legitimize the struggle for Irish independence (and, by association, Irish prison writing) by portraying the present "Troubles" as the direct result of a newly-formed "Irish mafia" simply ignore historical record.

Secondly, I wish to show the way in which from an early date the interests of British empire in Ireland have been and continue to be served by historians

and poets alike. Indeed, some of the greatest names in English literature had vested interests in Éirinn, and it is against these voices of oppression that prison literature struggles. There is no coincidence in the fact that some of the pillars of the present literary canon, including Spenser, Sidney, and even Shakespeare, are at times mere mouthpieces for imperialism. Canon and cannon are the two greatest tools of empire, and even when the latter is withdrawn, the former keeps order. The current move in many colleges to conceive of (and literally refer to) students as “customers” is only the latest and most obvious incarnation of a system that uses its disciplinary structures—schools and prisons foremost among these—to insure its interwoven political and economic interests remain unquestioned and intact.

#### First Colonization to the Renaissance

The story of Republican prison writing begins more than eight centuries ago when the first invasion from mainland Britain came in 1187. Soon thereafter followed the establishment of the Pale, the greatest stronghold of British influence, which included Dublin and the surrounding environs. For the next four hundred years or so, British control in the territory beyond the Pale<sup>1</sup> was often shaky at best, dwindling swiftly as time went on. Although the early Anglo-Norman invaders had conquered much of southern and western Ireland, the conquest was in reality short-lived as the colonizing population rapidly “went native,” adopting Irish customs, culture, and even language. The distant monarchs of England saw their subjects backsliding and enacted the Statutes of Kilkenny in 1366 in order to put a halt to this Gaelicization. These acts have been called a form of early apartheid legislation by some historians; for, in the words

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<sup>1</sup> This is indeed the origin of the saying: anything “beyond the Pale” (i.e. Gaelic) was beyond the boundaries of civilized society and hence barbaric.



of historian James P. Meyers Jr., marriage between the native Irish and British settlers "was defined as high treason" (4). In addition, the Statutes forbade the speaking of Gaelic, the wearing of traditional Irish clothing and hairstyles,<sup>2</sup> and sought to eliminate Irish cultural activities like games, music and poetry. In this way, the society that they attempted to create foreshadowed the divided North of the twentieth century in that state legislation was used both in the denial of civil rights to the native Irish population, as well as in that such laws encouraged segregation.

With the exception of the Pale, by the time of Elizabeth I the island of Ireland had, for all intents and purposes, slipped from English grasp. The Queen began a forceful campaign to take the island, beginning in the province which was most troublesome to her: Ulster, the nine northernmost counties.

Although his anti-Irish bias is clear,<sup>3</sup> historian Constantine FitzGibbon paints an accurate picture when he writes

Throughout most of the middle ages, and particularly during the sixteenth century, Ulster was the heartland of Irish resistance to Anglo-Saxon dominance; perhaps the heartland of the whole 'Celtic' world which stretched along the Atlantic seaboard from southern Brittany to the northernmost islands of Scotland. Until the Irish Elizabethan Wars spread to that province (1596-1603) Ulster had never really been conquered, though it had been raided by Vikings, Normans and Scots and

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<sup>2</sup> One hairstyle was known as the coolin, and is commemorated in a traditional melody even today.

<sup>3</sup> He writes elsewhere that the Irish of this time were "reverting, rapidly, to paganism" and that the Elizabethan wars "accelerated this relapse into savagery" (FitzGibbon 10). This racist cant was written in 1971. Not co-incidentally, this was the year that the Irish Republican Army began its new campaign against the British Army, which had occupied Ulster for the previous two years. The symbolic connection between the two time periods is supposed to be clear. FitzGibbon's absurd claims seem to imply that past or present, the Irish need to be saved from their own "savagery" by British force of arms, ignoring the fact that in each case, what is really being described is resistance against a foreign army.

there was, indeed, already a Scots-Irish 'colony' along its eastern seaboard, in what are now the counties Antrim and Down. (8)

The Elizabethan campaign was a brutal one which seemed modeled after the sort of total warfare that the poet Edmund Spenser<sup>4</sup> argues is needed in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*. "Laws and ordinances," are insufficient, the poet writes: instead, England must rely upon the power of "the sword, for all those evils must first be cut away before any good is planted" (Spenser 108).

As one might expect of a cunning poet, the choice of that final word is not random. Apart from metaphorically signifying the inculcation of positive (i.e. English) values, this is a clear allusion to the new British technique of plantation: the policy by which territory was won by first clearing the land of its native populace by treaty, force, or a combination of the two, then subsequently settling it with colonists.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Ulster, the colonists sent by the Queen were mainly Scottish Presbyterians. This division between the native Irish and the planted Scottish is what manifests itself today in the form of Catholic and Protestant: however, the conflict has always been more a political one concerning seizure of land and subsequent access to governmental power than a strictly religious one regarding articles of faith.<sup>6</sup> As Seamus Deane argues in the introduction to *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, today in the North of Ireland we "are witnessing rather the effects of a contemporary colonialism that

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<sup>4</sup> Nor were Spenser's philosophies disinterested, as he had a three thousand acre holding in the second Munster Plantation (Spenser 60).

<sup>5</sup> This policy of course would become tragically familiar to indigenous nations in the Americas, where England exported it soon after. The relationship between the joint-stock company, colonialism, emergent capitalism, and genocide is perhaps more terrifyingly clear during the early years of the seventeenth century than in any other historical period.

<sup>6</sup> Though, of course, those colonists leading military campaigns against the native Irish generally came from fanatically Protestant background, and would have had no love for the Catholic faith of the island they were invading; as it would be in America, religion at best was only a pretext and a justification for the seizure of indigenous peoples' land by colonial aggressors.

has retained and developed an ideology of dominance and subservience within the readily available idiom of religious division" (8).

The ruthlessness by which Ulster was planted was almost unprecedented in the history of warfare up to that moment. Whatever medieval chivalric notions with regard to treatment of prisoners, civilians, and soldiers alike had survived until this point would be changed forever in Ireland. Again, we can turn to Spenser for a synopsis of the new techniques of warfare that Elizabeth thought were merited to conquer the neighboring island. In concert with a scorched-earth policy, the poet went as far as to advocate the wholesale slaughter of combatants and non-combatants alike. As a victim of such a campaign, according to Spenser the Irish rebel will

findeth then succor in no place: towns there are none where he may get spoil—they are all burnt; country houses and farmers there be none—they be all fled; bread he hath none... [and as a result, he will] shortly want life.

(Spenser 113)

In this way we see Spenser justify targeting the civilian population by putting forth the assumption that in fact no such thing actually exists. In his view, all Irish people are part of a concerted war effort, providing food and shelter to the combatants, and as such equally meriting violent suppression. This, of course, is the same rationale seen today used by Loyalist paramilitaries engaged in random sectarian killings of Catholics. In this mindset, the assumption is that if someone lives in a predominantly Catholic area, they must be Catholic; if they are Catholic, they must be nationalist; if they are nationalists, they must be Republicans; if they are Republicans, they must be members of a paramilitary group like the IRA; if they are a member of the IRA, then they are valid targets

for military action. As Dr. J Bowyer Bell<sup>7</sup> writes in his book *IRA Tactics and Targets*,

Since 1972 the major violent activity of the loyalist paramilitaries has been to stike at the subversive traitors, *them*, the nationalists, Irish, Catholic, Republicans, all disloyal so all the equivalent of the IRA. A great many vulnerable Catholic males without politics or connections with the Republican movement have been killed or wounded and some brutally tortured first. (32)

Such twisted logic has cost many innocent lives, and it is a logic that can be traced directly to the great poet Edmund Spenser.

Indeed, while it may be the case that some poets live in and produce works about a world only loosely connected to reality, unfortunately this is not the case with Spenser, both in our time and in his own. His philosophies were put into daily practice throughout Ireland, but with particular vehemence in Ulster. Two examples from the military career of the Earl of Essex provide grim evidence of the lengths to which the English would go to pacify Ireland. In 1574 he launched a night raid against the inhabitants of Rathlin Island off the Antrim coast, butchering the entire population of six hundred. That same year, Essex slaughtered Sir Brian McPhelim O'Neill, his wife, and two hundred followers at a Christmas feast. Queen Elizabeth's response to Essex's murderous Ulster campaign was to send him a message commending his service to England "because," she said,

We do perceive that when occasion doth present you do rather allure and bring in that rude and barbarous nation to civility and acknowledging of their duty to God and to us by wisdom and discreet handling than by force

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Bell's book is notable in that it even gives mention to Loyalist paramilitaries. In most journalistic and academic accounts the existence of pro-British death squads seems deliberately ignored.

and shedding of blood; and yet when necessity requireth you are ready also to oppose yourself and your forces to them whom reason and duty cannot bridle. (qtd. in Canny 121)

Unquestionably, these atrocities were sanctioned by the Queen herself, and were not the lamentable work of rogue army leaders. In 1599 she herself voiced this in the "Proclamation on Sending Over the Army into Ireland," stating that she was "compelled to take resolution, to reduce that Kingdome to obedience (which by the Lawes of God and Nature is due unto us) by using an extraordinary power and force against them" (Tudor 315). The situation has improved less than one would hope four hundred years later, with massacres of civilians like Bloody Sunday and the SAS shoot-to-kill policy<sup>8</sup> ordered from the highest levels of government in order to quell rebellion through fear.

As disturbing as this total warfare was and is, perhaps even more insidious is the role of many Renaissance writers and their heirs—modern literary critics and literature departments—as propagandists on its behalf. For, indeed, Elizabeth's wars with Ireland provided the testing ground not only for the new British weapon of plantation but also for the philosophical framework at once enmeshed in and motivating colonization. When Elizabeth I issued the "Proclamation on Sending Over the Army into Ireland," more than simply justifying a war, she was selling a new ideology-- indeed, a new economy-- to her subjects.

At this stage in English history, the boundaries between merchants, civil servants, and petty nobles were often blurred (if they existed at all), and this nascent bourgeoisie was eager to profit in colonial ventures. Moreover, this was the class from which the greatest writers of the time sprang, for if they were not members of this class themselves, their patrons often were. This is certainly the

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<sup>8</sup> The latter of which was condemned by the European Court of Human Rights on 27 September, 1995.

case with William Shakespeare, whose patrons were involved with ventures in Ireland as well as in the Virginia Company. This close contact with the builders of empire had a lamentable influence on the playwright's works: the nationalistic references in hope of the defeat of Ireland at the conclusion of *Henry V* are only one example.<sup>9</sup> Sir Phillip Sidney embodies the essence of a civil servant/minor aristocrat/poet with close ties to the colonization of Ireland during these years, and one who (in the words of the historian Nicholas P. Canny) "considered himself to be dealing with people who were essentially pagan" when the people in question were Irish (585). Perhaps this is not surprising, given that his father was Lord Deputy of Ireland and that his godfather (with whom he had an exceedingly close relationship) was the same Earl of Essex who slew every inhabitant of Rathlin Island. Of course, the views of the poet Edmund Spenser on the matter hopefully have been made abundantly clear.

Republican prison writing's struggle should also be abundantly clear. How can the whisper from within a distant cell be heard with the voices of such literary giants booming down the empty and echoing halls of the academy? While every potential graduate student in America faces the sure prospect of Spenser's thinly-veiled allegory of the necessary conquest of Ireland, the *Faerie Queen*, on the English Literature Graduate Record Examination, the chance of finding a single question on the writings of a political prisoner is slim. Indeed, it seems that to enter the deeper levels of academia, one must have been exposed

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<sup>9</sup> In my article "Caliban as Taig: The *Tempest* and British Colonialism in Ireland" I argue that the play is an allegory for the colonization of Ireland. Suffice it to say that descriptions of Ireland's inhabitants and the advice given with regard to their treatment in Hollinshed, Barnabe Rich (who provided source material for *Twelfth Night*), and Spenser are strikingly similar to the monstrous Caliban and the specific ways in which he is treated by Prospero. For example, Caliban's wearing of a mantle (under which Trinculo creeps in Act II, Scene ii) echoes the Irish rebel who Spenser says "maketh his mantle his house, and under it covereth himself from the wrath of heaven, from the offense of the earth and from the sight of men. . . for under its voluminous fabric all sorts of bootie, weapons, and even the savage himself might be hid" (82).

to the proper amount of indoctrination. It is no wonder that career-minded future professors spend their time studying the canon rather than the writings of freedom fighters.

#### Circa 1916

For brevity's sake I must now leave study of the distant past and turn attention to the early part of the twentieth century. Suffice it to say that the intervening centuries brought great ruin upon Ireland. By the beginning of the eighteenth century England had conquered the whole island.<sup>10</sup> The military phase of the colonization had ended, and the years that followed would see legislation rather than guns become the weapon used with most regularity against the inhabitants of Ireland as acts like the Penal Laws sought to deprive Catholics of their religion and their property. Yet, this oppression was not endured meekly; as the Easter Proclamation would later state, every generation would assert the right to national freedom and sovereignty by force of arms from this time forward. Desire for liberation flamed in 1798, when Protestant and Catholic fought together as United Irishmen under Wolfe Tone; it would do so again in 1803 with Robert Emmet's rebellion, in that of the Young Irelanders in 1848, in the Fenian Uprising of 1867, and finally, in the Easter Uprising of 1916.

In many demonstrable ways, the Easter Uprising traces its roots to the Fenians. The origins of the Irish Republican Army are found here in the form of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, founded on Saint Patrick's Day, 1858, by James

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<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it is worthwhile at this point to note that the battle which ensured British control of Ireland was *not* that of the Boyne in 1690; a victory which was won, according to Constantine FitzGibbon, "largely by Danes, Germans and French Huguenots" and not by Protestant Ulstermen (36). Though Loyalists in Ulster commemorate this day on the twelfth of July every year, in fact the military defeat which guaranteed the rule of William III took place a year later at Aughrim. The celebration of the former battle seems puzzling until one remembers (in the words of historian Jonathan Bartlett) that "Aughrim is in the province of Connaught, not Ulster, and it is perfectly understandable that the Protestant Ulstermen would prefer to commemorate a battle on their own soil rather than that of a neighbor—and a Catholic neighbor at that" (7).

Stevens and Thomas Clarke Luby (Coogan, *The IRA* 10). Although the Fenians were unsuccessful in their bid to oust the British from Ireland, they would provide successive generations with both a military and literary model from which to draw.<sup>11</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa is a superb example of the latter, not only in terms of his involvement with the newspaper *The Irish People*, but also because of his jail memoirs entitled *Irish Rebels in English Prisons*, first published in 1872. O'Donovan Rossa was imprisoned from 1865 to 1871, and his account details his harrowing experiences, including having his hands manacled behind his back for thirty-five days.<sup>12</sup> Much of his warders' savagery was in response to his continual attempts to be recognized as a political prisoner. Though this agitation takes place on many levels throughout the book, Chapter Ten of his jail memoirs is specifically entitled "The Struggle for Political Treatment;" his self-awareness was a trait that would be emulated by later Republican prisoners. Indeed, O'Donovan Rossa saw his autobiography as something of a training manual for future freedom fighters. The first chapter of the book concludes with these words:

In order to achieve anything, men must be prepared for suffering; and, if they are not, they will lag behind. Men must be ready to brave all that they will learn from me, within and without prison, if they mean to free Ireland; and, if my words be of no use to the present generation, they may be to the next or the one after the next. (19)

O'Donovan Rossa thus sees the struggle for nationhood as generational, one fought with equal determination behind prison walls. In fact, the experience of prison might become a *necessary* component of the struggle, a place from which

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<sup>11</sup> I have tentatively begun a book-length project examining Irish Republican prison writings from this period to the present which will further examine these traditions, with some attention paid to John Mitchel's earlier experiences in his *Jail Journal*.

<sup>12</sup> He writes, "It [the handcuffing] continued day after day for thirty-five days, and before a week of that time had passed I could count eight bloody marks on my wrists" (O'Donovan Rossa 198).



battles are won and policy conceived and distributed. It is important to note also that O'Donovan Rossa situates himself within the context of Ireland's colonization by Britain: he begins his book with an overview of Irish history from the Norman Invasion to his own time. In this fashion as well, he includes himself within the generational historical struggle; for his is not the story of one imprisoned man, but rather, a small part of the story of an imprisoned nation. His narrative is projected both back in time as well as forward, beyond "the present generation."

As he anticipated, his words would truly be heard in the time that followed, although a period of long years would intervene before a new generation of leaders would arise to take up O'Donovan Rossa's cause. After the defeat of the Fenian Uprising the guns of the IRB had fallen silent and the organization had dwindled to almost nothing. Tim Pat Coogan notes that "though they had a newspaper, *Irish Freedom*, Clarke and the young IRB men cannot have had more than a handful of active members spread throughout the country at the onset of the Ulster crisis" (*The IRA* 13). By 1910, the long struggle for Home Rule was causing patience to wear thin in both nationalist and unionist circles. Although the terms of Home Rule came nowhere near granting independence to Ireland,<sup>13</sup> pro-British elements were alarmed at the prospect of any action that might be perceived as a movement in this direction. Fearing British acquiescence to the demands of nationalists, Unionist leader Edward Carson—who actually hailed from Dublin—created the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in 1912, the members of which swore in the Ulster Covenant to

stand by one another in defending for ourselves and our children our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom, and in

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<sup>13</sup> Only local powers would be given, and matters of law, finance, and education would still be under Westminster's control. The British Army would be brought in if required, but day-to-day police matters would be handled by the Royal Irish Constabulary.

using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland. (qtd in Coogan, *The IRA* 8)

It was in response to this that the IRB would be transformed into the organization now known as the Irish Republican Army. In October of 1913 the IRB proposed the creation of a body of Southern Volunteers modeled after the UVF. This armed force was to be used only if the UVF sought to halt the introduction of the Home Rule bill to Parliament, and this defensive strategy was maintained until the 1916 Rising (Coogan, *The IRA* 14). As Coogan perceptively argues, revisionist historians and British propagandists who seek to portray the IRA as a war-mongering terrorist organization from its inception ignore

the central fact that the 1916 Rebellion by the Irish Volunteers was in fact an armed gesture by a body which came into being only *in reply* to an earlier gesture of the Protestants of Northern Ireland—the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force to frustrate the British Liberal government's plans to introduce Home Rule to all Ireland. Had the Protestants of the North not acted thus, Home Rule would have passed, and it is difficult to see what force would have existed to stage the 1916 Rebellion. It seems certain, however, that there would have been no Irish Republican Army, no I.R.A. (*The IRA* 4)

Nonetheless, this was not to be, and history took the course that we know today. This explosive scenario would be repeated in the North of Ireland in 1968, when once again the British government would capitulate to Loyalist pressure, ignore calls for the smallest changes, and in its savage response to agitation, cause the rebirth of the modern IRA.

The passing of the generation of 1867 also created an urgency within their descendants that helped move the Volunteers from a defensive to an offensive position. Funerals have provided occasions for innumerable political acts and statements by militant nationalists. The funeral of O'Donovan Rossa in 1915 is, for instance, described by Seamus Deane (editor of *the Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*) as "the most successful and the most menacing" of all the Fenian funerals (Deane 193). It is not by chance that the funeral oration for O'Donovan Rossa was given by Padraig Pearse, who would be one of the leaders of the 1916 Uprising, and co-author of the Easter Proclamation read out on the steps of the Post Office the first day of the Rising. At the graveside, Pearse prompted loud applause and cheering from the huge crowd with his words:

Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations . . . [The English] think that they have foreseen everything, think that they have provided against everything; but the fools, the fools, the fools! --they have left us our Fenian dead, and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace. (294)

Pearse's words on the day of O'Donovan Rossa's burial echo still today on the streets of the North. In fact, there is a mural on the Falls Road in Belfast, which reproduces part of it, in stark white letters against a black background: "Ireland unfree shall never be at peace." As the author not only of forceful political tracts, poetry, and fiction, (not to mention the document which would guide militant republicanism to this day), Pearse is the embodiment of both the literary and military manifestations of the IRA. As stated in the Proclamation, it is "the dead generations from which [Ireland] receives her old tradition of nationhood." The commitment to sacrifice one's body-- and if need be, one's life—is a thread that has been an integral part of the diverse weave of Republicanism in its literary and physical force tradition alike since O'Rossa's

time and before. Death is not the end, but rather a sanctification, a legitimizing force operating through generational devotion and sacrifice.

Such a figure as Pearse seems surprising indeed to some, who see craft as a writer and skill as a warrior to be two diametrically opposed subject positions. Coogan, for example, who generally does his best to maintain a balanced approach to the IRA writes

The I.R.A. tradition is one of physical action and separatism. It is not an intellectual one, which is why I have carefully refrained from discussing events or personalities which some historians might feel were influential in the Republican story: the constitution of 1937 or the declaration of a Republic in Ireland in 1948, for examples on the political side, or the writings of Seán Ó Faoláin or of Brendan Behan on the literary one. These are not important to Republicans of the 'physical force' school. (*The IRA* 255)

Here we see the notion that action as a soldier and action as an intellectual are deemed to be mutually exclusive activities, despite evidence to the contrary in the leaders of the Fenian Uprising, the 1916 Uprising, and the Hunger Strikes. More frustrating to a student of resistance literature is Coogan's *conscious* bracketing of relevant writings: he merely refuses to discuss their bearing on the topic without explanation as to why. It seems that simply by taking up arms one is banished from intellectual status in Coogan's implied model. Unfortunately, this view was shared by many of Pearse's contemporaries in the literary world of the time, setting the tone for historians and critics alike. As can be seen in Coogan's outlook in the last years of the twentieth century, it is a view that has plagued resistance writers ever since.

The military failure of the 1916 Rising and the execution of its leaders by the British had unexpected results. The Irish populace, who had by and large *not*

supported the Easter Rising, now rose themselves in armed resistance against colonial rule. Thus began the Anglo-Irish War, which for the Volunteers meant a protracted guerilla campaign. The conflict was often brutal on both sides, but one that—hearkening back to the days of Spenser—by the British was waged with great ferocity against the civilian populace. The infamy of the Black and Tans, auxiliary troops who were organized for the specific purpose of ruthless pacification, lives on today.<sup>14</sup> Even the writer Herb Greer, whose rabid anti-republicanism will be explored later with regard to Bobby Sands, is forced to tell of how in 1920

the crowd at a Dublin Gaelic football match in Croke Park was surrounded by the Royal Irish Constabulary and some auxiliaries. The officers were supposed to search for IRA gunmen. Instead they fired into the crowd, killing twelve civilians. The same night two IRA prisoners were killed by the police at Dublin Castle, along with a civilian who had been picked up at a nationalist haunt in the city. In December crown forces, taking revenge for a terrorist outrage, burned out and destroyed the whole center of Cork. (46)

Of course, when British forces—supposedly those of law and order—engage in such atrocities as these as part of a deliberate military strategy, Greer might rightly be questioned in his use of the word “terrorist” to describe only the actions of the Irish Volunteers. As German historian Sebastian Haffner writes in his book *The Meaning of Hitler*, “[w]ar and murder, easy as it is to equate them rhetorically, are two different things” (128). Before using such a term as “terrorist,” we must differentiate between actual crimes and what Haffner terms

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<sup>14</sup> The troops were so named for their half-black and half-khaki uniform. Indeed, it is ill-advised to order the half-beer, half-porter drink known as a “black and tan” in America using that nomenclature in Ireland. The preferred term is a “half-and-half.”

“the normal dirt of war;” otherwise, Haffner argues, we risk overlooking the true horror of murder in wartime (127).

It is an unfortunate fact that the majority of struggles for national liberation have-- at least in part-- accomplished their goals through use of force: the American Revolution is only one of countless examples. In branding the Anglo-Irish War as a conflict between “terrorists” and the crown forces, the British (and revisionist writers like Greer) attempt to delegitimize a war for independence. As regrettable as war is, it is not, by international law, criminal. In his discussion of such legislation as that produced by the Geneva Convention, Haffner elaborates:

In point of fact, the ‘laws and usages of war’ are based upon the contrary view that war is not a crime but a basically accepted (because unavoidable) international institution; they merely serve the ‘hedging in of war’ and attempt, chiefly by regulations and agreements on the protection of civilian populations and prisoners of war, to contain it and make it more tolerable. (131)

With this in mind, if there were terrorists operating during the Anglo-Irish War, we must clearly include the British in their number. In the public slaughter of prisoners of war and non-combatants alike, the crown forces behaved as war criminals if not outright terrorists, as their actions were definitely intended to terrorize the population into submission.

Regardless, in the end, the Anglo-Irish War concluded with only a partial victory for nationalists. The IRA had fought the British Army to a standstill, but the prospect of a total victory seemed unlikely to the nationalist leadership. In the minority Unionist circles, a total defeat was to be avoided at all costs. As a result, both sides reluctantly settled on the British plan of partition rather than total victory. It is as if international lawyer and policy advisor David Fromkin is

describing the political scenario in Ireland at this time when writes in his book, *The Independence of Nations*, that

Often, for example when partition is proposed or administrated by a colonial Power in the country that it occupies, its function is to divide the loyalties of the peoples of the subject country in order to weaken the resistance to colonial rule. A complimentary strategy is the proposal of partition by a minority group within a colony on the verge of independence, in an effort to block the granting of independence or else to modify the terms under which the majority would assume power after independence is attained. (56)

Ireland would be divided, with the twenty-six southwestern counties free to eventually become a republic and the north-easternmost six<sup>15</sup> counties remaining under British control. These were the counties in which Unionist Protestants were the majority, though of course a minority in the whole island of Ireland, and not coincidentally, the counties in which heavy industry like shipbuilding was concentrated. The question of British presence in Ireland was resolved to the satisfaction of no one, as was soon violently manifested in the Irish Civil War, with pro-partition Free State troops fighting against anti-Treaty republicans. The divided stage was set for the explosive conflict that reemerged in the late 1960s.

The same issues that caused political conflict were also reflected in the writing of the time, and indeed, the years surrounding 1916 would be a watershed in Irish literary history as well. The Irish Revival was reaching its zenith with writers like Joyce, Synge, and Yeats in the flower of their work. Gaelic culture and language had survived the onslaught of years and legislation,

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<sup>15</sup> Traditionally, the province of Ulster has nine counties. However, when the term "Ulster" is used today by Unionists, it is meant to be synonymous with the Six Counties of Northern Ireland.

and authors like these sought in their own ways to preserve them in print, with particular attention paid to the folklore and legends of an epic past. However, this re-mythologization was not without its problems. As noted Irish critic Seamus Deane rightly argues,

The revival, like the rebellion and the War of Independence, the treaty of 1922 (which partitioned Ireland into its present form), and the subsequent civil war, were simultaneously causes and consequences of the concerted effort to renovate the idea of the national character and of the national destiny... The Irish Revival and its predecessors had the right idea in looking to some legendary past for the legitimating origin of Irish society as one distinct from the British, which had a different conception of origin. But the search for origin, like that for identity, is self-contradictory. Once the origin is understood to be an invention, however necessary, it can never again be thought of as something "natural." (13-7)

I agree that part of the reason that many of the resulting works fail is that they often pay only passing attention to the concrete here-and-now of contemporary politics, concentrating instead on the past, both mythic and otherwise. Preferring to dwell in a safely distant era which may have never existed, such authors make only metaphoric gestures toward the present—gestures which generally speak from within the comfortable confines of middle-class ideology.

William Butler Yeats is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. Of the Revival, he is probably the best known and most widely anthologized of the period and perhaps of Irish writing in its entirety. His place within the literary canon is unassailable: certainly the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925 ensured that. Yet, not surprisingly, in many ways he is the *least* revolutionary of the authors of his time. Although he is at times touted as a firebrand of rebellion, even the most glancing look at his overtly political poems show him to be deeply



troubled by militant nationalism. Describing a member of the Irish Republican Army in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" Yeats writes: "An affable Irregular,/ A heavily-built Falstaffian man,/ Comes cracking jokes of civil war/ As though to die by gunshot were/ The finest play under the sun" (113). Though the Volunteer is not dismissed entirely, perhaps only because of his affable nature (which in Yeats' view seemingly allows the soldier to transcend momentarily his political commitment), certainly this poem is not a Republican call to arms and sacrifice.

This call for an apolitical populace is echoed in "The Tower," which speaks positively of "The pride of people that were/ Bound neither to Cause nor to State,/ Neither to slaves that were spat upon,/ Nor the tyrants that spat" (107). In this latter instance, Yeats presents the reader with a rather difficult duality to reconcile. In an oppressive colonial setting, how does one avoid being a slave without at least engaging in a modicum of agitation for some civil rights "Cause," whether militant or not? Apparently, as the reader is told later in "The Tower," one should busy one's self not with activism, but only with "Poet's imaginings/ And memories of love,/ Memories of the words of women,/ All those things whereof/ Man makes a superhuman/ Mirror-resembling dream" (108). Yeats here succumbs to the tired and false Arnoldian notion that poetry is best when it somehow disengages itself from the politically-charged world which surrounds it. Terry Eagleton's description of "the aesthetic as 'disinterested' mythic solution to real contradictions" is apropos in this instance. Eagleton asserts

There are Irish critics and commentators who deploy the term [the "aesthetic"] today as a privileged mark of that decency, civility, and cultivation of which an uncouth nationalism is fatally bereft... the poetic is still being counterposed to the political—which is only to say that the

“poetic” as we have it today was, among other things, historically constructed to carry out just that business of suppressing political conflict. Imagination and enlightened liberal reason are still being offered to us in Ireland today as the antithesis of sectarianism; and like all such idealized values they forget their own roots in a social class and history not unnoted for its own virulent sectarianism, then and now... The liberal humanist notion of Culture was constituted, among other things, to marginalize such peoples as the Irish... (33)

With the potential for liberation promised in Yeats’ work-- the foundation of the Abbey Theatre and his insistence on the importance of Irish themes in his writings, for instance—it is sadly ironic that ultimately he seeks to quell rebellion against tyranny rather than foment it.<sup>16</sup>

One final example from the annotated third edition of *William Butler Yeats: Selected Poems and Three Plays* will suffice to show the way in which Yeats’ work naturally lends itself to the tyranny of the aesthetic, the police state of the academy. “Easter, 1916” is one of his best known poems, and one most frequently misread as having nationalistic overtones. Edward W. Said,<sup>17</sup> for instance, takes this poem to be “the celebration and commemoration of violence in bringing about a new order” (85). While perhaps it is a commemoration it is hardly a celebration, for the change wrought by the rebellion to Yeats is not an amelioration, but death itself. When speaking of the executed rebel leader

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<sup>16</sup> It might be said furthermore, that in his work Yeats alludes as frequently to English literary icons like Shakespeare and to Greek and Roman mythology as he does to exclusively Irish subjects.

<sup>17</sup> Said makes a valiant attempt throughout this essay to portray Yeats as more militant than in fact he is, arguing at one point the probably untenable notion that Yeats had a “direct association... with the Easter Uprising” (85). According to Said, Neruda also believed Yeats to be “a national poet who represents the Irish nation in its war against tyranny” (87). After all of these attempts to portray Yeats as a rebel, even as ardent a supporter as Said must temper his argument, and in fact he concludes the essay with the words: “True, Yeats stopped short of imagining the full political liberation he might have aspired toward, but we are left with a considerable achievement in decolonization nonetheless” (94).

termed a "drunken, vainglorious lout," the reader is told "He, too, has resigned his part/ In the casual comedy;/ He, too, has been changed in his turn,/ Transformed utterly/ A terrible beauty is born" (84). To change is to die in this poem—1916 heralds not the promise of Ireland's liberation, an Éire Nua (New Ireland), but rather, only its demise, particularly on a "moral" level.

Here, at least, the poem is allowed to speak for itself. Soon, however, the perils of an annotated text become apparent, as the voice of the academy (in the form of editor M.L. Rosenthal) intrudes. When the last stanza asks "Was it needless death after all?/ For England may keep faith for all that is done and said" (85), Rosenthal comments that these lines are

An allusion to the promise of Home Rule, voted by Parliament but delayed by the outbreak of the world war, and to the possible good intentions of England generally (a characteristic Yeatsian concession which greatly deepens this poem). [225]

Ignoring for a moment the manner in which England showed her "good intentions" after the Rising,<sup>18</sup> it is important to note Rosenthal's implied equation of poetic depth with a lack of nationalistic overtones. Resistance writing and "true" literature by this definition are mutually exclusive. Here, the reader hears again the theme developed earlier by the editor. Perhaps betraying his own political views as much as those of the poet whose work he is editing, Rosenthal writes in the book's introduction

Political struggle, though occasionally inspiring and doubtless necessary, was thus seen by Yeats as not only tragic but by its very nature inimical to uncompromised idealism. Against it he could set the struggle for Irish art

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<sup>18</sup> Tim Pat Coogan writes "After the 1916 Rising, events took their predictable course. Great roaring fires of patriotism banked up as the British executed the principal leaders of the revolt, imprisoned others, imposed martial law, and hanged Sir Roger Casement in August, long after any danger of another Easter Uprising had passed. British efforts to arrest the development of events [i.e. passage of Home Rule] were swept aside" (16).

and intellectual life best exemplified by Synge and Lady Gregory. The house of Lady Gregory at Coole he saw as the center of this nobler struggle. A refuge and a meeting place for people like himself, it generated the atmosphere out of which came the Abbey Theatre and the new Irish literature, and in itself stood for a heritage—aristocratic, disinterested, aesthetic—which was Ireland's true meaning. (xxvi)

This statement is not merely a commentary on Yeats' work and personal ideology, but a synopsis of the admission standards of the traditional canon. Like those of Yeats' tower, the thick walls of Lady Gregory's house are meant to keep out the politically and poetically rebellious and provide a throne room for the tyrants of the aesthetic.

Unfortunately, the majority of contact that many readers—students, faculty, and non-academics alike—have with Irish writing (perhaps with the exception of Swift) is through the works of Yeats and his contemporaries of the early twentieth century. I myself as both a graduate and undergraduate have had classes in "Irish Literature" that dealt with only three authors: Yeats, Beckett, and Joyce. The greatest danger in the conflation of "Irish Literature" with the Revival is self-evident: such a move dismisses more than a millennium of other writing, exciting and politically charged writing. Indeed, as both Beckett and Joyce spent most of their creative lives as expatriates, one might be tempted to think that "Irish Literature" can only be produced in exile. Furthermore, one might be hoodwinked into believing that perhaps it cannot even be created in English (let alone Gaeilge), as Beckett wrote his later work solely in French, only subsequently translating it to other languages. Stephen's description of Ireland as "an old sow that eats her farrow" in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is one that Joyce himself shared, one that the canon seems intent on foisting upon the world (198).

Yet Irish writing does not begin and end with the clever words of Modernist expatriates and bourgeois mystics,<sup>19</sup> however aesthetically pleasing their work, however innovative their technique. In order for a course to properly term itself one that examines "Irish Literature," it must take into account a broader spectrum of writings. Such is the project of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, edited by Seamus Deane. Deane describes his project as "an act of repossession" combining not just literary, but (among others) economic, political, and philosophical writings "with a degree of ironic self-consciousness," the point of which

is not to establish a canon as such; it is to engage in the action of establishing a system that has an enabling, a mobilizing energy, the energy of assertion and difference, while remaining aware that all such systems—like anthologies of other national literatures—are fictions that have inscribed within them principles of hierarchy and of exclusion, as well as inclusion, that become evident only when the mass of material is organized into a particular form... It is a recuperation of these writers into the so-called other context, the inside reading of them in relation to other Irish writing, in order to modify and perhaps even distress other "outside" readings that have been unaware of that context and its force. (15)

Indeed, it is within such a context as Deane describes that I would like to locate the present study. For, although *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature* re/places such authors as Swift, Shaw, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett in a new context outside of the usual British/English literary tradition, the circle must grow wider. The same names in a new context is a good starting point: new names

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<sup>19</sup> Yeats was a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, a mystical society that numbered among its adherents the famed sorcerer Aleister Crowley.

from a new tradition in a new context will further the progression. It is prison literature that will prove to be the new context's greatest engine.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE ROOTS OF INTERNMENT TO SPECIAL CATEGORY STATUS: 1968--1976

At last we have come to the era which is the centerpoint of the present study. Again, however, a brief time must be spent in giving the background to the most current phase of the struggle. As has been briefly described in the previous chapter, since first colonization the British have used their legal system as a coercive force. In the partition of Ireland and in the establishment of the six county statelet at the close of the Anglo-Irish War, the British continued in their unpleasantly familiar pattern, setting in motion events that would come into tragic flower in the summer of 1968.

It was ultimately housing that caused a new beginning to armed conflict in Ireland. At this time Ireland as a whole and the North of Ireland in particular suffered a severe housing shortage. As Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey, civil rights activist and former MP, reported in the film *Off Our Knees*,<sup>1</sup> the situation was the worst in western Europe. Yet, it was not merely the existence of a shortage that was problematic in the North, it was the manner by which housing was distributed. Local Unionist-dominated councils were in charge of allocation, and consistently did so along sectarian lines. But it was when a home was taken from a married Catholic family with three children and given to a childless, single, nineteen year-old Protestant woman (who also happened to be the secretary of a Unionist parliamentary candidate) that discontent turned into open, peaceful protest in the formation of the Derry Housing Action Committee

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<sup>1</sup> This film is especially notable in that it was created by the original founders of the Civil Rights Association to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the organization's formation.

(Curtis 23). This organization and others like it soon were working together towards common goals with the formation of the Civil Rights Association in late 1968. Devlin-McAliskey argues that

Their demands were simple: 1) the right of every person over twenty-one to one vote and only one vote in local elections; 2) an end to religious discrimination in employment; 3) an end to religious discrimination in the allocation of houses; 4) an end to the Special Powers Act. (*Off Our Knees*)

However simple the demands the Stormont government wanted no part of them, for granting even these basic rights would threaten the legal and political machinery that ensured Unionist control of the Six Counties.

The first and third demands were closely related and perhaps require further explanation. At this point in time, universal suffrage did not exist in the British-controlled North of Ireland. Only homeowners could vote, and as housing was allocated by local government-controlled authorities, the chances of a nationalist getting either a home or a vote were slim. Even were they to receive a house, their votes were overpowered by business votes-- the directors of some limited companies were given up to six votes (*Adams, Free Ireland* 21). Coogan describes the practice further:

Limited companies and occupiers of premises with a rateable valuation of 10 pounds could appoint nominees—as could companies for each 10 pounds of their valuations—under a system of plural voting, which even allowed votes to be cast in another constituency (where Catholics might have a majority), so that the poorer Catholic community was in effect electorally disenfranchised. (*The IRA* 264)

In addition to this creation of excess votes, a system of gerrymandered electoral districts was created that ensured pro-British economic interests were served. In



Derry city, for instance, the Catholic population was 36,049. Through this division of electoral districts, they were unable to elect a nationalist candidate, though the total Protestant population was only 17,695—less than half their number (Coogan 265).

However thoroughly disenfranchised the population was, incredibly the legal oppression did not stop there. The Special Powers Act, according to British law professor David R. Lowry, “gave the authorities, *inter alia*, power to hold suspects incommunicado and indefinitely without lawful arrest, charge, or trial” (1). Nor was this the end of the authority granted by this legislation: as noted by Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams in his book, *Free Ireland*, among other repressive powers the Security Forces were allowed to enter and search homes without warrant, to prevent meetings, even to outlaw possession of restricted films or recordings (22).

It was against these injustices that the Civil Rights Association fought with non-violent protest, including marches modeled after Martin Luther King’s example in America.<sup>2</sup> Journalist Liz Curtis describes the media’s reaction to the early days of the CRA:

The first march, from Coalisland to Dungannon. . . had been ignored, but the Derry demonstration was well covered by television, and viewers throughout Britain and Ireland saw the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] baton-charge the demonstrators, leaving an MP, Gerry Fitt, among the wounded. (24)

Each of these marches had encountered violent resistance both from loyalist civilians as well as official government forces, but it was the reduplication of this violence upon countless television screens that caused another great wave of recruitment to the CRA. And, despite all of the suffering endured by the

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<sup>2</sup> Such a tactic is especially poignant given the American leader’s assassination just a few months earlier.

marchers, the movement remained non-violent. Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey reminds us that “looking back on the period between August to Christmas 1968, the degree of activity, of marches, and the amount of violence suffered without any return, is staggering” (*Off Our Knees*).

Unfortunately, the non-violent unity of the CRA would soon be sorely tried by a new technique. After the Derry march on 5 October 1968, the local Unionist government began concerted attacks on nationalist areas rather than on the CRA marches. This campaign of terror was spearheaded by the Unionist forces of “law and order,” the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and their methods were brutally effective. One resident of Belfast described how the police marched up the road, firing their Sten machine-guns into the ground so that the resulting damaged bullets could not conclusively be traced back to an individual weapon (*Off Our Knees*). Catholics in “mixed areas” were particular targets, and were burned out of their homes by police-led mobs. Professor Lowry notes “the result was the largest population movement in Europe since World War II as Catholics crowded into the ghettos for protection” (2). To give an idea of the enormity of the exodus it has been reported that between July and September 1969, 1,820 *families* were forced from their homes (qtd in Sluka 79).

The British Army was ordered onto the streets in 1969—so Westminster said—to restore order. At first, beleaguered Catholics hoped that this would be the case. However, those who distrusted the decrees of London soon were proven right. Gerry Adams, a lifelong resident of Belfast and witness to the savagery of those years writes

Bombay Street, and, two months later, Coates Street, were burned down by loyalist gangs and the RUC *after* [emphasis mine] the British troops arrived and after the larger scale burnings had already taken place. Whole streets of houses were burned out, people were killed and about a hundred

injured during the two-day attack on this Catholic area in the Lower Falls. The fact that the British army did not intervene taught nationalists an important lesson. (*Free Ireland* 41)

Tragically, even this passive role would be forsaken by the Army, as the curfew of the Catholic Falls Road of 1970 ended with five civilians killed and three hundred arrested. The Army did its best to keep its actions from the general public, enlisting the aid of an all too willing media. As Liz Curtis reports,

Even journalists who believed themselves to be skeptical tended unquestioningly to accept the army's version, unless they personally witnessed the event in question. Simon Winchester [a reporter for *The Guardian*] told how, after the curfew imposed on the Lower Falls in Belfast. . . the British army said they had only fired 15 shots—but the true figure turned out to be 1,454 rounds. (27)

In stark contrast to the violence enacted against Catholics, loyalist areas were not curfewed at all. Enlisting the support of a pliant media, the British Army had revealed itself openly to the Catholic minority as a co-conspirator in the campaign of loyalist terror while attempting to keep its tactics hidden to the rest of the world. This combination of military action and propaganda would find its most nakedly murderous expression in 1972 in an event known today as Bloody Sunday, where British troops opened fire on unarmed civilians protesting internment. Seven of the fourteen people killed were children. In an attempt to falsely report that the murders were in fact a response to aggression, the Security Forces actually planted nail bombs on the body of one of the children after his death (Mullan 25).

The strain of this war took its toll on the CRA. In 1970, the first break in the unity of the movement came when the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) was formed. From the beginning, it was a moderate constitutional-

nationalist party; indeed, its timidity has long been criticized by the Republican movement. Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey has pointed out that John Hume (one of the SDLP's founders and recent recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize) had been "strenuously opposed" to the CRA march in Derry (*Off Our Knees*). With their communities under violent attack, many residents of the North sought to defend their homes by any means necessary, and turned to the Irish Republican Army to do so. Tim Pat Coogan rightly argues

It is hardly an over-simplification to say that Catholics were forced off the streets into the arms of the I.R.A., who were subsequently maintained in their recruiting in the activities both of the Protestant paramilitary mirror organizations which grew up to combat the I.R.A. and of the British Army. (*The IRA* 259)

Indeed, as one Belfast resident put it in the documentary film *Behind the Mask*, describing a loyalist mob's attack on her house, "If it hadn't been for the IRA that night I probably wouldn't be here." Not only abandoned but *attacked* by the state security forces, communities took defense into their own hands.

In 1969 and 1970, however, there was not much of an IRA on which to rely. Coogan reminds us that at this point the IRA was short on both funds and on weapons, having sold the majority of its guns to Welsh Nationalists (*The IRA* 251). One former paramilitary relates that at this time the whole of the IRA of his area of Belfast had only one revolver, two M1 rifles and one Sterling submachine gun (*Behind the Mask*).<sup>3</sup> This would soon change, though for a long period Volunteers far outnumbered available weapons. Indeed, it was not until February 1971 that the first British soldier was fatally shot (Coogan, *The IRA* 285).

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<sup>3</sup> One must compare numbers like these to the 107,000 *licensed* weapons the Hansard report revealed were held by Protestants, "including two machine guns, for which an obliging Justice of the Peace had issued a license to a gentleman who had said that he needed them to 'kill otters'" (Coogan 269).

Later that same year, the British government reactivated a policy that had often served it well: internment. Professor Lowry describes the policy as follows:

Internment as used in Northern Ireland means that any person can be taken into custody although no evidence or suspicion of any crime is required. Such a person could be held incommunicado and detained in prison indefinitely. As the detainee is never charged with any offense, access to court, due process and civil rights are thereby denied. (2)

On 9 August the British Army swept through Catholic districts, arresting three hundred and forty-two men the first morning (Faul 1). The intensity of the operation continued unabated: Lowry notes that in the three months following the initial campaign, 1,400 people were interned (2). Researcher Allen Feldman further points out that 2,357 people were arrested by January 1972 (*Formations of Violence* 86).

Yet, as appalling as these numbers are, it must be remembered that internment was only part of an overall campaign waged legally and militarily against the Catholic population. In concert with the arrests came block-by-block searches of homes. The government again used the draconian authority granted it by the Special Powers Act to its fullest and with increasing intensity. 17, 262 houses were searched in 1971, the number climbing to 36,617 the following year, finally reaching a high of 74,556 in 1973-- one-fifth of all homes in the North. The following year's number was only slightly lower: 71,914 (Cocgan, *The IRA* 287).

A further weapon in the British government's arsenal was the virtual media blackout that surrounded the introduction of internment and the subsequent torture of internees during their interrogation. Local Northern Irish nationalist newspapers were covering the abuses suffered by the prisoners within ten days of the first arrests, and by the end of the month, these reports had

appeared in all major Irish papers. Yet the British papers were silent. This quiet is striking in its intentionality. The English media certainly could not feign ignorance about the topic: even were their reporters not on the ground in the North of Ireland, organizations like the Association for Legal Justice had circulated prisoners' statements to the press by 20 August. The British-based Anti-Internment League had distributed further information by the first week of September. However, it was not until 17 October—more than two months later—that the first British papers began reporting the story (Curtis 31).

Even when the newspapers finally revealed to the British public that internment was being implemented in the North of Ireland, objective reporting was, in fact, actively discouraged in both print and televised media. As Liz Curtis discovered in the case of the BBC program *Today*,

The BBC reporters had been instructed to present all interviews with ex-internees 'in as skeptical a manner as possible' ; they had done this, and the interviews had nonetheless been banned. They had also been forbidden to seek corroboration from doctors and priests, which would have lent weight to the allegations. As Jonathan Dimbleby wrote, 'Quite clearly, until the Compton Report bore out much of what had been alleged, the BBC's intention was to discredit the allegations and those who made them.' (33)

As deplorable as these directives were, they were merely following precedents set even before internment began. In 1971, for example, when British soldiers opened fire on two innocent men, killing one and injuring his companion, *Sunday Mirror* reporter Kevin Dowling's story about the incident went unpublished. In fact, Dowling relates, "I was threatened with dismissal if I ever again suggested that our army was doing such nasty things in Northern Ireland" (qtd. in Curtis 27).

Yet even with media self-censorship working in concert with government-imposed bans, as a result of those who published and distributed prisoners' statements the horrors surrounding internment eventually came to light and explanations had to be given. The language that was used by the British government to justify its legal and military excesses is remarkable. Lord Diplock, who headed the Commission to Consider Legal Procedures to Deal with Terrorist Activities in Northern Ireland actually blamed rights that are taken for granted in democracies. In setting up a policy by which a suspect can be convicted merely on the sworn word of a member of the Security Forces that the suspect "confessed" to an offense, Lord Diplock wrote

The detailed technical rules and practice as to the 'admissibility' of inculpatory statements by the accused as they are currently applied in Northern Ireland are hampering the course of justice in the case of terrorist crimes and compelling the authorities responsible for public order and safety to resort to detention in a significant number of cases which would otherwise be dealt with both effectively and fairly by a trial in a court of law. (qtd. in Taylor 33-4)

There is, of course, a dark irony in Diplock's suggestion that due process must be eliminated in order to give suspects due process. Because laws protecting human rights exist, this way of thinking maintains, those laws need to be circumvented by imprisonment without charge or trial.<sup>4</sup>

Less convoluted but no less flawed in logic, another tactic frequently used to justify internment is to blame Republican paramilitary groups, and in particular the IRA. Jim Challis, author of *The Northern Ireland Prison Service*

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<sup>4</sup> Although shocking to a democratic sensibility, the notion of internment in a variety of guises has a long history in the British legal system. For instance, the Prevention of Crime Act of 1908 empowered authorities to give sentences of up to five years "preventative detention" (when no crime had been committed) to habitual offenders (McConville 156).

1920–1990: *A History* exemplifies this approach, writing that “the increase in terrorist activity from 1968 to 1971 led to the re-introduction of internment” (4-5).<sup>5</sup> This approach conveniently ignores several crucial points: first of all, it ignores the fact that the IRA took no offensive action *until* 1971 and was effectively non-existent in 1968. The terrorist activity during the period set forth above was mainly that of loyalist mobs in collusion with the RUC burning innocent Catholic families out of their houses, yet the ambiguity of Challis’ word choice is deliberate. After years of British propaganda, he hopes that the term “terrorist” is synonymous with the IRA in the mind of a reader unfamiliar with the history of the early years of the “Troubles.”

Secondly, one would assume that if such a policy as internment was in truth directed at people engaged in violent activity, loyalists would have a fair representation among those arrested. In fact, not one Protestant was detained in the initial arrests. This omission is striking not only in light of the unabashedly loyalist mob violence, but also given the facts that Coogan points out in *The IRA*: “the first killings of any sort, the Malvern Street murder, the first explosion and the first constable killed in the North, Constable Arbuckle, were all carried out by Protestants” (261).<sup>6</sup> Yet, perhaps Challis’ own history explains his position. A former British soldier who served in Northern Ireland in 1973, he later was a prison guard in Long Kesh during the brutal days of the Hunger Strike (ii). Challis’ book is yet one more example of how—in the tradition of Sidney and Spenser-- writers and historians can be soldiers on colonialism’s behalf, sometimes quite literally.

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<sup>5</sup> He later insists “With the increase of IRA activity, coupled with the loyalist counter violence (sic) in the early 1970’s, internment once again became the Government’s instrument to reduce violence in the streets” (29).

<sup>6</sup> It is to Coogan’s credit that whenever practical he humanizes the victims of violence with the inclusion of their names.



One-sided media coverage and histories like that of Challis obligate us to read prison literature. Indeed, it could be said that much of the history of Anglo-Irish relations can be told entirely through the medium of prison memoirs, especially when one considers the relative paucity of “scholarly” works related to Irish prison experience. Prison writing is a literary map of the dialectic between individual historical moment and the individual him/herself. I would argue that this is particularly the case with Republicans, whose literary and cultural history is inextricably entwined with the experience of incarceration. Every Republican faces a real threat of death and an even greater likelihood of prison, and it is precisely within these moments, when the power of the state is brought to bear upon the body and mind of the individual, that this chapter and those that follow will focus.

The violence of the first years of the modern Anglo-Irish conflict have hopefully been set forth with sufficient clarity to now turn to the writings of those who experienced it first hand, and found themselves imprisoned as a result of their heritage and political beliefs. In many ways, these early years could be considered the worst, at least in terms of the measurable intensity of the conflict. Challis cites a document that claims that half the people killed between 1969 and 1994 died between 1970 and 1976 (64). This general trend is confirmed by Coogan, who reveals that 1972 saw the greatest number of shooting incidents in modern Irish history: 10,628 in that year alone (*The IRA* 287). To put this in perspective, one would have to add all of the shooting incidents between 1976 and 1987 to match this single year (Coogan, *The IRA* 503). It was in this atmosphere of unprecedented violence, injustice, and oppression that Gerry Adams and Roseleen Walsh found themselves interned; Adams in Long Kesh on two occasions, Walsh in Armagh Jail in 1973.

Women's Voices: Roseleen Walsh

Despite their active participation in politics and warfare alike throughout history,<sup>7</sup> the story of women in Ireland has remained largely untold. In the modern era, women literally have fought alongside the men at every stage of the nationalist struggle, yet historians and critics alike tend to ignore the contributions of Republican women, and at times so has the nation for which they made so many sacrifices. The example of the Ladies' Land League in the 1880s is representative. When the leaders of the Land League were imprisoned, Anna and Fanny Parnell-- the sisters of Charles Stewart Parnell—formed their own organization to fight for the same causes of fixity of tenure, fair rents, and the right to free sale for Irish farmers.<sup>8</sup> However, as the filmmakers responsible for *Mother Ireland* relate, upon their release the male leaders disbanded the women's organization, thinking it "too radical."

There are a few notable exceptions who fight the forces attempting to silence women's voices in history, and filmmakers are at the forefront. Anne Crilly, director of the aforementioned film *Mother Ireland*, is one. Her work is of great importance for several reasons, most obviously that it is a feminist exploration of women's contributions to Republicanism. *Mother Ireland* is noteworthy also in that it was the first film to fall victim to the 1988 broadcasting ban put in effect by the Thatcher administration.<sup>9</sup> The film was targeted in October of that year not only because of its images of Emma Groves—a woman

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<sup>7</sup> This tradition extends far back into the mists of time as can be seen in the figure of the warrior-queen Maebh.

<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that these seem rather Christian demands, both manifestations of the Land League became enemies of the Catholic Church. In fact, one of the League's first victories was to get Canon Burke—a parish priest—to reduce his rents (*The IRA Coogan* 5). The Church was and is, of course, one of the largest landholders in Ireland and profited alongside the absentee landlords under the British system. Here is yet another example of a point of friction between nationalists and the Church hierarchy—a friction ignored by Loyalists like Ian Paisley who equate nationalism and Catholicism.

<sup>9</sup> This ban will be discussed in greater depth in the section dealing with Gerry Adams.

shot in the face and blinded by a British soldier's plastic bullet—but also because of its interviews with Republicans like Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey and IRA women like Mairead Farrell (Curtis 291).

From the perspective of the British government, the footage of Farrell was particularly ill-timed, as she had been killed with two companions in March in an SAS<sup>10</sup> shoot-to-kill operation in Gibraltar. This was not a firefight resulting in death, but rather a coldly planned execution. Coogan rightly places responsibility at the highest echelons of Westminster, relating that “at a cabinet level in Mrs. Thatcher's government, a judicial murder was decided upon. On March 2, 1988, an S.A.S. ‘hit squad’ was flown to Gibraltar with instructions to kill the I.R.A. party” (*The IRA* 440). Farrell and Dan McCann were killed a short distance away from and a few moments before Seán Savage. All three were unarmed. One key independent eyewitness told Thames Television<sup>11</sup> that the SAS

just went and shot these people. That's all. They didn't say anything, they didn't scream, they didn't shout, they didn't do anything. These people [Farrell and McCann] were turning their heads back to see what was happening, and when they saw these men had guns in their hands they put their hands up. (qtd. in Murray, *State Violence* 193)

Farrell and McCann were then shot repeatedly, even after their bodies hit the ground, an action duplicated during the killing of Savage who was struck by between sixteen and eighteen bullets. One witness gave testimony that an SAS man actually stood on the fallen Savage and fired four shots into his head at point-blank range. This statement was borne out by Professor Watson, a

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<sup>10</sup> An elite British commando group, comparable to the American Delta Force or the Special Forces.

<sup>11</sup> The documentary that aired this statement, *Death on the Rock*, was broadcast on May 5, 1988 just five months prior to Thatcher's broadcasting ban. However, Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe had “asked” that the program not be aired. Aired it was, but at a cost: in a move widely seen as punitive, the Independent Television Commission refused to renew Thames Television's franchise (Curtis 288).

pathologist who reviewed the forensic data during the later trial at the European Court of Human Rights (Murray, *State Violence* 195). On 27 September 1995, the British government was found guilty of breaching Article Two of the European Convention of Human Rights: the Right to Life. The British government said that it would ignore the verdict. In fact, the Deputy Prime Minister, Michael Heseltine, boldly stated that if given the choice “the same decisions would be made again” to kill the three unarmed people (qtd. in Murray, *State Violence* 192).

Although history may remember Mairead Farrell best as the victim of the SAS, she is far more than that, for in addition to being a warrior she was also a creator of policy. As has already been seen with O'Donovan Rossa and will later be seen with Bobby Sands, often the most innovative and iconoclastic Republican thought comes from inside prison walls. Furthermore, these theories often go against the grain of established Republican policy as well as the status quo of the larger society, yet it is through these tensions that Republican groups—paramilitary or otherwise—remain dynamic. Earlier in her life, when Farrell was jailed, she was the commanding officer of the women in her prison, and fought against the stereotype of the Irish woman as passive or subordinate to males, whether in the home, in prison, or in the IRA. In an interview in *Mother Ireland* she summarized the conservative view that held that

Women aren't supposed to be politically active, they're supposed to be looked after, taken care of and definitely not taking part in a no-wash protest, never mind being in prison. We even thought in the early days that we were an extension.

Farrell and the other female prisoners would soon prove to their critics—from inside and outside the Republican movement—that they were the equal of the

men in endurance as well as in intellect, engaging in Blanket and No-wash protests, as well as hunger strikes in order to achieve political status.

If literary critics are silent with regard to male prisoners, they are doubly so with regard to women imprisoned for political reasons. Once again, Barbara Harlow is one of the few at the forefront of the movement to bring resistance writing into the polite halls of the academy. Picking up where her earlier book, *Resistance Literature* (1987), left off, as its title suggests *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* is a gynocentric look into the literary production surrounding female political prisoners. Echoing the concerns of Mairead Farrell, Harlow argues that the conservative discomfort with the intersection of the feminine and the political "is continuous with, if not derivative of, a historically dominant project of patriarchy—and academic humanism—to maintain the self-interested conveniences of an unequal division of labor" (*Barred* 83).<sup>12</sup> Earlier in the book she brings her critique more fully to the academy:

Reading prison writing must in turn demand a correspondingly activist counterapproach to that of passivity, aesthetic gratification, and the pleasures of consumption that are traditionally sanctioned by the academic disciplining of literature. (*Barred* 4)

The traditional role of the reader, like the traditional role of women, has been passive. The same pedagogy that encouraged aesthetic distance from the overtly political in writing also discouraged activism outside the classroom. By studying prison literature this enforced status quo can be addressed, for not only does jail literature require an innovative critical approach, but it also provides examples

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<sup>12</sup> Alluding to the famous mural painted on the side of a house which read "You are now entering Free Derry," Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey once commented with characteristic wit "Derry wasn't that free this side of the wall either" (*Mother Ireland*). Although women worked in as vital roles as men in organizations like the Civil Rights Association, she maintains that many men still were capable of seeing them only within the traditional domestic sphere.

of resistance to its students. It is not surprising that Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey has argued that

The best young women of the feminist movement are those who have come through the experience of the Republican movement--those who have come to an awareness of their oppression as women through a growing awareness of all other layers of oppression. (*Mother Ireland*)

In the challenge of critically approaching prison writing, readers prepare themselves for the challenge of addressing this oppression.

As promising a start as Harlow makes, however, in the end she fails to heed her own advice to turn directly to the words written in prison. In the chapter from *Barred* most relevant to the present discussion, "Beyond the Pale: Northern Ireland," of the twenty-two pages devoted to the region, only four actually are spent in direct discussion of writings of women prisoners (95-9). The majority of the chapter is spent in an examination of the images of Irish women in films like *Cal*, in the canonical writings of male authors like Yeats, and, briefly, in Eoghan Mac Cormaic's play, *The Price of Freedom*, which had been smuggled out of prison. Her analysis is thorough, and indeed she offers many valuable insights into these texts: she points out, for example, that to Yeats "women's participation in that engaged political project [nationalist and suffragette work] is seen to de-feminize their personas" (83). However, while it is of undisputed importance to establish the grain against which women's narratives need to be read, the narratives must then *be* read-- spending on them the proportionate amount of time that is their due. It is not enough simply to expose the underlying patriarchal structure. Unless alternative texts are advanced simultaneously with alternative readings of the canon, prison writing will remain forever at the margin. This responsibility is one of which Harlow herself is aware, writing in a subsequent article about prison literature entitled

"The Writing on the Wall," that she conceives of herself as a "dealer, as it were, in books or texts" (115). It would hardly be radical (and might indeed be more productive to her project) to foreground multiple texts written by women.

The limited number of texts presented on the topic of the North of Ireland in *Barred* itself leaves something to be desired. Only two texts are actually examined in these four pages: *Sisters in Cells* by Aine and Eibhlín Nic Giolla Easpaig, and *Tell Them Everything* by Margaretta D'Arcy. The former work is indeed worthy of inclusion in any discussion of prison literature, for it is a harrowing account of the sisters' ten years spent as Irish political prisoners in Durham Prison in England. Harlow rightfully points out that in the sisters' case

Their incarceration experience as Irish women in a British jail was radically different from that of their compatriots in Armagh. Rather than the highly trained, disciplined, and organized solidarity of the republican women prisoners, the Giolla Easpaig sisters had, in the midst of British "criminal" women and hostile wardresses who resented republican activities, only each other. (97)

The Nic Giolla Easpaigs' unique experiences (including their bond as sisters, as well as the fact that they were allowed to serve their time together) had an obvious and direct impact upon the work that they produced. Indeed, a co-authored work of this nature would have been impossible had the experiences of one sister been severed from the other. Harlow observes that the sisters' sense of mutual self-reliance

is likewise written into the text in the variable narrator pronouns that they deploy together: a combination of the first person plural "we" and the first person singular "I" followed by either "(Aine)" or "(Eibhlin)," producing a collective narrative voice against both the repressive isolation

of confinement and the straightforwardly contained chronology of their prison story. (95)

The conditions in which they found themselves incarcerated, as well as their innovative, collaborative approach to telling the story of that incarceration work against the notion that all prison literature is essentially the same.

D'Arcy's book, on the other hand, is simultaneously more problematic, more complex, and less compelling than *Sisters in Cells*, particularly with regard to the private motivations that put D'Arcy in prison. While attending a 1978 poetry reading in support of political prisoners in the North of Ireland, she was arrested with eleven other women from the Twenty-six Counties for vandalizing the walls of the museum in which the event was held. In D'Arcy's words, disgusted with what was only "an impression of radical protest against censorship and the brutality of repression on the Falls Road,<sup>13</sup>" exemplified by the well-known writer Paul Muldoon dedicating a poem to a banned seventeenth-century Spanish painter, she "leant against the wall, took out a red marker and wrote H Block" (16). Her experiences (and, truth be told, her mindset) subsequent to this act of defiance provide examples of some of the perils of prison literature both in terms of its composition and its critique.

What Harlow reveals to the reader in her examination of D'Arcy in *Barred* that is not revealed in "The Writing on the Wall" is that in fact "the British courts, in the face of adverse publicity, proved reluctant to prosecute the southern women, much less send them to jail" (96). D'Arcy and one other woman chose not to pay a fine, and voluntarily went to prison in Armagh for three months. What resulted from this incarceration, I would argue, is not entirely prison literature, if only for the reason that D'Arcy conceived of her project more as an anthropologist studying a target group than as a member of a

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<sup>13</sup> A staunchly Republican area of Belfast.



group fighting against repression.<sup>14</sup> A revealing statement to one aware of the painful ethnocentrism sometimes associated with careless anthropology is found in D'Arcy's description of the women of Armagh as "a forgotten tribe held together in this hostile environment, secretly in the thrall of some tyrant of the forest," while characterizing herself as "an explorer who had stumbled in on their strange customs" (94). D'Arcy allows herself a similar flight of fancy earlier in her account, revealing that "At times I fantasised (sic) that we were part of some ancient matriarchal tribe with Mairead [Farrell, the same woman who would be killed in Gibraltar] as our Inkosi-kaas" (83). These depictions smack of the escapism of noble savagery, revealing the depth to which—despite her strained attempts to explain away her word choice to the POWs—D'Arcy really does conceive of her sojourn in Armagh as a "holiday camp" (94).

Though she does imitate the POWs by going on their No-wash protest, it seems done not out of real solidarity, but rather out of a need to provide first-hand details for her inevitable book, *Tell Them Everything*; the work is not so much prison literature as journalistic exposé. D'Arcy reveals this in her statement that "I was not only an observer, I was also a participant and I had to retain my own individuality as a civilian" (68). Despite undisputed bravery in submitting to voluntary incarceration, D'Arcy domesticates her narrative of the Armagh women by her philosophy of composition.

In addition to voluntary imprisonment, D'Arcy also in this way voluntarily isolates herself in important ways from the Republican POWs—exactly the sort of fragmentation that prison regimes seek to bring about through disciplinary structures. The attempt to evoke a sense of journalism "without

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<sup>14</sup> Certainly, there is no lack of courage or political commitment in many instances of voluntary incarceration: conscientious objection, for instance. In addition, many fine literary works have been produced by those willingly serving jail time for their refusal to pay government offices: Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" ranking highly among them.

bias" can endanger a politically charged text, for this approach must leave some things unsaid. D'Arcy herself admits that the scope of her book is necessarily confined by "the intimidating and expensive laws of libel and criminal libel... used by the vested interests of the state as a means of covert censorship" (9). The difference between the Republican prisoners and D'Arcy could not be more pronounced: the former willing literally to risk their lives in hunger strike and their health living on No-wash protest for two years, the latter afraid to tell the full story of her voluntary three month sojourn for fear of being sued. The POWs' plea for D'Arcy to "tell them everything" is ultimately hamstrung by the greatest fear of the middle class—loss of money.

Bracketing for a moment the tensions within *Tell Them Everything*, now the tensions with regard to its critique must be taken into account. While every complex text lends itself to multiple readings, those argued in Harlow's book *Barred*, and her article "The Writing on the Wall" reveal something about the opportunism that is an unfortunate and perhaps inevitable part of literary criticism: for, in order to fit a text into a conference theme, to inscribe it within the limited confines of an article, discrete parts of a narrative must be isolated, surgically removed, and subsequently assimilated within the critic's own text. This is often tantamount to doing violence to the literature itself, with the text made to bear the burden of sometimes contradictory critical motives.

As noted above, the examination of *Tell Them Everything* in *Barred* neglects to mention the actual reason for D'Arcy's incarceration: graffiti. This is partially because the worthy purpose of the book is to empower women's prison writing. Perhaps graffiti was not felt to be an active enough form of resistance to fit in with such a project, for Harlow in her book avoids the topic, telling the reader only that "Margaretta D'Arcy had been among a group of eleven women arrested as part of a protest on behalf of the Armagh republican women prisoners

by Women against Imperialism (sic)" (95). This indeed suggests a more militant defiance than the strokes of a red marker, strokes that in fact (as was quoted above), were in support of the H Blocks-- the male prison.

Conversely, though "The Writing on the Wall" foregrounds the actual act of resistance through writing (which should not by any means be discounted), with the surrounding environment of the act described in completely different terms. In the article, Harlow describes the occasion for the poetry reading in the following way:

The festival coincided with the first major H Blocks march in the north of Ireland. The male prisoners in the H Blocks, the name popularly attached to Long Kesh prison had been "on the blanket," wearing only their prison-issue blankets in protest at the withdrawal of political status that, among other things, had previously allowed them to wear their own clothes.

(118)

The article primarily concerns itself not with the earlier feminist approach to prison literature, but with how "The museum and the academy serve together to house the social order's sanctioned practices of representation—both pictorial and political" (116). The importance of D'Arcy's scribbles on the walls of the Ulster Museum thus becomes clear: it is the act itself—a transgression of a disciplined space-- that is most important in this article. Harlow's decision not to reveal in "The Writing on the Walls" the voluntary component of D'Arcy's imprisonment can also be explained with regard to this article's focus. Were graffiti revealed to be the misdemeanor that the courts were willing to treat it as, it would undercut the argument that D'Arcy's writing on the walls of the Ulster museum is seen by state institutions as dangerously transgressive rather than merely a nuisance. Whereas "The Writing on the Wall" privileges space, *Barred* privileges gender: in the previously quoted passage from *Barred*, it is not the

male H Block prisoners on whose behalf the protest takes place, but the female POWs in Armagh. Which, one might ask, was it? Was it *ever* a protest just for one group or the other? In either of Harlow's critiques, any real solidarity that existed between both male and female Republican POWs is ignored; mainly, it is tempting to say, in order to provide a tight, scholarly product for academic publication.

We must not be too hard on critics like Harlow, who at least are bringing prison literature to the academic community; however, we must make subtle distinctions between the project of the privileged literary critic (a subject position that on a certain level D'Arcy herself might be said to occupy) and that of the activists and paramilitaries engaged in a fight for freedom on a daily basis. The difference is not necessarily one of goal or intention, or even the relative efficacy of their approach: the difference is usually one of degree of commitment. Though the number of critics producing works about the conflict in the North of Ireland are few, even fewer still are those writers who are actively involved with the conflict. In an interview she granted me in August of 1998 Chrissy McAuley, writer, Belfast City Council member (Sinn Féin, Upper Falls) and former Republican POW, suggested that "The reasons are contained within the fact that people are so involved within the struggle on a day-to-day basis." Indeed, the scarcity of writings by political prisoners and of histories written by the people who experienced events first-hand can be attributed to some degree to the active investment of those people in their communities on a level other than discourse.

It is this reality that provides the stumbling block for many critics for whom "discourse" provides the raw materials of a career. Gayatri Spivak provides one example in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She contends

The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence.' It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, their ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow... (28)

In one respect, Spivak's concerns are well-founded. Certainly, part of the purpose of this dissertation is to address exactly those issues. Women writers must be encouraged to put their stories to paper in order that the world may know what they endured, and critics must take notice. As Councilor McAuley told me, part of the reason prisoners write in the North is to fight misrepresentations of history, "to record for others why we have a conflict here, why we need to address the causes of this conflict here. It's for others, so that others can't fall into the same silence-- which Britain created."

Nonetheless, in order to appreciate fully prison literature—as well as postcolonial literature in general-- critics must not privilege the word over action. Though words tell a story, to many postcolonial writers they are only completely heard when they result in deed. Readers should keep in mind the essay "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," Benita Parry's critique of both Spivak and Homi Bhaba's work, which she insists is marked by an

incuriosity about the enabling socioeconomic and political institutions and other forms of social praxis... their [Spivak and Bhaba] theses admit of no point outside of discourse from which opposition can be engendered; their project is concerned to place incendiary devices within the dominant

structures of representation and do not confront these with another knowledge. (43)

Critics are once again in Foucault's snare. If resistance is kept confined within traditional discourse or traditional canon, it is even more easily controlled. Prison writers who represent "another knowledge" must be found, writers who speak from outside the discourse that Spivak seeks either to enter or destroy. It must be lived experience, lived action, the first person of the *Níc Giolla Easpaigs* not the third person of D'Arcy, who is, after all writing more about "them" than "me." Additionally, if we as literary critics are indeed doomed to a function akin to the "dealer" of whom Harlow speaks in "The Writing on the Wall," then we have an obligation to unearth some unknown masterpieces. Perhaps this could be a postcolonial critic's version of "action": to find out and encourage unpublished writers, to explore lesser-known published authors, to simultaneously include all of these authors in the dominant discourse or, failing that, to create another—one that recognizes the power within and without the word. I hope to make a move in that critical direction in my examination of the works of Roseleen Walsh.

Before her writings are examined, the physical conditions of Roseleen Walsh's incarceration should be touched upon. Until March 1986, when Maghaberry Prison opened, Armagh Gaol was the sole prison for women in the North of Ireland. Father Raymond Murray, chaplain of Armagh Gaol from 1971 to 1986 describes the layout as follows:

There were two main cell wings emanating from a circle, one two-storeyed [sic] (A Wing) and the other three-storeyed (B Wing). These wings held 140 cells... In 1976 a small third cell block, known as C Wing, was opened in one of the prison yards. It was a two-storeyed concrete building with 30 cells. (8)

The effects of internment were as marked on this prison as those used to house males, and the reason for Armagh's expansion can be seen in Murray's revelation that "the number of women political prisoners increased from 2 in 1971 to more than 100 in the 1972-76 period. Thirty-two of these women were imprisoned without trial" (10).<sup>15</sup> In 1972, Special Category Status was won by political prisoners across Northern Ireland: in everything but name the prison authorities treated the Republican women of Armagh as prisoners of war. Jim Challis describes dealing with the female POWs from his point of view as a former prison officer:

They, as did their male counterparts, proved to be extremely difficult to handle. They mirrored the male internees in as much as they formed their own rank structure, both within the wing and in the jail as a whole...

As with the men, they were constantly trying to disrupt the system. (30)

As a disciplined militant force the women proved themselves every bit the equal of the males in escape attempts and various forms of prison protest. For instance, after the male internees of Long Kesh set fire to the prison compound in 1974, no news about casualties there was permitted into Armagh. In protest, the Governor of Armagh Prison and three wardesses were taken captive by the women in order to gain information about the male prisoners. The officials were held for fourteen hours, during which time the POWs shouted their demands to and exchanged information with reporters who had gathered on the street. When the desired information was obtained, the prison officials were

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<sup>15</sup> The sharp division in the great numbers of men interned compared to what may seem to be a small number of women in 1972 is actually somewhat misleading. During the height of the Anglo-Irish War in 1920-1, while there were 4,000 men interned throughout the whole of Ireland, yet according to Challis "The Government felt it unnecessary to intern women, as they felt it was sufficient to curb terrorist activity (sic) by the internment of males" (25). If women were excluded from this treatment during the excesses of the Anglo-Irish War, their inclusion in recent internments is emblematic of the lines England is willing to cross in the present conflict. The proportionately small area and population of the Six Counties (as opposed to the whole thirty-two in 1920-1) must also be taken into account.

released and the prisoners returned voluntarily to their cells. Even historian Jim Challis is forced to reveal that none of the officials were harmed in any way by this action that was more akin to a sit-in than a conventionally violent hostage-taking (30).

In this incident alone the Republican women proved that they were able to achieve their goals as POWs in a disciplined and reasonable manner, without inflicting injury. In fact, in his yearly report for 1974, Father Murray wrote that he had witnessed "good sense, good relations, and good leadership among all groups of prisoners," going on to say that "This high praise is not offset by the serious incident of 16 October 1974" (*Hard Time* 36-7). It is indeed interesting to note the way in which as time goes on Murray seems to grow more and more impressed with the political prisoners in his care. Writing in his Catholic Chaplain's Report in 1971 he expressed concern that

The ordinary criminal on a criminal charge, whom we would hope would find himself in an environment compatible with a speedy rehabilitation, now finds himself in a top security prison guarded by soldiers with arms at the ready, barbed wire and military observation posts... The ordinary prisoners feel that they should not be in jail in Armagh Prison in its present form. (15-6)

It seems quite clear that in his first few years at Armagh, Murray was concerned more with the "ordinary" criminal, and perhaps had some misgivings about dealing with political prisoners. Indeed, his description of internment in 1971 is revealing: rather than condemning the practice, Murray frames his discussion of it by revealing that the Catholic prisoners view their detention "rightly or wrongly, as unfair" (*Hard Time* 18). Over the next decade, his views and the stridency with which he argues them in his reports will change dramatically. In 1982, for instance, he contends



In the name of security the British government has committed the blunders of internment, the torture and brutality of Holywood and Girdwood,<sup>16</sup> the SAS, the Diplock courts, the Castlereagh beatings. This cruel will has spilled into prison affairs—condemnation of the innocent, excessive sentences, massive punishments during the prison protests, the debacle of letting the hunger strikers die... The political failures have insured the prison failures. (*Hard Time* 87)

In the 1971 report, it is almost as if it is the fault of the internees rather than the British government that Armagh Prison has turned into an armed camp. Eleven years later Murray finds himself disabused of the notion, in part because of continued repression enacted by governmental authorities, in part because of the example of the disciplined courage of the Republican women of Armagh.

Nevertheless, a growing sense of admiration does not exclude a certain amount of sexism from Murray's reports, particularly those from the earlier years of his chaplaincy. In 1972, for instance, the Republican women's political demands are mistaken for biological imperatives. He writes

There are a number of things that seem to cause constant irritation among the women prisoners, especially those special category who are sentenced. One of these is the cooking of food, perhaps because they are women. They always seem aggrieved at the cooking. Could they not be supplied with a hot plate? It would also keep them busy. (*Hard Time* 26-7)

One needs only turn to the male prisoners in Long Kesh in order to see the prisoners' demand is one more related to POW status than to the possession of

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<sup>16</sup> British Army barracks where brutal interrogations took place during internment. In 1972 and 1978 Amnesty International accused Britain of human rights abuses at interrogation centers like these and Castlereagh. Responding to these substantiated reports, in 1976, the European Commission of Human Rights found Britain guilty of torture for the treatment of detainees. In 1978 the European Court of Human Rights found Britain guilty of "inhuman and degrading treatment" (*Hard Time* Murray 9).

two X chromosomes. As Challis reports, part of the terms of Special Category Status in the Cages of Long Kesh required that "Food was passed through the control gate at the entrance to each compound, its distribution being a matter for the inmates" (59). Nor was the mere distribution of prison food an issue to the POWs, but rather the establishment of acceptable living conditions, including edible food.

While Challis argues later that "the food sent into the compounds very often came straight back out again, usually emptied over the staff sentry huts at the compound entrance for some trivial reason or other" (60), the Republican POWs have a very different version of the story. Gerry Adams reports that "If the food is particularly gruesome it will be refused by the Camp or the Cage Staff" (*Cage Eleven* 8). Clearly, this is a decision made for political (not to say humanitarian) reasons, and one that is formally executed by military chain of command. In addition, this refusal is related to the demands of the POWs that they be able to receive food parcels along with regular mail. Adams notes that those interned in Long Kesh "were permitted to receive a fairly wide selection of cooked food which was sent in from outside by our families or friends," but that those in the sentenced cages were more restricted in this regard (*Cage Eleven* 8).

It is important at this point to recall again Harlow's previously quoted argument that part of the "historically dominant project of patriarchy" is "to maintain the self-interested conveniences of an unequal division of labor" (*Barred* 83). The assumption that Father Murray makes in his 1972 report is one that is replicated in prison discipline as well. Work is assigned to prisoners along gendered lines. Councilor McAuley told me that during her incarceration in Mountjoy Prison the conditions for women were generally worse than those of the men as a result of an unfair division in labor. She reveals that

The main laundry for the whole prison, male and female, is situated in the female wing north. There was a small handful of women—the numbers could fluctuate. You could have a maximum of twenty-six, but you can have a minimum of six, and whatever the amount of women that was in the jail, they were expected to deal with the huge bulk of laundry—there were over four hundred men in the prison... The men don't take any part in the laundry because it's still deemed women's work... Then they had a sewing room. The women would make all the prison uniforms as well, because that was women's work.

As a Republican political prisoner, McAuley normally refused to do prison work of any sort. However, when the numbers of non-political female prisoners dropped, she would voluntarily help out her fellow women to show her solidarity with them against the patriarchal regime. If the refusal to work had been motivated by sloth rather than by a higher political ideal, the refusal would certainly not have been suspended during the periods when the greatest amount of work was required by the prison laundry. Conversely, her actions should not be looked at as a retreat from Republican ideals, but rather an affirmation of their most basic tenet: your actions should ultimately benefit the people or your community, whether they are Republican or otherwise.

Now, it is finally time to turn to the writings of Roseleen Walsh. In 1973 she was interned in Armagh Prison along with twenty-three other women. In an interview she granted me in 1998, she related that "The basis for my imprisonment was—I was going to say evidence, but it wasn't evidence—lies told about me because I was a Republican by the RUC." Walsh describes the hearing that put her in prison as farcical. The commissioner hearing the case had, according to Walsh, been a commissioner in South Africa for years, and had arrived in Northern Ireland just the week before. Indeed, to call the proceedings

of internment a “trial” would be inaccurate, at least if one has in mind the standard of due process that are expected in modern democracies. Walsh points out

For most of the hearing I was put out of the room, so I don't really know what was said about me in my absence. My solicitor didn't know either; he was also asked to leave the room. But whatever was said, the commissioner found I should be interned in Armagh Prison.

One part of the hearing that both Walsh and her solicitor were present for was the testimony of a member of the Security Forces<sup>17</sup> that a “friend” of Walsh's from the same area of West Belfast was interned already in Armagh, and he named a name.<sup>18</sup> Roseleen had never even heard of this woman and told her solicitor so. In fact, there was no such person in Armagh. The solicitor called one of the prison wardens to the stand. Walsh declares the warden “got up, took the Bible, swore, and told that she was in Armagh twenty-three years and had never heard of this person. But that was overruled.” Walsh was officially interned.

While imprisoned, Walsh wrote constantly. As the back cover of *Sticks and Stones*<sup>19</sup> (her collection of short plays) tells the reader, “she took great pride in covering her cell walls with her poetry. Eventually there was barely an inch of paint in any direction that hadn't one of her poems on it.” At the time she was

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<sup>17</sup> Walsh and her solicitor were told that this was a member of the RUC, but this remains unverified as all testimony was given from behind a screen.

<sup>18</sup> Walsh stated the name during my interview with her, and though it is clear the member of the Security Forces was fabricating the woman's imprisonment as well as Roseleen's association with her, I have decided not to print the name in case the person herself actually exists.

<sup>19</sup> This book and the forthcoming (at the time of this writing) collection of poems are published by Springhill Community House in West Belfast. The work of this press is an example for all postcolonial situations, in that it is a community involved in every aspect of writing its own stories and history, from the composition to the publication and distribution. The idea behind the SCH's Heritage Series of publications—of which Walsh's work is a part—is “to record for posterity the living memories of the people of West Belfast.” The press actively solicits texts in any conceivable form including “oral or written memories, documents, artifacts, etc” (in Walsh 40).

interned Republican prisoners automatically had political status, so writing was an easier task than it would become in 1976 when Special Category Status was revoked by the British. "We weren't really restricted," Walsh acknowledges. This relative freedom is reflected in some of the poetry produced in this environment. Unlike many poems smuggled out of the H Blocks during the height of the post-Special Category protests, these are not permeated by the immediate presence of incarceration. The horrors of the H Blocks are inescapable: those of Armagh may be momentarily transcended. The following poem will serve to illustrate. Walsh remembers the occasion of its writing, commenting that this poem was produced in 1973 in her cell in Armagh, and that it was written "for an IRA prisoner in Long Kesh." As at the time of writing, the poem is unpublished, I will reproduce it in full.<sup>20</sup>

### Imprisoned Lovers

If I could  
wander with the  
night and, be myself  
unseen, I'd travel to  
your place of  
sleep and dream with  
you your dream.

But I can't  
travel with the  
night, nor be myself  
unseen. I can only in  
my sleep, dream alone  
our dream!

The poem's effectiveness lies in its brevity, its delicate, repeated internal rhyme scheme, and the pleasant evocation of repeated nocturnal images. The first

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<sup>20</sup> All of Roseleen Walsh's poems in this dissertation are reproduced exactly as they appear on the typed copies of them given to me by the poet herself. Hopefully these and other poems will be published in the forthcoming collection with Michael Gallagher, *Aiming Higher* by Springhill Community House.

stanza is one of singularity: the "I" traveling to meet the "you," a union that proves to be impossible. The second stanza shows that though "Imprisoned Lovers" is succinct, it is far from simplistic, for though this is the moment when physical separation is realized to be unavoidable, it is also the place where the first person singular and second person singular merge into the first person plural: "your" becomes "our." The prison walls may have defeated a physical joining, but this separation paradoxically ensures a mental and spiritual one. The cells are so ineffective in preventing this melding as to not bear mentioning. Without the title a reader would perhaps never know the cause of the lovers' separation, a subtle and well-executed move on Walsh's part on the one hand, and a tiny glimpse into the conditions of Armagh on the other.

Of course, in making this argument I do not mean to imply that the experience of Armagh (or *any* other prison) was pleasant. Any curtailment of freedom is difficult to bear even in the best of facilities, and particularly when one is imprisoned without charge. As Gerry Adams notes in forward of his prison memoirs

Many of the pieces I wrote then and many of the chapters of this book are lighthearted, and the reader may imagine from them that Long Kesh was a happy, funny, enjoyable place. It was not then and is not today. But the POWs were happy, funny, enjoyable people who made the best of their predicament. We wanted out but we did our whack<sup>21</sup> the best we could.

(*Cage Eleven* 3)

Though the tone of "Imprisoned Lovers" is wistful rather than tragic—and ultimately triumphal in its union of dreams—the speaker would no doubt rather complement spiritual togetherness with the physical. Prison means love partially deferred, but this love makes incarceration bearable.

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<sup>21</sup> Prison slang meaning "to do one's time."

As was shown by the capture of the prison governor in 1974 described above, the women of Armagh remained politically active during their incarceration—indeed, some became even more politicized in jail, and encouraged others to do the same. This continued commitment is reflected in Walsh's poem "To my silent Church." As background information to this poem, she told me:

I was born a Catholic and I practice my religion. Now, myself and my husband go to daily mass. We receive the Eucharist daily. I fast one day a week and I'm a reader in the chapel, so I take my religion very seriously and I hold it very, very dear. I felt when I was in prison that we were-- as a people—let down a lot by the Catholic Church. There were very few priests who spoke out about, for example, the injustice of internment.

Her frustration is readily apparent in the poem, a frustration that, as will be seen later with both Gerry Adams and Bobby Sands, is shared by many Republicans who found themselves deserted by the Church hierarchy in their time of need. Again, the poem is reproduced in its entirety.

To my silent Church

Silence or cell.  
 Divided nature conquer well  
 for imitation love of peace  
 give all up to the oppressor.  
 Loose all, forget those who  
 have given all  
 so you can live in your  
 imitation home- made of  
 imitation security.

Silence or cell?  
 I choose cell.  
 My words were quiet  
 But I was not silent.  
 I did not want the cell.  
 It came- because I could not

bear the silence.  
 The silence was imitation  
 not truth.  
 Incomprehensible.

Christ died because he could not  
 stand the silence.  
 Because of your silence  
 I am condemned.

To be without freedom  
 I am therefore dead.  
 Speak! Act now!<sup>22</sup>  
**Silent Ones.**

“To my silent Church” shows again a subtlety that was evinced in “Imprisoned Lovers”: the repetition and development of a few key words whose meanings multiply and turn back on themselves as the poem progresses. The refrain “Silence or cell” that begins the first and second stanzas is an example of this. Moving from a declarative in the first, which describes simultaneously in the second and third person the first “peace at any price” option of the phrase, to the interrogative of the second stanza with its first person response, the refrain reveals that there is always a choice implied, a choice forced by the individual historical circumstances. The silence is revealed in the second stanza to be the root of ingenuine living, a conscious choice to capitulate to the forces of oppression so that a semblance of a quiet life can be lead. Yet, this life is only an “imitation”: in reality, repression unresisted can result in this quiet life ending at any time. Oppression can exist only in silence, can exist only when those unwilling to sacrifice allow it to do so. The invocation of Christ in the third stanza is at once a recognition of this need in addition to a call to those who claim to be His followers—the Church hierarchy in particular-- to respect this

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<sup>22</sup> In a reading of this poem that she did for the interview on 24 July 1998, this line was read: “Speak! Play now!” I have reproduced in written form, however the print version the poet gave me.



need and to call attention to the injustices that demand sacrifice. While individual clergymen may have lent assistance—Walsh notes that in the absence of a true prison library the aforementioned “Father Murray actually brought books to us,” --indeed, to many devout Republicans it is as much the Church’s fault as that of the British government, as it is “Because of your silence/ I am condemned.”

The last stanza, though the most abbreviated is the most powerful, an open exhortation to the listener to act, to break the silence. The speaker equates lack of freedom with death, but the image of Christ in the preceding stanza makes one wonder if this is a death that will result in a glorious resurrection as the silent ones find their voices. In truth, it is those people who are nominally free, those people not physically incarcerated who are imprisoned by silence, a fear of resistance that restricts their actions and confines their movements and minds alike. Only when injustices are truly addressed will there be true security. Until they are addressed, the security of the silent is only that of an ostrich burying its head in the ground as danger approaches.

In a colonized society, silence is one of the greatest dangers. As such, poetry is one way to break the silence, to enable communication between people who the authorities try to isolate and thus more easily control. Similarly, it is a way in which bonds may be forged between people who may not share similar experiences on a surface level. On a metaphoric level, the boundaries between prisoner and non-prisoner may collapse. Roseleen Walsh rightly argues “A lot of people who have heard the poetry have never been in prison, but they feel that they have experienced an imprisonment in their own lives—not necessarily the material prison. They’ve maybe had experience of mental and emotional prisons.” It must be kept in mind also that the experience of prison is rarely

unshared: relatives, lovers, spouses, and children also share in the incarceration.

As Roger Shaw wrote in *Children of Imprisoned Fathers*,

As soon as the children of prisoners come into focus the major contradictions of a criminal system become glaringly obvious. When the legally-sanctioned punishment takes the form of incarceration the concept of individual punishment for individual law breaking collapses. Children become caught in the web of punishment. (qtd in Coulter 21)

This situation is precisely that seen in Walsh's poem "To Aine." Aine is Walsh's youngest daughter, and the experience of her father's imprisonment had a marked impact upon her life as well as that of the family structure. As Roseleen explained it to me in an interview:

Shortly after my husband and I were married he was arrested and before Aine was born he was sentenced to twelve years in the H Blocks. So that involved at the time one visit per month, which worked out in one year I saw him six hours. For Aine's first six months of life, she slept through the six visits, so she didn't see her father. And he was on protest,<sup>23</sup> so when she finally did see him he had long, scraggly hair, and a long beard, wearing horrible clothes. Aine wouldn't go near her father for exactly eighteen months. She wouldn't sit on his knee; she would've cried the whole visit up until this. And so Aine never bonded with her father until two or three years ago. She's twenty-one now.

I have included this final poem of Walsh to show precisely these far reaching effects of incarceration. Although "To Aine" is not prison writing in the strictest definition—it was not actually written *in* prison—because it covers a topic so central to the experience of prison it merits inclusion.

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<sup>23</sup> The Blanket and Dirty/ No Wash Protests will be explained in greater depth in the chapter covering Bobby Sands.

## To Aine

Oh what wind blows thee so fair  
 what peace of mind gives thee thy smile  
 and makes thee lovely like a child.  
 What hand out stretched doth show thee where  
 love finds its rest in those who care  
 as doubt and hurt outside stir  
 while joy and song fill the air within.

Who put that courage in thy heart  
 and made it brave enough to start,  
 who graced thy face in beauty's style  
 and give thee life for just a while,  
 who so great gave these gifts to thee  
 daughter- was it only me!

A more formal poem than the previous two, "To Aine" contains with it elements reminiscent of Yeats<sup>24</sup>: repetition, alliteration, consonance, and assonance all in evidence. This is not surprising, as Walsh cites him as one of her primary influences along with Eliot. These influences may seem at first glance odd in a Republican poet for whom nationalism and resistance go hand in hand, and Walsh is aware of the seeming contradiction. "I know his politics and sort of push it to the side," she says of Yeats, preferring to concentrate on the way in which he is able to "transport" the reader with the power of words. Though she accurately notes that each of these poets were intellectuals, in her words, "removed from the masses of people," to Walsh it is their concern with "the ordinary things that most of us can identify with" that make their poems memorable.<sup>25</sup> In this, if not in the rest of their politics, the poets share a Republican concern with the everyday.

<sup>24</sup> I'm thinking, for instance, of the first lines of "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death": "I know that I shall meet my fate/ Somewhere among the clouds above;/ Those that fight I do not hate,/ Those that guard I do not love;/ My country is Kiltartan Cross,/ My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,/ No likely end could bring them loss/ Or leave them happier than before."

<sup>25</sup> Walsh cites "The Journey of the Magi" and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" as examples of this.

The final line of "To Aine" brings home the whole intent of the poem. This is not a work written just for a daughter, but one senses that it is equally intended for the father, conspicuous in absence until that final moment. Poetry thus reconstitutes family ties temporarily broken by the experience of prison. It is as if the speaker takes the hand of the child and puts it in that of her father in those final syllables.

Walsh is a powerful reader, her forceful, measured delivery an integral part of the poetry itself. In the same interview with me cited above, she asserted

If you read it well, you're actually conveying and communicating something to people that touches and wakens something in them. And though they mightn't understand the words, they mightn't identify with the words, they will identify with a tone. The reading of the poetry to me is as important as writing it. I don't like other people to read [aloud, publicly] my poetry. I like to read it myself.

This is a reminder that rather than being the cold and solitary experience that some intellectuals deem it to be, poetry is best heard—literally—in a communal environment. This is especially important in a community that has experienced trauma: Walsh herself is a member of the Felons' Writers' Group, whose members are all former political prisoners. In such a setting, common experiences can be shared in a safe, group environment and as a result the isolation of both cell and counter-insurgency can be resisted, true histories related. Projects like the Heritage Series begin in such gatherings, and there is every hope that the true history of communities like West Belfast will soon be written by the residents themselves.

There is still a need for Irish women's histories, particularly prison memoirs written by the participants themselves. At the moment, the genre is dominated by men, with particular attention paid to Bobby Sands. Sands' story is

one that must be told, but not at the expense of his female comrades from whom, as will be shown in the next chapter, Sands took great inspiration. Walsh comments that "I think if men write they are definitely taken more seriously, but I don't really care. I just write because of something in me that tells me to write. I think generally I see the same things as men see." This statement will only be put to the test when the stories of women are given equal attention as those of men. We must be given the opportunity to be able to see through the eyes of the women of Armagh, for it is only in this way—by knowing the full story—that healing will take place. Though Roseleen Walsh was released unconditionally, she, like other former prisoners understandably still harbors bitterness. She confided to me that "When eventually I was released—I was interned for thirteen months and two weeks—no one apologized to me, no one said 'we're now sorry, we made a mistake.' I got no compensation, no apology, no nothing." While an apology from the British government seems unlikely, perhaps in the telling of their stories the prisoners can reclaim a part of their lives unjustly taken from them.

## CHAPTER IV

### GERRY ADAMS

Gerry Adams, long time president of the legal Republican political party Sinn Féin, has suffered many trials in his life. Not the least of these were two internments, one for a period of months beginning in 1972, one beginning in 1973. Although he became a sentenced prisoner during his second detention, his charge came not as a result of successful prosecution of "terrorist offenses," but rather as a result of failed attempts to escape from his imprisonment without trial. Notwithstanding British efforts to brand him as a criminal and a member of the IRA, Adams has never been convicted of any "terrorist" crime, nor has he been proven to share with the IRA anything but a desire for the unification of Ireland. One positive and remarkable thing did result from his unjust incarceration, however: *Cage Eleven*, a collection of short stories smuggled out of Long Kesh between 1975 and 1977, in which Adams writes about his experiences as a political prisoner. Truly, what resulted from his imprisonment was extraordinary, for Adams paints for the reader a side of Irish life—as well as a side of himself-- unseen by most people, particularly foreigners who are often lead to believe by the BBC that Republicans in general and IRA members in particular are inhuman monsters, senseless killing machines devoid of any emotion.

The roots of this smear campaign can be traced to arrival of the British Army in the Six Counties. Liz Curtis argues that before that moment some elements of the British press were sympathetic to the demands of the CRA, even

praising nationalist activists like Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey, MP. Of her, on 23 April, 1969 in an article entitled "Miss Devlin enthral[sic] packed House with straight-from-heart speech," *The Times* wrote "She's a bonny fighter," echoing the comments of the 19 April *Daily Express* article that trumpeted "She's Bernadette, she's 21, she's an MP, she's swinging" (qtd. in Curtis 24). This viewpoint would radically change subsequent to the arrival of the Army in August 1969, after which the young MP would now be said to be heading a "sinister army" of "revolutionary extremists" by an 11 September article in the *Daily Mail*. In this fashion, the press—co-opted by the Army in a new state of war—attempted to link in the public mind civil rights groups like the CRA with paramilitary groups like the IRA.

Adams himself still faces a similar problem. Many British and Unionist press organs use only the compound term "Sinn Féin/IRA" whenever covering the former (again, it must be emphasized, *legal* political) party. Richard Francis, the Controller of BBC Northern Ireland in 1977 classified Sinn Féin as a paramilitary group, and required his underlings to treat its members as such (in Francis' words, "as hostile witnesses") when reporting their activities or interviewing their representatives (Curtis 183). The directive was adhered to with glee by the BBC, as is exemplified by an interview with Adams on a November 1982 episode of the BBC news program *Panorama*. As Liz Curtis reports, the "interview" was "like a cross between an inquisition and a battle," and was

prompted by the previous month's Assembly election, but reporter Fred Emery showed little interest in exploring why Adams had topped the poll in West Belfast. Instead, his overriding concern was to undermine Adams' new status and to establish that Adams was a member of the IRA... A more enlightened approach would have been to ask why a man

who was associated—rightly or wrongly—in the public mind with the IRA, had won such widespread support among nationalist electors... The interview in the end elicited little about Adams save his determination to stand his ground, and the programme as a whole threw no light on why nearly 10,000 people had voted for him; Emery's approach ruled out the possibility of a sympathetic examination of nationalist attitudes. (184-5)

Despite the counter-productivity of this journalistic style in creating anything but pro-British propaganda, it was not seen to be effective enough by Margaret Thatcher. Under her urging (after ministers had talked her out of even more repressive measures) in 1988 Home Secretary Douglas Hurd introduced a broadcasting ban based on clause 14(4) of the BBC's License and Agreement, and section 29(3) of the Broadcasting Act of 1981. These laws were designed for use in wartime and gave the Home Secretary the power to prevent the broadcasting of any material s/he deems unfit. Under Hurd's plan, eleven Irish organizations were censored: neither the words of their representatives, nor words spoken in support of the censored organizations could be broadcast. Although Sinn Féin was a legal political party it fell under this ban, the language of which was initially interpreted in its broadest sense and used to exclude Republicans from appearing on television completely.

However, eventually the total media blackout was modified to the strictest literal interpretation of the legislation with Republican politicians allowed to appear, but with their own voices replaced either by subtitles or voiceovers. In some cases, actual events were reconstructed in totality, using actors (Curtis 290). While this at first glance may only seem absurd, the propaganda effect of having a Sinn Féin representative's voiceover being done by an actor with a sinister voice should not be dismissed. In addition, in the simple act of censoring an organization the British government hopes to cast doubt upon its legitimacy. In



reality, the legitimacy of an organization can only be determined when its representatives are allowed to speak freely, unfettered by restrictions.

It is for this reason that Adams should be studied, and not just as a glimpse into his political convictions: in raw literary skill, he could be ranked among the greats of contemporary Irish short fiction. As Michael Beard rightly argues in an article about the prison poems of Iranian writer Rezna Baraheni,

For a poet to take a public position against a powerful regime is an unmistakable act of bravery. That this bravery does not guarantee the success of the poems is a sad truth about the nature of poetry. The casualties of political terror frequently include poets; sometimes they include poems as well. (93)

With *Cage Eleven*, this justifiable concern is an unnecessary one. Certainly, a Republican philosophy is at the heart of his narratives, but it is Adams' virtuosity with language that truly drives the stories, not fanaticism. Indeed, self-mockery is a strong current within the book, and one which no group escapes in *Cage Eleven*, whether the subject is the all too human weaknesses and idiosyncrasies of Adams' fellow prisoners of war or a sacred cow like the Sinn Féin Árd Fheis—the party's annual national convention. Because of the author's keen eye for detail, linguistic finesse, and razor wit, his stories are revealing about Adams himself (as well as Republicanism in general) in ways that biased BBC interviews can never hope to be. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, they also combat the media silence with regard to the suffering endured by the people of Ireland at imposition of internment.

In the forward to *Cage Eleven*, Adams writes, "In this book the main characters are fictional, but they and their escapades are my way of representing life as it was in Long Kesh... We did our time together, and this is my attempt to

evoke, minus most of the f-ing and blinding,<sup>1</sup> the atmosphere of that strange yet familiar world we shared" (4). That world, of course, is one that cannot be severed from the historical and political realities of moment.<sup>2</sup> Until 1976, the majority of male political prisoners, both internees and those convicted of "terrorist offenses," were held in the British prison compound known as Long Kesh where they enjoyed "Special Category Status" while incarcerated, held separately in what were known as "cages." To get an understanding of life in the cages unavailable from government-influenced perspectives, we must turn to Gerry Adams' "Cage Eleven," the short story that begins the book of the same name. First and foremost, the reader learns about the physical makeup of the prison compound. Adams describes his former home in a prison Nissen hut in the following passage:

Nowadays there's thirty to a hut; it used to be worse. There are four or five huts to a cage, depending on the size of the cage; two-and-a-half huts or three-and-a-half huts for living in; an empty hut for a canteen of sorts, and the other half-hut for "recreation," with a washroom and a "study" hut thrown in. Wired off with a couple of watch-towers planted around, and that's us. (*Cage Eleven* 7)

Adams' trademark lively pace is clear to see in this passage's clipped, yet humorously descriptive last sentence. His brisk irreverence elevates the seemingly mundane task of setting forth locale, for it does far more than set the stage for the stories to follow. In reality, his description becomes a weapon

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<sup>1</sup> Slang for cursing.

<sup>2</sup> It could be said that all literature does this to some extent, whether consciously or not: regardless, prison literature is unique in that it rarely has the option to consciously de-historicize itself in an Arnoldian fashion. At the risk of redundancy, I take issue with those who define literature using Arnold's narrow confines, and question the possibility of disengaging one's self or one's work from history or power relations. Foucault has argued that we are constantly enveloped in fields of power of varying degrees of visibility. Those to whom power relations remain completely invisible generally are either privileged or complacent enough not to have discovered them.

against the compound itself, destroying the secrecy and isolation required by such institutions.

Like all concentration camps,<sup>3</sup> the success of Long Kesh as a disciplinary institution requires not only physical separation of its inmates from the outside populace, but the physical separation of the compound itself from too watchful a civilian eye. In smuggling out his description of the prisoner of war camp, Adams is putting the British government's own surveillance under surveillance—an act dangerous to his captors. It is no coincidence that maps of the Cages and the H Blocks precede even *Cage Eleven's* forward, which itself further specifies the prison's location between Belfast and Lisburn (1). Those who underestimate the anxiety with which the British government often greets the publication of sensitive information need only recall the recent furor over the appearance of a web page detailing locations of British Army bases in Northern Ireland.

Quite apart from this, the locative effect of description can be of benefit to those imprisoned in what the narrator of "Cage Eleven" at one stage terms "some surrealistic limbo" (6). The sardonic manner with which Adams describes his surroundings is a textbook example of how, according to the editors of *The Empire Writes Back*, "the prevalence of irony... emphasizes the importance of language—place disjunction in the construction of post-colonial realities" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 28). In the act of remembering that one is not marooned on a distant desert isle but in reality just a short way away from one of

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<sup>3</sup> I use this term deliberately, for the purpose of Long Kesh, as were Hitler's first camps-- housing political dissidents like communists-- was to arrest and concentrate in one managed institution elements perceived to be hostile to the state. Concentration camps must not be confused with the death camps of the later years of World War II such as Auschwitz, whose primary purpose was to exterminate. Nor is the concentration camp a purely European institution: even before the establishment of the camps into which Japanese-Americans were forced in the same war, the United States government has a long history of internment. The original objective was similar to that of Long Kesh when Native Americans were forced onto reservations in the 1800s.

the busiest highways in Northern Ireland, one is able to defeat the sense of isolation with which the prison authorities hope to break resistance. Words are a passage out of limbo into the world of the real.

Adams' narratives are also valuable in their description of the way in which Long Kesh occupants organized themselves. In practical terms, Special Category Status meant that they were treated as prisoners of war, each cage following a military chain of command, led by a cage Officer-in-Charge (OC). Adams elaborates on this command structure in the short story "Early Risers," noting that it was "very formal and militaristic, but that's the way prison camp is. We elect an OC and he selects a staff and that includes an adjutant, an IO [Intelligence Officer], a quartermaster and various other dignitaries" (*Cage Eleven* 14). Within the confines of the cage, the prisoners were responsible as individuals only to their officers, not to individual "screws" (warders): relations between prison officials and POWs were negotiated through the camp or individual cage OC. In addition, POWs were allowed reasonable amounts of packages (including food), mail, and periodicals from outside the prison. Lastly, and as it turned out, crucial to the conflict that followed, they were allowed to wear their own clothes (Coogan *The IRA* 367). From these seemingly innocent details, the reader learns that not only did the inmates conceive of themselves as a disciplined, legitimate military group (if they were paramilitaries) or civilians imprisoned for political reasons, but that the authorities did as well—a point that will gain further significance (and which will be covered fully in the discussion of Bobby Sands' writings) when the policy of "criminalization" is implemented in March of 1976.

The military manifestations of Republicanism are more familiar to a general audience (though, as a result of biased reporting, perhaps only in inaccurate form). However, in the short story "Sláinte" we see what may be to

some an unexpectedly light-hearted side of resistance in the Cages. The story centers on the mayhem that ensues as a result of a POW's unfortunate encounter with a good batch of the Dosser's *poitín*-- Irish moonshine. "The making of *poitín* requires a certain finesse and a degree of expertise," observes Adams (*Cage Eleven* 42), and this is indeed true-- connoisseurs of Irish drink both in and out of prison are known to have extended (and often heated) debates on the subject.<sup>4</sup> One needs only listen to traditional Irish songs to understand the place that this high-octane nectar holds in Irish drinking culture, a place high enough to warrant the secret construction of a still in a concentration camp. The ingenuity of distillers like the Dosser has to be admired:

his hiding places or dumps were carefully constructed and some of his brew survived for six months, simmering gently in the innards of our cage until the potent smell demanded that it be moved on to the next part of the process. The Dosser left nothing to chance. All his deposits were graded according to age, content, quantity and temperature of the dump. All relevant information was recorded-- in code, of course. (*Cage Eleven* 43)

The production of *poitín* has had subversive undertones in Ireland for centuries; at least since 1661 when the British government levied a tax on local distilleries. Rather than pay the tax, many of the residents took matters into their own hands and their stills into hiding. However, the production of *poitín* is even more subversive within the confines of Long Kesh than it is outside. Simply going against prison regulations by dismantling the shower and turning it into a distilling apparatus is certainly resistance enough, but when this is done to

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<sup>4</sup>I would like to note here that the discussion even enters university classrooms. When I was at the University of Ulster, Coleraine doing the Diploma in Irish, a professor once stopped his lecture to inform us at length about the distinguishing characteristics of good *poitín*. He did this because, he said, "Your lives might depend upon it someday."

produce within a British prison something so particularly a part of Irish culture and resistance, the triumph is complete.

Indeed, in "Sláinte," we see other ways in which Irish culture is kept strong in the Cages when the Gaeltacht hut is encountered. Gaeilge, the Irish language, has been under attack since the first moment of British occupation. Speaking of this assault, Adams himself rightly argues in *Free Ireland*,

There is no such thing as a neutral language, for language is the means by which culture, the totality of our response to the world we live in, is communicated; and for that reason the Irish language had to be destroyed... It is a badge of our identity and part of what we are. (120)

The use of Gaeilge is defiance in many respects: first and foremost, it is the continued expression of a besieged culture-- a language that many nationalists had no opportunity to learn before imprisonment. In fact, the *ranganna* (classes) that were held in the prison were so successful that (as the editors of *Nor Meekly Serve My Time* note) Gaeilge became the "everyday language" of Long Kesh and the later H-Blocks in particular (Campbell, McKeown, Ó Hagan x). Empowered by learning a language in this fashion, the prisoners realized their own ability to teach; a "consciousness of consciousness" of which Paolo Friere would be proud. "Culture is too important to be left to the cultural specialists," Adams maintains in *Free Ireland*, and not only do the Irish POWs show themselves in agreement with this sentiment, they actively pursue its implications (125). Last, but not least, in addition to the pride and culture instilled by Gaeilge, it also proved to be a useful weapon-- a means of communication unintelligible to their captors.

Unquestionably, the inclusion of actual dialogue in Gaeilge is a continuation of this resistance by Adams, a resistance which is seen in the rest of the selections in *Cage Eleven*. Although in this North American edition parenthetical English translations immediately follow the Irish dialogue, the

point has been made, the emphasis given. It would, after all, have been easy enough to simply note the fact that the speakers were conversing in Gaeilge without actually representing the Irish itself on the written page. In a similar fashion to Synge before him, Adams does not shy away from using colloquialism. The use of "youse" for the second person plural, "stocious" for excessively drunk, "mucker" for friend: these are all very Northern Irish, and I would argue, important inclusions. To illustrate, although the editors of the ground-breaking book on post-colonial literature *The Empire Writes Back* recoil with horror from anything approaching an essentialist view of language, even they concede that "untranslated words, the sounds and textures of the language can be held to have the power and presence of the culture they signify-- to be metaphoric in their 'inference of identity and totality'" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 52), and this is precisely the presence that Adams evokes in *Cage Eleven*. Even while speaking in English, the cultural differences between captor and captive are there.

As anyone who has any familiarity with Irish culture knows, humor plays a large role in daily life, and this is particularly the case in Long Kesh. Laughter is not just a pastime-- it is a tool of survival, and *Cage Eleven* is filled with the slugging, the back-stabbing, and the practical jokes that made life endurable in a concentration camp. Part rites of initiation, jokes played upon one another in reciprocal fashion functioned in Long Kesh in a manner reminiscent of the antics of trickster characters in Native American stories. Speaking of the Lakota trickster Iktomi, anthropologist William K. Powers writes, "In the now famous stories he plays tricks on humans, animals, and birds only to find himself in compromising situations. In his quest to deceive, he winds up being deceived, an apt moral story to tell young children" (154-5). Although this indeed is one of the trickster's primary roles, he fulfils functions far more complex and important

than this quote suggests, roles which are as instructive to adults as children; for tricksters perform their vital and sacred function through reversal of expected roles and by the laughter resulting from their unexpected, often obscene behavior.<sup>5</sup> In the words of well-known anthropologist Barbara Tedlock,

The clown's mystical liberation from ultimate cosmic fears brings with it a liberation from conventional notions of what is dangerous or sacred in the religious ceremonies of men... Although the clown, by causing people to laugh at shamans and other religious authorities, might appear to weaken the very fabric of his society's religion, he might actually revitalize it by revealing higher truths. (108-9)

Although the trickster's actions may seem humorous or even worthy of ridicule, in fact they are endowed with great powers. Paradoxically, they encourage critical detachment from the surrounding world while simultaneously showing the way toward integration within that world.

In *Cage Eleven* one can see many recognizable manifestations of the trickster<sup>6</sup> in stories like "Only Joking." This story finds the occupants of the cage reminiscing about all of the pranks played upon fellow inmates, and a debate ensues as to which prisoner was the most skilled practical joker—the "best mixer." Egbert's choice is a man named Dominic, whose trademark was faux "confessions" were set up in the study hut. The "new lads" (freshly incarcerated prisoners) would be told that a priest was in to hear their sins, and were shown into the hut where a makeshift confessional was constructed. Egbert explains

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<sup>5</sup> And, to be fair to Dr. Powers, his analysis of the heyoka within Lakota society deepens later in *Sacred Language*.

<sup>6</sup> I must emphasize at this point the sacred nature of tricksters in Native American theology. Both mythological figures like Iktomi and human medicine people that function in a similar fashion (like the heyoka of the Lakota) are treated—rightfully-- with great reverence. I would never suggest that there is a one-to-one correspondence between what is seen in *Cage Eleven* and Native manifestations of the trickster, not only because of the formalized ritual place reserved for contraries in Native literature and religion, but also because of the sacred power wielded by them.



“Dominic would be behind a blanket draped across the hut and he’d have a boxing glove on. You get the picture? He’d begin the confession just as any priest and he’d start to ease all the lad’s sins out of him and then, when the lad admitted some particular offense, he’d shout: ‘You did what?’ and he’d whack out with the boxing glove! It was really something to see. An arm with a boxing glove on the end of it coming round the edge of the blanket. The young lad staring at it in disbelief, then wham!

“And you, ha, ha, you know, nobody ever looked behind the blanket. Even when they got whacked a few times. They just went on with their confession. Ha, ha, ha. One young lad ended up cowering in his seat in dread of the boxing glove as he made a clean breast of things.”

“What kinds of sins did they confess?” Your Man asked with interest.

“Oh, nothing much. I mean, no mortal sins; all venial ones. Only telling lies, losing their tempers, masturbating—that one was worth two punches...” (*Cage Eleven 127*)

Dominic’s targets on one level are obvious ones. The new prisoners, usually young and without previous experience of incarceration, are unschooled in the routines of prison life and have not yet been integrated into their cage. Yet, as targets of such practical jokes, they are taken into the fold through common experience of victimhood. In effect the “new lads” are running a ceremonial gauntlet before adoption by their new tribe; having successfully negotiated these ritualized obstacles, they will take up a position of equality within the compound.

However, the initiation lead by Dominic has other targets as well, and holds within it lessons that the new prisoners would do well to learn. In true trickster fashion, complete with transgressive discussion of sexuality, Dominic is

mocking one of the most sacred rites of the Catholic Church: that of confession and the absolution of sin. In this version, penance is not accomplished through the mind and prayer, but rather through violence against the body. This mild assault is symbolic in two ways. In one respect, it is indicative of how many POWs came to equate the Catholic Church with repression and anti-nationalist sentiment. In *Free Ireland*, Adams states his position more directly, arguing that during the periods of terror immediately prior to internment "Working people took control of aspects of their own lives, organized their own districts, in a way that deeply antagonized and traumatized the Catholic middle class, and particularly the Catholic Church hierarchy" (39). Similarly, in the essay "Christians for Freedom?" he complains "the Catholic Church has failed miserably to fulfil its role in Ireland... History tells its own story of the pro-establishment line adopted by Church leaders throughout the ages" (*Cage Eleven* 87). In "Only Joking" Dominic ritually enacts the hostility of the Church toward the Republican POWs, a hostility which Church leaders will graphically demonstrate during the Hunger Strikes of 1980-1.

Secondly, Dominic's "mix" is a forceful reminder to the "new lads" of the need to question their complacency with regard to authority. The fact that not one prisoner looked behind the "confessional" curtain, even after repeated blows, is indicative of the dangers of unquestioned obedience and trust in ritual. Like the inverted rituals of Native American contraries, the "confessional" on the one hand mocks the sacrament it imitates, yet it also simultaneously reminds one of that ritual's essential purpose. Rather than settling for the abuse of a hostile Church hierarchy and empty, unquestioned ritual, the initiate should instead seek the absolution that is the true purpose of the ceremony. Such a liberation must be achieved by a combination of spiritual search and political analysis, for in the end, the world that the prisoners inhabit is hedged in (and

partially constructed) by the violence of Church and state authority. One needs to develop self-reliance in such an environment, determining by reason and experience what is truly important in life.

Such a lesson is learned again as a result of a ritualized humiliation in "Sláinte" when Egbert's artistry leaves the unconscious and drunk Cedric a changed man:

Cedric was lying in the yard, his face painted bright green, with two yellow strokes where his eyebrows used to be. His eyebrows and half his mustache had been shaved off. Egbert had done his work well: having used only the best leather dyes, it would be three weeks before Cedric's visage would return to its normal rosy pallor. But Cedric was oblivious to all this. He was stocious; he felt great. He managed to get a finger-hold in the tarmac and inched his way toward the wire. He sang Leonard Cohen ditties tunelessly to the ground. (*Cage Eleven* 44)

Yet, even in his drunken state Cedric retains both his wit as well as his determination to resist, mocking a British soldier and his war-dog by singing "alsatians once again" to the tune of the rebel song "A Nation Once Again" (45).

Here we see yet another use of humor-- as a weapon. It is that much harder to terrorize and intimidate when one is being laughed at, and the POWs know it. The power of the British Army in Long Kesh is located in the physical-- beatings, shootings, and incarceration of the body-- and the soldier's impotent rage at Cedric is born of the inability to engage in a physical confrontation because of their separation by the mesh fence. The prison that the British have constructed around the Irish defeats itself, actually preventing the exercise of the brute force otherwise so integral to the system. The moral and intellectual force in "Sláinte" is clearly with the Irish, and both the guard and his dog are silenced at Cedric's proclamation across the wire:

"We are the indomitable Irishry. You are mere tools of the colonizers. You cannot defeat us. You do not understand us. Time has triumphed," he orated, "the wind has scattered all. Empires are lost. Or in other words," he continued,

"Ireland was Ireland, when England was a pup,

"Ireland will be Ireland, when England's bugged up." (45)

Drunk as he is, crude as he is, as humiliating as his physical transformation might have been, Cedric knows why he is imprisoned, knows his worth as an individual; not as a faceless member of an oppressive military machine, but as a bearer and creator of culture. The soldier is merely a wooden baton, a war-dog, a rifle. Cedric symbolizes the collective struggle against the machine of colonialism that seeks to sever cultural connections, to isolate, to break the will and spirit, to transform living, thinking beings into docile bodies. What matters is not the external, but rather the internal integrity. Like a masked heyoka, Cedric's lesson comes to his companions and to the soldier alike-- if they are alert enough to look beyond exteriors and see the truth being delivered by what at first glance seems a bizarre and inappropriate messenger.<sup>7</sup>

Turning once more to "Only Joking" we see demonstrated another trickster motif demonstrated: the clown falling victim to his own joke. In one instance, a new "confessor" named Bloggs is set up by his comrades, who had previously recruited a "new lad" for just this purpose, giving him a false confession guaranteed to traumatize. When "Father Bloggs" asks the young man if there is anything troubling him, the lad "confesses" that he's gotten his girlfriend pregnant. Barely able to contain his laughter, "Father Bloggs" asks if it

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<sup>7</sup> In addition, the appearance of Long Kesh contraries is to the inmates' own benefit as a defensive device. The British soldier is said to be "unnerved at the green-faced apparition which crouched before him" (CE 45). The guards would exhibit even stronger reactions to the filth of the Dirty Protest (which will be covered later).

would help if he visited the girl to talk with her. The young man says that it would, revealing the district of Belfast she lives in: the same part as the real Bloggs. Further questions ensue, and it turns out the pregnant girl not only lives in the same part of the district, but the same street as the real Bloggs—in fact, it is his daughter! Cedric describes the effect this had on the Bloggs the father: “There was holy murder. Bloggs went through the blanket at the wee lad. He never, ever forgave him. And he had to get a special visit before he’d believe it was a mix” (CE 129). Here is certainly a case of the deceiver being himself deceived. Like Iktomi, whose trickery wins him only temporary victories and who usually ends up looking ridiculous (and often physically injured), Bloggs falls victim to his own craft.

Powers notes elsewhere in *Sacred Language* how tricksters provide negative examples of kinship relations, in which auditors of the stories learn how *not* to behave (155). Again, we see this echoed on several occasions in “Only Joking.” While Iktomi’s social transgressions are often incestuous (for instance, marrying his mother-in-law or his daughter), one of the greatest transgressions in Long Kesh is when a joke, as Your Man puts it, “isn’t very comradely,” such as when someone put bread on the top of another hut, so that the flocks of seagulls would noisily take their breakfast on the resounding tin roof at dawn (*Cage Eleven* 126). When Egbert’s trouser legs are sewn shut on the morning of a British Army raid on the cage, he declares that his objection to the mix comes primarily from the fact that “It wasn’t fair, making an eejit of me in front of the Brits. Not a very Republican thing to do” (CE 129). The perpetrators of these mixes transgress perhaps the most important kinship relation within the cages—that of Republican brotherhood. In both cases, these jokes threaten POW discipline on a group level, in terms of readiness for the frequent pre-dawn raids on the cages by the Army: in fact, bread-throwing was specifically banned by

the cage OC (CE 126). The trickster who sewed Egbert's trouser legs defied the unspoken decree that a united, dignified front needs to be shown at all times by the POWs against the Security Forces.

Even mixes that seem more serious in terms of physical pain are looked upon with greater favor. Perhaps it is because his deterrent to inaccuracy in the cage washroom is recognized as a misguided attempt to encourage discipline that "big Mick" is kept from censure by his compatriots. Big Mick constructed his "mousetrap" by setting a steel tray next to the hut toilet, then attaching wires to the tray which were plugged in to a handy electrical outlet; "if you splash, you flash" was his warning to those who braved the dark latrine (CE 125). In contrast, in Egbert's instance the joke is not a private one between comrades that bonds the participants: the laughter of the Security Forces is another means by which the POWs are degraded. Humiliation is only truly possible with an enemy observer. The laughter of comrades, while at times temporarily hurtful, in the end is always accompanied by solidarity.

In addition to a recurring trickster motif, in stories like "Sláinte" it is hard not to see a variant of Hegel's Master/Slave relationship being enacted. Just as the Master has seemingly assumed a position of superiority through force of arms, the ascendancy proves itself unstable. For, Hegel writes,

It is not an independent, but rather a dependent consciousness that he [the Master] has achieved. He is thus not assured of self-existence as truth; he finds that his truth is rather the unessential consciousness, and the fortuitous unessential action of that consciousness... But just as the position of the master showed itself to be the reverse of what it wants to be, so, too, the position of servant will, when completed, pass into the opposite of what it immediately is: being a consciousness repressed within

itself, it will enter into itself, and change around into real and true independence. (406-7)

The soldier who guards the wire of Long Kesh in "Sláinte" can only ever be a reactionary force. As Alexandre Kojève writes, "The purely warlike attitude of the Master does not vary throughout the centuries, and therefore it cannot engender a historical change" (51). The soldier's function is to keep the situation safely in the confines of the status quo; a mastery based on military prowess. In reality, it is the "men behind the wire," the POWs, who are now beginning to find their independence in their state of mind, in their active analysis of the political situation in which they find themselves, and in their active and passive transformation of the world surrounding them.

This Hegelian dialectic further manifests itself in the short story "Screws."<sup>8</sup> In the simple action of a walk from a cage to the prison hospital, Adams presents the reader with a picture of how dependent the guards have actually become on the POWs, even in terms of physical motion:

When I feel fit enough to go to the doctor's I have my own special screw to keep me company. He is a remarkable piece of humankind—a right pockel.<sup>9</sup> I pause, he pauses; I hobble fast, he hobbles fast; I stop, he stops. I smirk at him, he smiles shyly back; I glare at him, he looks away; I address him as "my good man," he grins stupidly; I ignore him, he observes me sleekitly. I go to the doctor's, he goes to the doctor's.

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<sup>8</sup> The word "screw" is derogatory prison slang for a warder. Challis traces its origin to Pentonville Prison in the 1840's where a machine called "the Crank" was put to penal use. It was precisely what its name implied: "a handle attached to a gear and counting mechanism. The handle had to be turned 20 times a minute—10,000 times a day—and, if the going got too easy, a screw could be tightened to control the pressure to make it harder to turn" (123). It is not surprising that Republican prisoners would readily incorporate this metonymy into their daily lives.

<sup>9</sup> Adams later defines this as an "awkward person." Similarly, "sleekitly" is defined as "cunningly, slyly" (145).

I think he really hates me. Deep inside his blue uniform, I reckon he really, really harbors a burning hatred for me. Like, I'm not sure of that, of course, but the majority of screws here behave, most of the time, as if they hate the prisoners. (17)

No victory is too small to be reckoned in Long Kesh. The narrator is keenly aware of the reversal of expected roles: it is not the warder who controls the pace or the destination of the walk, but the POW. Indeed, it is indicative of the extent to which the warders have accepted the position dictated to them by the rules of Special Category Status, which had been won only after a hunger strike on the part of the Republican prisoners: perhaps used to dealing with POWs through their OC, this warder is only able to follow the prisoner's lead in one-on-one situations. Assuredly, this attitude is symptomatic of the Security Forces' slipping hold over the POWs in general.

Hegel tells us that the Master "exists only for himself, that is his essential nature" (406); a rigid, militaristic self-interest which causes soldiers to brave dangers to preserve their societal position. Nevertheless, this ascendancy is maintained not through creation but negation—negation of Republican freedom through incarceration, and as a consequence, negation of the Masters' own true freedom. After all, *someone* must guard the prisoners. In a passage at the end of "Screws," the narrator shows that the POWs are quite cognizant of the dilemma in which the British have found themselves:

Outside our cages they hunch against the wind. At their gates they jangle keys. In sentry boxes they huddle against the cold. Don't ask me why they do it. I'm not programmed like they are so I couldn't give you an answer. It took the British Army, the RUC, a British judge and a few Special Branch men to get me in here. Screws serve their sentences voluntarily.



Well, they do so for a lucrative wage plus overtime. I don't really hate them. I'm not so much against anything or anybody, it's just that I'm for a lot of things. None of them includes screws. (19)

So as to maintain their own world order, the British have, in effect, voluntarily imprisoned themselves. This manifests itself on many levels, most obviously in the form of the warders who endure much of what their prisoners do, at least in terms of exposure to the elements. But this imprisonment occurs at an ideological level as well: by detaining a civilian population without charge or trial, the government has committed itself to a warlike, intransigent stance, one from which it will be difficult to depart. The recurring image in "Screws" of the warders as machines "programmed" to do their soldierly duty, not as beings capable of rational thought, is only ideological petrification made visible. In contrast, the positivist bent of the POWs can be seen in the penultimate sentence of the passage quoted above. Whereas the warders have a near monomaniac negative fixation on their prisoners, as can be seen in the second paragraph of the first excerpt quoted above, the POWs in their turn primarily have other things on their minds.

This does not mean, however, that the POWs have-- at this stage-- been able to completely extract themselves from the mindset of the Master. Because of the particular phrasing in the use of the term "our cages," the Nissen huts occupied by the POWs seem less like ones in which they are forced to live. Unless one reads irony into the possessive pronoun, Adams' word choice reveals that the POWs have internalized their setting to some small degree; he, after all, could have used the definite article in that setting. While there is a distance between those cages and "their gates" (the possessive here an indication not only of the practice of assigning specific gates to individual guards, but also of the British Army/government as the master gatekeeper), in this unconscious slip

the narrator reveals that on some minor levels, as Hegel terms it, "the master is taken to be the essential reality for the state of the servant" (407). Regardless, movement through the Master's reality is a temporary and necessary measure according to Hegel, and one which will eventually lead to a liberation: already the huts are being transformed by the actions of their occupants-- as was seen quite literally in "Sláinte" in the prisoners' plumbing modifications-- for the inmates' own purposes. The POWs themselves, in turn, will negate the oppressive world around them through their own subversive action, through both intellectual and physical means.

## CHAPTER V

### THE HUNGER STRIKES: BOBBY SANDS

The negotiation begun by the POWs would soon reach its fullest and most tragic manifestation not in the Cages, but inside the physical confines of a new plan to break Republican resistance: cellular confinement within the newly-constructed H Blocks. The British had soon recognized that the Cages were public relations liability in their struggle for continued power in the Six Counties. As stated in the previous chapter, in jails and compounds across the North of Ireland embarrassing numbers prisoners had enjoyed Special Category status after winning it during a hunger strike. They were for all intents and purposes legally classified as political prisoners: the POWs were allowed to wear their own clothes, to have free association, had access to educational facilities, and did not have to do ordinary prison work.

However, beginning on 1 March, 1976, Special Category Status ended. This ill-advised decision on the part of the British government can be traced to Lord Gardiner's report of January 30, 1975 regarding the state of prisons within the North of Ireland. It revealed that seventy-one percent of male prisoners were being held in compound-type prisons at the time rather than traditional cellular confinement. Gardiner was vehemently opposed to Special Category Status as well as to the manner of incarceration practiced in the compounds, contending "there is virtually a total loss of disciplinary control by the prison authorities inside," and arguing that the POWs with political status held there "are more

likely to emerge with an increased commitment to terrorism than as reformed citizens" (qtd. in Coogan, *On the Blanket* 58).

Significantly, Gardiner's report ignored the observations of officials within the prison system itself. In each of his annual reports Father Raymond Murray, the prison chaplain for the women of Armagh, praised the effects that Special Category Status had on relations between staff and prisoners. In 1973 he wrote "Armagh Prison is a very different place to the one I wrote about in my last two annual reports... Since political status was granted, there has been a wonderful change, for example, in prison life in Armagh Prison" (*Hard Time* 30). In 1974 he attributed good relations between warders and prisoners to, among other things, "The Special Category status (sic) of political prisoners which allows for dignity and self-respect. Rumors that this would disappear under the Gardiner report can only have been circulated by people who have no experience of prisons" (36). Again the report for 1975 highlights a positive atmosphere with regard to interaction between prison officers and their charges. He wrote the following with what turned out to be well-deserved foreboding:

It is my opinion that the present prison reforms were brought about through the granting of Special Category status (sic). One hopes that imprudence in this matter will not wreck the present harmonious atmosphere. It is clear from the past six years that in vulnerable institutions like prisons a crisis will spill over into the wider community.

(44)

The Gardiner Report also ignored data collected by social workers who, in the words of Coogan "all say that the degree of normality enjoyed by the compound prisoners makes it far easier for them to adapt to a normal life afterwards, and that their rate of return to their para-military (sic) organization is tiny by comparison with that of the embittered, institutionalized cell prisoners" (*On the*

*Blanket* 59). The concerns of which Coogan and Father Murray wrote were later proven true. In an interview in 1991, William Smith, head of Justice for Lifers,<sup>1</sup> stated that

Ninety-five percent of prisoners who had special category status never went back to jail. Because of the regime there they came out without a chip on their shoulder, because one thing they kept while they were in prison was their dignity. Those who come out now who had no special status are full of resentment and that affects their families too. (qtd in Coulter 92)

Not only did Gardiner ignore the advice of experts: he ignored the remarkable patience and forgiveness of the nationalist population, for the vast number of people interned without charge (including the charge of membership in a paramilitary organization) must be remembered. If Smith's statistics are accurate, we must view with some amazement the fact that the overwhelming majority of people imprisoned unjustly never ended up joining a paramilitary organization.

While at first the connection between repeat arrest and IRA membership may seem tenuous—and indeed it should, given the numbers of people arrested without any evidence of either wrongdoing or even membership in a paramilitary organization-- in this context we must keep in mind Coogan's claim that between 1975 and 1977 "the active service life of the average young IRA volunteer was effectively cut to around three months" by British intelligence collected by brutal interrogations that broke the secrecy of the old battalion structure (*On the Blanket* 67). If former internees were leaving prison to join the IRA in droves, one would wonder why in such an atmosphere of efficiency on

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<sup>1</sup> This organization, which describes itself as "non-political and non-sectarian" began on the Loyalist Shankill Road. The existence of groups like Justice for Lifers argues against the notion that political status is sought only as Republican propaganda.

the part of British intelligence they were not themselves arrested within three months. These numbers would indicate not only that the majority of internees did not join the IRA, but also that admitted IRA volunteers frequently did not return to active service subsequent to their release. As Father Murray rightly argued as early as 1974, the dignity of recognized political status—and the humane treatment that this status at least nominally guaranteed—prevented the growth of bitterness and hatred among the POWs, a hatred which, as will be shown in Sands' writings, is the direct result of the physical environment in which the POWs were placed after Special Category Status was removed.

The removal of Special Category Status required an extensive reworking of legal status in combination with a massive propaganda effort. An integral part of the new British strategy was a policy that has come to be known as

"criminalization." Criminalization, according to Tim Pat Coogan, was

aimed at taking away whatever dignity the Special Category Status conferred and making the IRA not an organization with a political ambition and its roots in history, but a mafia-like conspiracy differing only in its methods from what the North of Ireland Secretary of the time . . . termed "ODCs"-- Ordinary Decent Criminals. (*The IRA* 368)

Prisoners sentenced after 1 March 1976 would not be assigned to the Cages, but to a cell in the newly-constructed H Blocks. Here, the POWs became mere prisoners: rather than being allowed communal association, they were separated one or two to a cell; rather than negotiating through OCs, prisoners had to negotiate individually with the Prison Officer in charge. Finally, the prisoners were forced to wear the regulation prison uniform. In short, in the words of Allen Feldman in *Formations of Violence*,

the first IRA men to enter the H-Blocks encountered a regime that refused to recognize any social unit larger than the individual inmate. The

depoliticization of the paramilitary's former political status conversely meant his extreme individualization and a refusal on the part of the prison administration to recognize his organizational affiliation. (152)

Whereas the POW is defined by the paramilitary group to which s/he belongs, the inmate is defined singularly. The inmate is no longer a part of a body, the inmate now *is* a body, and nothing more.

In his influential work *Asylums*, Erving Goffmann puts forth the theory that at the moment an inmate enters into the space in which s/he will be confined, something akin to a rite of passage occurs. This is the moment that will construct the identity of both inmate and warder within that institution and, presumably-- if and when the individual leaves the institution-- outside of the confining space as well. The previous existence of the inmate is eliminated to facilitate this "corrective," "socializing" change. Goffman accurately notes the ritual nature of such an erasure, observing

Admission procedures and obedience tests [such as forcing inmates to address prison officers as "sir"] may be elaborated into a form of initiation that has been called "the welcome" where staff or inmates, or both, go out of their way to give the recruit a clear notion of his plight... The admission procedure can be characterized as a leaving off and a taking on, with the midpoint marked by physical nakedness. Leaving off of course entails a dispossession of property, important because persons invest self feelings in their possessions. (18)

Therefore, when an H Block prisoner is stripped and forced to wear a prison uniform, it is not merely the clothes that the British government seeks to remove, but the political identity as well. The uniform is the most immediate signifier of state power acting upon the individual: like the bricks and mortar all

around, the uniform confines the inmate's body again, a visible sign of imposed criminal status, undifferentiated from thieves and sex offenders.

The POWs were quite aware of what was at stake with the implementation of the policy of criminalization, and resisted from the beginning. As is shown in the following account of a member of the Provisional IRA, resistance began from the moment of incarceration:

The screws were screaming at us. We had refused point-blank to even touch the "monkey suit." They asked us all our sizes, and we refused to give them our sizes. Before they put us down into the cells they lined us up in the circle. We were watching all around us because we were expecting a tanking [beating]. There were six of us, and we says to each other: "The first time they lift their hands get fucking into them. You're going to be murdered, but fight or we're going to get tortured. If they frightened us now they'll be torturing us for the rest of our wick [time].

(Feldman, *Formations* 154)

The penal system relies upon the passive complicity of those who accept categorization as criminals, but in this critical, identity-fixing moment the Republican prisoners have inverted the power structure. Instead, these men force the guards to negotiate both physically and verbally with prisoners who are supposedly powerless beneath the state's influence. The body is the locus of this rebellion, for in the act of refusing to state their clothing size, the POWs are dramatically demonstrating their self-knowledge, and conversely, the inability of the state to categorize them accurately from without. Similarly, the POWs have reclaimed subject status in their decision to attack the warders, despite the sacrifice that their flesh will have to endure: were they not to resist, the POWs would have accepted victim/object status, ready to be inscribed by the state. Instead, they have gone through Goffman's rite of passage on their own terms.



The resistance to classification continued after the POWs were relegated to their individual cells, for they constructed their own uniform, and in so doing, reconstructed their previous, politicized identities. Stripped to the bare skin, many inmates would be left with nothing. The Republican POWs, on the other hand, found they had everything, for they had their identities intact. Rather than ever submit to the convict's uniform, they chose instead to wear only their prison blankets, and in so doing not only prevented their individual selves from collapsing into undifferentiated criminal status, but also in their nakedness created a new structure and solidarity that the prison authorities could not take away. The pre-existing structures (like the military chain of command) that the Republican POWs brought with them into the H Blocks, not only survived the transition from cage to cell, but flourished and redefined themselves in the Blanket protest.

Having failed to break the resistance of Republican prisoners as they crossed the threshold of the H Blocks, the prison authorities sought other means to secure submission, and one of the techniques utilized was that of constant and often brutal observation. In his widely-cited work *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault could have been describing the claustrophobic cells that the POWs found themselves in when he describes the

enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded . . . in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which the individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings . . . all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (197)

The inmates of the H Blocks found themselves under the most extreme forms of scrutiny, beginning with apertures on their cell doors that allowed the screws to observe prisoners at any time. Furthermore, when prisoners were taken to the showers, they were forced to bathe under the watchful gaze of their captors. The POWs would be dragged to tubs of water to which stinging disinfectants had been added, the water itself either blisteringly hot or ice cold, and were held down in it and scrubbed with wire brushes by the screws. Accounts smuggled out by POWs universally mention the particular attention that the screws paid to brutalizing the sex organs of their captives (Sands, *One Day in My Life* 64).

Nor was this gaze limited to external surveillance, for any time that POWs left a cell, they were forced to undergo a full cavity search. As a preview to the more detailed examination of his writings that follows this introduction, we can turn now to Bobby Sands' graphic account of a typical "mirror search" to gain insight into how degradation and surveillance find a nexus in the body of the POW:

They grabbed my arms and threw me up against the wooden wall. The impact made a dull thud. They held me in spread-eagled fashion. Someone punched me in the ribs, and my feet were kicked to part my legs. A terrible pain tore through my outstretched arms and my already aching, bruised body hurt all the more. They continued to hack at my ankles with their heavy issue boots, constantly screaming and shouting, cursing and threatening me.

I felt the cold chamfered edges of the large mirror being pushed between my legs. They were scrutinizing my anus using the mirror to afford them a view from every angle. A foreign hand probed and poked my anus and, unsatisfied, they kicked the back of my knees forcing me down into a squatting position where they again used the mirror and, to

finish off, they rained more kicks and blows on my naked, burning body for good measure. (Sands, *One Day* 83-4)

When prisoners are kept in their empty cells for more than twenty-three hours a day (oftentimes, twenty-four), it is clear that such searches are a part of prison procedure, not so much for their value in discouraging or discovering contraband, but rather for their value in demonstrating the utter extent to which the state could invade and observe the inner recesses of mind and body. As one IRA prisoner puts it, mirror searches were principally "for making you feel vulnerable" (Feldman, *Formations* 158).

Again, however, the POWs found a way to reclaim their own spaces and identities. Against such brutal treatment as cited above, as well as against the screws' practice of emptying the chamber-pots on the prisoners' bedding, the POWs began what would come to be known as the "Dirty" or "No-wash" protest. The Republicans began refusing to go to the showers, to get haircuts, or to shave. Moreover, rather than allow it to be ground into their mattresses and blankets, they also began to smear their excreta on the walls of their cells.

This type of resistance is notable on several levels: first of all, of course, it is an example of deliberate defiance of prison regulations. More importantly, however, it is an example of how prisoners can again invert the hierarchical power structure of the prison itself. By allowing bodily functions free sway, they were subverting a system that seeks to regulate and standardize. Shaggy-haired, long-bearded inmates were as out of place in the system Long Kesh sought to impose as would they be in the regularizing structures of military boot camp.

Furthermore, I contend that in covering their cells with excreta, the POWs were in fact taking the cells into their own bodies. The walls were no longer concrete, but rather extensions of the POWs' own physicality: symbolically, the cells now no longer confined, but like skin, merely marked the terminus of the

prisoners' person. This also gave the POWs a certain degree of protection from the screws' attacks, for the guards avoided entering such reconstructed cells, and as such, beatings within the cell boundaries decreased. A grimly humorous example of the protection afforded by filth occurs in Bobby Sands' short story "Bury Me in My Blanket." When a bored warder decides to pass some time by antagonizing the prisoners, his assaults remain only verbal as he is repulsed (pun intended) by the physical condition of the cell. The tension increases palpably as the guard prepares to enter the Blanketmen's domain, but turns darkly and unexpectedly comic:

"Truth hurts," he said foolishly and edged himself in through the entrance of the door.

"Mind them poor wee maggots on the floor." I said, prompting a two foot withdrawal and the first tactical success to myself as he jumped back. (Sands 153)

The POWs had thus defeated one of the central objectives of a prison, for instead of being confined within a space, in reality they caused their so-called *captors* to be confined outside that space.

Although the Blanket and No-wash protests allowed the POWs to reclaim the private space of their individual cell, they had not produced significant results outside of those walls. It was agreed among the Republicans that the protest needed to be taken to the next level. In January 1980, the POWs published five demands: 1) right to wear their own clothes; 2) no prison work; 3) free association with other POWs; 4) a visit, parcel, and letters per week; 5) return of remission lost due to protest action on the Blanket. By issuing these demands, Blanketman and Wing OC Bik McFarlane explains, supporters "could campaign around a very specific programme. The five demands, we felt, also gave the Brits

plenty of room to manoeuvre since no emotive terminology<sup>2</sup> was used" (Campbell et. al. 104).

Unfortunately (though not unexpectedly) Margaret Thatcher, then Prime Minister of England, was taking a hard line with the Republicans. No concessions were to be made. In the face of this intransigence desperate measures were called for: the POWs decided it was time to embark on a hunger strike. In the words of Blanketman Leo Green:

Initially I had believed that the Blanket protest by its own steam would bring about a restoration of status, and the merits of a hunger strike were therefore academic. By mid-1980 such illusions were long gone. The intensity of all that had occurred in the intervening period by way of attempts to break us had convinced me some would die on hunger strike before it swung the pendulum our way and forced the Brits to concede . . . The choice was stark: sit and hope a solution would fall into our lap or go for one final intensification of the fight for political recognition. In effect, no choice at all. (Campbell et al 108)

Thus the decision was made, a decision that would end in two separate hunger strikes and ten men dead.

The hunger strike has been a form of protest among the Irish since pre-Christian times: wronged individuals would sit on the threshold of their enemy's home and starve themselves until recompense was made. British reporter and researcher David Beresford emphasizes the continuity of this protest from before the coming of Saint Patrick to the present day, revealing that the non-Christian Celts reserved a place for hunger striking in their civil code (14). The old practice was assimilated swiftly into the new Christian tradition, and Beresford tells how legends quickly grew in which the patron saint of Ireland

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<sup>2</sup> The reader will note that nowhere in the Five Demands is the term "political status" used.

was found "hunger-striking against God. God always caved in—capitulation in the face of such self-sacrifice being seen by early Christians as a godly quality" (15). It is not surprising then that this capacity to endure suffering-- even to the point of death -- has always been an integral component of the Republican psyche. This attitude is condensed in its purest form in the words of Terence McSwiney,<sup>3</sup> who died in 1920 after a seventy-four day hunger strike during the Anglo-Irish War after his inauguration as Lord Mayor of Cork. Tim Pat Coogan quotes him at length in *On the Blanket*, perhaps the definitive work on the protest that preceded the Hunger Strikes:

the contest on our side is not one of rivalry or vengeance but of endurance. It is not those who can inflict the most but those that can suffer the most who will conquer . . . It is conceivable that the army of occupation could stop us functioning for a time. Then it becomes simply a question of endurance. Those whose faith is strong will endure to the end in triumph. (15)

In the hagiography of Irish politics, McSwiney was probably the most exalted figure prior to Bobby Sands; indeed, Sands invokes the Lord Mayor's name frequently in his diary of the first seventeen days of the 1981 hunger strike. It was in McSwiney's rhetoric that the sufferings of modern Republican hunger strikers continued the tradition begun with the stories of Saint Patrick, becoming identified in curious ways with the sufferings of Christ.

Indeed, it is not surprising that the cover of Coogan's *On the Blanket* is dominated by a modified representation of Holbein's *The Body of the Dead*

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<sup>3</sup>Beresford reveals the extent to which McSwiney was viewed as a victim, even by the normally anti-Republican Catholic Church. In an unprecedented move, "the Pope, Benedict XV, sent an Apostolic Blessing and Plenary Indulgence; four bishops attended a funeral service at Southwark Cathedral and eight accompanied his remains through the streets of Cork" (18). The tradition of electing political prisoners (especially hunger strikers) to office while they are incarcerated is also a peculiarly Irish form of warfare.

*Christ in the Tomb*. Commenting on Holbein's original, Julia Kristeva describes the painting as "a vision that opens out not onto glory but onto endurance" (Kristeva 243), a vision

of man subject to death, man embracing Death, absorbing it into his very being, integrating it not as a condition for glory nor a consequence of a sinful nature, but as the ultimate essence of his desacrilized reality, which is the foundation of a new dignity. (Kristeva 249)

Robert Ballagh's cover art for *On the Blanket* works in similar ways. The dead hunger-striker appears in virtually the same position as Holbein's *Dead Christ*: this corpse is also seen from the right side, its head tilted slightly back, the middle finger of the right hand stiffened in the same horrifying manner. Christ's long hair and beard become those of a man who refused to shave during the No-wash protest. The body in Ballagh's composition is obviously tortured, but unlike Holbein's "hardly draped" (Kristeva 241) Jesus, it is covered almost entirely by the main signifier of the H-Block protests: a prison issue blanket.

By identifying the dead hunger striker with Holbein's *Dead Christ*, Ballagh (and, implicitly, Coogan) has produced a stirring message. The cover for *On the Blanket* is, like Holbein's work, a vision of human (mortal) endurance. The Blanketman's death was not a "consequence of a sinful nature": in fact, the whole protest was about decriminalizing Republican prisoners. Nor was the death intended to ransom a way into the divine beyond, for indeed, the Catholic Church viewed the hunger strikes as suicides-- mortal sin that would deny access to Paradise. Both Ballagh and McSwiney give Republicanism a political vision of sacrifice, desacrilized in the sense that *all* Irishmen and Irishwomen have a chance to strike for Ireland's freedom by virtue of their human capacity to suffer, by virtue of their bodies. This is a humanization of the divine, for every Éireannach (Irish person) can be a Christ for the nation: other concerns

including eternal salvation—at least as envisioned by the anti-Republican church hierarchy-- are sometimes secondary.

In *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus angrily remarks that "Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow" (Joyce 198). This is the same reaction that Kristeva cites in her examination of Holbein in the words of Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin, who wonders if looking at such images of death would cause people "to lose their faith" (Kristeva 239). This can indeed be perceived as

some huge engine of the latest design, which has senselessly seized, cut to pieces and swallowed up-- impassively and unfeelingly-- a great and priceless Being . . . if, on the eve of the Crucifixion, the Master could have seen what He would look like when taken from the Cross, would He have mounted the Cross and died as he did? (Kristeva 241)

Truly, this is the sense of fear and dread that Coogan intended his book to provoke: the distinct possibility of great death, destruction, and sorrow almost mechanically produced by the engines of the H Blocks. *On the Blanket*, after all, was published in the early part of 1980 when the first Hunger Strikes were imminent but not preordained. In the last pages of the book there is a passage that reminds one of the thunder of an approaching storm: "As this is being written, the OCs in the H Blocks are collecting the names of volunteers who are prepared to embark on the final desperate course—hunger strike" (241). Coogan, after all, knew his fears were founded, not only because of the circumstances of the immediate political moment, but also because historically for Irish nationalists the answer to Myshkin's question has been yes.

The IRA sources for *On the Blanket* soon proved reliable, and a hunger strike to regain political status began on 27 October, 1980 with seven men from the H Blocks. On December 1, three women from Armagh Prison joined their



male comrades: Mairéad Farrell, Mary Doyle, and Mairéad Nugent. Two weeks after this, another thirty men joined the strike. As one of the hunger strikers, Seán McKenna, neared death, motions towards a finding a middle course were made. According to Gerry Adams, "The British government, despite taking a hard line of 'no concessions' in public, indicated that a compromise could be reached and that a document setting out details of a settlement would be presented to the prisoners if they came off hunger strike" (*Free Ireland* 63). On 18 December the first hunger strike was called off, the POWs trusting a settlement had been found in the form of a thirty-four page document which, in the words of a press statement released from the Republican Press Centre<sup>4</sup>, "contained in our estimate 'the requirements of our five demands'" (qtd in Coogan, *The IRA* 376). The promise of the document proved to be empty, however, for without the public relations nightmare of POWs dying on hunger strike, the British government had little incentive to actually meet any of the prisoners' demands. As Coogan accurately asserts, Margaret Thatcher's "inflexible nature and the Loyalist prison administration's reluctance to concede anything to Republicans completed the lighting of the powder fuse" (*The IRA* 376), and a second hunger strike soon was initiated. It was in these horrifying conditions, progressively worsening as Blanket Protest became No-Wash Protest, and No-Wash Protest became Hunger Strike, that the OC of the H-Blocks, a young IRA prisoner named Bobby Sands was writing.

Like Gerry Adams, Bobby Sands was able to smuggle many of his writings out of Long Kesh, and like Adams he was elected to the British Parliament. Neither man would take the seat, and in Sand's case, he was elected not only

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<sup>4</sup>*The Irish News* agrees with the Republican Press Centre's version of this negotiation, noting that "Although the British Government denied that it had given the hunger strikers word of its intentions, it would seem highly unlikely that the strike would have been ended had the strikers' negotiators not known of the concessions made" (Nicholls 32-3).

while in Long Kesh but also while on his fifth week of hunger strike on April 9, 1981. Sands received 30,492 votes in the election: more than Margaret Thatcher in her election as Prime Minister. As Adams himself remembers, Bobby's victory

exposed the lie that the hunger strikers-- and by extension the IRA and the whole republican movement-- had no popular support. The British campaign of 'criminalization' which motivated their removal of political status, had sought to portray republicans as 'godfathers' operating by intimidation and as isolated fanatics. Their propaganda had now been dramatically refuted, and the election of Bobby Sands resounded internationally. (*Free Ireland* 66).

Sands would eventually die after sixty-six days on the strike, but he would live on by both words and example.<sup>5</sup> His writings show in both prose and verse the determination and conviction that are required to fast to the death for justice, but more than that, they show the quiet humanity of Sands himself-- Sands the poet, Sands the solitary individual pitted against the collective weight of the British military machine. By reading Sands' writings we can see through the half-truths and outright lies of authors like the American playwright and pseudo-historian Herb Greer whose article, "Ulster: In the Empty House of the State" makes the deliberately misleading claim that Bobby Sands "managed to win an Ulster by-election before committing suicide" (55). As was shown earlier, the unprecedented electoral mandate given to Sands hardly merits Greer's dismissive use of the term "managed," and as will be shown later, Sands' mental state during his hunger strike was anything but suicidal—particularly in the manner that Greer's word choice implies, with its connotations of depression,

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<sup>5</sup> As a direct result of his election, the British passed the so-called "Sands Bill" that outlaws the election of any prisoner to Parliament.

surrender, and cowardice. Instead, throughout his writings Sands displays a fierce bravery and unbending devotion to comrades and cause, characteristics hardened into something darker than anything seen in Adams' writings, characteristics shaped by the brutality of the prison regime and the particular physical conditions in which the men in the H Blocks were confined.

The form in which Sands' works have been most recently published (1997) is that of a compilation of two previous books: *One Day in My Life*, an extended prose piece describing the daily routine of a POW on the No-Wash Protest, and *Skylark Sing Your Lonely Song*, a collection of verse and prose that also contains Sands' hunger strike diary. Like Adams' *Cage Eleven*, this new compilation, *Bobby Sands: Writings from Prison*, begins with the writing that most completely describes Sands' place of incarceration. However, whereas the physical environment is a backdrop in "Cage Eleven," it is an active participant in *One Day in My Life*. It is worth quoting the entire first paragraph of the narrative to demonstrate:

It was still dark and snowing when I woke. I don't think I got more than an hour's sleep during the long, restless, torturous night. The cold was intense, biting at my naked body. For at least the thousandth time I rolled over on to my side, hugging the blankets close to my body. The sleep that the bitter cold had denied me hung above me, leaving me tired and drowsy. I was somewhat exhausted, and every bone in my body seemed to be protesting at the ordeal of spending yet another night on a damp foam mattress on the floor. No sleep again worth mentioning! I was frustrated, cross and curled up in a little ball to get warm. If I had something to boot, I would have booted it, that's just how I felt. I had tried lying in every sort of position to get warm, but the cold still penetrated. My three flimsy

blankets were no match for the bitter, biting cold that came creeping through the bars of my window, situated above my head. (25)

Compare this passage to the one that begins "Cage Eleven":

I'm in bed at the moment, covered in breadcrumbs and skimpy grey British Army blankets, my knees tucked up under my chin and a blue plastic mug of blue plastic tea in my hand... After the first visitless week or so, men take to their beds. It's not a pretty sight. Your Man has retired for the night already, pink pajamas neatly creased and rosary in hand. And it's only seven o'clock. (Adams, *Cage Eleven* 6)

While the narrators of each of these stories are first encountered in a fetal position, that pose beneath identical British Army blankets is one of the few similarities between the two POWs. Adams' story takes on the quality of a surreal sleepover, with Your Man's incongruous appearance figuring strongly in the scene. The narrator in "Cage Eleven" is found in the attitude of a quiet Sunday in an odd dorm, remnants of comfort food close at hand, the humorous tone downplaying what was undoubtedly a real sense of loss at the removal of visits. In stark contrast to this, Sands' narrator is huddled under his blankets not out of depression, but out of real need. Images of the cold fill almost every sentence of the passage quoted above, becoming an almost sentient enemy in the pathetic fallacy of the final sentence quoted above, creeping toward him through the open windows like a predator.

In both "Cage Eleven" and *One Day*, sleep is sought as a balm, an escape from the immediate. Yet the crucial difference between the two situations is that the stresses on the POWs have entirely different origins: for the inmates of the Cages, it is *external* to their space, as visits have been denied to them. In the H Blocks, however, though the POWs also are denied visits as a result of their refusal to conform to prison regulations in the Blanket and No-Wash Protests,

this hardship is so minimal in relation to the rest that it gets no mention. The immediate stress comes from the physical experience itself of the space that they occupy, a stress too invasive to flee even in sleep. The physical environment thus permeates both Sands' mind as well as his body, making even mental escape from the cell nearly impossible. The cell is so frigid that Sands seems to run out of words to describe it, the staccato repetition of the word "cold" reminiscent of chattering teeth.

Again and again in Sands' writings the reader can see the way in which the physical environment of the cell intrudes upon the world of the mind. By way of example, the short prose piece entitled "I Once Had a Life" spends almost the entirety of its length leading the reader along a pleasant trail through the outdoors: the birds are singing, the sun is shining, the scenery is beautiful. However, at the sound of a gun this world melts away, and the speaker is revealed to be imprisoned in the H Blocks. The shift is a melancholy one: "I arose, not from my panoramic platform, but out of the inky blackness in the corner of my filthy, cold cell, where, wrapping a dirty, flimsy blanket around me to cover my naked body, I stepped towards the barred window and leaned my head against it" (Sands 88). One is unsure whether the gunshot is part of the fantasy or if it arises from the real world of concrete and razor wire that surrounds the speaker, but either way, that the liminal moment is one of violence is telling. In prison, the violence enacted against the mind is just as dangerous as that directed against the body, if only because it brings the POW back to his body and the physical discomfort of the frigid, dirty cell. The dissociation between mind and body is that of sleep and wakefulness, as can be seen in the peculiar, almost third person way in which the prisoner observes and describes himself emerging from the blackness of sleep into the blackness of the cell.

Again and again, brief respites from the immediate surroundings are short lived. "Christmas Eve," which begins as a prose piece and ends as a poem is yet another example. The poem finishes with the brave lines "But I tell the Screws and Mason<sup>6</sup> too/ To break a blanket man you cannot do!" but this is not where the writing ends: in emphatic capital letters, Sands writes "—I HATE THIS PLACE" (168). The concluding line of the writing as a whole is honest and stark, causing pity and sympathy to well up in the mind of the reader, for it is revelatory on many levels. Though the POWs will fight bravely to the death for political status, the suffering they endure permeates their existence, Sands' word choice illustrating that it emanates from a spatial, physical source.

This pattern exhibits itself again in the concluding passage of *One Day in My Life*. Sands' autobiography has come full circle at this stage, and in its last pages the POWs are settling in to try to sleep. Yet, the pattern that emerges is not just a cyclical one of prison routine or of nature's rising and setting sun. It is a cycle of resistance against the four walls that confine the POWs, a physical space that is as physically punishing as any beating. As the night falls, Sands writes the final lines:

It was cold, so very, very cold. I rolled onto my side and placed my little treasured piece of tobacco under the mattress and felt the dampness clinging to my feet.

That's another day nearer to victory, I thought, feeling very hungry.

I was a skeleton compared to what I used to be but it didn't matter. Nothing really mattered except remaining unbroken. I rolled over once again, the cold biting at me. They have nothing in their entire arsenal to break the spirit of one single Republican prisoner-of-war who refuses to be broken, I thought, and that was very true. They can not or never will

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<sup>6</sup> Roy Mason, Secretary of State during the late Seventies.

break our spirit. I rolled over again freezing and the snow came in the window on top of my blankets.

“Tiocfaidh ár lá,”<sup>7</sup> I said to myself. “Tiocfaidh ár lá.” (81)

This concluding passage is remarkable in the pendulum regularity with which the narrative switches between mental resistance and recognition of physical discomfort. It is only with near superhuman willpower that the POWs are able to match their cells, to endure and keep the equilibrium. The physical environment in the cell is the same as it was in the morning—even the POWs postures are the same—but they remain unbroken. It must be remembered too that at this stage those windows are at once friend and enemy to the prisoners: though the bitter snow and air passes through them, they at least provide some form of optical escape from the cell. In a short while, however, all of the windows in the H Blocks will be sealed up, preventing even that modicum of escape from the cell walls. This particular type of confinement is the origin of the hatred seething in the POWs of the H Blocks, a hatred not seen in the Cages, “a hatred so intensive (sic) that it frightens me” as Sands confesses in the essay “The Harvest Britain Has Sown” (94).

This passage again demonstrates a quality earlier touched upon in the discussion of the opening paragraph of *One Day in My Life*: that of repetition. The reader will note that the first paragraph and the last passages of *One Day* both exhibit an almost uncontrollable repetition of the word “cold.” Yet this reduplication cannot be simply written off as a stylistic error, for it also speaks to other issues, those of literary production and the aesthetic expectations of the academy. To a sophisticated literary audience, perhaps Sands’ technique seems lacking in finesse and polish, and hence unworthy of study. I would argue that

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<sup>7</sup> Irish Gaelic, meaning “Our day will come.” Sands is credited with politicizing this phrase (Coogan, *The IRA* 380), and one sees it replicated in the discourse of graffiti and wall murals in nationalist areas of the Six Counties, as well as in that of Republican writing.

these jagged edges and sometimes visible seams reveal as much, if not more, about the politicized nature of the academy than about the prison writer producing the works, a nature that the academy often deliberately conceals in a mantle of false neutrality. In contrast to the near pathological obsession with revision currently in vogue in composition departments across the discipline, prison literature is discourse at its rawest, least edited, and most powerful. I concur with writer Elaine Scarry who argues in *The Body in Pain* that

Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language.... to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language. (4-6)

The cold that Sands' writes about is not a distant memory that is written down in tranquil recollection: he must suffer that same cold again tonight, he must endure it even as he writes. In addition, there are few opportunities to write or revise in the H Blocks as the consequences of discovery at any stage of the writing process—as soon will be graphically shown-- are severe. While revision is valuable, indeed sometimes allowing writers to express their points or describe a scene with improved clarity, in visceral documents like those smuggled from the H Blocks we see the physical environment actually inscribed in the words. The repetition of the word "cold" indicates its cyclical, physical assault on the POW. Contrary to the usual terms of academic aesthetics (the well-wrought Arnoldian urn), we must realize that where the text suffers can be a marker of where the human creator suffers.

Behind the aesthetic yardsticks by which bourgeois literature is judged are the benefits of privilege, from the ability and leisure to write and revise to the most basic need of all: actual access to writing implements. All of these are



deliberately denied to the POWs in the H Blocks, and it is only through the incredible ingenuity of the prisoners that any writing is able to be done at all, let alone smuggled out of the H Blocks. As Sands himself writes later in *One Day*,

We had one miserly pencil and a pen refill that were constantly in use around the wing, going from one cell to the next, back and forth from one side of the wing to the other, eating up sheets of "bog roll" (toilet paper) for the wee smuggled notes to worried wives, mothers and girlfriends; for the letters to the newspapers and the quickly scribbled notes to the H Block Information Bureau telling of the beatings and horrors that took place every single day. I would have to wait my turn for the pen or pencil. (69)

Forbidden items like tobacco, cigarette papers, and writing implements were imported surreptitiously whenever practicable. This contraband found its way to the POWs during rare visits either from friends and relatives or from sympathetic officials like priests. Sometimes commiserating orderlies, themselves prisoners in the H Blocks, supplied the POWs with the requested items. To move the precious supplies internally within the prison often meant *literally* moving them internally, hiding them in the mouth, foreskin, or rectum<sup>8</sup> to defeat the scopic regime of the warders as exemplified earlier in the mirror search. In order to produce prison literature in the first place, the POWs needed to overcome deep-seated societal taboos, and in so doing in yet another way they politicized their bodies. The transgressive action required by their incarceration forced the prisoners to inscribe their commitment to the struggle directly within themselves. The written word is only a small part of prison

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<sup>8</sup> Known in prison parlance as "fagining" in the case of the foreskin and "bar gling" in the case of the rectum. The first term is an appropriation of the Dickens character. As one POW explains it, "We called the penis a fagin from a character that was a real droopy looking and sinister fucker" (qtd. in Feldman, *Formations* 200). I deem this a fine example of how prisoners appropriate passive canonic literature to put to their own active use.

discourse: action is its heart, inseparable from it in the same way that organ is part of a living body.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the initial psychological (as well as physical) difficulties in moving both the raw material of literary production and that product in final form, the necessarily physical risks that the POWs took transporting their literary contraband within the prison were profound. When discourse is literally internalized, physical agency is required on the part of the prison authorities to extract it, to neutralize it, to depoliticize the inmate's body by the technology of state medical purification. The account of POW Ciaran McGillicuddy forcefully demonstrates the ritual nature<sup>10</sup> of the extraction when he and a companion are discovered carrying contraband passed to them during Mass. Like his comrade, he had concealed a beart<sup>11</sup> (in McGillicuddy's case, a pen and some cigarette papers) in his rectum, but these had been detected during the mirror search on the way back into the cells. The screws deal with McGillicuddy's companion first:

Off he went. The cell he went to was only about 15 feet away. I heard a lot of moaning and a bit of a beating and the next thing about eight screws came out, each with a big smile. One was carrying what looked like a pair of pliers and in them he had a little parcel which was covered in blood.  
(Campbell, et al. 91)

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<sup>9</sup> I take pleasure in wondering whether critics would be as committed to—or as long-winded about—the notion that discourse alone (a thing in their theories somehow removed from physical struggle) is the only location to engender resistance were they required to bangle their writings as the first step in publication.

<sup>10</sup> The close ties between the medical and the disciplinary in the H Blocks are echoed in Sands' description in *One Day in My Life* of how, in his "medical examination" after a severe beating by warders "the glorified screw with the white coat began to examine me, fiddling about my body, poking and probing, imitating the antics of a doctor, trying to impress the audience of screws who stood around the entrance of the cell" (48). Truly medicinal examinations are only invasive in order to heal: this one is intended to intimidate, as is emphasized by the intrusion of multiple warders into the exam area.

<sup>11</sup> Gaeilge for "parcel," the term most often employed by the POWs to describe such miniature packages.

This account is reminiscent of a scene from an earlier era's public judicial torture. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault reminds us that in previous times "The first degree of torture was the sight of the instruments" (40). The warder's first assault on McGillicuddy thus actually takes place *before* the POW is touched in the display of the forceps, to borrow a Homeric phrase, freighted with dark pain. The extracted parcel itself takes on an organic, biological quality by its immersion in blood: the removal of discourse becomes a twisted surgical procedure. The screws then turn their attention to McGillicuddy himself, and his ordeal at the hands of the guards is every bit as painful as the forceps promised it to be. In order to demonstrate the horrible complexity of the assault as well as the POW's reaction to it, it is necessary to quote an extended passage. McGillicuddy reports

...The screw who had my hair let go as my head was now caught and forced down onto the stool. Then two more screws came and lifted my legs into the air. This left me upside down with my head between my legs, four screws holding me with the screw who had been holding my hair free to do his work. I could hardly breath and I thought I was going to pass out. They were all laughing out loud and then he came with the pliers. I remember him putting them into me and he nipped me two or three times. If I cried out, the screws holding me would push me to keep me quiet. They got the pen and paper and they all kept laughing at me.

When they left and the door closed, I sat down on the small stool. Once I knew they weren't coming back, I cried. I had no clothes on. It was 12:00 when I went to the boards<sup>12</sup> and the next thing I remember was the door opening for my tea which was at 4:00 pm and I was still sitting on the

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<sup>12</sup> The cells specifically reserved for the punishment of infractions of prison rules, and the place where McGillicuddy's torture took place.

stool with no clothes on. I remember feeling dirty, I wanted to ask for a bath.

Certainly, McGillicuddy's experience is nothing short of sexual assault. Part mock medical procedure, part judicial torture, part gang rape, the extraction of the tools of discourse from the POW unites all of these invasions of the body in the form of disciplinary regulations intended to break Republican resistance. Yet it is undoubtedly the sexual dimension of this assault that is most damaging to McGillicuddy: his response to it bears the classic reactions of a rape victim in the (for a POW, uncharacteristic) tears, the blackout, and the desire to physically cleanse the body as an attempt to cleanse symbolically the psychological wounds of the attack. Like a rape victim, the attack is only with great difficulty verbalized or even called to mind. With undeniable courage, McGillicuddy confesses "I know for me the above has, since that day, been a very emotional topic to talk about even though it happened over ten years ago now. It gives me great pain whenever I talk or think about it" (Campbell et al. 92).

The POWs' willingness to put their bodies on the line in order to ensure that their story is told again calls to mind Hegel, not only in reference to his Master/ Slave dialectic, but also with regard to his notion of the Intellectual who occupies a position in a twilight world somewhere between the two. I turn once more to Alexandre Kojève's excellent work, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, and his commentary on Chapter V of *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* where Kojève summarizes the peculiar netherworld of the Hegel's Intellectual:

In short, being neither Master nor Slave, he [the Intellectual] is able—in this *nothingness*, in this absence of all given *determination*—to "realize" in some way the desired synthesis of Mastery and Slavery: he can *conceive* it. However, being *neither* Master *nor* Slave—that is, abstaining from all Work and from all Fighting—he cannot truly *realize* the

synthesis that he discovers: without Fighting and without Work, this synthesis conceived by the Intellectual remains purely verbal. (68)

The notion that intellectuals do not engage in either Work or Fighting is a common, and sometimes well-founded assumption, and one that to some seems to apply particularly to imprisoned authors. Even critics who specialize in prison literature perhaps unknowingly perpetuate such an attitude. For instance, in the otherwise excellent essay, "Ways of Appropriating Space in South African Prison Memoirs from Ruth First to Nelson Mandela," Werner Sedlak claims that Ruth First's plan to write a novel "under the increasingly severe conditions of solitary confinement (no writing or reading material allowed apart from the Bible), can only be carried out inwardly: ie (sic), as an act of internal resistance and appropriation" (192). Further on he points out how in the case of Albie Sachs "The detainee's creativity is directed towards a literary project... which again cannot be realized under prison conditions" (193). In the cases of the latter two quotations, certainly Sedlak is commenting on specific instances of authors somehow prevented from writing: in one sense, it is an apparently objective description of the situation in which the two authors found themselves. However, these examples are symptomatic of assumptions within the academy as well. The fact that neither author fights (in either the Hegelian or the H Block sense of the word) for a way to write registers no surprise in Sedlak's investigation. If not in First and Sach's worlds, in Sedlak's world since reading and writing material have been banned, no further question is needed, no further opposition required on this front: authority is deferred to, whether consciously or not. Indeed, he reacts with something akin to surprised disdain toward what he terms "power-struggle" on the part of South African prisoners, activities including work boycotts, hunger strikes, and physical confrontations.

In physical resistance of this sort, Sedlak argues, "any creative appropriation of space becomes practically impossible" (196).

I find the opposite to be true in the case of the H Blocks. It is only through a combination of Fighting and Work that space is appropriated and discourse produced, and it is in this active, physical resistance that the prisoners display some of their *greatest* creativity in appropriating their surroundings. The POWs both "realize" and *realize* the Hegelian synthesis, for they simultaneously occupy Master, Slave, and Intellectual positions. Like Slaves, they must Work, transforming not only the world around them in the form of alterations in their cells and cleverly constructed bearta,<sup>13</sup> but themselves as well: they become vessels for their creations. The sacrifices they endure are never selfishly but rather communally motivated, a particularly Republican form of "being for another." We see this in Sands' writings on many occasions in the sharing of all contraband among the POWs. In *One Day in My Life*, when a lump of tobacco is smuggled in, Sands divides it up into miniature cigarettes for distribution among the wing:

Five completed! I began the sixth, thinking how much one lousy cigarette meant and how it could lift morale, even of the lads who didn't smoke. Somehow or other everybody realized and took satisfaction from the fact that somebody or other had gotten one over on the bastards... and that meant a great deal. (69)

The communal nature of Republican self-sacrifice is evident here in the fact that non-smokers not only share in the common sense of victory brought about by the successful receipt of a beart of tobacco, but they also share in the effort and danger that is an inherent part of its import. It's clear from this passage that there was not just one or even several individuals who functioned as carriers

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<sup>13</sup> The plural form.

within a strict division of POW labor, the ambiguity in the terminology indicative of the extent to which it was a communal task: each of the POWs in their turn was the "somebody" who had "gotten one over" on the prison authorities, and by extension, the British government.<sup>14</sup>

The POWs negate the conditions of the prison that surround them in other ways as well in terms of the way in which contraband was passed from one cell to the next. Before the windows to their cells were blocked up by the warders the prisoners were able to construct small ropes out of fabric taken from their blankets, and using items of food like potatoes or pieces of bread as counterweights were able swing bearta tied to the ends of the rope from cell to cell. Nor did the blocking up of the windows put an end to the prisoner's ability to transfer items. In *One Day*, Sands describes one of the methods the POWs used to pass bearta, tools, and even fire between cells sharing a common wall:

they had engineered little holes in the walls where the pipes ran through which would enable them to pass the cigarettes up and down the line, as well as a light. A light for the cigarettes would be made and lit, allowing the glowing material to be passed from one cell to the next, until everyone got a light. (67)

In addition, the POWs were able to ferry their imported items across the corridor that separated the cells within the wing. In an ingenious procedure they termed "shooting the line," what was intended by the prison authorities to be an insurmountable obstruction to the inmates was negotiated and crossed. Sands illustrates the procedure, which again began with the construction of a line from blanket threads:

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<sup>14</sup>This is not to say, of course, that there were not some POWs who were especially good at the procedure. Feldman in *Formations* presents the example of Malachi whose nickname of "the Suitcase" came from his proficiency at banging (200).

The long line would be secured to a button and flicked along the ground under the door and across the corridor. The man on the other side would search for it outside his door, using a strip of paper. When he detected it he would slide the paper underneath it and pull it in under his door.

Then the ferrying of notes, cigarettes or whatever, to and fro began! The cigarettes would be tied on to the line and like a long train dragged across.

*(One Day 71-2)*

In this fashion, even in solitary confinement the POWs were able to establish something akin to physical contact with one another. In a curious fashion the cell walls were more confining on a mental level than a physical one: as laborious a task as it was to shoot the line, as shown earlier, it was even more laborious not to succumb to depression.

Along with depression, not a day passed in the H Blocks that wasn't permeated by fear, and in this experience again the POWs partake of some of the Hegelian Slave. This fear was what prompted the men to keep a constant watch on the actions of the warders, yelling out in Gaelge the screws' activities to their comrades. Sands comments in *One Day*

It was normal to shout if anyone knew what was going on. It let everyone else know. There was nothing as nerve wracking or as frightening as sitting naked behind a closed door not knowing what was going on when danger was lurking, and in our predicament danger was constantly lurking. (31)

Let us turn our attention back to the discussion of the effects of fear on the Slave in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Hegel argues that rather than being a degrading experience, fear is actually a necessary component of the Slave's journey toward emancipation through Work. He declares



in fear, the self-existence is present implicitly; in fashioning the thing, self-existence comes to be felt explicitly as its own proper being, and it attains the consciousness that itself exists in its own right and on its own account (*an und fuer sich*). By the fact that the form is objectified, it does not become something other than consciousness molding the thing through work; for just that form is his pure self-existence, which therein becomes realized. Thus precisely in labor where there seemed to be merely some outsider's mind and ideas involved, the servant becomes aware, through this rediscovery of himself by himself, of having and being a "mind of his own." (409)

In the case of the H Blocks this experience of constant apprehension shaped the POWs in multiple ways, and they shaped their world accordingly. Not content to simply live in terror, it prompted them to put prison surveillance under surveillance, to develop their own scopic techniques. The Republicans were not cowed but rather inspired by fear to negate their environment, this fear in part responsible for the entire technology and economy of literary production in the H Blocks, from the importation of the raw materials to the delivery of written reports of abuse to H Block Information Centres outside the prison.<sup>15</sup> If anything, the initial experience of terror hardened their Republicanism and reaffirmed who they were and why they were imprisoned. On a visit to the H Blocks in 1980, Coogan commented on precisely this aspect of life in the prison when he reports the reaction of two Republican POWs to the scopic invasion of their cell in *On the Blanket*:

When the door opened they both looked frightened and looked anxiously at us for a moment. They were pallid and naked except for a blanket

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<sup>15</sup> Nor was this development isolated to male prisoners in the H Blocks. Councilor McAuley told me in an interview that her first writings in prison primarily took the form of reports of the treatment that the women received at the hands of the guards.

draped over their shoulders. They stood silently, fear hardening into defiance, I felt, as we looked at the cell. (207)

In this atmosphere of anxiety, more intense than that experienced in the Cages, the H Block POWs are moving toward the Hegelian synthesis of Master and Slave. Perhaps Hegel would argue that this development is accelerated in the H Blocks as a result, but it is important not to conceive of this development in terms of a linear and inexorable development of history. Such progressions are cyclical (remember Donovan O'Rossa's similar struggles) and simultaneous: the Cages and the H Blocks literally existed side-by-side for years.

In order to further distance this analysis from the linear progression that some argue lurks in the background of a purely Hegelian model<sup>16</sup>, if one prefers this could be considered in post-structuralist terms. The words of Dreyfus and Rabinow are germane at this juncture. In their analysis of Foucault, they argue that unless "unequal relations of power are traced down to their actual material functioning, they escape our analysis and continue to operate with unquestioned autonomy, maintaining the illusion that power is only applied by those at the top to those at the bottom" (186). Power, to Foucault merely exists, to be used by whomever is able. In *Discipline and Punish* he maintains "power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privilege,' acquired or preserved, of the dominant class" (26). Accurate as this argument may be, Foucault's theories are unsatisfactory in their dismissal of human agency in power struggles. As Madan Sarup contends, "though he remarks that wherever there is power there is resistance, he offers no grounds for encouraging resistance or struggle" (81). While Hegelian theories may be guilty of an element of predestination, unlike Foucault's they at least focus on some potential grounds of insurgency. An

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault of course is only one of many who would avoid anything that smacks of an inexorable march to "perfection," and indeed *The Archeology of Knowledge* is a project almost entirely devoted to subverting such a notion.

understanding of the rationale of rebellion is essential when approaching resistance writing in general and the writings of Republican POWs in particular, and as such a blend of Hegelian and Foucauldian approaches would best serve those examining the literary output of the H Blocks.

There is one particular moment in which Hegel proves superior to Foucault and yet still inadequate for the purposes of the examination of H Block prison writings, and this is during the Hunger Strike of 1981, which ended in the deaths of ten men. The reason is this: at the heart of both Hegel's Master/ Slave dialectic and the Hunger Strike is Recognition, the recognition that comes only as a result of risking one's life. "The individual, who has not staked his life" Hegel insists, "may, no doubt, be recognized as a person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness" (403). Recognition is a double-edged sword, however, because it requires the participation of another and can never be entirely independent. Without someone else to be acknowledged by, humans would not truly *be*. They might be beings, but not *human* beings in the Hegelian mode. Yet the Master's dilemma differs somewhat from the Slave's, as the Master does not recognize the Slave's humanity. Kojève comments:

if—at the start—the Slave's freedom is recognized by no one but himself, if, consequently, it is purely *abstract*, it can end in being *realized* and in being realized in its *perfection*. For the Slave *recognizes* the human reality and dignity of the Master. Therefore, it is sufficient for him to impose his liberty on the Master in order to attain the definitive Satisfaction that *mutual* Recognition gives and thus to stop the historical process.

Of course, in order to do this, he must fight against the Master, that is to say—precisely—he must cease to be a Slave, surmount his fear of death. He must become *other* than what he *is*. (50)

Bracketing for a moment the Hegelian notion that history can ever end, one can see in this paradigm the basic rationale of the Republican fight for political status in the form of the Hunger Strikes. The POWs refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the legal system that incarcerates them, the British fight to force this recognition. In turn, the Republicans begin a last-ditch effort to force the British to recognize them as prisoners of war, and in 1981 put their lives on the line to rise up out of this Slave status.

Yet, there are important differences that make the H Block confrontation more complex than Hegel's general theory anticipates; however, in this complexity, the men<sup>17</sup> like Bobby Sands create a transcendent synthesis of Master, Slave, and Intellectual that might have surprised Hegel himself. The first important difference is contained within the very form of battle that the POWs chose: the hunger strike. The intention of this form of warfare is, of course, not to destroy others as in Hegel's model, but to destroy or threaten to destroy one's self. In this scenario, when Recognition is granted it is not given out of fear on the part of the Master of his/her own death but rather, I would argue, out of a

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<sup>17</sup> Women are only excluded from this discussion because the hunger strikes staged at Armagh in 1980 resulted in no fatalities. While certainly the women braved death in the same fashion as the men in the 1980 H Block Hunger Strike, the actual completion of a fast to the death presents a more complex scenario for Hegelian analysis. However, I would like to point out that the reason that the British government allowed this event to transpire was partially as a result of an earlier hunger strike by the Price sisters in 1974. The two women, Marian and Dolours, went on protest to secure transfer from a jail in England to Armagh in the Six Counties. Their hunger strike ended up lasting 206 days as a result of force-feeding by the prison authorities. In this procedure the prisoner's jaws are held open with a clamp and a lubricated tube is forced down his or her throat in order to fill the stomach with liquid nourishment. It is an imprecise procedure, tantamount to torture at best, and sometimes fatal when the tube is pushed down the windpipe, as proven later in the case of Michael Gaughan in 1974 (Beresford 23). In the words of Coogan, as a direct result of the aforementioned prisoners, "the then Home Secretary Roy Jenkins announced that henceforth in any case of hunger striking prisoners, force-feeding would not be used" (*On the Blanket* 120). Though both of the sisters survived, they developed anorexia as a result of their ordeal.

truer Recognition of the humanity of the Hunger Striker. While it is true that there is a coercive element to this tactic—and thus it qualifies as Fighting in the Hegelian sense of the term—it is not, one might say, *externally* violent as the coercion is one born of national and world opinion. In fact, the dangerous innovation of a hunger strike within Hegelian terms is that the pressure on the British government comes from the Recognition of the humanity of both sides of the Anglo-Irish conflict by those *external* to that combat as well as from those within it.<sup>18</sup>

The Recognition sought by the POWs in the H Blocks has two parts: first, the simple humanity of the prisoners; second, their status as political prisoners. That the first part is in question is shown by the fact that the protest was allowed to escalate to the Hunger Strike. Some POWs had been on the Dirty Protest for more than three years by 1981, and one needs only read these prison writings to learn the effect that living in an excrement-smeared cell for that length of time can have on the mind of an inmate. Certainly Cardinal O’Fiaich saw this quest for Recognition in terms of simple humanity, for in his statement after visiting the H Blocks prior to the Hunger Strikes he asserted that “One would hardly allow an animal to remain in such conditions, let alone a human being,” adding that in two of the cells he was “unable to speak for fear of vomiting” (qtd. in Lowry 4). Lest O’Fiaich’s description be considered hyperbole, it should be noted

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<sup>18</sup> It should be remembered that while the hunger strikers themselves were supported in their decision, the decision itself to go on hunger strike was strongly opposed by the Republican movement and the IRA outside the H Blocks, particularly the second time in 1981, when all concerned knew that deaths would occur before compromise. Adams (*Free Ireland* 63), Coogan (*On the Blanket* 120), Beresford (33), and the prisoners themselves (Campbell et al. 110-1) all agree on this, refuting the notion that the men who died were somehow forced into it by the sinister leadership outside the prison. The first-hand accounts of the POWs collected in *Nor Meekly Serve My Time* are unanimous in their description of the procedure of first voting within the H Blocks with regard to having a hunger strike at all as well as in the voluntary nature of submitting one’s name to go on hunger strike. This internal decision making is yet another example of how Republican policy is shaped from within the prisons, often against the grain of current policy taobh amuigh (Gaeilge for “outside”), and in a fashion that has lasting repercussions inside and out for Republicans and non-Republicans alike.

that the MP Frank Maguire (whose seat in Parliament was won by Bobby Sands) actually did vomit amid the appalling conditions of the H Blocks (Campbell et al. 45). That the Republican prisoners of war were recognized as such by people outside the Republican movement is evident in Sands' election to the British Parliament and Kieran Doherty's election to the Irish while both were on hunger strike. Sands received visits from members of the European Commission of Human Rights, the European parliament, and the Pope's private secretary. In addition, approximately 100,000 people attended Sands' funeral (Coogan, *The IRA* 380-1).

That Sands was willing to sacrifice his life for Recognition is most dramatically evident in the diary that he kept on the first seventeen days of his hunger strike. The diary itself begins with the statement "I am standing on the threshold of another trembling world. May God have mercy on my soul" (219). Bobby knew his fate from the commencement of his hunger strike. A fellow POW said of him:

I saw Bobby at mass on the morning before he went on hunger strike. Everyone was talking to him and shaking his hand; his reply to them was, 'You are talking to a dead man.' He was under no illusions about the outcome. He was a realist and knew that men would die, but he hoped that by his death we would get our demands and no more men would have to die. (Campbell, McKeown, and Ó Hagan 147-8)

In the opening paragraphs of the diary Sands writes what could be viewed as a hunger strike manifesto. He is keenly aware of his actions as a life or death struggle for Recognition. In order to appreciate fully the multi-faceted role of the Hunger Striker, it is necessary to quote this first entry at length. Sands writes

I believe and stand by the God-given right of the Irish nation to sovereign independence, and the right of any Irishman or woman to

assert this right in armed revolution. That is why I am incarcerated, naked and tortured.

Foremost in my tortured mind is the thought that there can never be peace in Ireland until the foreign, oppressive British presence is removed, leaving all the Irish people as a unit to control their own affairs and determine their own destinies as a sovereign people, free in mind and body, separate and distinct physically, culturally and economically.

I believe that I am but another of those wretched Irishmen born of a risen generation with a deeply rooted and unquenchable desire for freedom. I am dying not just to attempt to end the barbarity of H Block, or to gain the rightful recognition of a political prisoner, but primarily because what is lost in here is lost for the Republic and those wretched oppressed whom I am deeply proud to know as the "risen people." (219)

In these passages, Sands reveals himself to be theorist, warrior, and, to borrow Fanon's phrase, one of the wretched of the earth. These paragraphs acknowledge a former existence as a Slave, but a Slave who is now "risen," not just by force of arms but by the force of discourse, and as such he *realizes* the ideal of freedom formulated by the cerebral but passive Intellectual through the active, warlike action of the Master. Yet Sands does not fall into the trap of the Master, who can only act (or rather, react) in a military fashion, a trap he would have fallen into had his struggle remained a mere part of the physical force tradition of bombings and shootings. In the Hunger Strike, he negates the outwardly aggressive nature of the Master and attempts to gain Recognition not by the usual tactic of instilling fear, but by awakening identification. To watch someone die on hunger strike is to watch a similar part of one's self die as well. The Recognition that one grants in this scenario in truth comes from within rather than being imposed from without, and as such is of a more powerful and transcendent sort

than that that which comes at swordpoint. Though Sands himself apparently thought of British and Irish as diametrically opposed conditions, his action in the Hunger Strike moves beyond this dyad, moves beyond the limitations of discourse, and attempts to synthesize the dyad through paradox: peaceful aggression, passive action.<sup>19</sup>

Lest the reader think that I have given Hegel's Intellectuals too hard a time, I will conclude my discussion of the writings of Bobby Sands by attempting to show how even in a theoretical mode he was able to take an active part in emancipation, a role most clearly demonstrated in his choice of tongue. Similar to Adams, in Sands' writings we see a concern for language in the literal sense of the word, not just in terms of compositional skill. In the latter part of the diary, fair portions are written entirely in untranslated Gaelge. It is significant that the last entry contains not a word of English. Bobby knew that his death approached rapidly, and chose Gaelge to write what he knew might be his last words. His stance is more uncompromising than Adams' because the situation in which he found himself was the most extreme possible: it is fitting then that whoever was to read those lines had to know Irish, had to know something about the culture for which Sands was giving his life. Translation would occur later, but to experience that lonely moment near its occurrence one needed to be a part of his world.

In fact, this is still the case, as the English translation omits several key sections of Sands' Gaelge text. For example, in the third paragraph from the end of the final diary entry the second and third sentences are left untranslated, and

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<sup>19</sup> In making this argument I do not intend to de-emphasize the horror of a death by hunger strike. When he died on hunger strike in 1978, Frank Stagg had gone blind and weighed only fifty-six pounds (Coogan *The IRA* 318). Though they knew what to expect as a result of this tragic precedent, it is only with great pain that fellow Blanketmen recall the "inhuman sound" of Paddy Quinn as he lay dying on hunger strike. Laurence McKeown remembers that the roar of Quinn's pain "would subside for a while, then be followed by a high-pitched scream, then what sounded like giggling or chanting in a very high-pitched voice. There would be an interval of silence, then it would start all over again, slowly building to a very loud scream" (Campbell et. al. 238).



the fourth sentence could be interpreted in a radically different fashion. This passage and my translation<sup>20</sup> of it are as follows:

Is é an mheabhair an rud is tábhachtaí. Mura bhfuil meabhair láidir agat chun cur in aghaidh le achan rud, ní mhairfidh. Ní bheadh aon sprid troda agat. Is ansin cén áit a dtigeann an mheabhair cheart seo. (Sands 238)  
 The mind is the most important thing. Unless you have a strong mind to oppose everything, you will not live. You would not have any fighting spirit. It is there where this proper mentality comes from.

One must wonder why omissions of this nature occur in the English translation. Was this merely carelessness on the part of the translator and editor? Was this a deliberate attempt to make the passage seem more polished or self-assured and less repetitious? Certainly the English paragraphs are divided differently than the ones in Gaeilge. In the Irish, the third-to-last paragraph ends with the sentence translated as "perhaps from one's desire for freedom" and the penultimate paragraph begins with "It isn't certain that that's where it comes from" (Sands 239). These final paragraphs of the diary are quoted below in their entirety to illustrate:

Is é an mheabhair an rud is tábhachtaí. Mura bhfuil meabhair láidir agat chun cur in aghaidh le achan rud, ní mhairfidh. Ní bheadh aon sprid troda agat. Is ansin cén áit as a dtigeann an mheabhair cheart seo.  
 B'fhéidir as an fhonn saoirse ("Perhaps from the desire for freedom").

Ni (sic) hé cinnte gurb é an áit as a dtigeann sé ("It isn't certain this is the place where it comes from"). Mura bhfuil siad in inmhe an fonn saoirse a scriosadh, ní bheadh siad in inmhe tú féin a bhriseadh. Ní brisfidh siad mé mar tá an fonn saoirse, agus saoirse mhuintir ns hÉireann I mo chroí.

<sup>20</sup> The translation that appears in *Bobby Sands: Writings from Prison* will be given shortly.

Tiocfaidh lá eigin nuair a bheidh an fonn saoirse seo le taispeáint ag daoine go léir na hÉireann ansin tchífidh muid éirí na gealaí. (Sands 238)

The differing structure of the final four paragraphs of the English translation given in *Bobby Sands: Writings from Prison* is as follows:

The body fights back sure enough, but at the end of the day everything returns to the primary consideration, that is, the mind. The mind is the most important.

But then where does this proper mentality stem from? Perhaps from one's desire for freedom. It isn't certain that that's where it comes from.

If they aren't able to destroy the desire for freedom, they won't break you. They won't break me because the desire for freedom and the freedom of the Irish people, is in my heart. The day will dawn when all the people of Ireland will have the desire for freedom to show.

It is then we'll see the rising of the moon. (Sands 239)

The English translation ends with one dramatic, succinct phrase, yet it should be obvious even to someone without Gaeilge that the final sentence in the Irish original contains a great deal more. Indeed it does. The last sentence in the English translation is actually just the last six words of the final paragraph in Gaeilge [ansin tchífidh muid éirí na gealaí ](Sands 238).

Certainly the editor's choices give the translation more technical prowess; Sands thus appears to be a more precise writer than he is, but does this not do a disservice both to the reader and to Sands himself? One needs to consider the effect of seventeen days of hunger striking on body and mind. How many people would be able to write at all, let alone at the level at which Sands does in his final diary entry? Easing a rough transition and streamlining a few seemingly contradictory thoughts are a high price to pay in exchange for what may be a

truer glimpse into the psychological state of one of Ireland's most famous martyrs. But then, one wonders whether Sands himself would have thought that possible at all through the medium of English, and whether his final act of resistance is marred by translation of any sort. Whatever the case, these editorial choices—or errors, as they may be—are reproduced exactly in both the most recent compilation, 1997's *Bobby Sands: Writings from Prison*, and 1982's *Skylark Sing Your Lonely Song*. Bobby Sands' resistance lives on, but so does the academic and publishing community's inability to deal with it accurately.

There is a mural on the side of a house on the upper Falls Road that never failed to strike my eye every time I passed it. It depicts a young red-haired man in paramilitary garb holding an assault rifle, and about him in bold letters is written "They can kill the revolutionary, but never the revolution." This, it seems to me is the underlying spirit in Sands' work, a philosophy which he both wrote about and *lived* in the process of writing about it. His identification with his land and language drove him to write, drove him to resist, and gave him strength to endure what needed to be endured. In so doing he transcends his existence as an isolated individual and through his words he has become a part of that culture that formed him. His captors' attempts to kill his spirit have been defeated utterly, and even death has no power over Bobby Sands now. He partakes now of pure spirit, that fighting spirit, the power of the word, the word made real by extraordinary action.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE QUESTION OF AUDIENCE

Perhaps the question of audience is at the heart of the confusion and error surrounding the publication of Sands' work in particular and Republican prison writing in general. Who do the authors imagine as readers-- whether consciously or unconsciously-- while composing? It is my contention that once more, the individual experience of incarceration is at the heart of the construction of an imagined reader. Just as one can observe a correlation between the militancy of a prison author's stance and the severity of the regime that incarcerates him or her, so too can one witness a correlation between the militancy of an invented audience and the treatment of the writer within prison walls. This phenomenon is readily apparent in the manner in which Sands and Adams treat the sad case of Danny Lennon in their prison writings.

Lennon was personally known to both authors, having served time with them in the Cages of Long Kesh. Like Sands, Lennon resumed active duty with the Irish Republican Army immediately after his release from the Cages on April 30, 1976. Little more than three months later he and three civilians would be killed in a tragedy that was the birth of the short-lived Peace Movement. Coogan describes the event in this manner, the moment when

British troops in hot pursuit of a car driven by Danny Lennon, a member of the Provisional I.R.A., fired on him, fatally wounding him and causing the car to go out of control on Finaghy Road North, mounting the

pavement and killing the three young Maguire children, Joanna (aged eight), John (two-and-a-half) and baby Andrew (six weeks), before the eyes of their traumatized mother, Mrs. Anne Maguire and their aunt, Mrs. Pat O'Connor, whose children mercifully escaped unhurt. (*The IRA* 305)

In the wake of the deaths the children's aunt, Máireád Corrigan, and another woman, Betty Williams, formed in Coogan's words "the biggest mass movement of the decade": the Peace Movement (*The IRA* 306). However, what began as a noble and non-sectarian attempt at peace soon fell victim to human frailty. As a result of a continued motion in a unionist direction and amid allegations of financial corruption (Coogan notes the "vast sums of money" that were collected by the organization) the Peace Movement came to an end (*The IRA* 306).

Coogan gives an accurate summation of the so-called "Peace People" in *The IRA*:  
 the movement allowed itself to give the appearance of being more anti-I.R.A. than anti *all* forms of violence—understandably, perhaps, in view of its genesis—and was used by the Northern Ireland Office as a smokescreen for political inertia and ultimately left no lasting imprint on the campaign. (306)

The eventual demise of this movement came as no surprise to Republicans. Yet, for a time the Peace People represented a threat to their interests in the form of the lost potential support that moderate nationalists have on occasion lent to the Republican movement, for instance, in the outpouring of votes in Bobby Sands' election to parliament. In addition, this lack of active support might have been turned into active *opposition* as the increasingly anti-Republican stance of the Peace Movement made itself manifest. The manner in which Adams and Sands respond not only to the tragic deaths of Lennon and the Maguire children but to the Peace Movement as well demonstrates that while Adams actively courts the moderates, Sands does not.

Adams begins "In Defense of Danny Lennon" in a manner that a reader might not expect, given the title of the piece. He writes "On August 10, 1976, three young people died in Belfast. Two were young children, the other a young man. Later, a third child died, and with his death a young family was almost wiped out" (*Cage Eleven* 120). Though this introduction includes Lennon in its evocation of untimely death the emphasis is placed on the loss of *civilian* life, the tragedy of a family broken. Indeed, in the final paragraph of the piece, Adams argues that in the violent world of the North of Ireland, "None of us stands guiltless; only our children are innocent" (123). Never does Adams seek to downplay the loss suffered by the Maguire family, as three times during the essay he offers his condolences to them.

Nor does Adams try to gloss over the fact that Lennon was an active member of the IRA. He clearly states,

Danny Lennon went out with a weapon against the people he had identified as enemies... He meant no harm to anyone other than the people who eventually killed him; and even then it was the system they represented which he was opposed to. (121-2)

Adams does not even note (as does the unnamed editor of Sands' text) that the weapon in Lennon's car was not in working order, and at the time of the tragedy was being transported to an IRA arms dump for repair (Sands 213). Such assertions might seem mere excuses or outright lies to moderates, and Adams wisely deals with the issue of armed resistance in as direct a manner as possible. Yet, he is at pains to note that none of Lennon's actions that day were motivated by the stereotypes wrongly associated with militant Republicanism, writing that Lennon "wasn't a young man caught up in violence... Danny Lennon cared nothing for myths, for personalities, for glory-hunting" (122). Instead, the image presented in the background of the larger tragedy is one of a reluctant young

soldier fighting against a mercenary colonial regime. Adams defends Lennon but does not deify him—the Maguire's losses remain at the center of the essay.

Such a strategy certainly is more palatable to an audience opposed to the physical force tradition, but Adams directs his apologia to a wider population even than that. In the middle of "In Defense of Danny Lennon" Adams actually defines those he seeks to address:

We can and we must do our utmost to ensure that everything we do will have the minimum effect on those people with no vested interest in opposing us and we must, on a personal level, ensure that our conduct, our discipline and our attitude will encourage, not discourage continued support for the Republican cause.

This letter, then, is to those people who have no vested interest in opposing us. I do not seek to change opinions about myself, about Republicanism, about violence, about the IRA nor the Republican leadership. Think what you will, good or bad about these, I, from Long Kesh, can do little to influence you. Only those Republicans on the outside, by their actions, attitudes and conduct, can do that. (121)

In the conclusion of the essay, Adams is even more precise, if not with regard to his intended audience, then with regard to those outside its confines, maintaining that his essay would be a success "If for one minute it allows readers to understand the many Danny Lennons who have been attacked and denounced by people older, greedier, and more mercenary" than those they oppose (123).

It is important to note that Adams' definition of his audience does not use the emotive terminology and easy dualities of Catholic/ Protestant or nationalist/ unionist. He is aware of the divisions among the nationalist community itself as well as those along strictly sectarian lines. In an appeal like

the one just previously quoted he seeks to create bridges along age and class lines even more than religious ones, and one can hear a thinly-veiled critique of the inaction of the aging middle class during the Troubles in that statement. Certainly youth was at the forefront of Republicanism at this stage in Irish history: the eldest Hunger Striker, Joe McDonnell, was only thirty years old, and Sands himself was only twenty-seven when he died. But in the end, while not above a quick jab at his political enemies, Adams remains mainly conciliatory toward people not of his way of thinking and sympathetic to victims of violence. His depiction of British soldiers in the essay acknowledges their humanity, defining them as Lennon's enemies only in their participation in a wider machine of repression against which the IRA does battle. In a move that mirrors the internal and external relations between prisoners of war—who, after all, came from a broad spectrum of political orientation-- and warders in the Cages, he seeks to maintain if not solidarity then communication with as wide a population as possible.

This approach is nearly the diametric opposite of that taken by Sands in his poem "Danny Lennon." While Adams' work begins with a surprisingly neutral description of the events of 30 August, 1976, Sands' begins with an outright assault on the duplicity he finds within the "Peace People." The first eight lines of the poem are as follows:

Gone are those weeping throngs of right,  
 Who marched upon your blood,  
 And upon the blood of little innocents,  
 To tramp freedom down into the mud.  
 Poor, poor fools led by others' greed,  
 Where are those others now?  
 They've gone, comrade, with their bloody silver,  
 'Fore their masters' feet to bow. (213)

In stark contrast to "In Defense of Danny Lennon," Sands opens not with a eulogy so much as an attack. The moderates with whom Adams would like to



converse are immediately and irrevocably linked to the forces of repression and, with the image of ill-gotten silver, the biblical Judas. Whether or not this characterization of the Peace People is true is moot for the purposes of determining Sands' imagined audience. Dialogue with the middle class is not a part of this poem, as the final two lines make unapologetically clear: "We oppressed men and women of no property shall realise (sic)/ The Irish Socialist Republic" (213).

The militancy of the poem is established from the first two lines, as in a reversal of Adams' depiction *Lennon* appears as the primary victim. While the anonymous "little innocents" are mentioned, their brief presence is only a backdrop for the Hegelian struggle taking place between Masters and Slaves. Indeed, in the sixteenth and seventeenth lines of "Danny Lennon" Sands echoes Padraig Pearse in both the Easter Proclamation and the warlike "Graveside Panegyric" spoken at the funeral of O'Donovan Rossa with the statement that "For 'tis not sleeping graves these English knaves have made,/ But unquenchable stars of freedom's light" (213). In the poet's view, these deaths only hasten victory to the Republican cause, as they steel the hearts of those actively engaged in the struggle: working class women and men willing to fight for freedom by all methods at their disposal, including armed resistance.

By characterizing Sands' imagined audience in this fashion I do not mean to imply that his perceptions or choices as a writer are necessarily naïve. In fact, I would argue that in truth Sands has a thorough grasp of his working class audience, in particular those who dwelt in such ghettos as Divis Flats in the Lower Falls area of Belfast. Sands and his fellow Blanketmen bore the full brunt of the British policy of criminalization, while the luckier men in the Cages lived in comparative luxury. In a like manner, the ghetto areas of the Lower Falls bore the brunt of the violence perpetrated against the Catholics of Belfast, particularly

in the earlier years of the Troubles, while the middle and upper class denizens of such areas as the Malone Road were less affected by the warfare. As the non-conforming Republican prison population of the H Blocks and the ghetto dwellers of Divis Flats suffered in an analogous fashion, they not surprisingly developed a similar ethos with regard to the Security Forces.

In his book *Hearts and Minds, Water and Fish*, social anthropologist Jeffrey A. Sluka reports his findings with regard to the attitude of the residents of Divis Flats toward violence in general and Republican paramilitary groups in particular. Sluka spent eleven months as a participant-observer living among the people he was studying, sharing their daily lives. His findings are often startling, and sometimes reveal the apparent inconsistencies of the human mind. For example, after interviewing the residents, he discovered that while 46% said they support Republican paramilitary groups, 70% support their goal of a united Ireland, and 55% said they support armed struggle as a political tool (Sluka 119). Furthermore, Sluka reveals,

We can add to this disparity the fact that 74% of the residents believe that the community needs the guerillas and feel more secure having them there than they would if they were gone. Again, the significance of this dissonance is that many of those who do not identify themselves as IRA or INLA supporters do sympathize with their goals and/or methods, or sympathize with them to the extent that they believe their community needs them. These residents are all expressing an ambivalence toward the guerillas<sup>1</sup> that should be considered a form of soft support for them.

(Sluka 119)

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<sup>1</sup> This ambivalence should not be read as fear rising from intimidation by the paramilitaries. Sluka writes that while 30.3% of Divis residents felt that "the presence of the IRA and INLA in the complex represents a threat to their safety, no one I interviewed said that they were intimidated by the guerillas" (144). In the residents' view, the danger of paramilitary presence came primarily from increased attention paid to the Flats by the Security Forces, and the potential

Interestingly enough, when the terms of the questions are altered, an even greater base of "soft" support for the paramilitaries reveals itself. Sluka found that

when asked specifically if they [the paramilitaries] are needed for community defense, 83.7% say that they are, and when asked specifically if they are needed to help control antisocial behavior [broadly defined criminal acts that endanger or negatively affect the community, including joyriding, burglary, and rape], 76.9% say they are. Again, there is a statistical disparity between the answers to these questions, which I interpret as being indicative of ambivalent attitudes toward the IRA and INLA, and would argue that this ambivalence translates into a form of sympathy or soft support for them. (120)

These last figures<sup>2</sup> in particular must be kept in mind while looking at Sands' writings. Among working class Catholics as represented by the residents of Divis Flats, violent actions perceived as being in defense of the community are overwhelmingly supported. But what criteria are involved in judging the defensive nature of such actions? Paramilitary operations that give the appearance of being sectarian in nature, which result in civilian casualties, and those deemed particularly cruel are "generally condemned" according to Sluka;

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for being caught in the crossfire during military engagements (145). Sluka cites many incidents that support these statistical findings, including the case of a woman who refused to let the INLA use her garage, even after being asked on multiple occasions. She felt quite comfortable arguing with them, and the paramilitaries "took no for an answer" (145).

<sup>2</sup> A brief word on the use of such numbers as well as some insight into Sluka's methodology: Sluka himself is aware of the potential plasticity of statistics, writing "If one wants to "prove" that people in Divis (or any other Nationalist area) object to the Provo's [Provisional IRA's] role as community police, it is not difficult to find people who will express such objections. On the other hand, if one wants to "prove" that people approve of this role, it is equally easy to find individuals who will express strong support for the IRA's actions as community police. But if one does not want to prove anything, but instead looks at the situation without any preconceived conclusions, one finds there is a wide range of opinion within the community concerning this issue. And when an adequate sample is taken, a consensus of opinion does clearly emerge. As we have noted, the consensus of opinion among people in Divis Flats is that the community needs the IRA to fill this role" (134).

witness the alienation of support caused by the execution of prison guards in the presence of their families during the Hunger Strikes. In contrast, targets of an obvious political or military nature, including members of the Security Forces, judges, and hardline Loyalist politicians are usually considered legitimate (Sluka 150).

Thus, when examining Sands' writings, it is not surprising that by and large they are structured in terms of binary opposition, with enemy figures unambiguously defined within the accepted parameters of justifiable military action, at least with regard to occupation: prison officers and soldiers form the usual cast of characters, and as such are suitable objects to resist. But in observing this pattern I am by no means censuring Sands, as his writing reflected the reality of his identity as a paramilitary and a POW. Though many of the enemy figures one encounters in his writing are openly hostile and one-dimensional—no doubt accurately reflecting their treatment of him in his own experiences—not all of his POs and soldiers are flat characters. Take for example the main character in the short story "Come On, You Wee Reds." Unexpectedly, the narrator is a member of a British patrol making its way through West Belfast. He is neither a monster nor a bigot, even commenting with regard to the particular hostility of the nationalist women in Belfast that "in a way I can understand them 'cause it's their sons and daughters who we've killed and gaoled, but I'm only doing my job, aren't I" (Sands 92)?

The story's stream of consciousness style permits Sands to paint a picture of West Belfast while simultaneously allowing the reader insight into the soldier's own personal life. We learn that he is married with a daughter who was "three last month" (93), that he is close to his family, writing to them (93) and that he is making plans to take the child to the zoo back home (94). In fact, he plans to leave the British Army as soon as he can, imagining that "Maybe if I

get a good job I could get a car" (94). With this modest goal and with his obvious commitment to his family, Joe the British soldier is very like most of the working class population that he polices.

However, he mirrors the Irish ghetto dwellers in one other respect as well. The state of warfare has impressed upon him the necessity of survival, and to achieve that goal, the occasional necessity of violence. He must run the gauntlet of Divis Flats, and his thoughts demonstrate the manner in which during a combat situation people and objects are experienced as targets whose legitimacy sometimes must be determined within a fraction of a second: "Jesus, it's cold but only six more minutes, old son, and you're home. Along Townsend Street and watch the Divis Flats, Joe. If they are there they'll be high. Track the windows with the sights, shoot first and ask later" (Sands 93). At the story's conclusion, however, it is Joe who is the victim of a bullet as a sniper picks him off just as he is ready to enter the safety of his barracks.

In this story, Sands recognizes that any war involves human beings with their own loves and frailties killing others like themselves. Having briefly gotten to know the character of Joe and his family, it would be difficult not to sympathize with the British soldier in this story, and in fact I believe that Sands himself does. Yet, as a member of the IRA Sands has sworn to rid Ireland of British presence; and if armed resistance is required, then such shootings are an unpleasant but necessary task. It is useful to turn once more to Sluka for a pithy encapsulation of this ideology:

The government, Security Forces, and other critics of IRA "terrorists" scoff at any suggestion that there could be morality among them. Their view is that the IRA is made up of people who are entirely unscrupulous, pragmatic, and immoral, and for whom any means are justified by their political ends. This is neither the view presented by the IRA, nor that

which is held by the residents of Divis Flats... [The paramilitaries] believe that murder is wrong, but make a distinction between murder and killing in a just war, and IRA Volunteers can be courtmartialled for murder. The IRA chooses to make efforts to avoid death and injury to innocent civilians, not simply because of a pragmatic realization that it alienates their public support, but because they consider it to be not only practically but also morally wrong. (96-7)

To borrow Gerry Adams' description of Danny Lennon's mindset, Sands believes "that force, with all its hardships and tragedies, can be justified only by those who know what they are fighting for and by those willing to fight, by those willing to share the hardship" (122). Sands is able to see Joe as a fellow human being and a fellow soldier. It is just that to Sands and to his audience, the latter subject position must be reckoned first in a time of war, a dehumanization which is yet another tragedy of conflict, and one of which Sands is keenly aware.

I will conclude this discussion of audience by examining a play by Roselen Walsh entitled *Cease-fire*, a work which was produced for stage in Dublin as well as the radio by the Transatlantic Theatre Company, Limited in 1998, and is reproduced in Walsh's book *Sticks and Stones*. In making this move, I am aware that I am departing from the parameters that I set up in the introduction, of literature actually written during the experience of incarceration, but I do this purposely in order to explore an area into which Sands and Adams never venture: IRA execution of informants.

The final act of *Cease-fire* is made up almost entirely of the soliloquies of Jack, a nationalist who had been "turned" by the British. The deadly seriousness of the situation is evident from the start of the scene, as the protagonist is tied, barefoot, to a chair. The IRA man who will be his executioner enters soon after the scene begins, and the following dialogue takes place:

Seamus: You know the score, Jack. I could say that we're releasing you.

But you already know—don't you?

Jack: Can I have a priest?

Seamus: (*Shakes his head*) Sorry, Jack, you may make direct contact with the Big Fella himself. (*pause*) You can write Betty a letter, if you want. (*pause*) I'll get you pen and paper. I'll untie you, but one false move and you're a goner. (*pause*) Here and now. If I don't get you there's three downstairs who will.

Jack: (*Confused*) O.K. Thanks Seamus. Will you be doing it anyway?

(*Seamus nods*)... (Walsh 14)

Jack had been involved in an affair, and things began going wrong when the two lovers were stopped and questioned by the Security Forces. They were released but as Jack explains, the soldiers knew that the two lovers "had no reason to be together," and seeing an opportunity for blackmail, they arrest Jack three weeks later (Walsh 16). Jack tearfully tells the audience

I was very vulnerable—and they knew it. They didn't beat about the bush—they came straight to the point: work for them or they'd set me up. I should never have agreed. They went on and on and on. When they released me I didn't even realize that I'd agreed to work for them. (16)

In this arrest and interrogation Jack is put into a situation that great numbers of his fellow nationalists have experienced, and while the recognition of this shared trauma might create sympathy among them, Jack's decision during his ordeal to help the British will likely cause a withdrawal of their support. In this moment Jack becomes one of the worst things that a nationalist can become: an informant, for as Sluka correctly maintains,

many Catholics express a deep repugnance toward informers. This is a Catholic ethnic or cultural trait, which is partly related to their religion

and partly related to their political culture. Many are simply horrified at the idea of becoming a "Judas," and hatred of informers is a well-developed sentiment on the Falls Road [Republican area of West Belfast where Divis Flats were located], where there is a long history of political repression and a long-established tradition of rebellion and insurrection. (140)

Such political and religious signifiers are visibly present in Walsh's play. Immediately after the first exchange of dialogue quoted above, Seamus had left the room in order to allow Jack to write his letter to his wife in private. In the dramatic moments at the end of the play Seamus returns, ordering Jack to get on his knees. A scene of execution is imminent, and in those final moments Seamus demands

Jack, tell me why, man to man. Why did you betray those who trusted you? Tell me. Go on, man to man. How did you look them in the eye, knowing you were like Judas—breaking bread—sipping something from the same cup? Go on, Jack. Why—and how? Tell me, just man to man. I need to understand. (17)

Jack's transgression is so egregious as to be incomprehensible to a committed Volunteer like Seamus. In that speech we see the IRA man attempting to come to terms with the betrayal by framing his questions in vocabulary readily available to the working class: sex roles (notable in the repetition of "man to man"), community loyalty, and in the religious image that Sluka previously noted provides such a forceful negative model of behavior in Catholicism: the figure of Judas.

However, while informers may be nearly universally despised among nationalists, precisely what to do with them once they are discovered is a question without an easy answer, not just for the people of the community but



for the paramilitary groups like the IRA who have taken on the duty of policing their neighborhoods. Sluka again argues a critical point with regard to this topic when he observes that in enforcing social control over informers and criminals

The problem for the IRA is, as even they and their staunchest supporters recognize, that paramilitary justice is rough justice. It is often brutal and ugly, and mistakes do occur. Every act of punishment for antisocial behavior results in some degree of moral backlash within the community against the IRA. After someone is kneecapped, there are always those who say "good" and are pleased that the Provos are doing something to control criminal behavior, but there are always those who shake their heads and say "the poor lad." (124)

There can be no justice much rougher than an execution, and it is precisely on the discomfort accompanying such a penalty that Walsh's play centers. The IRA's case against Jack is watertight: he admits setting up three (presumably IRA) men with information passed on to the British, resulting in the death of one, and life sentences for the other two (16). While Jack's confession—a luxury not always found among recipients of paramilitary justice—makes his guilt certain, it does not ultimately resolve the question of equivocal feelings about putting another person to death, in particular if that person is from one's own community.

Fortunately for Jack, in the moments before he was scheduled to die, the IRA calls a cease-fire. When the trigger of the gun that Seamus puts to Jack's head is pulled, only a sharp click is heard: it is unloaded, and in the words of Seamus, Jack turns out to be "the luckiest bastard alive" (18)! While the play might be said to thus not force a final decision on the matter, it is one of the few works by a Republican writer (particularly a former POW) that addresses the topic. But it must be remembered that the play was written years after Walsh's

imprisonment, and furthermore as a drama its very form suggests a public audience (and public debate) that most prison journals do not anticipate. Certainly the poetry readings that Walsh has given have drawn diverse crowds, though usually they have been given in predominantly nationalist areas, sometimes in conjunction with such events as the West Belfast Festival, held in August every year. In a 1998 interview Walsh told me

My readings have more or less been in West Belfast. Not that it's to like-minded people...I would be reluctant to go to a Unionist area to read my poetry—I would be frightened. But I have read my poetry to Unionist people in West Belfast... and I think they saw it as a piece of literature-- on what level I don't know—but I wasn't insulted by their reaction, so I take it that it touched on something within them.

That Walsh's poetry is able to reach across sectarian divides is not surprising, for quite apart from her skill with words, as has been demonstrated above she is unafraid to deal with topics that more doctrinaire resistance poets might avoid.

However, her later work stands in marked contrast to that written while she was physically incarcerated in Armagh, as the third chapter of this dissertation revealed. While perhaps never as militant as Sands, those poems are understandably more traditionally Republican. To POWs who are actually incarcerated and facing danger and deprivation from their very surroundings, indecision and lack of total commitment (the two greatest luxuries of the privileged postmodern condition) may indeed literally prove fatal. This is not to say that POWs like Sands did not engage in active debate and did not challenge and change their own views and those of the movement outside during their incarceration: if the previous chapter failed to convince the reader that development of a critical consciousness was an integral part of life in the H Blocks, then perhaps a reading of the polyvocal *Nor Meekly Serve My Time* will.

Rather, I am arguing that the goal of such debates was to create solidarity, a framework within which POWs could situate themselves individually, sure of their comrades' support and their own complete commitment to a mutually agreed-upon objective. Additionally, it must be considered that often in prison writing the intended audience is primarily one's self, and frequently any internal debates that may occur must be resolved quickly in order to move the struggle from the realm of ideas to that of the real. In extreme conditions like those in which Sands found himself, action and unshakable resolve were arguably the only two things keeping the POWs alive in a hostile prison regime. In reality, the Blanketmen were not struggling to keep the audience's attention, but rather were struggling to keep the audience—themselves—alive.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION: TOWARD TODAY

In the March 1994 communiqué from Long Kesh that concludes *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, the POWs note that the defiance exhibited on the hunger strikes eventually won all five of the Hunger Strikers' demands. "Today," they say, "the inheritance of our dead comrades is all around us as we pursue the new goals which we have set ourselves" (Campbell et al 267). It is a testament not just to the willpower of the Hunger Strikers, but to the dedication of all of those involved in the Republican struggle that such a victory was won, albeit at a very dear cost. It was a victory won by and large by working class participants, women and men often without university or even much formal schooling. Perhaps this background in the Hegelian concept of Work was a contributing factor to this success. Whereas bourgeois Intellectuals (and one might—reluctantly—include in this category traditional career politicians) may "realize" what needs to be done, they cannot *realize* it without Work.

This situation calls to mind the predicament of Professor Jane Tompkins, who in her essay "Indians" recounts the difficulty she had in establishing "what had happened between the English settlers and the natives in seventeenth-century New England" (585). Her quest leads her through history textbooks with a bewildering plurality of perspectives, captivity narratives, and (inescapably in the academy of the latter decades of the twentieth century) post-structuralist theory. She moves from one viewpoint to another, one text to another as the

days pass by. In the end, she decides that all of this has lead her to what common sense instructed her to do in the first place, to piece the story together as best she can, in her words "according to what seems reasonable and plausible, given everything else that I know" (600). Yet her dizzying foray into the dusty world of academia has wakened her to a problem not only inherent to post-structuralism, but to the university. I quote now the conclusion of "Indians," where Tompkins correctly recognizes that

It is only the nature of the academic situation which makes it appear that one can linger on the threshold of decision in the name of an epistemological principle. What has really happened in such a case is that the subject of debate has changed from what happened in a particular instance to the question of how knowledge is arrived at. The absence of pressure to decide what happened creates the possibility for this change of venue.

The change of venue, however, is itself an action taken. In diverting attention from the original problem and placing it where [historian Perry] Miller did, on "the mind of man," it once again ignores what happened and is still happening to American Indians. The moral problem that confronts me now is not that I can never have any facts to go on, but that the work I do is not directed towards solving the kinds of problems that studying the history of European-Indian relations has awakened me to. (600-1)

One of the reasons that academia in many ways has failed to be a force for positive change in recent years is that, as Ketu H. Katrak has succinctly phrased it in the essay "Decolonizing Culture: Toward a Theory for Post-colonial Women's Texts," many critics see "theoretical consumption as an end in itself" (256). Katrak and other advocates of postcolonial texts find this preoccupation with the purely theoretical problematic for many reasons. In the first place, many literary works of postcolonial authors might be deemed too lacking in theory by Western academic

standards and ignored, the critics turning their attention elsewhere, ignoring the real work of decolonization.

This tendency is rampant in prison literature. As I argued in the introduction to this work, with the notable exception of some brave writers like Barbara Harlow there is a reluctance to deal with the literary production of political incarceration in its modern form. In contrast, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, with its focus on a relatively distant past, its lack of interest in examining forms of resistance to power, and most of all, its dense, privileged theoretical jargon, receives continual commentary in academic circles. Felix Driver hits on an important point in his essay "Bodies in Space," where he observes that the critics who examine Foucault generally focus their attention on a fittingly theoretical aspect of *Discipline and Punish*, ignoring his examination of the real prison colony Mettray. Driver asserts

Seen in the light of contemporary accounts... the description of Mettray in *Discipline and Punish* as a model disciplinary institution seems to carry considerable weight. Yet Foucault's critics have paid little attention to his discussion of the colony; as if mesmerized by his coruscating account of the Panopticon, they seem almost not to have noticed it. In crudely empirical terms, however, Mettray was the more important institution. Whereas the Panopticon was dismissed in Bentham's own day as a speculative fantasy, Mettray was widely acclaimed as a working model, the original for thousands of copies. (124)

The resultant picture is absurd and not a little frightening: theorists theorizing about a theorist theorizing about a theoretical institution.<sup>1</sup> That Foucault popularized a concern with disciplinary and scopic regimes is undeniable, as is the fact that there are useful, innovative insights about these regimes throughout

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<sup>1</sup> It must be remembered, after all, that the Panopticon was never actually built, let alone used as a place of incarceration.

*Discipline and Punish*. My point is that if theory is going to be made relevant, or at least if these theories are going to be tested, they need to be applied actively to the real world, to real examples of incarceration, to actual prison regimes. Foucault himself makes a move in that direction with Mettray and now his critics need to follow suit. To remain solely in the theoretical is to resign one's self and the academy perpetually to the inertia of which Tompson writes.

There are those who are fully committed to staying within pure theory, however, content to see academia's role as passive. J.E. Elliott, for instance, in a discussion of "theory and the politics of empowerment" makes the claim that both of these

qualify as performative, social acts. Their confusion, however, is deadly—at least in the university, defining itself as an institution of formal learning. If one continues to demand social emancipation beyond what is indirectly present in intellectual exchange and application, one ought, I think, to turn one's attention to university reform or else get out of the field. There are, after all, other areas of human endeavour, by no means inferior to the academic, in which more good and less harm can be done with such a commitment. (52)

This argument smacks of a "my academy, right or wrong" mentality, or at the very least one which fears the possibility of change engendered from within the discipline. It is telling, for instance that "university reform" can only be accomplished from outside, and is presumably safely in the hands of an administrative bureaucracy—a frightening thought to those who are able to move beyond the merely theoretical implications of this locus after reading Foucault. Would Elliott really prefer reform imposed from without?

In addition, the distinction made between the "application" of "intellectual exchange" and the desire and demand for social emancipation is a puzzling one. In

Elliott's paradigm, learning is a passive, seemingly apolitical process, a classic example of what Paulo Freire terms the "banking concept of education." As Freire suggests in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

The capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students' creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed... Indeed, the interests of the oppressors lie in "changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them"; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated. (55)

Elliott's model implies that the university should be a quiet, proper place where liberal humanist views are exchanged in orderly, formal classrooms or over a mocha in the campus coffee bar, this exchange remaining entirely verbal, the concepts expressed brought into existence only on the plane of ideas. Like Hegel's Intellectual, these denizens of the academy—faculty and students alike—do not engage in Fighting or Work, do not transform their ideas into material reality, and are thus rendered safely idle so long as they remain in the confines of the institution. At best they engage in what Freire terms "armchair revolution," a form of pseudo-dissent tolerated by the oppressors because its advocates are sworn not to bring it physically about.

I believe with Freire that "reflection—true reflection—leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection" (48). It is no accident that the writings of political prisoners have not appeared in the canon of an academy that promotes the domesticated and domesticating learning that Freire describes and Elliott seems to advocate, for such writings graphically demonstrate the praxis with which *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is concerned: critical



thought in a symbiotic relation with action. Sands of course springs immediately to mind in this context, but a multitude of other less militant examples could be given, Thoreau and Gandhi to name just two. And, I would argue, in finding and examining examples of this emancipatory praxis within prison writers (particularly the unpublished or little-read), Hegel's Intellectuals could themselves engage in transformative action. It would be asking much to seek to recruit the aggregate of critics into more active acts of social emancipation<sup>2</sup>, but in the role of Harlow's "dealers," this much they could do, acting almost as literary agents and exacting editors for resistance writers still unfairly excluded from academia. That such authors be included in a revised canon should not mean that they are read uncritically or, as Kate Millett warns in *The Politics of Cruelty*, simply "as hagiography, satisfying the same needs for heroism and example that the lives of the saints and martyrs once fulfilled" (106). Intellectual rigor must be maintained, however, one must not fall simultaneously into the trap of equating a politicized critical consciousness with blind zealotry. Sometimes a bad poem is just a bad poem.

I wonder, however, if this fear of hagiography is not motivated in part (perhaps on the most subconscious of levels) by a post-structuralist ideology, the sea in which human agency currently drowns. It is in the interest of an entrenched canon for there not to be a way in which action on a level other than discourse can bring about change. It is for this reason that writings of political prisoners again

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<sup>2</sup> There are of course a multitude of precedents for a more invested existence at university. Close to my academic home, one needs only to look at the strong showing of faculty members actively involved in the protest against racist stereotypes in the form of the University of North Dakota "Fighting Sioux" mascot and logo. Despite the fact that Native American student groups have explained that the term "Sioux" is offensive (actually being a corruption of an Anishinabe term meaning "little snakes") and despite the fact that every Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota (as the nations are properly called in their own language) reservation in the state has formally protested UND's continued use of these symbols, the university's administration adamantly refuses to abandon them. This conflict is a graphic illustration of why reform should not be left to university bureaucracies, as Elliott's flawed argument implies.

proves dangerous, for they dramatically show the power of discourse combined with physical resistance, whether this takes the form of Work or Fighting. In addition, the prison writers themselves are a danger to traditional critical approaches, for neither they nor their writings are passive. Whereas the canon of a time gone by submits meekly to the inquiry of its readers, POW literature resists these techniques in much the same way that its authors resisted the questions of their prison interrogators, subverting the authority of the Master by calling the terms of the questions themselves into question. Not content to hide behind mere aesthetic beauty, almost categorically writings of political prisoners undermine the repressive systems that maintain ascendancy by disciplinary systems like universities and jails. They do not submit to the relentless order of capitalist society to passively consume, whether in terms of drinking soft drinks or in terms of reading books. They are a call to intellectual arms.

There is much yet to be done, much to be written within the context of Irish prisoners of war. The feminist work that Barbara Harlow began in *Barred* needs to be continued and re-centered in actual women's narratives. Although secondary historical accounts and works of literary theory are indispensable components of studies of prison literature, they should not be the primary focus. The trap into which Foucault's critics have often fallen needs to be avoided, as in prison literature the theoretical needs to be joined with the actual. An examination of the writings of real prisoners in real prisons provides the truest of starting points in this endeavor. An obvious point of feminist inquiry in the Irish context would be the connection between the nationalist and suffragette movements in Ireland circa 1916. Critics like Maroula Joannou have begun the project from, one might say, the other end of the line. In the article "Gender, Militancy, and Wartime," Joannou examines the sometimes violent actions of the suffragette movement in England, involving limited campaigns of arson among other physical forms of protest and resistance that the

author terms “high-risk strategies” (36), strategies that very often led to jail time. In her examination of the autobiographies of the English suffragettes Joannou observes deep-seated anger at the differential treatment afforded to men and women by the authorities and deep-rooted conviction that the full coercive machinery of the state—punishment vastly disproportionate to the seriousness of any offence—would not have been brought down to bear on them had they offended in the pursuance of some cause that was in the interests of men. (36)

In a parallel examination of the accounts of Irish women and English women, this theory could be even further developed. Were the English suffragettes persecuted to a greater, equal, or lesser degree by the authorities than their counterparts in Ireland who were simultaneously engaging in nationalistic rebellion? An inquiry into the prison experiences of these two groups would provide something of a yardstick by which one might measure the degree to which nationalist as opposed to suffragette activity was viewed as transgression by patriarchal authority. To what extent were bonds of common culture a mediating force when the Security Forces dealt with British as opposed to Irish women?

In a related topic, an organized study should be done of the experiences of Irish Republican POWs in English jails as opposed to those imprisoned in the Six Counties. My tentative inquiries into this area have already shown that conditions vary widely, and that much of the way an Irish prisoner experiences an English prison has to do with his or her own political convictions as well as the presence of Republican POWs in the jail. In this project, a comparison of political versus non-political (if such a category can actually be said to exist) prisoners would be useful. For example, though Gerry Conlon was not a member of the IRA and was not affiliated with any Republican group, on the basis of a physically coerced confession and falsified forensics reports he was unjustly convicted of a bombing in Guilford and was released only after having spent fifteen years in jail. Because of the hostile

attitude of British prisoners and warders alike, he had a more difficult time in prison than others until he was transferred to Wakefield Prison, where he came into contact with Republican and IRA prisoners. This had a marked positive effect on Conlon in the especially anti-Irish regime of this particular jail, and he observes in his prison memoir *In the Name of the Father*<sup>3</sup>

Republican prisoners are different from other prisoners, because they are not there for personal gain and they are not freaks. That sets them apart from everyone else. They are generally very disciplined. They don't involve themselves in the pettiness of much of prison life, such as setting up complicated attacks on the nonces,<sup>4</sup> and grudge attacks on screw or other prisoners. They also look after their own.... They were a strong influence for good over me, offering the protection and sense of belonging which I so badly needed. They were like an extended family. That will sound strange only to those who have the 'IRA Monsters' stereotype in their heads.<sup>5</sup> (159)

In Wakefield Conlon moves from the terrifying isolation experienced by the Price sisters into an atmosphere of peaceful, protected community. Conlon's newfound identification with the Republicans, which is his first experience of politicization, is a direct result of the harsh regime he endures as an Irish person in an English jail. The scenario of the H Blocks is replicated in less extreme form here: if Wakefield had not been harsh to Irish prisoners, perhaps this solidarity would not have grown and perhaps this critical consciousness would not have developed in Conlon. In reality

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<sup>3</sup> This book was originally published in the UK under the title *Proved Innocent*. That the name was changed in the American edition as a tie-in to the film of the same name is evident in the head-shot of Daniel Day Lewis (who played Conlon in the big screen adaptation) that is the book's only cover art.

<sup>4</sup> Prison slang meaning sex offenders.

<sup>5</sup> Ironically this stereotype was incorporated into the film version of the story where--in a complete reversal of Conlon's actual experience--an IRA thug sprays a prison guard with lighter fluid and ignites him, maiming him for life as the voice-over tells us. Daniel Day Lewis's version of Conlon then ritually severs ties with the Republican prisoners, again in a complete reversal of actual events. So much for the rule of written discourse.

such prisons are Republican factories, often changing apolitical Irish inmates into committed nationalists. In the attempt to de-politicize and criminalize Republicans, instead the jails again only manage to politicize them further.

That such actions only jeopardize the interests of the British is evident if one compares the inmates of the H Blocks to those of an American prison. Inez Cardozo-Freeman's study of the Washington State Penitentiary is a useful basis of comparison. In her article "Slipping and Sliding: Survival Games in a Prison," the reader can see the extent to which the H Block POWs control and alter their environment, forcing change when needed. In contrast, those American prisoners that would be classified as Ordinary Decent Criminals (i.e. non-political) exhibit little tendency to alter the terms of their incarceration, at least in comparison to the POWs. While Cardozo-Freeman does point out that in Washington State that "an important aspect of prisoner world-view involves breaking all official prison rules and regulations" (104), this rebellion is unfocused and individualistic (despite a general tendency for prisoners to group loosely according to race) and such rebellion is not intended to effect institutional change. Using the simile of prison as theatrical stage, Cardozo-Freeman notes that "When an 'actor' is killed, the 'audience' experiences a cathartic sense of relief that it is not a player [on the metaphoric prison stage]" (105), a reaction in marked contrast to the collective sense of pain and guilt shared by the Hunger Strikers' comrades from the moment they joined the protest to the moment of death. In an extremely individualized setting like this, the lack of collective and politicized action ensures the Washington State inmates' relegation to object status. In fact, the author observes that to the Washington State Penitentiary prisoner "within this arena a particular and unique order exists that determines how he will play his game" (108). Though minor disobedience may occur, the ascendancy of the disciplinary regime remains for all intents and purposes entirely intact. In their fragmentation, the inmates aid in their own policing.

Contemporary accounts from the North of Ireland will be of particular interest with regard to the effect of physical environment and individual prison regime on literary output. Soon after the 1981 Hunger Strikes ended, the POWs did in fact receive the Five Demands for which they had fought and died. These reforms allowed men and women the previously forbidden access to writing materials, and as a result, many inmates began writing. In fact, expanding on a tradition that began in the earliest days of internment when the Republican newspaper *An Phoblacht* published a weekly column of writing smuggled from Long Kesh, a glossy magazine called *An Glór Gafa* (*The Captive Voice*) sprang up, its contents produced entirely by Republican POWs and published by community presses. The nationalist people of the North of Ireland are not waiting for academia to wake from its slumber; they are taking control of their life stories at every stage of their production. This trend is slowly making inroads into academia as well. I know of at least one POW who was studying for his university degree in English while in the H Blocks in the late 1990s. His thesis topic: a critique of images of Republicans in "Troubles" fiction; novels like *Patriot Games* and the like. Through the actions of the protestors, the H Blocks became a very different place than the one in which Bobby Sands was writing on toilet roll and cigarette papers.

Some postcolonial critics argue that such a change, while of undoubted benefit to the POWs, might have a deleterious effect on their writings. Commenting on the writings produced in his own region, George Lamming in the essay "The Occasion for Speaking" argues that "freedom from physical fear has created a state of complacency in the West Indian awareness" (15). Later in the same essay he extols the virtues of "the creation of a situation which offers antagonistic opposition and a challenge of survival that had to be met by all involved" (16). The Hegelian dialectic is clear in his argument, but only careful scrutiny of more recent

Republican prison texts will determine whether the evidence of this argument is equally clear in the case of Ireland.

In the case of *Then the Walls Came Down*, Danny Morrison's prison memoirs, one definitely does not see the sort of intensity that permeates every page of Sands' writings, yet this lack of intensity does not necessarily indicate the presence of complacency. However, on the one hand, it is the Loyalists who seem to be the ones fighting most desperately in the physical sense against the prison regime in this account. Morrison writes in 1991 that

The loyalists are on some form of protest here—over what I'm not entirely clear. They've been smashing sinks and ripping out pipes. They're probably also trying to provoke us but we're in a pacifist phase! They threatened the orderlies not to serve in the canteen, clean in the wing or leave out mops and buckets for slopping cells. So some of the warders have had to take on these duties. (158)

Ten years after the Republican POWs literally fought to the death for their rights, the loyalists mount their own protest, and it is a successful one in that they are able to invert the disciplinary order of the prison, actually causing warders to engage in work usually done by prisoners. Morrison's response to the Loyalist action is somewhat puzzling in its uncharacteristic lack of interest in a volatile political situation.

There are other moments in *Then the Walls Came Down* that on a surface level indicate that Lamming's fears regarding complacency may be coming true. For instance, at one stage Morrison claims "If you don't accept the walls of your cell you go up them by your fingernails but will still fall down. There is no escape" (136). This sentiment seems to be the diametric opposite of everything seen in Sands' writings with their unrelenting struggle against the cell. Yet, this is not really the case, for the circumstances in which Republican POWs find themselves at the time of

Morrison's writing are quite different. The cell in which he is imprisoned has a political valence already: as he has *de facto* political status he does not need to physically and psychologically battle against the cell in the same fashion that was required of Sands. The conflict that is most immediately present to the Republicans at the time of Morrison's incarceration in Crumlin Road prison is more between themselves and the Loyalist paramilitary prisoners. This is not to say that psychological and other forms of non-violent resistance are not directed against the screws, however, as he notes that the Republicans often engage in a variation of "good cop, bad cop" when dealing with them (38). In addition, they participate in "small acts of sabotage—sinks and toilets being broken, the TV smashed" (45) when a warder sets up one of their number to be attacked by three Loyalists. Though it is primarily of a defensive sort, resistance is alive and well in Morrison's time. There is a difference between complacency and disciplined response. In both his time and Sands' the POWs gauge their reaction to the individual situations in which they find themselves, demonstrating a continuity of nuanced rebellion over the years which should not be mistaken for surrender.

This is one final way in which Morrison's prison journal differs from that of Sands—the former does exhibit a more nuanced style, born of the luxury of access to writing materials and the ability to compose and revise openly. As should be abundantly clear from the previous chapters, this observation is not a condemnation of Sands' work but rather a continuing examination of the impact of place and historical moment on literary production. In both style and tone *Then the Walls Came Down* is a radically different work than anything that Sands produced. For example, while *One Day in My Life* is remarkable in how little emotion is betrayed, Morrison's account fairly drips with it, as it is primarily comprised of letters written to his lover outside.



The reason for the frequent hardness of Sands' narrative is precisely because he was engaged in a literal life or death struggle for political status, an escalating battle of brinkmanship in which he eventually sacrificed his life. To blink in this contest was to lose. That this was Sands' philosophy is shown graphically in a passage where he describes being left completely naked in a freezing, empty cell after a wing shift.<sup>6</sup> Early on in *One Day in My Life* he writes

The biting cold refused to yield. If I didn't get a blanket or two soon I'd be in trouble. You don't ask them for one either. I learned that a long time ago. Show one sign of weakness and you've dug your own grave. Besides, there were forty-three of my comrades in the wing in exactly the same predicament as myself. So forget the moaning and get some heat into your body, I thought, rebuking myself for dangerously playing with thoughts of self-pity and thinking too long and too much of the hardships. (30)

We see in part here some of Sands' ideology, what Massimo Lollini terms "the Leninist idea of the professional revolutionary who puts his feelings and affections under the strict control of his will, renouncing his private life and paying attention only to public and political life" (526-7). This is, of course only part of the story, for in addition to a political act, it was an act done for sheer, basic survival. Had he asked for a blanket, the guards would not have given him one; as such his temporary act of self-denial is actually a courageous form of self-preservation. Having to control his psyche in such a fashion to survive, it should come as no surprise that his writings are at times emotionally distant.

Morrison's theory of composition is quite the opposite, despite the fact that at one stage he argues that "It is difficult enough to expose one's inner depths even to the person we love, without going public with them" (224). Considering that the

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<sup>6</sup> The POWs on the Dirty Protest would be moved periodically to cells in an empty wing so that the previously occupied cells could be cleaned.

majority of the book is an extended love letter to his partner, this fear must have been overcome. It is probably not by accident that immediately prior to this protestation he quotes Marcel Reich Ranicki, the author of a biography he is reading, whose philosophy is that "It is undoubtedly the right and duty of a serious writer to expose his inner depths, even at the risk of being accused of exhibitionism" (223). This does seem to be the governing policy of the book at times, for in some places a reader might feel unintentionally voyeuristic as the lovers' pet names for one another [variants of "Honey-Bunch" (143) appear frequently] are revealed.

In saying this I want to be clear that Morrison's narrative is far more than literary public display of affection, for it is precisely this emotional risk-taking—the dangerous revelation of vulnerability in a prison environment—that elevates his work above many other prison writings. When a reporter asks him if he is "writing any Behanesque novels at the moment," Morrison's answer is a truthful no (34), for he has pushed the prison narrative into a demonstrative realm that the genre seldom enters, allowing the reader to experience his doubts and depressions as well as his bright spots and moments of resistance with him. Though of course any autobiographical or epistolary construction of the self is necessarily in part a fiction or a mask—a point which Morrison himself makes, stating "Whether or not all of this is accurate is moot" (38)—one still gets the sense that he makes more than the usual prison writer's attempt to be present to himself as much as practicable. Part of this is Morrison's agency, but part of it is a reflection of being in a carceral institution that actually provides a photography service to those receiving visits. "It's a couple of quid for three black and white shots" he reveals (194).

While these prison conditions may be surprising, particularly considering the hell in which Republican POWs lived in twenty years ago, it must be remembered that conditions within the prisons usually mirror the conditions of the world taobh amuigh. Much has changed even since 1996 when I first began the tentative inquiries

that would become the basis for this dissertation, and some of the changes seem almost miraculous. Since that time the Provisional Irish Republican Army has called a cease-fire, the Good Friday Agreement and the Assembly have brought Republicans and Unionists together in government, and the H Blocks of Long Kesh have been shut down. In the words of the Northern Ireland Prison Service, the POWs who were "convicted of scheduled offenses (terrorism-related) and attracting a sentence of five years or more became eligible to apply for early release from the Independent Sentence Review Commission" as a result of the Agreement in 1998, and in subsequent years nearly all have been released. Yet, the explanation for these remarkable developments is close at hand. The amelioration that has occurred is not the result of divine intervention nor a linear, preordained march to the end of history, but rather the fruits of a hard-fought battle by those whom the Lakota Nation would term the *ik'ce wica'sa*: the common people of the North of Ireland.

The battle is far from over, however, for Recognition still needs to be fully won. The British Government still refuses to define past paramilitary acts as in terms other than criminality. The release of the prisoners does not indicate that they were granted legal POW status by the Good Friday Agreement: the official Northern Ireland Prison Service web site, for example stated in September 1999 that "there are no political prisoners in Northern Ireland... All those sentenced to prison terms have been convicted of criminal offenses." In the absence of a continued quest for justice, as the song goes, Ireland's fight for freedom would still be in danger of being branded eight hundred years of crime. Now that the physical force tradition has been rendered unnecessary—hopefully for good—the work may continue on the level of discourse alone. And, as one might have expected, the same people involved in the prison struggle still are actively involved in the written struggle: the extraordinary work *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, a collective narrative of the H Block protests from 1976 to 1981 is only one more example of the histories—new in form

and focus—now being produced by the people who lived them. But there is work yet to be done. For the foreseeable future, advocates of POW literature must continue, each individual employing the tactics s/he finds most effective to bring about this elusive Recognition, saying as Sands once did, “*tiocfaidh ár lá:*” our day will come.

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