Enshrining Ireland’s Nationalist History Inside Prison Walls: The Restoration of Kilmainham Jail*

The overwhelming majority of history-related tourist sites in Ireland are concerned with Ireland’s distant past. There are dolmens, stone circles, castles, ancient burial chambers, and ring forts, as well as monasteries with picturesque round towers and awe-inspiring high crosses. Surprisingly in view of the place of the struggle for nationhood in the Irish popular imagination, there has been little room for Ireland’s more recent history among this impressive collection of sites. While it is certainly true that a growing number of tourist attractions appeared during the 1990s that address eighteenth- and nineteenth-century events—the 1798 Center at Enniscorthy and the Famine Museum at Strokestown are two major examples—the War of Independence and Civil War are almost completely ignored. In fact, of the top twenty tourist sites in Ireland, only two provide any treatment of twentieth-century Irish nationalist history—the National Museum in Kildare Street, Dublin, and Kilmainham Jail1—and only the jail is devoted almost entirely to Ireland’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century national struggle for independence. Further still, Kilmainham offers a vastly different

*I would like to thank the staffs of the National Archives of Ireland, the National Library of Ireland, and the Kilmainham Jail Archive. I also wish to thank Aoife Bhreatnach for her comments on an early draft of this article.

1. The great majority of sources that mention Kilmainham prison use the spelling “jail”; the more usual British and Irish spelling of “gaol” is employed here only when it specifically appears in a given source or is used as the formal title of a particular site.
experience than, for example, Cork Gaol, where the emphasis is on ordinary prisoners and the prison experience itself—a fact that has its roots firmly in the restoration of Kilmainham.

Kilmainham Jail emerged as an important memory and tourist site during the 1960s after a voluntary organization was developed to undertake its restoration. Because volunteers restored the prison as a tourist site, the renovation itself was integrated into the constructed narrative of the jail. Kilmainham has thus been fashioned as a place of continuous national sentiment stretching from the prison’s opening right through to the late twentieth century. This article explores the story of the restoration of the jail by addressing three main issues: the possible reasons why modern nationalist history has been largely ignored by tourism developers; the evolution of the restoration campaign; and the integration of the restoration into the story of Kilmainham’s nationalist history.

**Ignoring the Struggle**

Ireland’s more recent past has been neglected in tourist development for several reasons. First, when the 1930 National Monuments Act was initially drafted in 1927, it was intended that the act cover structures built before 1800 and Gaelic-language manuscripts written before 1850. The final legislation was less chronologically specific, but it drew attention to ancient tombs and early monastic sites rather than to more recent structures. Furthermore, the Department of Finance was given oversight of the Office of Public Works—the body entrusted with maintenance of all national monuments. Although the Department of Finance was generally willing to grant preservation orders when costs were low, they were overwhelmingly

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3. National Monuments Act, 1930 (Dublin, 1930). It is worth noting that the Office of Public Works was not given responsibility to develop sites for tourist purposes, only to preserve them.

4. The department’s willingness to grant preservation orders for stone circles, ancient ring forts, dolmens, and similar sites is clearly evident in its records. See National Monument Act, 1930—Issue of Preservation Orders (NAI, DF, S200/2/38).
conservative and tight-fisted in their approach to the allocation of money for larger projects. Most civil servants at Finance entered the department during the early 1920s and maintained an extremely cautious approach to spending until the late 1950s. There was little motivation to consider more expensive development or restoration projects.

Another limiting factor was that in the wake of the Irish Civil War there existed a widespread desire to thrust unpleasant divisions into the dark recesses of the unspoken past. As late as the 1950s Ireland’s political leadership remained divided by bitter memories of the Civil War, and living together peacefully often required pushing this bleak chapter of the nation’s history under the carpet. It was not that the past was forgotten, but rather that “silence was better than hypocrisy.” To remain silent was also easier than to feel disgust at having done to fellow Irishmen what the British had done so recently to Irish revolutionaries. The struggle was remembered, but it was not emphasized.

Those charged with the development of tourism shared a general feeling that sites associated with Ireland’s recent struggle were of little interest to tourists. There were even concerns that historic sites had little attraction more generally, in spite of industry reports to the contrary. In addition, the overwhelming majority of tourists in Ireland have always come from mainland Britain. Even in recent years, when the number of tourists from continental Europe has jumped markedly and when Americans have flown across the Atlantic in record numbers, tourists from Britain still dominate the Irish market. In 2000, for example, almost 3.5 million British tourists visited Ireland, while just under 1.5 million arrived from Europe and slightly more than 1 million came from North America.

6. Anne Dolan, “Commemorating the Irish Civil War, 1923–2000” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Cambridge University, 2001), 333–34. This interesting dissertation was recently published under the same title by Cambridge University Press.
Given this heavy dependence on tourists from across the Irish Sea, it is hardly surprising that Irish tourist promoters have not gone out of their way to emphasize past conflict with Britain. As early as 1925 the Irish Tourist Association spoke of “new and stronger ties of friendship” between Ireland and England, already shoving the recent conflict out of sight.\(^\text{10}\) Several years later, the IRA painted anti-English slogans near tourist facilities in Killarney; these included, “England, damn your concessions, we want our country,” “Down with England,” and “We want no uninvited guests.” Even as the Irish government refused to act, not wanting to “fire the first shot in a new war with the IRA,” some British travel agencies responded by pulling Irish Tourist Association advertising from their shelves, an action that prompted tourism interests in Killarney to demand an end to IRA sloganeering.\(^\text{11}\) Anti-Englishness accomplished little more than a reduction in tourist revenue and would not be tolerated by tourism interests. Similarly, in 1963, when a comparable incident resulted in the cancellation of a trip by some young English servicemen to Achill Island, it inspired horror at both the local and national levels. An anxious taoiseach, Seán Lemass, wrote to Erskine Childers, then minister for transport and power, that in future, “whenever arrangements contemplated by them [Bord Fáilte] appear likely to involve political consideration[s], they should consult with you in advance.”\(^\text{12}\) Activities or projects that would dredge up memories of past Anglo-Irish hostility or contemporary political problems were avoided by the semi-state tourism organizers.\(^\text{13}\) The stakes were just too high.

Even so, in spite of the various reasons not to develop tourist sites promoting the memory of Ireland’s revolutionary past, Kilmainham

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13. Although the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising inspired mass festivities, the event was not intended for tourists and was apparently not suggested as a focus of possible tourist activity. Even in the late 1960s guidebooks mentioned Kilmainham and the newly opened Garden of Remembrance only in connection with the memory of those who gave their lives for Irish freedom; there was no discussion of enemy actions or of specific conflicts involved. See *Visitor’s Guide to Dublin* (Dublin, [?])1969.
Jail was developed and is currently one of the most important tourist sites in the country. In the remainder of this article I will seek to explain the development of Kilmainham as one of Ireland’s few tourist sites devoted to remembering revolutionary history. Ultimately, the ascension of the prison to success as both a tourist and a memory site is to be found in the very process of its restoration as much as in its role in Irish history. It was the act of reconstruction itself that assured the success of the site as a lieu de mémoire, redefining Irish history as a never-ending process of rebirth that persisted even after independence had been achieved.

As the literatures on heritage, memory, and preservation grow ever larger, there is very little that is surprising about the notion that restoration can change the meaning of the site or object being repaired. Perhaps more than any other single author, David Lowenthal has demonstrated how the heritage industry has altered the meanings of specific sites or sights even as it has tried to preserve old meanings. According to Lowenthal,

> every act of recognition alters survivals from the past. Simply to appreciate or protect a relic, let alone to embellish or imitate it, affects its form or our impressions. Just as selective recall skews memory and subjectivity shapes historical insight, so manipulating antiquities refashions their appearance and meaning. Interaction with a heritage continually alters its nature and context, whether by choice or by chance.

The very act of recognizing the past as important alters our relationship to it. Placing signs around castle ruins, for example, leads visitors to read the site or sight as a particular historical narrative. The castle is therefore defined in a specific fashion that may have little to do with the actual past of the monument. Indeed, the more preservationists seek to preserve an authentic vision of the past, the more they change the narrative in question. In one particularly

14. In 2000 almost 118,000 tourists visited Kilmainham Jail. This was a slight increase over the 112,000 who visited in 1999 and 108,000 who toured the site in 1998 (numbers supplied by Bord Fáilte).

revealing example Lowenthal recounts the story of the Minute Man National Historic Park in Massachusetts during the 1960s:

To display the story of that day [the Battle of Lexington and Concord], residents were evicted, post-revolutionary houses demolished, and traditional farming brought to an end. The remaining houses were boarded up, fields and pastures reverted to brush, and within a few years the whole countryside ceased to bear any resemblance to the revolutionary epoch’s usage. Instead of a living landscape with past and present visibly and functionally linked, a sumptuous visitor centre now shows surrogate relics and events of 1775 in audiovision; outdoors, where the skirmishes actually happened, elaborate notices along a measured, wood-chipped trail interpret the historical views that could have been seen before the National Park Service obliterated them.16

No doubt, the Park Service intended to save the past, maintaining it for present and future generations of visitors. The intention was almost certainly to create an agreed-upon national narrative of a fight against oppression, of the battle for freedom. As this narrative now stands, however, it is clearly not a reflection of reality. Instead, it is largely a constructed fiction, designed, as is often the case, to perpetuate the national mythology.

The restoration of Kilmainham, on the other hand, was designed both to save the past for future generations, creating a narrative not altogether dissimilar from that of the Minute Man National Historic Park, and to say something about the present generation. The preservationists recognized the symbolic significance of using a volunteer labor force; indeed, it was an important component of their plan.

BACKGROUND

Kilmainham Jail first opened in 1796 and functioned as an active prison until 1924. It was a product of the late eighteenth-century prison-reform movement that placed an emphasis on punishing the mind (rather than taking revenge on the body), while also impro-

16. Ibid., 360-61.
ing hygiene and thus acceptability to humanitarian concerns. The vast majority of convicts who passed through the prison were confined there for assault, burglary, shoplifting, rape, highway robbery, murder, bigamy, cattle stealing, and other such “common” crimes. During the Great Famine, for example, many afflicted people actively courted arrest in order to obtain relief, and the prison soon became vastly overcrowded. While life in the prison was unpleasant, at least there was food to eat. Even so, it is the political prisoners incarcerated there who have been placed front and center in the museum’s narrative. Contemporary visitors are told about the 1798 rebels, Robert Emmet and his secretary Anne Devlin, the Young Irelanders, the Fenians, and the martyred rebels of 1916, not to mention Charles Stewart Parnell and IRA men from the War of Independence. In the last decade brief mention of “ordinary” prisoners has entered the narrative. Still, the story remains overwhelmingly nationalist in its tone, featuring a heart-wrenching account of the marriage of Joseph Plunkett and Grace Gifford just hours before Plunkett was executed in the prison yard—yet another victim of British barbarity. 

FROM RACK TO RUIN

When the prison was decommissioned in 1924, there were no calls for its preservation. For most people Kilmainham Jail was a site of suffering more synonymous with oppression than heroism. The fact that the first four republican prisoners executed by the Free State

17. It is instructive to compare the narrative presented in materials published by the Kilmainham Jail Restoration Society with those published by the Heritage Service, or Dúchas, which now manages the site. The current guidebook (Pat Cooke, *A History of Kilmainham Gaol* [Dublin, 2001]), while still focusing most of its attention on political prisoners, provides accounts of eighteenth-century prison reform, ordinary prisoners, and even the Great Famine. The earlier guide offered by the Restoration Society (*Kilmainham: The Bastille of Ireland* [Dublin, 1970]), on the other hand, is entirely devoted to the nationalist past of the site. Although beyond the scope of this article, the change in narrative content is the product of larger trends in the presentation of historic sites as educational “interpretative” centers over the past ten years. A more complete account of the changing narratives at Kilmainham would be a worthwhile project but would depend on obtaining access to currently un-indexed files at the prison archive.
during the Civil War were shot in the prison yard cast an even darker shadow over the site. After the buildings had lain vacant for two years, in October 1926 the Shannon-scheme contractors approached the Department of Justice about using the old prison buildings as a storage depot for “masts and other weighty material,” a use for which government officials deemed the site unsuited. In the following year the contractors again approached the Prison Board about using the site for smaller items. At the time the board was considering reopening the prison. Before this could have been done, however, it would have been necessary to tear down several structures in order to increase light and space for necessary cooking, heating, and exercise facilities—a project which the board was uninterested in undertaking immediately. An agreement was therefore reached under which the site could be used for storage in exchange for future assistance in demolishing and reconstructing the necessary outbuildings.18 In 1929 any possibility of reopening the site as a prison was abandoned, and various government departments were offered the space for offices and storage—an offer that was, not surprisingly, politely refused.19

During the next several years Kilmainham Jail disappeared from government deliberations, although its destruction was briefly considered in 1936 before being abandoned as too expensive.20 The prison does not seem to have been of particular interest to the Dublin brigade of the Old IRA or other organizations either. In 1933, for example, the Irish Tourist Association published one of the most curious guidebooks in the history of Irish tourism, an Official Guide to Dublin that actually emphasized the city’s revolutionary history—something that, to my knowledge, is unique in Irish tourism literature prior to the 1980s.21 The guide not only mentioned the 1916 Rising but also recalled later key events:

19. Letter from Department of Justice to Department of Finance, 2 Feb. 1929 (NAI, DF, 13/9/29).
21. As far as I can tell, tourist authorities did not make any similar references to the Civil War until a short note appeared in a special “history issue” of Bord Fáilte’s travel magazine Ireland of the Welcomes (“Special Issue: ‘History Is Prologue,”’

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In 1921 a truce was proclaimed, negotiations being opened up. In January 1922 the Treaty was passed in the Dáil at University College, Dublin, by a majority of seven votes. The bombardment of the Four Courts, Republican headquarters, followed in June, many buildings being seized and burnt during the fighting that followed. Further executions followed in Dublin and elsewhere. 22

In spite of this quite unusual reference to the Civil War and Free State execution of Republican prisoners, Kilmainham Jail was not singled out as a worthwhile tourist or memory site.

The First Proposal

By the late 1930s there was increasing interest in Kilmainham. The most important development was a formal proposal by the National Graves Association, a republican organization devoted to the preservation of nationalist gravesites throughout Ireland, to develop the site as a memorial and museum to house artifacts related to the 1916 Rising. 23 The plan proposed the installation of a plaque at the site where members of the Irish National Invincibles were hanged in 1883 for the Phoenix Park murders. 24 At the site of the 1916 executions, a few hundred feet away, there was to be an 18-inch wall surmounted by grave-railings along with a fountain. A plaque was to proclaim, “On this hallowed spot the executed leaders of the Rising fell [followed by their names].” 25 The proposal made no mention of

Ireland of the Welcomes, July-Aug. 1986, 39-40). That such an overt reference was made in 1933 resulted from the composition of the Irish Tourist Association staff, which was composed of former anti-Treaty republicans who had become devoted members of Fianna Fáil, and from its publication shortly after the 1932 Fianna Fáil election victory. It is essential to note that the ITA was neither a semi-state body nor a government agency, although it did receive money from local authorities as prescribed by the 1925 Local Government Act.

24. The Invincibles were an offshoot of the Irish Republican Brotherhood who advocated political assassination. They are most significant for carrying out the Phoenix Park murders in 1882.
25. Reflecting the growing republican interest in the prison, the Irish Tourist Association drew attention to Kilmainham in 1938 by publishing an article in its monthly magazine, Irish Travel, entitled “A Visit to Kilmainham Jail, Dublin: The
the Civil War executions that occurred roughly 40 feet to the south, nor did it draw attention to the site where James Connolly had been shot, located on the opposite end of the stone-breakers’ yard from the rest of the 1916 killings. The latter omission may have been the result of poor research by the Graves Association or of Connolly’s Marxism, which was periodically raised as an issue during this period of intense anticommunism. Perhaps a different plan was simply judged undesirable from an architectural or political standpoint: Better that the leaders be commemorated together in order to spatially demonstrate Irish unity in the fight for freedom. As will be noted below, just such a concern later provided the motivation behind the Kilmainham Jail Restoration Society’s unwillingness to allow a separate Connolly memorial.

The Commissioners of Public Works had no immediate objection to the Graves Association proposal, even suggesting to the Department of Education that a museum be developed at the site. Public Works officials estimated that the scheme would cost £600 to implement. In order to stock the museum with artifacts it was suggested that the “National Risings Collection” be relocated from the National Museum in Kildare Street to a new jail museum. The Department of Education rejected the proposal, however, on the grounds that the collection was a popular attraction at its present location, where it could be adequately cared for, whereas if moved to Kilmainham, the collection would likely deteriorate in the increasingly run-down prison buildings. Instead, Education officials suggested that the site could be maintained in its current condition, and paintings of revolutionary leaders mounted in their corresponding cells, in order “to recall the history of the liberation movement,” while the great hall of the jail could be fitted up to display the automobile collection then housed at Kildare Street. This was intended as a constructive suggestion, but it was quickly tabled at the onset of the “Emergency” in 1939.26

Bastille of Ireland.” The article detailed the role played by the prison in Irish nationalist history, though it limited mention of the Civil War to a short note about female prisoners in 1923 without using the words “Civil War.” See C.F. Ridgway, “A Visit to Kilmainham Jail, Dublin: The Bastille of Ireland,” Irish Travel, Nov. 1938, 34.

Consideration of Kilmainham’s restoration did not reemerge until the immediate aftermath of the war when the Office of Public Works commissioned an architectural inspection of the buildings. The results were distressing. Though the inspectors found that the walls were in no immediate danger of collapse, they alarmingly observed, “There is constant danger from falling slates, glass, and plaster, and . . . timber floors and roofs are far from safe.” Under the circumstances the commissioners suggested that it would be extremely costly to repair and maintain the buildings: “Any considerable expenditure merely for the purpose of removing their present dangerous condition would not be worthwhile.” Because the Department of Education was still unwilling to consider establishing a museum at the site, and since the Office of Public Works persisted in its view that the prison would not constitute acceptable office space, the commissioners recommended a limited preservation program. Their plan would have preserved those cellblocks having historical significance, as well as the yard where the 1916 executions had occurred, while the rest would have been disposed of for building purposes.27 This suggestion did not demand dramatic expense, but it functioned to pay lip-service to remembering Ireland’s revolutionary history—a concern of at least a minority of the population during the immediate postwar years. Again, however, little happened.

By 1953, while the prison was rapidly descending into ruin, commemoration plans resurfaced. This time the Department of the Taoiseach initiated discussion of a prison-restoration and museum-development project—not because de Valera wanted to relive his days as a prisoner at Kilmainham, but as an employment scheme.28 Unemployment in Ireland was reaching crisis levels, and emigration was now a national disease. The restoration of Kilmainham Jail could provide jobs while meeting the republican desire to remember Ireland’s proud fighting past. The planning committee adopted the old National Graves Association proposal, but once again little happened, and the condition of the site continued to deteriorate with

27. Ibid.
alarming rapidity. By 1955 the Commissioners of Public Works warned that the public should no longer be allowed any access to the site. Slates were blowing off the roof, glass and plaster were falling, and ceilings were caving in.

Normally, we have been accustomed to refuse permission to members of the public to visit the jail. . . . We have allowed visits in exceptional cases, subject to the applicants signing a form of indemnity against accidents. In view, however, of our architect’s report we do not propose to permit any further such visits. As this may possibly give rise to protests and representations to members of the government, we have considered it well to report the matter at this stage for the information of the minister for finance.29

The situation had now reached a crisis. Kilmainham Jail was collapsing and would not last for many more years if the government persisted in its disinclination to act. If there was to be a solution, somebody or some organization outside the government would have to provide it.

The Restoration Society

The Kilmainham Jail Restoration Society began to gestate in the mind of a young North Dubliner named Lorcan C.G. Leonard in 1952. Leonard had become interested in the prison while waiting for a bus ten years before; he perceived a “friendliness” at the site that was almost certainly absent for most visitors, both past and present. Ten years later, Leonard and his friend Tommy O’Brien jointly agreed that the Invincibles had been unfairly exiled from Irish history and that something should be done about it: “Even radical republican thought . . . maintained an ignorance of them. Evidently, the efforts of the Invincibles were too ‘earthy’ for even their refined palates.” The men’s answer to this historical quandary was to plan a documentary film about the Invincibles and to use the proceeds to install a memorial at the jail. Among other potential col-

29. Letter from Commissioners of Public Works to Department of Finance, 1 Dec. 1955 (NAI, DFA, S102/017/53).
laborators Leonard contacted “Cre” O’Farrell, Sean Dowling, and Paddy Stephenson. These men told Leonard that he was “dealing with a dangerous subject which is best left alone.” Dowling eventually agreed to take part as long as his name was never formally associated with the project. The next step was to film key locations inside the prison itself—a task made impossible by the unwillingness of the Office of Public Works to provide access. The film project immediately foundered, but Leonard’s interest in the prison did not.

Not long after the death of the movie idea, Leonard received word that the Office of Public Works was accepting bids from demolition companies to tear down the prison. Leonard was horrified: “This was indeed the last act of the philistines, who had already provided a rash of ‘Mother Eire’s’ and Celtic crosses from one end of the country to the other to prove, I suppose, the respectable and Catholic character of the ‘four glorious’ years.” Leonard quickly approached a friend and fellow member of the Old Dublin Society, Paddy Stephenson, who agreed to participate in any “mass action” to preserve the penitentiary. Discussing the matter further, they hatched a plan to restore the site by using volunteer labor and donated materials in order to establish a museum, and communicated this intention to Sean Dowling, later chairman of the restoration campaign. They asked for help “in an effort to save Kilmainham Jail from the ravishes [sic] of time and the indifference of politicians,” for “what was once [a] monument to heroic endeavour is now the silent mocking cavern to the indifference of our times.” Good Irish men and women simply could not allow “the most holy spot in Ireland” to vanish into thin air.

In September 1958, Leonard brought a small group together at Jury’s Hotel in Dublin to discuss restoration plans. There was skepticism about the viability of a volunteer effort, but the participants kept talking. It did not take long for the group to agree that “in order to preserve unity of purpose, nothing relating to events after 1921 would be introduced into any activity, publicity, or statements in connection with Kilmainham.” With a common understanding of

the road ahead taking shape, Leonard began recruiting workers—primarily from among known republicans. Leonard and his colleagues believed that members of the Old IRA would furnish the bulk of volunteers because these men “needed no instruction on Kilmainham or its unique position” as a building of major significance in the republican history of Ireland.

Support began to mount. The Congress of Irish Trade Unions informed the fledgling society that the TUC would not frown on voluntary efforts to restore the jail, though it was unwilling to offer an official endorsement. Likewise, the Building Trades Council agreed to back a voluntary restoration effort. The Old IRA was also willing to aid the plan, but only on condition that “nothing of or relating to the period after 1921 would be identified with the Kilmainham project.”

Dublin Corporation had already shown an interest in preserving the building and probably also supported the proposed idea, although Leonard does not specify whether he or his colleagues had contacted city councilors. With all of the essential groups lined up in support of the plan, or at least not in opposition, the time had arrived to submit a proposal to the government.

While Leonard was pushing forward with his voluntary restoration scheme, the National Graves Association was also petitioning the government on behalf of the jail. As in 1938, it advocated plaques, a fountain, and grave-railings, but it now added the new elements of a pathway to the site of the graves of the Invincibles and a museum in the nineteenth-century great hall that would house “national relics, mementos, documents, guns, and other articles associated with our fight for freedom.” Sean Fitzpatrick, the secretary of the association, told the press: “There is no place more intimately and dramatically associated with our fight for independence than Kilmainham, and no matter what else may be done in the way

32. Leonard, “Kilmainham Project.”
33. In 1956, Dublin Corporation received a planning application for a cinema to be constructed immediately adjoining the jail. The corporation declared that “it is of the utmost importance that its amenity ground be strictly preserved,” and advocated using the jail as a museum. It was urged that “every precaution should be taken to safeguard the amenities of the hospital-jail complex in light of possible future fruition of these schemes.” See Letter Regarding Kilmainham Jail, 15 Oct. 1956 (NAI, DFA, S102/017/53).
of memorials to our past, we all want Kilmainham restored and preserved. It is really the focal point of our centuries-long struggle.”

Likewise, the Old IRA Literary and Debating Society also lobbied the government to act on the restoration. Writing to de Valera, leaders of the Old IRA argued that the matter should be “treated as urgent,” for the decaying jail should not be allowed to disappear:


> When the Restoration Society’s plan was received, the government was again considering the Graves Association proposal in a slightly modified form. The estimated cost had risen to £20,000. See Proposal Submitted Concerning Jail by Cabinet Committee, 29 Oct. 1958 (NAI, DT, S6512D/63).

> Outline Proposals for Restoration of Kilmainham Jail, 1958 (NAI, DT, S6512D/63).


> 36. When the Restoration Society’s plan was received, the government was again considering the Graves Association proposal in a slightly modified form. The estimated cost had risen to £20,000. See Proposal Submitted Concerning Jail by Cabinet Committee, 29 Oct. 1958 (NAI, DT, S6512D/63).

oners who had been housed in the jail. A committee of management was to serve just below the main board, handling finances and directing day-to-day building operations. Work would be carried out by two storekeepers, six bricklayer-masons, four plasterers, four carpenters, four slaters, four painters, thirty laborers, two steamfitters, three plumbers, three electricians, and six helpers and apprentices, and the project would enjoy the services of an architect, a civil engineer, and electrical and mechanical engineers—all of whom would receive insurance against personal injuries, the services of a canteen, and access to washroom and cloakroom facilities. The plan left little room for government objection, and it was formally approved by the Department of Finance in February 1960.

It is worth stressing the Restoration Society's idea that the jail would function as a tourist site. Previously, tourism was not a factor in any restoration plan or government discussion. By 1958, however, there was a growing awareness of the important role that tourism could play in stimulating the lagging economy, especially following the publication of the Programme for Economic Expansion. With government interest in tourism at a high point, the society was probably more interested in delineating a potential revenue stream than it was in educating British tourists about Irish martyrs, but this hardly mattered. Tourism and Kilmainham were now joined, thus ensuring that the prison would become more than a site for domestic cultural consumption.

**Restoration**

When Leonard finally entered the front gate of the prison on a dreary, wet Saturday in November 1959, the sights that he encountered must have been quite disheartening. The condition of the prison “defied description.” Many of the roofs had collapsed, the wooden floors had rotted through and were caving in, the windows were all destroyed, the masonry was crumbling, 20- to 30-foot trees sprouted from dense undergrowth, itself 4 or 5 feet high, and piles of guano covered exposed floors to a depth of as much as a foot in

38. Ibid.
39. Minute to Dr. O'Sullivan from [?Slavery], 1963 (NAI, DT, S6512D/63).
some places. Kilmainham was little more than a derelict ruin. The
volunteers had their work cut out for them.40

The Irish government formally handed over the keys to Kilmain-
ham Jail on 21 May 1960, charging the Restoration Committee a
nominal rent of one penny per year for a term of five years. At the
end of the lease the government was to hand over the prison to the
society on the understanding that adequate progress had been made
toward complete restoration of the site.41 The group started by
clearing away vegetation, chopping down trees, and removing fallen
masonry, bird droppings, and other obstructions. The oldest section
of the jail, the “ ’98 Section,” was also one of the most damaged and
required the complete removal of both roof and flooring as well as
the reconstruction of several portions of wall. Scaffoldings were
constructed to allow for the repair of gutters and the resetting of
coping stones.42 By November 1962 the Victorian portion of the
prison was nearly completed, allowing painting and the restoration of
roofing slates to begin. In addition, office space was established in
the prison governor’s house, the Catholic and Protestant chapels
were largely restored, and the all-important site of the 1916 execu-
tions was cleared of weeds, ivy, and rubble.43

There was very little public conflict concerning the reconstruc-
tion—with one exception. Although the Civil War issue had been
erased early in the process, the treatment to be accorded to the
Marxist leader of the Citizen Army, James Connolly, remained a
stumbling block. In September 1966 the Labour party proposed the
erection of a special Connolly memorial in the yard where he had
been executed—on the wall opposite from where the other executed
1916 leaders had fallen. As previously noted, such a memorial was
absent from the Graves Association proposal, and it was similarly
excluded from the Restoration Society’s plans. According to Seán
Dowling, chairman of the Restoration Society, the unwillingness to
provide a separate memorial on that spot was not politically moti-
vated in any way. Dowling argued: “James Connolly belonged to the

40. Leonard, “Kilmainham Project.”
42. Kilmainham News (Dublin, 1960), in KJA.
43. Kilmainham News (Dublin, 1962), in KJA.
whole Irish people and not to any political party, not even to the one he founded.” As a result, the society “decided . . . that no separate plaque to any leader would be permitted in the execution yard, but that the Labour party might erect a plaque to the memory of Connolly anywhere else in the jail.”\(^44\) For the Labour party this was unacceptable. Its leaders charged in their reply that the Restoration Society was clearly “subservient” to Fianna Fáil, and alleged that “the republican party” was using the prison for its own ends—accusations that were strenuously denied by Dowling.\(^45\) Perhaps as a measure of the popularity of the restoration project, the public in general sided with the society. One Labour supporter argued, “A separation [of the 1916 leaders] would diminish both Connolly and the other signatories [of the proclamation of the republic].”\(^46\) Another letter writer, who did not specify his political affiliation, “fully agree[d] with the committee’s decision to keep the execution yard a sacred place, free from all references to present-day political parties.”\(^47\) By now Kilmainham Jail was not just the project of a few republicans anxious to remember 1916 rebels, the Invincibles, or activists in the War of Independence; it was instead a commemoration of Irish national identity, a symbol not only of the nation’s past but also of its present.

**New Meanings for an Old Prison**

What made the site so powerful in cultural terms was that its restoration was almost entirely a grassroots effort—just as had been proposed. During the reconstruction of the prison the Kilmainham Jail Restoration Society received only small contributions from the Irish government. In 1966, Seán Lemass wrote to Dowling to inform him that monies collected from the pool at the newly opened Garden of Remembrance near Parnell Square would be donated to the society—a grand sum of about £50.\(^48\) In addition, the govern-

\(^{44}\) Seán Dowling to *Irish Times*, 27 Oct. 1966 (KJA).
\(^{45}\) Ibid.
\(^{47}\) J.P. Anderson, “Kilmainham Jail,” ibid.
\(^{48}\) Seán Lemass to Seán Dowling, 18 May 1966 (NAI, DT, 96/6/193).
ment did provide £1,000 per year through the Office of Public Works to cover insurance for the workers and furnished roughly a hundred glass display-cases for the museum. Government officials, however, were far less forthcoming when the society requested roof slates valued at £1,500. Overwhelmingly, the costs of restoration were met through voluntary contributions from individuals, businesses, and other organizations willing to support the project—a significant indication of how popular the restoration eventually became. Not only did the voluntary nature of the project allow the society to work around unpleasant memories, but it also reshaped the central memory of the prison into that of a site representing the whole of Ireland. The project would not have been possible without government approval, but the lack of government funding or other major official involvement kept tourist authorities well clear of the enterprise. This made it possible to evade the fact that the conflict commemorated at the jail had been with the British—Ireland’s single largest tourism market, valued at some £24.3 million annually in 1962. In addition, the Civil War was removed from the table as a subject of contention, and only positive memories of Irish nationalist activity were specifically invoked. Most important of all, it was the voluntary effort of disparate nationalist groups that made the reconstruction possible—men from both sides of the Civil War conflict and from all age and social groups.

From the beginning, the Restoration Society drew careful attention to the workers. In their first newsletter the leaders of the group boasted that the number of workers now included “over two hundred tradesmen and skilled workers giving of their spare time, working hard night after night and on Saturday afternoons. Praise is silenced. Let what must be said of this magnificent effort be said afterwards—now is the time for work and effort.” Of course, these sentiments did not stop them from pointing out that the workers were of “all ages and walks of life,” that “lads of 15 and 17 years” were present along with 80-year-old veterans, Dublin dock workers,

51. Seán Dowling to Seán Lemass, 15 March 1969 (ibid.).
and even an ex-British army sergeant. When Lemass visited the site in 1964 to survey progress, he was lavish in his tribute: “The work of restoration to the buildings was of national importance. The work already carried out by voluntary labour was . . . truly remarkable.” He was echoing a sentiment that the media had stressed as early as 1962. The *Dublin Evening Mail*, for example, featured a story that consisted of short biographical sketches of the workers, and not, as might have been expected, of the numerous illustrious prisoners who had served time in the jail. Among the commonplace figures mentioned was Jim Bruce, who had worked on the prison since September 1960, focusing his attention on the roof; Damien and Raymond Cassidey, who had “devoted their evenings to rebuilding the jail since reconstruction began”; and Joe Magill, a bricklayer “who has found more bricks than enough to lay in his hours after work.” For a time at least, heroism was about giving something back to Ireland through the rebuilding of a historic site. Another paper went so far as to boast: “Who said idealism is dead in Ireland? Go to Kilmainham Jail any evening, even with snow on the ground, and you will find a living proof that the idealism of 40 years ago is still very much alive.” Even in 2003, the *Dúchas* guide to the prison recalls the restoration as “an epic feat of voluntary effort and enthusiasm achieved without the support of government grants.”

Through comments such as these, the voluntary labor to reconstruct the jail was itself integrated into the mythology of the prison, in effect adding to the register of heroes associated with the site. These workers may not have fired on an enemy, but they had taken aim at the economic and spiritual malaise that gripped Ireland in the 1950s, and they stood as flesh-and-blood reminders of the improving fortunes of the early 1960s. During the 1950s industrial output fell, the country’s GNP dropped, and unemployment climbed at an

53. *Kilmainham News*, 1960, in KJA.
alarming pace. Between 1951 and 1956 the population contracted by 2.1 percent.\(^{58}\) When “remarkable growth” succeeded distressing decline in the early 1960s, the workers were already in place to symbolize the reversal.\(^{59}\) Their labors were born of a need to draw people into a national rebuilding program, and their progress physically illustrated the success of those efforts at a time when the policies outlined in the *Programme for Economic Development* were helping to turn around the economy. The restoration project held up the spectacle of everyday Irish people physically demonstrating their national pride through distinctly corporal memory work. In striking contrast to the tens of thousands who emigrated during the 1950s, these ordinary Irish people were not only staying put but also constructing Kilmainham as a totem of the national struggle while they themselves became symbols of that struggle. The enemy was different, but the nationalist zeal was still very much alive.

**Conclusion**

Paul Connerton has argued that collective memory is engendered through physical participation in the memory process.\(^{60}\) This is nowhere more true than in connection with Kilmainham Jail, where the whole process of voluntary restoration created memories of a collective past devoted to nation-building in both violent and peaceful forms. By participating in this protracted process, volunteers created a new history of the jail, with their own actions of swinging hammers and clearing rubble not only permitting the prison to persist as a site of memory, but also making the restorative action itself part of the memory continuum. Kilmainham was originally built by the British to imprison Irishmen. By reconstructing it, the Irish built a site that could enshrine their past as one of unified struggle against imperial oppression and the improvement of Irish lives.

The intention of the preservationists was to create Kilmainham as a memorial to Irish revolutionaries, but for this goal to be achieved,

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59. Ibid., 49.
the enterprise had to be undertaken by Irish citizens themselves because only a grassroots, voluntary effort could circumvent the challenges facing the construction of any tourist site devoted to modern Irish nationalist memory—not the least of which was government unwillingness to pay for any large restoration project. By removing the Civil War as a source of contention immediately, by linking revolutionaries of diverse political views together in one group, and by not allowing any single nationalist figure to be appropriated for contemporary political ends, the restorers of the prison developed a uniquely “national” site, dedicated to Ireland as a whole. Finally, the fact that Kilmainham was reconstructed through voluntary effort ensured that Irish tourist authorities remained distanced from memories of earlier historical struggles, unencumbered by the past as they tried to entice the old enemy into taking relaxing Irish holidays. Indeed, _Bord Fáilte_ maintained this distance by not mentioning Kilmainham or any related revolutionary sites or events in the pages of its tourist magazine until the 1980s.⁶¹

Since its restoration Kilmainham Jail has evolved to meet modern tourist tastes by incorporating more elements of Irish history, including attitudes to crime and prison reform, the Great Famine, and even the Irish Civil War. Yet, even with these new additions, the jail remains Ireland’s primary tourist site devoted to revolutionary history. Kilmainham not only projects its history as a prison for Irish nationalists since the late eighteenth century but also stands as a symbol of continuing Irish nationalism even after the end of armed struggle—a shrine to Irish nationalist feeling both before and after the revolution.