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Narratives of Confinement: Fenians, Prisons and Writing, 1867–1916[1]

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I

In 1889 a truly awful novel was published in London by the prominent publishers Chapman and Hall. It was written by J. D. Maginn who, for many and obvious reasons, did not go on to literary greatness. As is often the case with bad fiction it had an alliterative title, *Fitzgerald: The Fenian*. In the course of the novel the eponymous hero comes to believe that pride in Irish nationhood is compatible with friendly relations with England, a realisation symbolised by marriage to an Englishwoman. Before settling down, however, Dick Fitzgerald spends his youthful days in rebellion followed by imprisonment. On his release, Fitzgerald informs his father that he has not wasted his time while in gaol, but has written a memoir, *Meditations of a Prisoner*, in which a London publisher is already interested. Later, Fitzgerald impresses his wife-to-be, Miss Cuthbert, with the information that his *Meditations* has made it to a third edition, to which she replies: 'Oh, yes; I have heard your book spoken of with great praise. It is in every drawing room, and every one reads it.'[2]

By the second half of the nineteenth century, not only had imprisonment become a common experience for advanced Irish nationalists, but prison memoir had attained a prominent place in nationalist culture. Ireland was not alone in this. Across Europe, just as the prison became the primary means of punishing crime,[3] so too it became the most important weapon available to states attempting to control political dissent.[4] One of the side-effects of this was the emergence of the prison memoir as a significant genre and the political prisoner memoir as an important sub-genre.[5] The Italian nationalist, Silvio Pellico, achieved continent-wide fame when his *My Prisons* was published in 1832 and subsequently translated into at least a dozen languages, including English.[6] In 1861 the English liberal journalist John Alfred Langford wrote that, through his

memoir, Pellico had 'made the House of Hapsburgh (sic) a thing of shame, and his narrow home of iron and stone a more glorious spot than the crime-stained court of Vienna'.[7]

The Fenians were not the first Irish rebels to be imprisoned or to write prison memoir. Among their predecessors was William Steel Dickson, a prominent United Irishman, who recounted his prison experiences in the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion in *A Narrative of the Confinement and Exile of William Steel Dickson, DD*. Perhaps the most widely read of the narratives of confinement written by an Irish rebel was the *Jail Journal* of the Young Irelander John Mitchel, which was published in 1854.[8] Captivity as experienced by the Fenians was different, however, and, consequently, their memoirs were different. Steel Dickson described a comfortable regime of military detention at Fort George, Scotland, and Mitchel, while typical of later prison memoirs in his less sanguine attitude towards his treatment, had been transported rather than imprisoned. Although sixty-two Fenians were transported in September 1867, a majority of Fenian convicts found themselves confined within a thoroughly modern English prison system,[9] a system characterised by 'uniformity' and 'severity'.[10] Fenian prison memoir then described a particular experience of imprisonment and took on a particular tenor which was to prove inordinately influential. This influence was ensured by the longevity of the Fenian tradition combined with the recurring importance of imprisonment within that tradition and because Fenian prison memoir appeared when the Irish national narrative was taking its modern shape in the context of a burgeoning nationalist print culture.

An exploration of writing by and about Fenian prisoners and their imprisonment in the years 1867 to 1916 suggests that this literature – both memoir and fiction – passed through several identifiable phases. In its first phase it was autobiographical, and the prisoners' primary concern was to influence the telling of their story. Casey A. Jarrin has described Tom Clarke's prison memoir as 'a textual refusal of carceral silence' and this is an equally apt description of earlier Fenian prison memoir.[11] It was also produced in direct opposition to the state's presentation of Fenian imprisonment and the tone was propagandistic. Its aim was to alter the prison status and treatment of Fenian prisoners or to achieve their release. This first phase of Fenian prison writing implied a general critique of the English prison system, a critique that became more explicit with time. It is this shift in emphasis that is characteristic of the second phase which includes Michael Davitt's later writing on prison. A third phase might be dated to the years 1909 to 1913 when a series of fictional treatments of the role of the former Fenian prisoner appeared at a time when the future of radical separatism seemed doubtful. This phase was quickly succeeded by yet another when a new generation of radical separatists, who looked

to the Fenians as 'a source of emotional energy, as a storehouse of memory and example', were imprisoned.[12]

II

Writing on South African prison memoirs of the apartheid period (and with Michel Foucault in mind) Paul Gready has argued that 'to be a prisoner is to be variously written, to be contested through writing' and that 'autobiography chiefly served to restore elemental political ground to the prisoner, and can be seen as the most sophisticated articulation of the oppositional "power of writing"'.[13] During the late 1860s and the 1870s the treatment of Fenian prisoners was the subject of an intense battle of words which took place on platforms, in parliament, in newspapers, in hundreds of confidential minutes and memoranda and in official reports. For the most part the prisoners' experience was represented by others. The state, in the form of bureaucrats and politicians in power, generally defended the Fenians' imprisonment and their treatment, while amnesty campaigners and sympathetic Irish nationalists – most often politicians and journalists – made the case that the Fenian prisoners should be released or afforded ameliorated treatment. Producing autobiographical accounts afforded Fenians the opportunity to act as witnesses on their own behalf and influence the interpretation of their prison treatment that would prevail in contemporary culture and for posterity.

In the first instance, the prisoners' story was presented through an amnesty campaign, which attracted widespread support in Ireland. This campaign pointed to the death in Woking prison of Patrick Lynch in June 1866 and employed images of Fenian prisoners who were 'starved, overworked, thrust into association with sodomists and syphilitics, driven mad and denied medical treatment'.[14] In May 1867, in response to this battery of allegations, the home secretary, Spencer H. Walpole, decided to commission an inquiry to be conducted by two officials, Alex A. Knox and George D. Pollock. On 16 March 1867, while the Home Office inquiry was still in train, the *Irishman*, a determinedly nationalist newspaper which gave much coverage to the prisoners' cause, published a letter that had been smuggled from Millbank prison, alleging maltreatment and persecution in vivid and evocative language.[15] From an early stage the prisoners' advocates were conscious of the value of first-hand accounts by prisoners. Accusations, true or otherwise, seemed more authentic when made by one of the alleged victims. The letter in the *Irishman*, which caused embarrassment to the authorities and outrage in Ireland, was the work of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. O'Donovan Rossa was to become the most iconic of Fenian prisoners. He had been convicted in Dublin on 13 December 1865 and transferred to England later that month. There, in

various prisons, a contest ensued between him and the prison authorities; a contest in which, in the words of Seán McConville, 'defiance and punishment continued unceasingly'.[16]

It was in this context that Knox and Pollock submitted their report to parliament in June 1867. It concluded by praising the staff and management of prisons in the highest terms, noting that the 'only true cause of complaint the treason-felony convicts have against them the authorities is that they can't get out'.[17] They took care to depict O'Donovan Rossa as a crank and an instigator of discontent: a portrait that was not without credibility. They derided his letter in the *Irishman* as 'a letter stuffed full of the most absurd and unfounded accusations against everybody ... It contained the story of his wrongs and was to set the country ablaze."[18] While in the most telling sentences in the entire report, the commissioners argued that 'the word of a convict is not taken against the word of a warder or other prison official. If this were so, of course there would be nothing for it but to throw open the gates of the prison, and to tell the convicts they were at liberty to depart.'[19]

Nonetheless, the reaction of the prisoners' advocates was, when possible, to meet the words of Knox and Pollock with more of the prisoners' words. They did this confident that many in Ireland would take the word of a Fenian convict against that of an English prison official. In 1869 the *Irishman* published a pamphlet entitled *Things Not Generally Known: England's Treatment of Political Prisoners*. It was an account by an unnamed Fenian prisoner and consisted of paragraph after paragraph of alleged brutalities. The author expressed revulsion at close association with non-Fenian convicts, men he characterised as 'the vilest criminals' and 'leprous outcasts', and insisted that many of them 'suffer from the most loathsome and infectious diseases, syphilis, &c'.[20] In contrast, the author was portrayed as 'a chivalrous young Irishman of superior education and spotless honour' in an introduction, probably the work of the editor of the *Irishman*, Richard Pigott.[21] This text was an explicit response to the official report of 1867 and is marked by an insistence that the prisoners were more reliable witnesses than their gaolers. In the introduction readers are told that the 'details within these pages have been corroborated by those prisoners who have been liberated. They cannot, therefore, be contradicted. By these the public may judge how deceptive was the report of the so-called "Commission"', while the prisoner concluded with the hope that his account would 'enable the public to form a more correct judgment on the report published by Commissioners Pollock and Knox'.[22]

In February 1869 fifteen of the thirty-nine Fenian prisoners then held in English prisons were given an amnesty.[23] In June of that year efforts to obtain an amnesty for the remaining men were redoubled under the auspices of the newly established Amnesty Association.24 In November

O'Donovan Rossa won a by-election in Tipperary: he was still in prison and his backers traded on his growing reputation as a prison rebel.[25] In 1868, when John Savage's *Fenian Heroes and Martyrs* was published in Boston, O'Donovan Rossa was introduced as 'an unbending and defiant patriot in his chains'. Savage wrote that 'the authorities have laboured, by putting him at the most loathsome duties, and by treatment of the harshest kind; by bodily chastisement, and the starvation system known as the "lightening process", to break him down; but he is indomitable, and will only succumb to death.'[26] In May 1870, in the face of continuing complaints the Home Office commissioned a further inquiry. On this occasion the appointed commissioners, chaired by Lord Devon, were more independent and their report reflected this.[27] Again, they did not find any grounds to believe that the Fenians had been systematically, or even regularly, subjected 'to any exceptionally severe treatment'. On the other hand, they did make several criticisms of the prison authorities' approach and found that there was substance to two of O'Donovan Rossa's litany of complaints. Further, they acknowledged that the Fenians found their association with criminals 'degrading' and suggested that they might be segregated from other prisoners.28 In practice the Fenian prisoners had by then received a series of ameliorations and most of them, including O'Donovan Rossa, were released in December 1870.

With so many former prisoners free it was only a matter of time before one produced a full-scale prison memoir. In the spring and summer of 1870 amnesty campaigners, including Pigott, had again canvassed former prisoners for accounts of their prison life with the purpose of supporting 'the charges of harsh treatment denied by the Government'. Although it remains incomplete, and was not published until 2005, John Sarsfield Casey's account of his imprisonment in England and subsequent transportation seems to have had its genesis in these requests.[29] When a memoir did arrive it can hardly have been a surprise that the author was O'Donovan Rossa. He was resident in America when his memoir was published by the American News Company in New York in 1874. It was his attempt to have the last word on his prison experience and more than any other text *O'Donovan Rossa's Prison Life: Six Years in Six English Prisons* has fixed a particular image of political imprisonment in the mind of the Irish nationalist public. It is, appropriately, a jeremiad, infused with a profound sense of persecution, while aspiring to be a portrait of proud defiance. O'Donovan Rossa depicted his experience of imprisonment as the persistent imposition of humiliation and degradation 'among the garrotters and Sodomites of England'.[30] Contrary to the reports of 1867 and 1871, he maintained that the Fenian prisoners were not treated like all other prisoners: 'I would not grumble or wonder if, as political prisoners, it were exceptionally better, but no, it was exceptionally worse than the worst criminals of society.'[31]

Repeating the pattern of the previous decade, it was in the context of a renewed amnesty campaign that Michael Davitt began to present his prison experiences for public consumption in 1878. Following seven and a half years in prison, Davitt was released in December 1877. Almost immediately he joined the efforts to secure the release of eight men who remained in prison; on 9 March 1878 he addressed an amnesty meeting in London and the speech formed the basis for a pamphlet which appeared in May of that year.[32] The pamphlet was entitled *The Prison Life of Michael Davitt by himself* and in it Davitt, like his predecessors, provided an account replete with the indignity of invasive strip-searches, the oppression of silence, and the severity of poor diet and heavy physical labour. Davitt depicted a prison system that sullied all those within its grip, describing men who had become 'animal-like' as a consequence of a hunger which drove them to 'eat old poultices found buried in heaps of rubbish I was assisting in carting away, and I have seen bits of candles pulled out of the prison cesspool and eaten, after the human soil was wiped off them!'[33] As in the case of O'Donovan Rossa, Davitt insisted that 'the fact of my being a political prisoner exposed me to, rather than saved me from, the most inconsiderate treatment at the hands of the prison officials'.[34] Davitt has rightly acquired a reputation as the Fenian prisoner who was most concerned at the treatment of ordinary convicts, but in 1878 his pressing concern was the release of his fellow Fenians and he wrote disparagingly of those they shared prison with, decrying 'the degradation of being placed on a footing, or rather below, the vilest offscum of crime and infamy'.[35]

In this first wave of Fenian prison writings a narrative was established which successor prisoner-memoirists and fiction writers tended to mimic. Imprisonment was not only brutal, but it was especially cruel for Irish political prisoners because they were peculiarly persecuted by the authorities and forced to associate with men who were morally and socially inferior to them. The role of the Fenian political prisoner became one of individual perseverance or resistance in the face of this fate. Both O'Donovan Rossa and Davitt mentioned their Fenian colleagues – and were motivated to write their accounts, at least in part, to assist those colleagues they left behind – but in essence the Fenian prisoner, as exemplified by these authors, was forced to stand alone against the system. That is not to deny that they, and many of their Irish readers, viewed the prison struggles as integral to a 'national' struggle. O'Donovan Rossa stated as much when he wrote of his abandonment of an early intention to approach prison with stoicism: 'My whole nature arose in arms, and I felt that even against prison government I could be a rebel too.'[36] Indeed, in these memoirs the prisoners' personal subjection and resistance became a metaphor for the nation.

III

Later editions of these memoirs reflected the changing concerns of the authors and, perhaps, the audience. *O'Donovan Rossa's Prison Life* appeared again in 1882 and 1889, but by then it carried the title by which it remains famous, *Irish Rebels in English Prisons*. It included a new preface which had little to do with O'Donovan Rossa's prison life, but constituted a significant addition to the text. Based on an article published in the *United Irishman* in January 1882, the preface offered a defence of the dynamite campaign.[37] New editions of *The Prison Life of Michael Davitt* appeared in 1882 and 1886. Both included Davitt's evidence before the Royal Commission on Penal Servitude of 1878, signalling a shift in emphasis in his public pronouncements on imprisonment; the concern to inform the public as to the status and treatment of Irish political prisoners remained, but greater stress was now afforded to his broader critique of the prison system.

Michael Davitt's second major work to draw on his prison experiences, *Leaves from a Prison Diary*, was published in 1885. It was not a memoir, but was dominated by an analysis of the population and management of the prison system. As Carla King has explained, these reflections first took shape under the title 'Traits of Criminal Life and Character' which Davitt wrote in late 1881 during his second term in prison.[38] Davitt's chief concern in *Leaves* was to delineate a taxonomy of convicts and, on the basis of this, to argue for the separation of the troublesome or hardened from those he regarded as more amenable to reform. The rhetoric used to describe non-political prisoners is markedly different from Rossa's and that in his own earlier pamphlet; he wrote: 'Pity, however, is the predominant feeling which so much moral deformity excites in the breast of an ordinary mortal who is doomed to behold the ruin which it has made of so many fellow-creatures.'[39] In later chapters Davitt outlined his views on various social ills and the governance of Ireland, but it was the prison sections that drew most attention and praise. In general the British press was impressed, preferring the more detached, almost anthropological, tone of this element of the book.[40] For instance, a review in *The Scotsman* stated that Davitt had proved himself an exception among Irish politicians because the volume did not contain 'one word of querulous complaint, one indication of a sense of personal injury'.[41] By September 1885 two editions had sold out and plans for a third cheap edition were in hand.[42]

Davitt's general assault upon the prison system was mirrored in *Moondyne Joe: A Story from the Underworld*, a novel by another former Fenian prisoner, John Boyle O'Reilly. It received a mixed critical reception, but was a considerable popular success for several decades. Beginning in November 1878, it was published in serialised form in the important Boston-based, Irish-American newspaper, the *Pilot*, which

O'Reilly edited.[43] In the following year the Pilot Publishing Company of Boston published it in novel form and it was soon picked up by publishing houses in New York, Australia and Britain. In 1913 a film based on O'Reilly's novel, *Moondyne*, was made in Australia, while the novel was translated into Irish as *An Múindín* and published by the Government Publication Office of the Irish Free State in 1931.[44] Although it drew on O'Reilly's experience as a political prisoner and transportee and took its title from the nickname of a real western Australian bushranger, Joseph Bolitho Johns, *Moondyne Joe* was neither a fictionalised account of O'Reilly's life nor that of the actual Moondyne Joe. Instead, it was an attack on, what O'Reilly believed to be, the inhumanity and cruelty of both the English convict system and transportation.

O'Reilly described the English prison system as a brutal 'convict-mill' and portrayed the 'Board of Directors' of England's prisons as bureaucrats whose bounded vision had cruel consequences. The prisoners were captives of the system, but O'Reilly's prison directors were captive to the ideal of the systematic. One of the novel's heroes, Will Sheridan, meets the directors and is struck by

> ... the stupendous conceit and incompetence of these men. They talked glibly about the weight of a prisoner's loaf, and the hours to light the cells in the morning; they had statistics at their finger-ends to show them how much a convict could perform on a given number of ounces of meat, but they knew nothing whatever of the large philosophy of penal government.[45]

Even less sympathetic was his depiction of Sir Joshua Hobb, a thinly disguised portrait of Sir Edmund du Cane, a director of convict prisons from 1863 and chairman of the Directorate of Convict Prisons from 1869–95.[46] O'Reilly emphasised his character's preoccupation with unvarying order: 'Confound the man ... he would take a hundred men, with as many diseases, and treat them all for cholera.'[47] When Hobb appears before a parliamentary committee to dismiss proposals for a humane and graduated penal system in Australia, he cites the lenient treatment of a Chartist convict and the alleged subsequent crimes of that man to illustrate his argument against any leniency. Inevitably Hobb's allegations prove false and instead the maligned Chartist convict emerges as the hero of the novel, once Moondyne Joe but now the respectable, yet mysterious, advocate of penal reform, Mr Wyville. Although it is not the central concern of his novel, it is evident that O'Reilly – in common with all Fenian authors – assumes the moral superiority of the political prisoner.

Despite the campaigns and the memoirs, political prisoners were not afforded a discrete category. The Prisons Act of 1877, which applied in England,[48] and the Prisons in Ireland Act of the same year, which established

the General Prisons Board of Ireland, did provide that those convicted of sedition, seditious libel or contempt of court should be held under the least punitive of penal regimes, that of first-class misdemeanant. Very few political prisoners, however, were to be convicted of these offences. Although the efforts of the Fenian memoirists (and books which were influenced by them such as George Sigerson's *Political Imprisonment at Home and Abroad* published in 1890) did much to convince the general public that political prisoners were 'special men' who deserved special treatment, the state continued to withhold acknowledgement in law that political prisoners were different.[49] The Fenian critique did contribute, however, to what Martin Wiener has characterised as a 'disillusion with the prison' or at least an erosion of certainty among administrators, politicians and the public that all prisoners should be treated uniformly and with severity. Consequently, the Fenian campaigns and memoirs (along with several other critical perspectives) eased the eventual introduction of more flexibility into the English prison system through the Prisons Act of 1898 which reformed penal servitude and separated first-time offenders from recidivists.[50]

IV

Writing by, and about, Fenian prisoners entered a new phase in the years immediately prior to the Irish revolution. In a period when revolutionary nationalism seemed moribund, the uncertain legacy of the Fenian prisoners attracted the attention of a series of writers. In May 1909 the first play staged by the newly established Cork Dramatic Society was a work by that society's leading light, the writer and critic Daniel Corkery. The ethos of the Cork Dramatic Society reflected Corkery's commitment to cultural nationalism.[51] In 1909, however, he was not a radical separatist and Patrick Maume has described the play as a 'Moranite satire on Irish politics, constitutionalist and physical force'. The central character of the play was a former Fenian prisoner who Corkery named John Whitelaw O'Loughlin. At the beginning of the play O'Loughlin, who is in straightened conditions, is finagled a job as a workhouse master by the local Irish Party organisers. In this O'Loughlin is clearly based on O'Donovan Rossa, who returned to Ireland between 1904 and 1906 when he was offered the job of corresponding secretary to Cork County Council. While the party bosses of Corkery's play calculate that it is politic to acknowledge O'Loughlin's sacrifice and that it is worthwhile to be associated with him, they also believe his brand of idealism belongs in the past. Among the younger generation, however, O'Loughlin finds one convert to radical separatism, Lawrence Kiely, who turns his back on the party and a guaranteed parliamentary seat. In his turn, Kiely discovers that this is an unprofitable and often

unpopular road, but he remains inspired by the prison sacrifice of O'Loughlin and too finds an acolyte among the succeeding generation, young Daly, who is willing to flaunt convention and embrace separatism.[52]

While Corkery acknowledged that in the Ireland of 1909 a Fenian prisoner retained a powerful, if limited, capacity to inspire using his story of sacrifice, others doubted whether this was the case. Lennox Robinson was among these. Though more famous for his relationship with the Abbey Theatre, Robinson began his career as a playwright with the Cork Dramatic Society.[53] He was familiar with *The Embers* and took up the theme of the returned Fenian prisoner in his own play, *Patriots*, which was first staged at the Abbey in April 1912.[54] Robinson wrote the play while on tour in America with the Abbey in the autumn of 1911,[55] and Chris Morash has written that 'it captures the mood of the years in which Yeats wrote "September 1913" with its well-known refrain "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone/It's with O'Leary in the grave"'.[56] *Patriots* tells the story of the return of James Nugent to his family and home town after eighteen years in prison for 'political murder' (shooting an informer). News of Nugent's release reaches home before he does, prompting his former colleagues to reveal their expectations of a former political prisoner: 'He'll be greatly changed', 'his health ruined', and 'his spirit broken too'. His daughter is told: 'Ah, you'll never have seen the real James Nugent, Rose. You'll only see an old broken man creeping home to die.' Before he dies, however, they would be delighted if he would attend a demonstration, maybe with a band and some bonfires, and if he would give a lecture. A lecture called 'Behind Lock and Key' or 'Prison Bars' would be 'the very thing. Why he'll have any amount to tell us, all about the prison and how he was treated – most interesting – most interesting.'[57]

What they do not want, and what they get, is an unrepentant rebel intent on carrying on where he left off prior to prison. He is not content to become a revered symbol in a nationalism of nostalgia: 'Good God, you seem to think my life is an anecdote – a thing to be told stories about … I've been dead for eighteen years. I've come back from the grave.'[58] He dismisses constitutionalism as 'that old Parliamentary game' and derides any reform as 'sops, sops'.[59] When Nugent organises a meeting to re-launch radical separatism under his leadership, however, he is confronted by disinterest, antipathy and disillusion. He discovers a town, family and old friends who are motivated by money and notions of respectability. Most people prefer to attend other events, the parish mission or a moving picture being shown in the town hall. A colleague from the old days tells him that 'they don't want to hear you speak … They are tired even of laughing at you.'[60] For a time Nugent seems intent on fighting on, but in the face of desertion by his old friends, bitter denunciation from his wife who tells him of the pain he has caused (including a delicate daughter), and

his failure to rouse support from the youth Nugent ends the play addressing the ghosts of the republican dead who used to visit him in his prison cell: 'I have tried – tried as you tried – and been broken.'[61] Although Robinson's conclusion suggests that he foresaw little future for the physical force movement, contemporary reviewers of the play, both admiring and critical, indicate that the character of Nugent evoked approval and sympathy from sections of the Abbey's audience. J. P. M. of the *Evening Telegraph* disapprovingly noted that Nugent was the best drawn character and that his speeches received 'loud applause', while Jacques of the *Irish Independent* reported 'loud applause from the deeply impressed pit'.[62]

Similar issues are addressed in the final work of the most popular Irish novelist of this period, Canon P. A. Sheehan. *The Graves at Kilmorna: A Story of '67* was written around the same time (1910–11), although it was not published until 1915 when it became an immediate best-seller.[63] It tells the story of Myles Cogan from idealistic participation in the Fenian Rising, through prison, and on to his life after release. Sheehan had first-hand experience of the Fenians in Dartmoor. While a curate in Exeter in 1876 he had on occasion filled in for the prison chaplain at Dartmoor,[64] and *The Graves at Kilmorna* features just such a priest.[65] Cogan's prison experiences mirror those of O'Donovan Rossa[66] and like O'Donovan Rossa he is in no doubt that he is of a different – superior – moral order to the prisoners around him:

> To have to look into the face of a reprieved murderer or burglar; to have to listen, as they moved around, arm in arm, to a Cockney voice narrating, with gusto, the story of an abominable crime, or to have to hear ribald talk, and sometimes blasphemous comments on the sacred mysteries of the faith that was so dear to him – this was the cruellest punishment of all this brave young fellow had to bear.[67]

Like O'Loughlin and Nugent, Cogan finds that the Ireland he returns to appears indifferent or apathetic about his ideals and sufferings: 'The insignificance of his release, and the unimportance of the whole affair, hurt him deeply.'[68] In an Ireland where going to gaol had 'gone out of fashion',[69] Cogan stands 'aloof ... in silence'.[70] The novel ends when, after many years, Cogan is tempted to break his silence to speak at an election rally in favour of a young independent nationalist candidate, the son of a woman who had loved him before prison, and is killed by a stone thrown at the platform by one of the unprincipled mob. In Sheehan's pessimistic vision, the Fenian prisoner is once more a heroic figure, but once again he is isolated and his fate is tragic.

Between them these three Cork writers offered little hope to radical separatists; however, in hindsight it is evident that the IRB was on the brink of re-invigoration as older elements within the organisation were

challenged by younger men such Patrick McCartan, Seán McDermott and Bulmer Hobson. In late 1911 these groups disputed control of the IRB's monthly paper, *Irish Freedom*, and by the beginning of 1912 the younger faction had gained control of the paper and the organisation.[71] A significant factor in their success was the support of Tom Clarke, who was revered as a former prisoner. Perhaps because the split had precipitated a dearth of contributors, but perhaps more importantly because the younger clique needed to assert their ownership of the Fenian heritage, they began to fill the pages of *Irish Freedom* with lengthy autobiographical accounts of the Fenian activities of John Daly and the prison experiences of Tom Clarke. Beginning in January 1912, Clarke began a series called 'Glimpses of an Irish Felon's Prison Life'. In all, thirteen instalments were published, the final appearing in July 1913. Clarke's account is very much in the tone and style of O'Donovan Rossa and Davitt's first memoir. This is once more a tale of 'English brutality'[72] and Fenian resistance: 'Never one moment,' wrote Clarke, 'did I forget I was an Irish Political Prisoner.'[73] It gained a wider audience when published posthumously as a book under the same title in 1922, but in 1912 and 1913 it had an important impact upon the small cohort of IRB activists and sympathisers who would be among the first to go to prison during the revolutionary period. Among young radical separatists, the former Fenian prisoner remained a potent symbol.

V

In 1915 the authorities in Ireland began to imprison a new generation of advanced nationalists. Prior to the Easter Rising of 1916, most of the small number of Irish Volunteers jailed were prosecuted under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) as a consequence of anti-recruitment activities. It is evident that this new generation had a keen familiarity with the Fenian literature of imprisonment and was influenced by it in several ways which had important consequences. Firstly, the Irish Volunteer prisoners' knowledge of Fenian prisoners shaped their expectations of imprisonment. Secondly, it influenced their experience of imprisonment. And, thirdly, it impacted upon their representation of their own prison experience.

During Ernest Blythe's first night in Belfast prison in July 1915 he imagined the horrors that awaited him.[74] He later explained that not many Sinn Féin people had been imprisoned before him, but that he was aware of the treatment meted out in an earlier generation to Tom Clarke and John Daly.[75] The extent to which the prisoners, and the advanced nationalist public, had come to take for granted a Fenian-conceived image of imprisonment is illustrated by the case of Herbert Moore Pim. Pim was jailed, along with Blythe, in the summer of 1915. On 7 August *Nationality*

printed a poem entitled 'To Ireland' by A. N. (frequent readers of the advanced nationalist press would have recognised this as Pim). The poem purported to be a despatch from prison: 'I tread the ground that felons tread/And sleep within a house of thieves/High is the window, hard my bed/Yet whoso loves thee never grieves/Thus felony and honour blend/The weeds are garnered with the sheaves/Hell upon earth shall have an end/So whoso loves thee never grieves.'[76] Pim had not written the poem in prison but had composed it while awaiting arrest, drawing on the tropes of Fenian prison writing. He then entrusted it to his amanuensis who was instructed to send it to the newspapers after a few weeks.[77] The readers of *Nationality* received it as an authentic despatch from a new prison martyr and Blythe remembered that for some time Pim had a high reputation with Sinn Féin devotees, largely based on these verses.[78]

In reality, the treatment meted out to early Irish Volunteer prisoners was nothing like that imposed upon O'Donovan Rossa, Davitt or Clarke. Penal servitude as described by the Fenians had ceased to exist and, in any case, these men were not sentenced to penal servitude. They were jailed in Ireland and their imprisonment was managed by a Dublin Castle regime that was sensitive to the possibility that repression could feed disorder rather than prevent it. Therefore, although the Irish Volunteer prisoners were not accorded a separate 'political' status, they were treated as exceptions and their prison regime was a privileged one. By 1915, in part as a consequence of suffragette prison campaigns,[79] the Irish authorities had broad scope for granting privileges and it is clear that the DORA prisoners as a body could have achieved a whole raft of further privileges if they had simply sought them in a concerted manner.[80] That they did not do so is an indication of the extent to which their image of political imprisonment, rooted as it was in Fenian experience, circumscribed their ability to recognise that prison had changed and that a different approach was appropriate. Anna Bryson has correctly noted that prison memoirs function 'to educate and inspire future generations of political activists',[81] but in this case Fenian memoirs provided the Irish Volunteer prisoners with a misleading model. They remained so in the thrall of the rhetoric of individualised martyrdom that they were slow to realise that their prisons were not the Fenians' prisons. As a consequence they had no strategy for the attainment of political status prior to their imprisonment and did not develop such a strategy during their imprisonment. As Blythe asserted: 'Ní raibh aon duine tar éis smaoineamh fós ar staideas agus cóireáil ar leith do phríosúnaigh pholaitíochta a éileamh, mar níor thuigeamar go raibh na Sasanaigh tar éis dul i mboige ó aimsir na bhFíníní.' In other words, they had not yet given thought to claiming the status and treatment of political prisoners because they did not understand that the English had 'gone soft' since the time of the Fenians.[82]

In contemporary propagandistic memoir these men wrote themselves into the Fenian tradition and in the nationalist press they were portrayed as joining the martyr elite. They were the new O'Donovan Rossas, the latest Clarkes. As with their influential predecessors, the memoirs produced by the early Irish Volunteer prisoners were firmly propagandistic in intent. In *Memories of Mountjoy*, which was serialised in the *Hibernian* in late 1915 and published as a book in 1917, Seán Milroy's aim was to expose, as he affected to see it, the felonising of Irish political prisoners. He wrote that his experience in Mountjoy was 'not an isolated incident' but 'just one link in the chain of criminal degradation with which England has sought to shackle and overpower the Irish Nation'.[83] Hebert Moore Pim also wrote a prison memoir, *What It Feels Like*. It was serialised in *Nationality* in late 1915 and published as a pamphlet before that year was out. In it Pim also dwelt on the failure to grant the men political status, insisting: 'We are, of course, political prisoners. But England treats her political prisoners as felons.'[84]

The funeral of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa in August 1915 encouraged the prisoners and propagandists to link the Irish Volunteer prisoners with the Fenians. Seán Milroy was one of those in Mountjoy on the day of the funeral. He recalled the occasion in his memoir, writing that he felt transformed somehow as he circled the exercise yard. He looked at his companions, Seán McDermott and Liam Mellows, and remembered O'Donovan Rossa and other patriots.

> Yes, the path I am treading is no longer the ring of Mountjoy merely. It is the pathway of Irish history, and we three – Mellows, McDermott and I, felons of 1915 – are marching with the men who suffered for the same cause and stood against the same power as that which has deprived us of our liberty, and which holds us in its tenacious grip. Round and round goest the marching tramp, and with the trend of these steps I hear the chains which Rossa drags after him; and my ears seem to catch, as from afar off, the sobs and sighing that echoed along the track of history which my companions of this hour have made so sacred with their sufferings.[85]

In his famous funeral oration Patrick Pearse suggested that not only were the mourners in spiritual communion with O'Donovan Rossa and with 'those who suffered with him in English prisons', but with 'our own dear comrades who suffer in English prisons to-day'.[86] This theme was reprised in Eily McCarthy's poem, 'The Funeral of O'Donovan Rossa', which appeared in the *Hibernian*: 'Now they pass near the prison wherein/To-day are men as noble and true/Who follow with joy the thorny way/That was trodden so long by you.' The poem concludes with the promise that on the day of revolution 'We will snatch from the gloom of

their prison den/The dauntless souls who there/Are keeping the faith of the Fenian men/Through sorrow and torturing care.[87]

If Irish nationality of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was published or imagined into existence[88] then Fenian prison memoir was a significant element in that process. These widely read and influential memoirs provided stories of martyrdom for the nation. They provided stories of resistance. The memoirists succeeded in shaping public opinion and sometimes prison policy. By the 1910s the Fenian prison memoir and the Fenian prisoner as a symbol of principled separatism were familiar to most nationalists. Within the culture of advanced nationalism the Fenian prisoners and their writings carried particular weight, helping to fashion in subtle, and obvious, ways the prison lives of another generation of radical nationalists. The memoirs of Fenian prisoners provided future prisoners with models which guided their actions and a written tradition which they sought to emulate. In Reading jail in July 1916, Terence MacSwiney found that his experience was immediately being read in this way by his friends outside. On 12 July Con O'Leary wrote to MacSwiney, citing *The Embers*, to suggest that the tradition of the Fenian prisoner was animated, that 'John O'Loughlin, Laurence Kiely and young Daly are in good health and very well',[89] while, three days later, his sister Nan predicted: 'We'll have a lot of interesting literature in the near future from "Irish Rebels in English Prisons".'[90]

NOTES

1. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the IRCHSS.
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3. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991); Dario Melossi and Massimo Pavarini, *The Prison and the Factory: Origins of the Penitentiary System* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution 1750–1850* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
4. Barton L. Ingraham, *Political Crime in Europe: A Comparative Study of France, Germany and England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Robert J. Goldstein, *Political Repression in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Kent: Croom Helm, 1983).
5. Philip Priestley, *Victorian Prison Lives* (London: Methuen, 1985).
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7. John Alfred Langford, *Prison Books and their Authors* (London: William Tegg, 1861), p. 4.
8. William Steel Dickson, *A Narrative of the Confinement and Exile of William Steel Dickson, DD* (Dublin: J. Stockdale, 1812); John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1913).
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10. Martin J. Wiener, *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law and Policy in England, 1830–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 309.
11. Casey A. Jarrin, 'You have the right to refuse silence: Oscar Wilde's prison letters and Tom Clarke's *Glimpses of an Irish Felon's Prison Life*', *Éire-Ireland*, 43/3–4 (2008), p. 101.
12. M. J. Kelly, *The Fenian Ideal and Irish Nationalism 1882–1916* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), p. 239.
13. Paul Gready, 'Autobiography and the 'power of writing': Political prison writing in the

apartheid era', *Journal of South African Studies*, 19 (1993), p. 493.
14. McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners*, pp. 175–82.
15. Leon Radinowicz and Roger Hood, 'The status of political prisoner in England: The struggle for recognition', *Virginia Law Review*, 65 (1979), pp. 1440–1; Owen Dudley Edwards, 'Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47, p. 858.
16. McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners*, p. 173.
17. *Report of the Commissioners on the Treatment of the Treason-Felony Convicts in the English Convict Prisons* in British Parliamentary Papers (1867), xxxv, p. 24.
18. Ibid., p. 23.
19. Ibid., p. 11.
20. *Things Not Generally Known: England's Treatment of Political Prisoners* (Dublin: The Irishman, 1869), p. 9.
21. Ibid., p. 4.
22. Ibid., pp. 4, 27.
23. McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners*, p. 227.
24. Ibid., pp. 219–20.
25. R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society 1848–82* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1998), pp. 178–9.
26. John Savage, *Fenian Heroes and Martyrs* (Boston: P. Donahoe, 1868), pp. 344, 354.
27. For an assessment of the composition of the Devon Commission see McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners*, pp. 196–7.
28. *Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Treatment of Treason-Felony Convicts in English Prisons* in British Parliamentary Papers (1871), xxxii, pp. 27–8.
29. See the introduction to Mairead Maume, Patrick Maume and Mary Casey (eds), John Sarsfield Casey, *The Galtee Boy* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2005), p. 6.
30. Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels in English Prisons* (New York: P. J. Kennedy, 1882), pp. 139–40.
31. Ibid., p. 73.
32. T. W. Moody, *Davitt and the Irish Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 147; McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners*, pp. 310–11.
33. Michael Davitt, *The Prison Life of Michael Davitt* (Dublin: Lalor, 1886, 3rd edn), p. 18.
34. Ibid., p. 29.
35. Ibid., p. 32.
36. O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels in English Prisons*, pp. 139–40.
37. Ibid., pp. i–xiv.
38. Carla King (ed.), *Michael Davitt: Jottings in Solitary* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2003), pp. ix–xxx.
39. Michael Davitt, *Leaves from a Prison Diary or, Lectures to a 'Solitary' Audience* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), p. 10.
40. See the volume of review clippings: Trinity College Dublin, Michael Davitt Papers, MS 9664.
41. *The Scotsman*, 17 Feb. 1885.
42. *North Eastern Gazette*, 2 Sept. 1885 (in the volume of press cuttings in TCD, MDP MS 9606).
43. A. G. Evans, *Fanatic Heart: A Life of John Boyle O'Reilly* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1997), p. 210.
44. John Boyle O'Reilly, *An Múindín: Scéal ar Shaoghal Braighdeach san Astráil* (Dublin: An Gúm, 1931). The translation was by Conchubar Ó hArgáin.
45. John Boyle O'Reilly, *Moondyne Joe: A Story from the Underworld* (New York: P. J. Kennedy, 1879), p. 101.
46. McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners*, p. 361.
47. O'Reilly, *Moondyne Joe*, pp. 94–9.
48. Radinowicz and Hood, 'The status of political prisoner in England', p. 1480; McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners*, p. 3.
49. George Sigerson, *Political Prisoners at Home and Abroad* (London: K. Paul, Trench, 1890); G. Shaw Lefevre, *Irish Members and English Gaolers* (London: K. Paul, Trench, 1889); E. Dwyer Gray (ed.), *The Treatment of Political Prisoners in Ireland* (Dublin: The Freeman's Journal, 1889).
50. Wiener, *Reconstructing the Criminal*, pp. 308–36.
51. Christopher Morash, *A History of the Irish Theatre, 1601–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 150–1.
52. This relies heavily on Patrick Maume's analysis of 'The Embers': see his *'Life That Is Exile': Daniel Corkery and the Search for Irish Ireland* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1993), pp. 20–2.

The play was subsequently published in a volume which is very difficult to obtain, Richard Burnham and Robert Hogan with Lloyd Worley (eds), *The Cork Dramatic Society: Lost Plays of the Irish Renaissance, Volume 3* (Newark: Proscenium Press, 1984).

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54. Lennox Robinson, *Patriots* (Dublin: Maunsel & Co., 1912).
55. Lennox Robinson, *Curtain Up: An Autobiography* (London: M. Joseph, 1942), p. 43.
56. Morash, *A History of the Irish Theatre, 1601-2000*, p. 151.
57. Robinson, *Patriots*, pp. 14–17.
58. Ibid., pp. 34–5.
59. Ibid., p. 24.
60. Ibid., p. 41.
61. Ibid., p. 49.
62. Robert Hogan with Richard Burnham and Daniel P. Poteet, *The Abbey Theatre: The Rise of the Realists 1910–1915* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1979), pp. 184–6.
63. M. P. Linehan, *Canon Sheehan of Doneraile: Priest, Novelist, Man of Letters* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1952), p. 112; Catherine Candy, *Priestly Fictions: Popular Irish Novelists of the Early 20th Century* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1995), p. 135.
64. Linehan, *Canon Sheehan of Doneraile*, p. 34.
65. Canon P. A. Sheehan, *The Graves at Kilmorna: A Story of '67* (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1950), p. 167.
66. Ibid., pp. 189–96.
67. Ibid., p. 168.
68. Ibid., p. 212.
69. Ibid., p. 322.
70. Ibid., p. 229.
71. Kelly, *The Fenian Ideal*, pp. 193–4; Owen McGee, *The IRB: The Irish Republican Brotherhood from the Land League to Sinn Féin* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), pp. 351–4.
72. *Irish Freedom*, Jan. 1912.
73. Thomas J. Clarke, *Glimpses of an Irish Felon's Prison Life* (Dublin: Maunsel and Roberts, 1922), p. 62.
74. Earnan de Blaghad, *Slán le hUltaibh* (Dublin: Sáirséal & Dill, 1971), p. 175. His exact phrase was the wonderful 'Bhíos ag iomlasc sa bhrionglóidíocht ghruama.'
75. De Blaghad, *Slán le hUltaibh*, p. 175.
76. *Nationality*, 7 Aug. 1915.
77. A. Newman, *What It Feels Like* (Dublin: Whelan & Son, 1915), p. 14. Pim is unique among political prisoners from this period in boasting an amanuensis.
78. De Blaghad, *Slán le hUltaibh*, p. 182; Witness Statement of Ernest Blythe, National Archives of Ireland, Bureau of Military History, WS 939.
79. William Murphy, 'Suffragettes and the transformation of political imprisonment in Ireland', in Margaret Ward and Louise Ryan (eds), *Irish Women and the Vote: Becoming Citizens* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), pp. 114–35.
80. See Chapter 3 of William Murphy, 'The Tower of Hunger: Political Imprisonment and the Irish, 1910–1921' (PhD thesis, UCD, 2006).
81. See the introduction to Anna Bryson (ed.), *The Insider: The Belfast Prison Diaries of Éamonn Boyce 1956–1962* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2007), p. 2.
82. See de Blaghad, *Slán le hUltaibh*, p. 182.
83. Seán Milroy, *Memories of Mountjoy* (Dublin: Maunsel & Co., 1917), p. 73.
84. Newman, *What It Feels Like*, p. 26.
85. Milroy, *Memories of Mountjoy*, p. 45.
86. Patrick Pearse, *Collected Works of Pádraic H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Maunsel and Roberts, 1922) pp. 133–7.
87. *Hibernian*, 21 Aug. 1915.
88. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991); Marie Louise Legg, *Newspapers and Nationalism: The Provincial Press, 1850–1892* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998).
89. Maume, *Life That Is Exile*, p. 52.
90. Nan MacSwiney to Terence MacSwiney, 12 July 1916, in University College Dublin Archives, MacSwiney Papers, P48b/8.