

The Art of War

A Troubles Archive Essay

Máirtín Ó Muilleoir



About the Author

Máirtín Ó Muilleoir is the publisher of community newspapers in the US and Ireland, most notably the *Andersonstown News*. He served as a Sinn Féin councillor in Belfast from 1987-1997 and again from 2010 and remains deeply involved in efforts to regenerate underserved communities in Belfast on both sides of the peaceline. An enthusiastic Irish speaker, he published the daily newspaper *Lá* under a two-year contract from Foras na Gaeilge until the end of 2008. He lives in Belfast with his wife Helen and they have four children. He attended Queen's University Belfast flittingly from 1977-1980 but graduated in absentia rather than experience 'The Queen' played by the RUC band at his graduation ceremony. He believes that all great communities surround themselves with great works of art and cherish their artists. He worked with artists Brian O'Doherty (the late Patrick Ireland) and Robert Ballagh to create the largest ever public artwork in West Belfast which will celebrate the Irish language and welcome visitors to the Gaeltacht Quarter.

The Art of War

The day my brother was released from jail was an occasion of much joy for my parents but not so for the younger Millars because his five day ordeal – house raid, arrest, detention, abuse, charging, release on bail – was about two days short of a genuine prison hankie. And, of course, the prison hankie, complete with national colours, requisite autographs, automatic weapons and rising phoenix, wasn't the sort of thing you could do on your return home.

Of all the art thrown up in the war years, prison art was uniquely site specific. If it wasn't forged in an internee's cage, or on a Crumlin Road Gaol landing, then, no matter how beautiful or impressive the imagery, it was neither valued nor valuable. Celtic crosses, Irish harps, magic marker (or multicoloured Biro) prison hankies, leather belts and wallets were the staples of the seventies prison art catalogue and, since the authorities had operated internment on a rolling basis every ten years or so, there was always at least one grey-haired prisoner who picked up where he had left off a decade previously, passing on his craft to a new generation.



Image courtesy of the Roddy McCorley Society, Moyard House, Glen Road, Belfast

The tradition of prison art was as old as the tradition of resisting colonial rule. The Fenians, shackled in Victorian dungeons, had created hankies to keep the green flag flying, while on the twenties prison ship, *The Argenta*, prisoners inscribed elaborate images on books. The 'forties men' and 'fifties men' had crafted Celtic crosses, some of which no doubt went up in smoke in the pogrom of '69, a conflagration which was to gift us, by and by, a new generation of prison art.

The prison handkerchiefs produced by the first political prisoners of the late sixties and early seventies were acts of propaganda. They told a story of defiance and suffering, one which wasn't being told through the 'official media', while bridging the gulf of separation imposed by the prison wall. They were intended for display in that most important gallery of working class existence, the living room, and they were hung in large numbers and with much pride on walls that formerly bore images of JFK or the Pope of the day. Such items were much coveted by British soldiers as trophies and were often stolen during raids on homes. Perhaps those soldiers, now pushing pension

age in Barnsley and Birmingham, take out their Long Kesh trophies from time to time and tell war stories as they bounce their grandkids on their knees.

The republican women of Armagh Gaol went a step further, creating tablecloths bearing republican mottos and imagery. A large work held by the Roddy McCorley Society in its impressive museum is a linen tablecloth signed by women prisoners who below their names have written the weapon which led them to a career in prison handicraft: "Sten gun" wrote one prisoner, "firebombs" another.

As the Long Kesh internees settled into life behind the wire and the realisation dawned that perhaps they might not be out in a week, the hankies gave way to woodwork, often Celtic crosses with the names of dead IRA Volunteers inscribed on the plinths. Walking past Divis Tower recently, I noted a seventies prison cross in one window, serving notice that the internment camp gassings, the hoods, the white noise and the naked beatings had been rebutted by prison art.

The artworks, of course, weren't just visual and tactile expressions of political and cultural identity; they also served the purpose of helping prisoners serve their time, providing a diversion during interminable days of imprisonment. They also allowed the prisoners to continue to contribute to their struggle from behind bars – prison craftworks were constantly raffled at republican fundraising functions both in Ireland and the US. In the dark night of the H-Block blanket protest, the prison artists came into their own as covert illustrators. Wearing only a blanket and smearing their own excrement on the cell walls, the republican prisoners of the late seventies and early eighties were denied all books but the Bible. The artists among the prisoners became admired for their ability to portray the horrors of the cell block in drawings, with contraband Biro refill or stubby pencil, on squares of toilet paper which were then smuggled out of the prison. Like a newspaper artist in an age before cameras, the blanketman "good at art" would be charged with responsibility for bringing the cell beatings and the strip searches to life for the reader on the outside. Jarring and urgent, the detailed drawings powerfully conveyed the reality of life inside, and the knowledge that the drawings were made not in a garret or a studio, but in a stinking cell by a bearded man in a blanket, meant the message was delivered with the force of a baton on the kidneys.

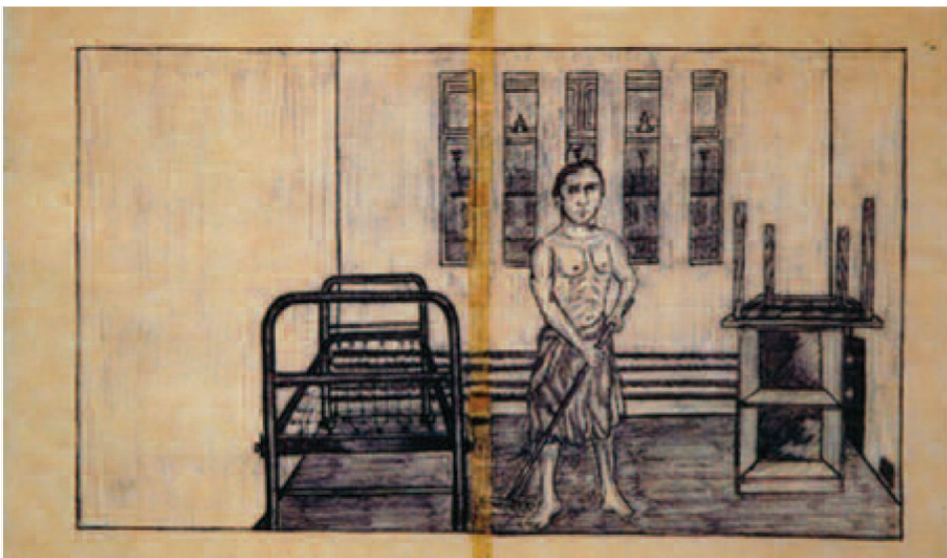


Image courtesy of the Roddy McCorley Society, Moyard House, Glen Road, Belfast

Did prisoners create the elaborate Celtic-style murals of excrement depicted in Steve McQueen's mesmerising film *Hunger*? For teenage political prisoner Pilib Ó Rúanaí, artistic ambition didn't run quite that high. "At first, we would occasionally write words with the shit," he says in Irish. "Some prisoners drew pictures on the wall, using a piece of mattress as a brush. But for me, after about three months the humour wore off and with it the interest in doing anything but getting the stuff on the walls."

Jake Mac Siacais, a one-time cellmate of Bobby Sands, recalls using the industrial-strength oxtail soup served up to protesting prisoners as ersatz brown paint in wall paintings of the images which dominated prison life: crows and seagulls. And while many of the toilet paper drawings from that traumatic time have been preserved by the Bobby Sands Trust (www.bobbysandstrust.com) and are now archived in the National Library, there is no extant copy of the elaborate chess set Mac Siacais once made of mouldy bread.

Bobby Sands – who, in an indictment of the local literati, observed that “the men of art have lost their heart” – rose above his own misery to pen rousing poems and short stories, in Irish and in English. He composed songs telling of the prisoners’ plight, inspiring Belfast seanchaí Liam Mac Carráin to write a moving lament to the hunger strikers. Derry lifer Eoghan Mac Cormaic penned a surreal novel in Irish, *Cáibín an Phápa*, while in the H-Blocks; while the former Sinn Féin spokesman Danny Morrison, imprisoned in the nineties, contributed the latest in a venerable line of Irish prison diaries, *Then The Walls Came Down* (Mercier). Gerry Adams’ *Cage Eleven* (Brandon Books) cast a wry and sardonic eye, in a series of short stories, on the prisoners of political status era Long Kesh. Playwright Martin Lynch went one further in 2009 by penning a musical hit, *Chronicles of Long Kesh*, which surveyed the 30-year history of Long Kesh and the Maze with a balanced eye. That excellent work builds on an earlier Lynch play about the notorious Castlereagh detention centre, *The Interrogation of Ambrose Fogarty*; Lynch had been held in Castlereagh on several occasions.

Out on the streets, mural art drew its vibrancy and inspiration from the prison protests of the H-Blocks. Led by Danny Devenney, who receives the acclaim and mass audience for his work that other artists can only dream of, the muralists transformed gable walls into vivid calls to action, documenting each stage of the prison struggle and spitting out the censor’s gag. These much-loved people’s paintings earned brickbats from the arts establishment. Indeed, one Belfast artist sneeringly assured the public that it wasn’t art at all, but that spoke more of political and class animus than of aesthetic misgivings over a badly-proportioned depiction of a hunger striker. Similarly, when Margaret D’Arcy had the gall in the autumn of 1978 to disrupt an Ulster Museum exhibition by writing on the walls in sympathy with the protesting women prisoners of Armagh Gaol, her crime was doubly reprehensible in the eyes of the arts cognoscenti because she had brought her protest to a South Belfast arts palace.

Where others saw offensive terrorist propaganda, Conrad Atkinson saw ordinary people seeking justice and using the tools of the artist to make their case. He first identified the potency of the Long Kesh hankie as an artform, appropriating it for a series of pieces banned from the Ulster Museum in 1978 in an outrageous act of thought policing which he dubbed “cultural paramilitarism”. His work is now in the Northern Ireland Collection of the Wolverhampton Art Gallery – the only major collection of its kind in Ireland and Britain. Atkinson has also used letters and poems from Long Kesh in a seminal work provoked by the slaughter on Bloody Sunday. Wolverhampton is also the unlikely resting place for Rita Duffy’s prison piece *Veil*, in which, through doors from the abandoned Armagh Gaol, the viewer is given a Judas-hole view of falling tears.

Perhaps the most monumental work of art inspired by the prisons age is Shane Cullen’s humbling *Fragments Sur Les Institutions Republicaines IV*, created over three years in the mid-nineties from 64,000 individually painted letters evoking the endurance of the H-Block prisoners themselves. *Fragments* retells the story of the hunger strike over 96 large panels on which prison ‘comms’ smuggled from the H-Blocks are hand-lettered.

Patrick Ireland (Brian O’Doherty) went full-tilt at the obscenity of the H-Blocks with his glorious *Big H* rope drawing-cum-mural. Shown in Belfast in 1989, it mixed mischief and magic in those three colours of the prison protest: orange, green and brown. “The ‘dirty protest’, as it was called, struck deep with me,” wrote O’Doherty (*Patrick Ireland: Labyrinths, Language, Pyramids and Related Acts*. Elvehjern Museum of Art).

“These then were the components of *Big H*: an orange H in a pyramid of green, two dismally dissonant colours, surrounded by the dirty protest, and further bracketed by a massive, dark split H ... There’s a great exchange of energy here ... I was careful that the work had enough neutrality to provoke both sides in different ways. The loyalists could see a powerful orange H blazoned on a field of green, asserting itself over that pestilential colour and the surrounding shit. The republicans could see the hated H about to be engulfed by the rising pyramid of noble green, eventually opening the prison door held between the lower limbs of the H, a generative position surely.”

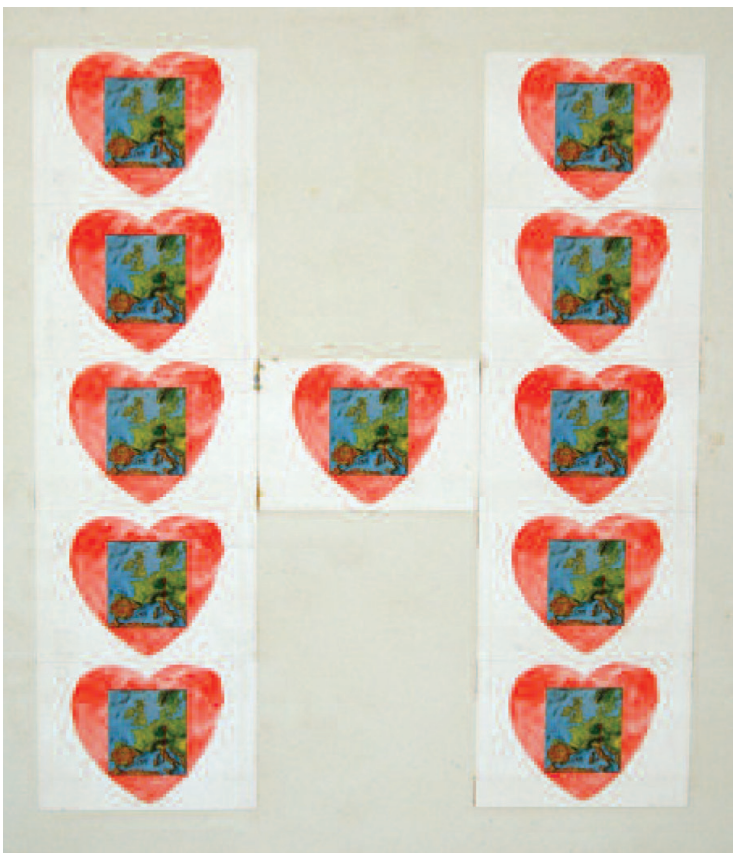
As with Cullen’s opus, Richard Hamilton’s famous image of the blanketman, *The citizen*, is part history lesson, part tribute. Writing to this author in 2006, (www.apublishersblog.blogspot.com), Hamilton (then in his 85th year) explained that the image (which was shown in the Tate Modern in 2006 close to thoughtful paintings of the H-Blocks by Hamilton’s wife Rita Donagh) shows Hugh Rooney (brother of Pilib) in his prison cell in a disturbing image from a 1980 BBC documentary.

“It is good to know that my triptych is appreciated in Ireland,” wrote Hamilton. “The paintings have a strange history. *The citizen* was first shown at the Guggenheim, New York, in 1983 ... The director ... having agreed to exhibit it, got cold feet and said it was too controversial, especially in view of the fact that the opening would

be just before the St Patrick's Day parade. I persuaded him that the New York Irish community would be unlikely to put a bomb in the Guggenheim. Very soon afterwards the painting was shown in Derry ... When the show opened a young woman supporter of the IRA surprised me by asking, 'Why did you make his eyes so evil?'

"This ambiguity in the reception of the triptych was interesting. The fact that all three pictures are now part of the Tate Gallery collection, bought by the British taxpayer without undue complaint, itself seems paradoxical. As for the eyes, I don't remember 'changing the eyes' intentionally. I believe Hugh Rooney's eyes in the painting are quite like his expression in the TV footage. I valued the ambiguity contained in the image. Some viewers see Christ, others see Charles Manson."

The use of the word 'citizen' is certainly related to Joyce's Fenian. "My title was appropriate for several other reasons. The word has significance in relation to its use during the French Revolution. A 'citizen' was opposed to the monarchy and to the aristocracy, and supported the republic. The later phase of IRA activity emerged from civil rights demonstrations citizens declaring their right to equality."



At the heart of Europe by Conrad Atkinson

For Hamilton, the wheel turned full circle when he later saw a documentary from the H-Blocks in which a prisoner had one of his images of a blanketman on his wall. Likewise, Robert Ballagh's work paying tribute to the hunger strikers – and another memorable piece he painted to highlight the campaign to repatriate republican prisoners from English jail, showing a light through a barred window falling on a sod of grass – would often adorn prison cells.

The prisons, of course, continue to leave their artistic imprint: Belfast's most-photographed mural is of a prisoner – Bobby Sands – while in more recent years the prisons themselves have been mooted as museums and art galleries. Indeed, Crumlin Road Prison hosted an evocative portrait exhibition by Dublin artist Eoin Mac Lochlainn (a son of Kilmainham Prison's first curator) in August 2009 with one compelling painting in each of eight cells. Philip Napier contributed one of the best known questioning reflections on Bobby Sands' death, *Ballad No.1* (1992) complete with chanter's accordion, while Locky Morris from Derry focused on the plight of the Birmingham Six, victims of injustice incarcerated in England with a work based on the immigrant's suitcase cut into playing cards – similar to those used as 'evidence' against the innocent men.

Former prisoner in the 'Crum' and H-Blocks, Raymond Watson is now an established artist whose *The Shot Lock* exhibition in 2008 provided a thoughtful visual reflection on the resourceful protesting prisoners of the H-Blocks gulag. His finest work in the series, *A Cold Floor*, shows a pair of feet – a blanketman standing on a Bible in order to keep himself warm. "The prison made me the artist I am," says Watson. "Though in much of my work I use the prison as a metaphor for the prisons of the mind which create barriers between us and others and which have to be overcome – just as the blanketmen found ingenious ways of communication to get round the prison walls which held them." Watson concludes that he wouldn't be the type of artist he is without his prison experience.



Image courtesy of the Roddy McCorley Society, Moyard House, Glen Road, Belfast

What impact then did his four month imprisonment from late 1970 to early 1971 for civil rights activities have on eminent Armagh artist JB Vallely? Following his detention, he recalls an international petition being circulated among prominent artists and writers – Samuel Beckett was among those who signed – insisting that he be allowed to paint in the 'Crum' rather than take part in prison work. "As a result, I was allowed to spend every day painting; it was amazing I had the run of the place," he said at the October 2009 unveiling of his portrait of outgoing Belfast Lord Mayor Tom Hartley. "I completed two large works, both around 60" by 50", depicting the glasshouse and wood yard, which they wouldn't let me take with me on my release and which I haven't seen since." He did use two days parole to attend an exhibition of his work in the Arts Council gallery in Bedford Street, Belfast. "To that date, it was the biggest exhibition ever hosted in the gallery but not one member of the Arts Council board attended the packed opening." A piece from this exhibition was subsequently obtained by the Arts Council and is in its collection.

But neither the conflict nor prison emerged in his acclaimed later work. "My involvement in politics was personal," he told the *Irish Arts Review*. "A good few years of fraught existence, returning to years of constant police and army harassment, a brief time in jail, on the run from internment. Our activity was civil rights orientated but the civil rights movement or the People's Democracy people were interned ... I still have notions on grand themes but it would be too self-conscious. Too near the knuckle." (*Irish Arts Review* Vol. 20 No. 3)

Throughout the period of warfare, there was also a prodigious amount of artistic material produced by loyalist prisoners – much of it above the level of the wall mural prized by the UDA leader filmed in his cell below a mural showing the horsemen of the apocalypse with the legend, 'Kill them all, let God sort them out'. In fact, the best-known 'prison artist' is probably Michael Stone, who turned to art on his early release after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, producing at least one exhibition of naïve works before returning to Stormont in 2006 in an attempt to murder Sinn Féin leaders in what he later insisted in court (unsuccessfully) was a piece of "performance art".

No major works of art were inspired by the loyalist prison experience, a fact attributable surely not to lack of ability but to the fact that, as the head of curatorial services in Wolverhampton Art Gallery, Marguerite Nugent, puts it: "Most of the work produced on political themes tends to be from the voice of the subjugated."

The subjugated have now swapped the prison cell for the Stormont chamber, and there are no more handkerchiefs being made for me to put on my study wall. The canvas on which they tell their story is now an unchained one.

Máirtín Ó Muilleoir