

EPISODE 3 – COMMUNICATING WITH PRISONERS

[Music played from soundtrack to podcast]

Isabel Claffey: Hello and welcome back to The Model, home of the Niland Collection in Sligo, and to this, our third episode of ‘Encounters with Jack B. Yeats.’ In this episode we will hear a tour guide talk by Jack’s painting, ‘Communicating with Prisoners,’ and this will be followed by a first-hand account of prison life in Kilmainham Gaol in 1923. Listener discretion is advised for this piece.



‘Communicating with Prisoners,’ Jack B. Yeats, c.1924, oil on canvas, 46 x 61. The Niland Collection, Sligo. ©Estate of Jack B. Yeats, DACs London/ IVARO Dublin, 2021



[Tour Guide talks about a painting by Jack B. Yeats, 'Communicating with Prisoners' (c.1924)]

[The sounds of several people entering an art gallery with the sound of their shoes walking across the gallery floor]

Tour Guide: Jack B. Yeats's oil painting 'Communicating with Prisoners,' is a beautiful mid-career work by the artist. It is one of the jewels of the Niland Collection and was purchased by public subscription in 1962, through the monumental fundraising efforts by the County Librarian for Sligo at the time, Norah Niland. Jack painted this work in around 1924, and he was about fifty-three-years old at the time.

A large billboard hoarding is placed prominently on the left hand side of the painting, and this is balanced compositionally on the opposite side by the large bastion tower of Kilmainham Gaol. The silhouettes of seven women are shown in the foreground, their backs are turned from us, and the head of a little boy peeks up from the lower right hand corner of the painting.

One of the posters on the billboard shows the image of a man either climbing up or down a ladder, and the top half of his body is cut-away by the frame, giving a... an immediacy to the work – a photographic quality like a snapshot quickly taken. The man on the ladder appears to be escaping from the picture, which is typical of Jack's humour.¹ Another poster on the billboard shows the burly image of Santa Claus, highlighting the sharp contrast between the festive season of Christmas and the deprivations of prison life.

There is a winter's feel about this scene - as the seven women are well-dressed, wearing heavy coats and colourful hats. We see their silhouettes framed against a dusky Dublin

¹ Republican prisoners, such as the Sligo woman Linda Kearns with three other female prisoners staged a daring escape from Mountjoy Prison in October 1921, climbing over the prison walls with a rope ladder, while Ernie O'Malley, who later became a close friend of Jack B. Yeats - a collector and advocate of his work - also escaped with two other prisoners in an audacious prison break from Kilmainham Gaol in February 1921.



skyline and the rooftops link the composition, between the billboard and the large bastion tower of the jail.

Jack had only begun to paint seriously in oils during his late thirties and by his early fifties he had become a master within this medium. The brush strokes within this work are looser than the oils that had come before and there is sketchy quality to the handling of the paint and in the depiction of the figures - even a Goyaesque quality in the use of flat unmodulated areas of paint and in the muted jewel-like colours of the ruby red hat and the dark emerald and burnished yellow-gold of the coats.

A greenish glow glimmers at the base of the tower and a huddle of faces press against the strip of cell windows above. The prisoners have broken a window and one prisoner can clearly be seen to be calling down to the women below - her hands cupped to her mouth, her elbows propped on the windowsill.

From February to September 1923, Kilmainham Jail was entirely occupied by female political prisoners. Over 500 women and girls aged between twelve and seventy were incarcerated here during this time.² These women were Anti-Treaty Republicans and were imprisoned here by the Free State Government during the Civil War period.

Like many artists at this time, Jack often used contemporary photographs as source material for his work and because of this - some of the figures depicted in this painting can be identified. In one photograph dating from 1920, Maud Gonne MacBride, Charlotte Despard and Dorothy Macardle inspect a bombed-out factory in Balbriggan. Their backs are turned from us.

² Sinéad McCoole, 'No Ordinary Women: Irish Female Activists in the Revolutionary Years 1900-1923', Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003, p.104



Photograph of Maud Gonne MacBride, Charlotte Despard and Dorothy Macardle as they inspect the burnt-out ruins of a hosiery factory in Balbriggan, destroyed in 1920 during the War of Independence. Photograph by W.D. Hogan and published in the 'American Commission on Conditions in Ireland Interim Report,' 1920. Image courtesy of Kilmainham Gaol Museum/OPW and ©National Museum of Ireland

Dorothy Macardle is the youngest woman in the photograph, and she is wearing a beret and holding a bag behind her back. She resembles the woman, second from the right in Jack's painting – this woman is wearing a brown coat. Her bobbed hair peeks out from beneath a dark blue-green beret. Her slender neck and slim shoulders resemble the figure of the republican activist and writer, Dorothy Macardle, who was imprisoned in Kilmainham Jail from February 1923 to April of that year.³ Maud Gonne MacBride resembles the tallest woman in the painting, who is dressed all in black. She was also incarcerated here during the civil war period as was her daughter Iseult Stuart.

³ Molitor, Jennifer, 'Dying for Ireland: Violence, Silence, and Sacrifice in Dorothy Macardle's *Earth-Bound: Nine Stories of Ireland* (1924),' in *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2008, pp. 43-61. See p.26 & p.55.



Dorothy Macardle was from a renowned family in Dundalk.⁴ Her father, Thomas Macardle was the founder of the Macardle Brewing Company.⁵ In her book, 'The Irish Republic,' published in 1937, she wrote that by the end of March 1923, there were about three hundred girls and women in Dublin prisons, and more were been sent up from the country at the rate of four or five every day.⁶ In early March, new regulations were introduced which forbade those in command to receive or send letters or to have any communication with their families, and Dorothy wrote, 'These rights which were essentials of political treatment were restored only after ninety-one girls and women had been on hunger strike for seven days.'⁷

This mandate issued in 1923 against the communication by the prisoners is one of the keys to unlocking Jack's work. Kilmainham Gaol closed in 1924, unofficially and officially in 1929, and these female prisoners were the last cohort incarcerated here.⁸ In recent years, it has been revealed that much of the graffiti inscribed on the soft lime plaster of the cell walls were made by these women and girls.⁹

The painting, 'Communicating with Prisoners,' is a contemporary memorial to these female revolutionaries - a document of female solidarity. In many of his later works, Jack painted the dead walking side-by-side with the living - in dream-like reveries where memory intertwined with the lived moment. In this, a transitional work from his career, we witness these seven women as they see themselves - locked behind the jail walls - and suddenly the painting transforms before our eyes. It is a living elegy to these women. As we see them –

⁴ For a short biography of Dorothy Macardle, see, Maume, Patrick. 'Macardle, Dorothy Margaret.' In the 'Dictionary of Irish Biography, Oct. 2009,' <https://www.dib.ie/biography/macardle-dorothy-margaret-a5097>

⁵ Macardle, Moore & Co.

⁶ Macardle, Dorothy, 'The Irish Republic,' published by Victor Gollancz, London, 1937; 4th Ed. Irish Press Ltd, Dublin, 1951, pp.838-839

⁷ Ibid

⁸ In 1924, the last prisoner in Kilmainham Gaol was Éamon de Valera. The prison fell into disuse until restoration began in 1960 and was officially reopened as Kilmainham Gaol Museum by President Éamon de Valera in 1966.

⁹ *Following the Fighters?: female, political imprisonment in early-20th century Ireland* was a project funded by the Irish Research Council [IRC] with the collaboration of the Office of Public Works [OPW] from October 2012 to October 2014, which involved identifying, photographing and analysing remnants of graffiti that survive in the West Wing [older wing] of Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin, with an analysis of the autograph books of the prisoners in the Kilmainham Gaol Archive – see publications of Dr Laura McAtackney, UCD.

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their backs turned from us - the work activates, and the painting becomes a literal window onto the past - and what if... what if one of these women, turned and spoke to us?

Jack B. Yeats, himself, was a compassionate observer of the events of the Civil War, and as with his other political painting in the Niland Collection, 'The Funeral of Harry Boland,' from 1922, a tangible sadness can be felt at its core but there is also a strong moral centre here and this emanates from the artist - as essentially, Jack was a chronicler of the human heart and although he sympathised with the human element of the republican cause, he was never a combatant but instead recorded these human passions in paint and the deep divisions that were created in Irish society by a fractious civil war.

In the Autumn of 1920, a 31-year-old, Dorothy Macardle rented a flat from Maude Gonne MacBride in her house on Stephen's Green,¹⁰ and from here she became involved in the republican movement. She helped Erskine Childers with his printing press - writing articles and propaganda for this press. And she was one of the women arrested at the Sinn Féin headquarters at 23 Suffolk Street on the 9th of November 1922.

While she was in prison, Dorothy wrote nine Gothic-styled ghost stories, which were published in her 1924 collection, 'Earth-bound' - each story dedicated to a female inmate, and later she went on to write a series of successful novels.¹¹

In an entry in her prison journal from 1923, Dorothy Macardle wrote an account of one particularly horrific day in Kilmainham Gaol. It was in the last days of the Civil War and the prisoners were to be moved across the river to the North Dublin Union, but they refused to leave as they feared for the safety of two of the other prisoners; Kathleen O'Callaghan, the widow of the Lord Mayor of Limerick, Michael O'Callaghan, who was shot dead during the War of Independence and Mary MacSwiney, the sister of the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney who had died from hunger strike in Brixton Prison in 1920.

¹⁰ Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921, National Archives of Ireland. Statement of Miss Dorothy Macardle, "Creevagh," Dundrum Road, Dublin - signed by Dorothy Macardle in 1950. BMH. WS 0457

¹¹ Three of Dorothy Macardle's novels, 'Uneasy Freehold,' (1941), 'The Unforeseen' (1946) and 'Dark Enchantment' (1953) were recently republished by Tramp Press in their Recovered Voices series. 'Uneasy Freehold' was made into the film, 'The Uninvited' in 1944 and this novel was later republished under this title by Tramp Press in 2016. It is now acknowledged as a modern classic ghost story.



For whatever reason, the Free State Government felt that these women prisoners were dangerous and sent in men from the C.I.D - the Criminal Investigation Department - to suppress the women's peaceful mutiny.

In this next piece, one of the seven women from Jack's painting does turn around - and speaks to us, as Isabel Claffey reads Dorothy Macardle's account of the brutality endured by these women in Kilmainham Gaol at the end of April in 1923.

[End of the guided tour of Jack B. Yeats's painting, 'Communicating with Prisoners (1924)]

[Isabel Claffey reads Dorothy Macardle's account, 'The Kilmainham Tortures, Experiences of a Released Prisoner,' dated 1st May 1923]¹²

[The sound of a door banging loudly and the jangle of keys]

It was the nineteenth day of their hungry-strike. Mrs. O'Callaghan was suffering a great deal and we were very anxious about Miss MacSwiney; she seemed much weaker than on her last day in Mountjoy, restless, troubled by heart attacks and sudden alarming collapses: we knew the Doctor had made an urgent report and hoped, every time the gate opened, to see two stretcher-bearers coming in.

[The sound of a door banging loudly and the jangle of keys]

At about 3 o'clock word came from the Governor that we were to be removed to the North Dublin Union that night; a meeting of the prisoners was immediately summoned, it was unanimous: to leave the hunger-strikers alone in the empty jail, at the mercy of such cruel tricks as were played on Miss Costello, was unthinkable; we sent our decision to the

¹²'The Kilmainham Tortures, Experiences of a Released Prisoner,' by Dorothy Macardle, 1st May 1923. This 3-page typewritten manuscript is held in the Kilmainham Gaol Archive, and was used for this episode courtesy of Kilmainham Gaol Museum/OPW and © Estate of Dorothy Macardle, courtesy of Curtis Brown Group Ltd.

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Governor at 4 o'clock: no prisoner would consent to leave until the hunger-strikers were released. We expected their release at any moment and we went to our cells to pack. It was about 9 o'clock when the Governor, Begley sent again to say that 81 prisoners were to be removed, if necessary by force. When asked whether woman beating was a soldier's work, he replied, "I don't mind that, I have beaten my wife."

[The sound of echoing voices added to Governor Begley's voice]

We prepared our plan of resistance. Suddenly a rumour flew through the prison; stretcher-bearers had come in: then a moment of joyous triumph and a shock of dismay, - Mrs. O'Callaghan had been released but not Miss MacSwiney. This was appalling news; we knew that Miss MacSwiney was no less dangerously ill than Mrs. O'Callaghan; they had been on hunger-strike the same number of days, arrested in the same circumstances; it suggested malice towards Miss MacSwiney that, for all we knew, might intend her death.

Our best strategic position seemed to be the top gallery, caged in with iron bars, which runs around the horse-shoe shaped building and has an iron bridge joining its opposite sides. From this bridge an iron staircase runs down to the compound; it is so narrow and steep that a stretcher cannot be carried down. Miss MacSwiney's cell is on the ground floor. The prisoners marshalled themselves on the top gallery and waited.

[The sound of a door being locked and the jangle of keys]

We had fastened the doors of the cells and the great well-like place was in darkness, except for one lit window beside the gateway behind which figures of soldiers and the wardresses hurried to and fro.

[The sound of feet running]

Our officers gave our instructions; we were to resist but not to attack; we were not to come to one another's rescue; no missiles were to be thrown; and above all, for the patient's sake, whatever was done to us, no one must cry out. Then we knelt and said the rosary. There was no sign of an attack. We stood three deep arms locked, and sang, as we do every evening, some of Miss MacSwiney's favourite songs. At 10 o'clock our deputies were called



to the Governor again and after a short time they returned. Mr. O'Neill, Governor of the North Dublin Union, was there; he had expressed dread at what seemed about to happen, promised that if 81 would go quietly to-night no one else should be removed before Miss MacSwiney was released, warned us that if we resisted, all the "privileges" we had won through our seven days' hunger-strike would be withdrawn; he implored us not to resist; we had ten minutes in which to decide. He was told once more that no prisoner would consent to be removed until Miss MacSwiney had been released.

[The sound of feet running up a metal staircase]

Ten minutes passed, then, up the staircase, with a lighted taper, one of the matrons came; she had seen the men who were to do the work; she was agitated and distressed; had come, on her own responsibility, to implore us to give way; they were not the military, they were C.I.D men and military police; she could not bear the thought of their handling the girls; "You have no idea," she said, "what horrible men they are." went down again heavy hearted; not understanding us at all. "God pity you, girls," she said, "You're going into the hands of men worse than devils."

[The sound of echoing voices added to the voice of the matron]

For a little longer we waited, then, suddenly, the gate opened and the men rushed in, across the compound and up the stairs.

[The sound of a large bang from the opening of a gate followed by the sounds of feet running up a metal staircase]

The attack was violent but unorganised. Brigid O'Mullane and Rita Farrelly, the first seized, were crushed and bruised between men dragging them down and men pressing up the stairs.

Our Commandant, Mrs. Gordon, was the next to be attacked. It was hard not to go to her rescue. She clung to the iron bars, the men beat her hands with their clenched fists again and again; that failed to make her loose her hold and they struck her twice in the chest; then



one took her head and beat it against the iron bars. I think she was unconscious after that; I saw her dragged by the soldiers down the stairs, all across the compound and out at the gate.

[The sound of a gate banging closed]

The men seemed skilled; they had many methods. Some twisted the girls' arms, some bent back their thumbs; one who seized Iseult Stuart kicked her on the stairs with his knee. Brigid O'Mullane, Sheila Hartnett, Roisin Ryan and Melina Phelin were kicked by a C.I.D man who used his feet. Florence MacDermott was disabled by a blow on the ankle with a revolver; Annie McKeown, one of the smallest and youngest, was pulled downstairs and kicked, perhaps accidentally on the head. One girl had her finger bitten. Sheila Bowen fell with a heart attack. Lily Dunn and May O'Toole who have been very ill, fainted; they do not know where they were struck. There was one man with a blackened face. When my own turn came, after I had been dragged from the railings, a great hand closed on my face, blinding and stifling me, and thrust me back down to the ground among trampling feet. I heard someone who saw it scream and wondered how Miss MacSwiney would bear the noise. After that I remember being carried by two or three men and flung down in the surgery to be searched. Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Gordon were there, their faces bleeding. One of the women searchers was screaming at them like a drunkard in Camden Street on Saturday night; she struck Mrs. Gordon in the face. In spite of a few violent efforts to pinion us they did not persist in searching us. They had their lesson in Mountjoy. They contented themselves with removing watches, fountain pens and brooches, kicking Peg Flanagan and beating Kathleen O'Carroll on the head with her shoe.

I stood in the passage then, waiting for the girls to be flung out, one by one. None were frightened or overcome, but many were half fainting. Lena O'Doherty had been struck on the mouth; one man had thrust a finger down Moira Broderick's throat. Many of the men were smoking all the time - our instructions not to hit back had been well obeyed. Some soldiers who were on guard there looked wretched; the wardresses were bringing us cups of water; they were crying; the prison doctor looked on smiling, smoking a cigarette, he seemed to have come for entertainment; he did nothing for the injured girls.

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[The sound of lorries driving away]

There was another struggle before we were thrown into the lorries, one by one, and driven away. It took five hours.

Dorothy Macardle.

Military Prison, North Dublin Union, May 1st, 1923.

[End of account - 'The Kilmainham Tortures, Experiences of a Released Prisoner,' by Dorothy Macardle, (1923)]

Isabel Claffey: Thank you for listening to this episode, which is part of the series, 'Encounters with Jack B. Yeats.' This series is kindly funded by the Decade of Centenaries Programme. Join us next week for the fourth episode, 'The Visitor,' where we will eavesdrop on a conversation in the artist's studio on Fitzwilliam Square, between a Japanese scholar-poet and the artist, himself. So, until then, from us in The Model, home of the Niland Collection in Sligo, take care and thank you again for listening. For credits, bios, and further information, please see our website www.themodel.ie.

[Music played from the soundtrack to the podcast]

END OF PODCAST

RUNNING TIME: 18:22 minutes

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Interior of the horseshoe shaped east wing of Kilmainham Gaol, with central iron staircase.
Image courtesy of Kilmainham Gaol Museum/OPW

'Our best strategic position seemed to be the top gallery, caged in with iron bars, which runs around the horse-shoe shaped building and has an iron bridge joining its opposite sides. From this bridge an iron staircase runs down to the compound; it is so narrow and steep that a stretcher cannot be carried down. Miss MacSwiney's cell is on the ground floor.'

- Dorothy Macardle, 1923.

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SHOW NOTES:

In the third episode from the series of podcasts, 'Encounters with Jack B. Yeats,' from The Model, home of the Niland Collection, a painting by Jack B. Yeats in the Niland Collection, 'Communicating with Prisoners' (c.1924) is contextualised against the backdrop of the Irish Civil War. The oil painting is a transitional work from the artist's career and portrays seven women as they attempt to communicate with female prisoners imprisoned inside the high bastion tower of Kilmainham Gaol. In 1923, Kilmainham Gaol was entirely occupied by female political prisoners and these women were Anti-Treaty Republicans, imprisoned here by the Free State Government during the Civil War period (1922-1923). Some of the women in the painting can be identified from contemporary photographs of the time. The second woman from the right in Jack's painting resembles the republican activist and writer, Dorothy Macardle (1889 -1958).



'Communicating with Prisoners,' by Jack B. Yeats, c.1924, oil on canvas, 46 x 61. The Niland Collection, Sligo. ©Estate of Jack B. Yeats, DACs London/IVARO Dublin, 2021



Photograph of Maud Gonne MacBride, Charlotte Despard and Dorothy Macardle from 1920, as they inspect the burnt-out ruins of a hosiery factory in Balbriggan during the War of Independence. Dorothy Macardle is wearing a beret and is holding a bag behind her back. Photograph by W.D. Hogan and published in the 'American Commission on Conditions in Ireland Interim Report,' 1920. Image courtesy of Kilmainham Gaol Museum/OPW and ©National Museum of Ireland

In the first part of the episode, a tour guide gives the background and context to Jack's painting; this is followed by a reading of Dorothy Macardle's, 'The Kilmainham Tortures, Experiences of a ~~Released~~ Prisoner,' dated 1st May 1923. This 3-page typewritten account is held in the Kilmainham Gaol Archives and was used for this episode courtesy of Kilmainham Gaol Museum/ OPW and ©Estate of Dorothy Macardle, courtesy of Curtis Brown Group Ltd.



Kilmainham Gaol: The setting of the oil painting, 'Communicating with Prisoners' (c.1924) by Jack B. Yeats. Jack took some artistic licence with the composition, omitting the high stone wall and the windows on the lower level of the bastion tower. Photograph taken by Thomas Flewett, Deputy Governor of the Gaol from 1870-87. Image courtesy of Kilmainham Gaol Museum/OPW.

This is Dorothy Macardle's first-hand account of a particularly terrifying day endured by the women prisoners in Kilmainham Gaol during the Irish Civil War. Access to archival photographs and material used for this episode were made possible through the kind assistance of the staff of Kilmainham Gaol Museum and Brian Crowley, Curator of Collections of Kilmainham Gaol Museum. This series of podcasts is kindly funded by the Decade of Centenaries Programme and supported by Sligo County Council. Listener discretion is advised for this episode.

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Writer & Activist: Dorothy Macardle (1889-1958)

EPISODE CREDITS:

‘The Kilmainham Tortures, Experiences of a ~~Released~~ Prisoner,’ by Dorothy Macardle, 1923. Courtesy of Kilmainham Gaol Museum/OPW and © Estate of Dorothy Macardle, courtesy of Curtis Brown Group Ltd.

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‘The Kilmainham Tortures, Experiences of a ~~Released~~ Prisoner’: voiced by Isabel Claffey

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