

# Mná 100

‘Hearts Ne’er Waver’

## The Women Prisoners of the Irish Civil War

Kilmainham Gaol Museum’s latest exhibition, ‘hearts ne’er waver’: The Women Prisoners of the Irish Civil War, marks the centenary of the imprisonment of over 600 women imprisoned between November 1922 and December 1923 in Mountjoy Prison, Kilmainham Gaol and a special female political prison camp set up in the former North Dublin Union (NDU) in Grangegorman. The exhibition was shaped not only by the extraordinary story of the women’s experiences during this time, but also by the remarkable collection of material in the Museum’s collection related to this period.

This is the largest historical exhibition mounted by the Museum in nearly 20 years. Letters, diaries and minute books of the meetings of the prisoner’s councils in Kilmainham and NDU give a sense of the everyday life of the prisoners. They also record momentous events such as hunger strikes, protests and, in particular, a notorious event in Kilmainham Gaol at the end of April 1923 when women who refused to be transferred to the NDU were beaten and removed by force. On public display for the first time is a fascinating diary kept by a young woman named Maura Redmond in which she describes hunger strikes, rounder’s matches, the violent forced removal of the women from Kilmainham to the NDU in late April 1923, as well as personal moments such as when she sees her mother from a window on the top of the Gaol. Other new material includes a handwritten draft of a letter written by Dolly Jeffares (later Quish) to the Governor of Kilmainham Gaol complaining about her treatment when she was arrested on 6 March 1923 and demanding the return of an attaché case containing some of her belongings and a sum of money she had on her at the time of her arrest. A property tag which also survived in her personal archive suggests that at least the attaché case was returned to her.

The exhibition also provides the opportunity to display items which have not been on display for many years. One of the largest items is a tricolour which is believed to have been made in Kilmainham Gaol by some members of Carlow Cumann na mBan. Measuring over two metres wide by one metre high, it had to undergo extensive conservation and mounting into a huge bespoke frame. Another major conservation project involved the repair and conservation of a crocheted top made by Essie Snoddy, also from Carlow, during her incarceration.

While nearly all the items on display come from the Kilmainham Gaol collection, we were also fortunate to have been able to borrow an original drawing by Grace Gifford Plunkett of the altar in the chapel of Kilmainham Gaol. She drew this sketch while she was a prisoner in Kilmainham in 1923 and gave it to one of her fellow prisoners, Nan Hogan. Grace had famously married her husband Joseph Plunkett, one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, in front of that altar the night before his execution. In addition to a section exclusively devoted to Grace Plunkett's Civil War prison art, a significant part of the exhibition also focuses on how acts of creativity sustained the women during their captivity. They sewed, embroidered, danced, painted, sang, performed plays and wrote poems and short stories. Sports, card-games, fancy dress parties and classes in subjects such as the Irish language, folklore, and history also helped them cope with the dull monotony of prison life.

I curated this exhibition along with my colleague Aoife Torpey. This process began with us firstly identifying the story the exhibition needed to tell, and then working on how we would divide that narrative across the four spaces of the temporary exhibition space. We then looked at the collection itself to identify the objects which might help us tell this story. While the narrative generally informs the choice of objects to display, the objects in the collection also determined the way the exhibition developed, especially large and significant objects such as the Carlow Cumann na mBan flag. Once a final list of objects to be included in the exhibition has been identified, we then had to consider what needed to be repaired, cleaned or mounted by a professional conservator. This painstaking conservation work can take several months or more, so planning and identifying objects needs to take place well in advance of the opening date.

One of the most challenging tasks we face with any exhibition is distilling down the story we wish to tell into a series of short exhibition panels with text of no longer than 200 words. At the same time we were also selecting the images to illustrate the various panels. Interestingly, there are no photographic records of life inside Irish female political prisons during the Civil War so as a result we had to draw from illustrations drawn or painted by the women themselves. On this occasion we worked with designer Wendy Williams who developed the graphic design of the panels and the overall 'look' of the exhibition. She also helped us reproduce copies of graffiti and images painted by the women in the Gaol in 1923 on the walls of the exhibition space. Most of this graffiti is located in areas which are inaccessible to visitors on the public tours, so these reproductions enabled us to share a very important aspect of the material culture of this period with visitors to the Museum.

Another new innovation with this exhibition was our decision to display it in parallel with the work of a contemporary Irish artist, Margo McNulty. In 2022 Margo was the recipient of a Markievicz Award from the Arts Council which is designed to develop new work that reflects on the role of women in the period covered by the decade of centenaries 2012–2023 and beyond. Over the course of nearly two years she visited the Gaol regularly and we provided her with access to material related to the women who were held in Kilmainham. Rather than displaying her work in a separate space, we decided that it should be seen alongside the historical material which inspired it. Seeing the exhibitions side-by-side enhances both, and the interplay between her work and the material which inspired it provides new insights into history of these remarkable women.

Brian Crowley