A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE: IRISH PRISON MUSEUMS AND THEIR VISITORS

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Since the mid-1990s Dark Tourism has been the subject of a lot of academic attention. However, despite the fact that Dark Tourism sites are places associated with a bleak past including concentration camps, prisons, graveyards and battlefields very few historians have engaged with it.[1] Such sites are of great historical interest, but many have broader cultural resonances too. A number of them including the prison at Alcatraz, the battle site at Gettysburg in the United States, the Cu Chi tunnels in Vietnam and most notably the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland have been the focus of representations in art, film and fiction as well as academic texts, but few historians have engaged with how the sites tell their own stories. Curators and managers of these sites have taken a range of approaches to interpreting the past. As Philip Stone has recognised, there are many shades of Dark Tourism. His 'Dark Tourism Spectrum' makes clear distinctions between "dark" and "darker" tourism: darkest are sites of death and suffering focused primarily on education and historical interpretation, while the lightest are sites with a greater focus on entertainment.[2] Prison museums in Ireland span the mid-range of this spectrum.

While Dark Tourism may be a relatively recent focus of academic attention, there has been public interest in death, suffering and the macabre long before academics cast their critical eyes in that direction. Huge crowds used to travel to watch the execution of prisoners, whether that was on a scaffold erected over the front gate of a prison, around a temporary gallows – as was the case for the execution of Robert Emmet in Dublin in 1803, or at the foot of the guillotine in Paris during the French Revolution. Indeed, Madame Tussaud made her career out of grisly spectacles first casting waxwork death masks of the guillotined. In 1802, she brought a travelling exhibition to London, later opening her Chamber of Horrors there in the 1830s.

Prison sites have long provoked public interest and in the nineteenth century many opened their buildings to tourists, though in the past visitors toured functioning jails to peer at the prisoners. Some were campaigning social reformers such as Elizabeth Fry, John Howard and Jeremy Bentham, but many others had an idle curiosity about places of incarceration and the people confined within their walls. In the late seventeenth century Ned Ward visited Bridewell and Newgate on his travels

[1] For the most part those who have researched and written about the subject have been scholars with a marketing, sociology, criminology or tourism background. For example Philip Stone (ed.) *Palgrave Handbook of Dark Tourism* (London: Palgrave, 2018) has 30 chapters with 44 contributors from a range of backgrounds – geography, tourism, business, economics, education, marketing, English, psychology, but no historians.
[2] Philip Stone, 'A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a Typology of Death and Macabre Related Tourist Sites, Attractions and Exhibitions', *Tourism,* 54, no. 2, (2006), 145-160.

around London.[3] Over a century later the practice continued and in the 1830s guidebooks to London provided details of prisons that could be visited.[4] In 1858 over 10,000 people toured the Eastern State Penitentiary (or Cherry Hill Prison as it was then known) in Philadelphia.[5] By the late nineteenth century, former prisons were being developed as tourist attractions. In 1889 the Libby Prison War Museum opened in Chicago. During the American Civil War Libby Prison had held over 40,000 Union soldiers in Richmond, Virginia. In the late 1880s four businessmen purchased the building and transported all 600,000 bricks of it to Chicago where it was painstakingly rebuilt and opened to allow ticket holders to explore the place of incarceration and examine an extensive collection of artefacts relating to the Civil War.[6] In 1890 the former prison hulk *Success* was bought from the Government of Victoria in Australia and transformed into a travelling prison museum. For over twenty years she sailed around Australia, Britain and Ireland welcoming thousands of fee-paying visitors. In 1897 *Success* visited Belfast, a decade later she was moored in Dublin and in 1912 departed Cobh to spend nearly three decades as a tourist attraction in the United States.[7] It would be another half a century before a former prison opened to the public in Ireland.

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Ireland now has a number of prison heritage sites and museums, but far fewer operational prisons than it did when *Success* sailed into port. In 1796 there were 51 jails in Ireland, by the late 1870s that figure had risen to 150 – mostly small bridewells which held prisoners awaiting trial, but also county jails, convict depots and debtors prisons. In 1878 these jails held 45,000 prisoners, 33% of them women. By the mid-twentieth century most of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prisons were obsolete and had been closed, many were demolished, others fallen into disrepair. Today there are 15 operational prisons on the island, housing just under 6,000 people (just over 4.5% whom are women).[8]

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[3] Ned Ward, *The London Spy*, fourth ed., 1709, Paul Hyland, ed., (Michigan: East Lansing Press, 1993), 107-112, 281; Jonathan Andrews, Asa Briggs, Roy Porter, Penny Tucker, Roy Waddington, *The History of Bethlem,* (London: Routledge, 1997), 182.

[4] J. Edmondson, 'Death and the Tourist: Dark Encounters in Mid-Nineteenth-Century London via the Paris Morgue' in Stone (ed.), *Palgrave History of Dark Tourism,* 88.

[5] Megan Tewell, 'Prisons in the Popular Mind: Historic Carceral Tourism and the Carceral State', PhD diss, North Carolina State University, 2020, 147. In 2019 there were 310,000 visitors to Eastern State Penitentiary.

[6] Katharine W Hannaford, 'The Libby Prison Museum and the Image of Chicago, 1889-1899', *Ecumene,* 8, 3, (2001): 284-316.

[7] Rose Cullen, 'The success of the *Success:* negotiating dark tourism on an exhibition 'convict ship'', *Journal of Tourism History,* vol 9, no. 1, (2017): 16. Alana Barton and Alyson Brown, 'Show me the prison! The development of prison tourism in the UK' *Crime, Media Culture,* vol 11 (3) (2015): 243.

[8] Gillian O'Brien, *The Darkness Echoing: Exploring Ireland's places of Famine, Death and Rebellion,* (London: Doubleday, 2020), 250; World Prison Brief data for Ireland and Northern Ireland for 2022, https://www.prisonstudies.org/map/europe

Like many institutional buildings there are often conflicting sentiments associated with the future life of them. Should they be repurposed, should their stories be told or is it better to demolish and remove the visible reminder of a harsh past? Some prisons (or parts of them) have acquired a new life: in Drogheda, the perimeter wall of the old gaol encloses Eddie's Hardware while the imposing exteriors of Roscommon and Carlow jails now form the entrances to shopping centres. In Dundalk the prison has been repurposed as the Oriel Centre, a performance and exhibition space.[9]

Across Ireland there are many opportunities for tourists to visit heritage sites which hold former places of incarceration. Many castles (including Cahir, Carrickfergus and Blarney) have dungeons and holding cells can be visited at St Connell's Museum in Glenties and Lifford Courthouse in Co. Donegal. At Nenagh Heritage Centre in Co. Tipperary and Youghal Clock Gate Tower in Co. Cork imprisonment forms part of the history of the sites, while at Down County Museum (in the former Down County Gaol), on Spike Island off Cobh and at Tarbert Bridewell in Co. Kerry incarceration and a visit to the cells form a very significant part of the visit.[10] There is a prison museum at Dublin's Mountjoy Jail, which is open by appointment. As this Victorian prison is still operational visitors don't have access to the cells, but the collection illuminates much of the story of the prison. Many of the artefacts displayed were salvaged over many years by prison officers who recognised their importance when the prison service wanted to dispose of them.[11]

The primary focus of this chapter is on the four former city and county jails that operate as heritage sites: Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin, Wicklow Gaol in Wicklow Town, Cork City Gaol and Crumlin Road Gaol in Belfast.[12] Michelle Brown has identified the motivations behind transforming former prisons into public spaces as 'education, historical conservation, architectural and artistic purposes, and commercial profit', while Jacqueline Z. Wilson and others have argued that prison tourism 'has the potential to contribute to many facets of a community's cultural understanding, children's education, economic benefit, and even its international profile'.[13] To a greater or lesser extent all the Irish prison museums and heritage sites have been motivated by Brown's reasoning.

[9] O'Brien, *The Darkness Echoing,* 251.
[10] See Incarceration chapter in O'Brien, *The Darkness Echoing,* 217-265.
[11] Mountjoy is not the only operational prison to have a museum associated with it. HMP Dartmoor in Devon has a prison museum which is open to the public without special arrangements and is run with the full backing of the prison authorities – indeed on the prison museum website it includes a welcome from the current prison governor. Dartmoor Prison Museum website, https://www.dartmoor-prison.co.uk/
[12] Sligo Gaol and Maze Long Kesh are two former sites of incarceration on the island which may open to the public over the next few years.
[13] Jacqueline Z. Wilson Sarah Hodgkinson, Justin Piché, Kevin Walby (eds), *Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism,* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 'Introduction', 4; Michelle Brown, *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society and Spectacle,* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 87.

Very little has been written about Dark Tourism and prison museums or heritage sites in Ireland, though there is a growing interest in and literature about prison museums more broadly.[14] In 2017 Palgrave published the *Handbook of Prison Tourism*, which runs to more than 1,000 pages with 48 chapters and 68 contributors; however, Ireland only features in one essay about Maze Long Kesh, a former prison which is not currently open to the public.[15] For the most part the scholarship on prison museums has been heavily focussed on a small number of prominent case studies, particularly Robben Island off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa, which was home to Nelson Mandela for 18 of his 27 years in prison and Alcatraz, the prison island in San Francisco Bay.[16]

In *Dark Tourism* John Lennon and Malcolm Foley observed that 'horror and death have become established commodities, on sale to tourists who have an enduring appetite for the darkest elements of human history'.[17] Prison tourism with its emphasis on crime and punishment certainly caters for those with an interest in the darker side of humanity and it is a substantial and growing business with over 100 dedicated prison museums across the world and many thousands more sites that incorporate cells or dungeons into their experience.[18] Former prisons are attracting increasing

[14] There have been books written about prisons in Ireland but very few of them consider the transition from prison to museum. Some exceptions to this, particularly relating to Kilmainham Gaol, are Rory O'Dwyer, *The Bastille of Ireland: Kilmainham Gaol – from Ruin to Restoration,* (Dublin: The History Press, 2010); Niamh O'Sullivan, *Every Dark Hour: A History of Kilmainham Gaol* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2007); Eric Zuelow, 'Enshrining Ireland's Nationalist History inside Prison Walls', *Éire-Ireland,* vol. 39, no. 3 (2004), Gillian O'Brien, *The Darkness Echoing.* Other publications that consider the history of Irish prisons and prisoners include Richard Butler, Cal McCarthy & Barra O Donnobhain, *Too Beautiful for Thieves and Pickpockets: A History of the Victorian Convict Prison on Spike Island,* (Cork: Cork County Library, 2016); Elaine Farrell, *Women, crime and punishment: Life in the nineteenth-century convict prison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) Tim Carey, *Mountjoy. The Story of a Prison,* (Dublin: Collins Press, 2000); Frieda Kelly, *A History of Kilmainham Gaol. The Dismal House of Little Ease,* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1988); William Murphy, *Political Imprisonment and the Irish* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Catherine Cox, Hilary Marland, *Disorder Contained: Mental Breakdown and the Modern Prison, 1840-1900,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Sean McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners 1848-1922,* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[15] William J.V. Neill, 'Representing the Maze/Long Kesh Prison in Northern Ireland: Conflict Resolution Centre and Tourist Draw or Trojan Horse in a Culture War?' in Wilson et al, *Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism,* 241-259.

[16] Some exceptions to this include Michael Welch, 'Penal Tourism and a tale of four cities: Reflecting on the Museum Effect in London, Sydney, Melbourne and Buenos Aires', *Criminology and Criminal Justice,* 13. 5, (2013): 479-505; James Rodgers, 'Visitor Experiences at Prison Museums: Freemantle Prison, Robben Island Museum and Eastern State Penitentiary' in Wilson et al (eds), *Palgrave Handbook of Dark Tourism,* 787-810; Carolyn Strange and Michael Kempa, 'Shades of Dark Tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island', *Annals of Tourism Research,* vol. 20, no. 2, (2003): 386-405.

[17] John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster,* (London: Continuum, 2000), 58.

[18] In 2012 Jeffrey Ross concluded that there were 95 prison museums across the world J.I. Ross, 'Touring Imprisonment : A descriptive statistical analysis of prison museums', *Tourism Management Perspectives,* 4 (2012): 115. This is undoubtedly an underestimate as Ross lists only one prison museum in Ireland at that time when there were four, and the numbers in Ireland and worldwide have continued to increase in the last decade.

numbers of visitors. Each year over 300,000 make the trip to Robben Island and about 1.3 million people step off the ferry onto Alcatraz while in Ireland over 430,000 visit Kilmainham Gaol.

Tourism is a business and commercial realities are a factor in developing any tourist site. Almost all sites need to make money (or at least not make a loss) and this is particularly true for those not in receipt of state or local authority funding. For Dark Tourism sites such as prisons the hosting of In itself telling the complex and diverse stories of the prisons in a compelling and attractive way is a considerable one. Often this is made even more complex as many prison sites also host weddings, concerts and ghost-hunting events which undoubtedly generate much needed income, but they also sit uncomfortably alongside the need to treat the stories of suffering, punishment and death with sensitivity and scholarly integrity. Getting the balance right is one of the biggest challenges for prison museums. The sites must tread a fine line between education, entertainment and sensation so that it is neither exploitative nor shies away from its difficult past.

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In 2009 Richard Sharpley stated that 'it remains unclear whether dark tourism is tourist-demand or attraction-supply driven', a question not yet adequately answered.[19] Visitor figures reveal how many people go to prison museums, but there is much more limited data on why they go. In a survey of visitors to Australian prison museums Wilson concluded that tourists showed 'a predominance of interest in the architecture, over and above consideration of the imprisoned human element.'[20] The forbidding façade of the prison which once repelled arrivals, now lures them in. Prison heritage sites possess something no purpose-built museum can offer: authenticity.[21] They are powerful sites of immersion.[22] The stories that are told at the sites could be told anywhere but they are particularly resonant when heard while walking the corridors, peering inside cells, traversing the yards and congregating around sites of executions. All of the Irish sites allow visitors to enter cells, though it is on Spike Island that the experience is most intense. In the Punishment Block visitors can enter one of the cells and close the door behind them. The 'prisoner' is left in the dark surrounded by the soundscape of clanking metal and shouting. And yet, even with that sensory experience, no tour can

[19] Richard Sharpley 'Shedding Light on Dark Tourism' in Richard Sharpley and Philip R. Stone (eds), *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism,* (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2009), 6.
[20] It is unclear how extensive the survey of visitors was. Jacqueline Z. Wilson, *Prison: Cultural Memory and Dark Tourism,* (Peter Lang, 2008), 42.
[21] Welch, 'Penal Tourism and a Tale of Four Cities, 483
[22] Colin Sterling, 'Designing 'Critical' Heritage Experiences: Immersion, Enchantment and Autonomy', *Archaeology International,* 22, (2019), 100-113; Jenny Kidd, '"Immersive" Heritage Encounters', *The Museum Review,* 3, (2018); Haywantee Ramkissoon, Muzafeer Uysal, 'Authenticity as a value co-creator of tourism experiences' in N. Prebensen, M. Uysal, J, Chen, (eds), *Creating Experience Value in Tourism*, (London: CABI, 2018); Piera Buonincontri, Alessandra Marasco, and Haywantee Ramkissoon, 'Visitors' Experience, Place Attachment and Sustainable Behaviour at Cultural Heritage Sites: A Conceptual Framework', *Sustainability* 9, 7, (2017).

replicate the reality of incarceration. As James Rodgers has argued, without the 'noise, smell, fear, isolation, and other pains of imprisonment' a visitor cannot really know what it was like.[23]

There are a myriad of other factors which motivate people to visit former prisons ranging from an interest in the history of the site, a desire to learn about the history of crime and punishment, to being entertained or simply just to say that they've been. For many visiting a former prison provides 'an opportunity to gaze within a space otherwise (and formerly) inaccessible. As an institution that remains taboo and enshrined with myth, the prison is a secret…place… Yet conversely, it is one of society's constant: a steadfast and visual icon of punishment that is familiar to most'.[24] Despite the fact that most people will never have personal experience of incarceration it is something that is ubiquitous when it comes to films, books, crime dramas, documentaries, podcasts and news items.[25] Prisons are both familiar and alien, a place that no one wants to enter and yet a place that sparks curiosity. In many ways it is no wonder that former prisons draw so many towards their now open doors.

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All the prison heritage sites in Ireland provide tours, some with a guide, some self-guided. The cost of each visit varies from €8 (£6.70) for an adult ticket at Kilmainham Gaol to £12.00 (€14.35) at Crumlin Road Gaol.[26] Detailed visitor figures are not available for all sites. The most reliable figures come from Kilmainham Gaol which caters for over 430,000 people annually. Visitors to Wicklow Gaol are estimated at 40,000 while 200,000 tour Crumlin Road Gaol are 200,000. No figures were available for Cork City Gaol.[27]

For the most part visitors to all four prison sites experience a nineteenth-century prison. There was an active prison on the site of Wicklow Gaol from 1702 until 1924 though substantial demolition carried out in the 1950s means that most of what survives today dates from the 1840s. Kilmainham Gaol was Dublin's County Jail. Designed by John Trail it opened in 1796 and the last prisoners left in 1924. John McCurdy designed the iconic East Wing which first held prisoners in 1861. Cork City Gaol, designed by Sir Thomas Deane, operated for almost a century – between 1824 and 1923 and Crumlin Road Gaol in Belfast, designed by Charles Lanyon, received its first prisoners in 1846 and the last left in 1996.

[23] Rodgers, 'Visitor Experiences at Prison Museums*,* 807.
[24] Diane Urquhart, 'Understanding the Attraction: Prison Tourism and the Public Gaze', *The British Journal of Criminology,* xx, (2021): 15.
[25] Urquhart, 'Prison Tourism and the Public Gaze', 3.
[26] Adult tickets for Kilmainham Cost: Kilmainham €8, Cork €10, Wicklow €11.50, Belfast €13.70 (£12.50). Prices correct January 2023.
[27] These figures are pre-covid as the figures for 2020 and 2021 are not representative given that most sites were shut for much of those years. Kilmainham Gaol Records, 2018; '40,000 visitors annually to Wicklow Gaol', *Wicklow People,* 29 August 2020; Deborah Mulhearn, 'Captive Audience', *Museum Journal,* (October 2018), 27.

Given the variation in operation, management and funding – private, state and council – there is a significant difference in how these sites are promoted via their websites and a range of social media. There are some similarities – tickets can be booked on all of them, opening hours and other practical information is provided and each provide some history of the site. Of the four websites under consideration the Kilmainham Gaol one is the most comprehensive. Visitors can download educational resources, read key documents and see photographs of some of Kilmainham Gaol's archival collection.[28] In addition to the standard information the website for Cork City Gaol also provides information on event hire.[29] Wicklow Gaol's site puts a heavy emphasis both on the tour of the prison but also on the virtual reality 'Gates of Hell' experience which tells three stories associated with different eras at the jail. Like Cork the venue can be used for weddings and corporate events. It also encourages children's birthday parties where the birthday child gets to have a personalised 'Wanted' poster and all partygoers don striped prison jumpsuits.[30] Crumlin Road Gaol's website is the most commercially driven with a heavy emphasis on live music events (often Johnny Cash or Garth Brooks tribute acts), weddings, conferences, business meetings and dinner at Cuffs Bar and Grill. There are evenings based on the television show 'Squid Game', paranormal investigations and related tours – the Troubles Walking tour and Black Taxi tour.[31] In addition to websites, all the sites engage with social media, though some are more active than others as outlined in Table A. The use of social media certainly raises visibility of the sites and is a free marketing tool, though it is not possible to assess if this visibility translates into increased visitor figures.

Table A: Internet and Social Media presence.[32]

	Instagram	**Twitter**	**Facebook**
Kilmainham Gaol	____	• 7,300 followers • Site posts regularly	• 13,500 followers • Site posts regularly
Wicklow Gaol	• 2,400 followers • Site posts several times a month	• 1,765 followers • Site posts c. once a month	• 20,500 followers • Site posts regularly
Cork City Gaol	• 2,050 followers Site posts several times a month	• 1,960 followers • Site posts every few weeks	• 9,400 followers • Site posts regularly

[28] Kilmainham Gaol Museum website, https://kilmainhamgaolmuseum.ie
[29] Cork City Gaol website, https://corkcitygaol.com
[30] Wicklow Gaol website, https://www.wicklowshistoricgaol.com
[31] Crumlin Road Gaol website, https://www.crumlinroadgaol.com
[32] Figures correct as of January 2023.

Crumlin Road Gaol	• 4,000 followers • Site has posted very little since Spring 2022	• 7,544 followers • Site posts several times a month	• 58,000 followers • Site posts regularly

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At all four Irish sites architecture, penal history, prisoners and jailers, women and children, escapes and executions and, in most instances, ghosts are mentioned. All the sites are rooted very much in their own locality and the eras and topics highlighted reflect not just penal history and the history of the prison, but also the of the local area. There is a lot more nuance on the tours than on the websites. The website for Crumlin Road Gaol gives the impression that the tour might be quite superficial, but the pre-Covid tour I took was detailed, educational and entertaining. Much of the focus was on prisoners and the prison during the Troubles and the guide gave an informative, but not sensationalised account. Tours were suspended as a result of Covid and when the jail reopened the visit was self-guided with a number of new audio-visual elements including holograms of a jailer and governor who told stories about the prison. The new version was informative but much less engaging than the guided tour. At Cork City Gaol visitors can choose to take an audio guide with them or rely on a map with information about the various stops on the tour. For the most part the Wicklow Gaol tour is self-guided with information panels and audio-visual material used. In Kilmainham Gaol visitors can see the museum on their own but entry to the jail itself is only by guided tour.

Despite each of the prisons being in use for at least a century they are often associated with one period – for Kilmainham Gaol it's the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence, at Crumlin Road Gaol the focus is primarily on the Troubles while in Wicklow Gaol it is a combination of the 1798 Rebellion and transportation of convicts from Ireland. Indeed, the former prison chapel has been transformed into the interior of a nineteenth-century ship. Sometimes content decisions are driven by funding considerations. In the case of Wicklow, the emphasis on transportation was required to secure funding from the European Regional Development Fund.[33]

The prison is the heritage sites' most valuable asset (and greatest expense). The architecture of confinement is used to explain the penal system, attempts at reform and daily life in the jail. Tour guides often use the site – cells, corridors, yards – to illustrate isolation, punishment, segregation and death. Thousands of prisoners passed through the jails but only a tiny fraction of the stories can be told. Managers and curators make decisions about what is emphasised and what is ignored and, as

[33] T.M. Breathnach, 'The Consumption of Heritage Sites in Ireland with particular reference to Wicklow's Historic Gaol' Dublin City University, PhD Diss, 2003, 164.

John Lennon and Malcolm Foley have noted, 'those with responsibility for tourism promotion and development may have…an ethical dilemma – that of adjudicating in debates over "whose history" prevails in interpretation'.[34] Visitors to museums and historic sites must take a lot on faith. They need to trust that the stories being told by guides, via an audio recording or on panel text, are accurate and representative of the prison. Apart from Kilmainham there is little attempt to explain interpretive choice, or to discuss sources (or lack of them).

Stories associated with representing incarceration, punishment and execution are complex and tone is very important. The past should be neither sanitised nor sensationalised. At former prison sites it can be tempting to provide the gory details of executions, highlight escape attempts, focus on the brutality of jailers or gloss over the serious crimes some of the inmates were guilty of. Writing about the experience of visiting Australian prison museums Wilson observed that 'Tour guides … commonly pitch their general commentary in comfortably humorous terms, focussing chiefly on the supposedly "lighter" side of prison life such as escape attempts gone wrong, stories of eccentric (i.e. harmlessly amusing) characters among the inmates and so on.'[35] The adaptation of the past to make it more palatable and entertaining often results in a diminution of suffering, both of inmates and the victims of their crimes. Where possible it is important to present multiple narratives and not to gloss over difficult history.[36]

Alongside the issue of how to package difficult history there is also potential conflict between different income streams. Many of these sites are multifunctional, but at times money-spinners sit very uncomfortably alongside sensitive and emotive stories of punishment and death. On one of my visits to Crumlin Road Gaol a stag party was part of the regular tour group. While in the execution chamber listening to the guide talk about the 17 men hanged at the gaol some of the stag party mimed putting the noose around their necks. Wilson has noted similar irreverence around the execution chambers on some of her visits to Australian prison museums.[37] It may be that this behaviour is a way of dealing with being uncomfortable. Whatever the reason such insensitive behaviour impacted the entire tour, despite the guide's best efforts to require the Stag Party to be respectful. Other visitors on tours encountered both weddings and hen parties while at the site.[38] Combining regular visitors to the jail with parties runs the risk of making a spectacle of suffering. It may be financially necessary to

[34] Lennon and Foley, *Dark Tourism,* 162.
[35] Jacqueline Z. Wilson, 'Australian Prison Tourism: A Question of Narrative Integrity', *History Compass,* 9, 8, (2011): 567.
[36] See Gillian O'Brien, 'Beyond Storytelling: Exhibiting the Past. A Report on Exhibition Development and Delivery', (2020).
[37] Wilson, *Prison: Cultural Memory and Dark Tourism,* Peter Lang, 2008, 179.
[38] Thomas Heron, 'Dark Tourism: A Comparative Study Assessing the Creation and Management of Prison Heritage on the Island of Ireland', Liverpool John Moores University, MRes diss, 2017, 58-9

operate as many tours and host as many events as possible but private celebrations running alongside sombre tours makes for a jarring and somewhat uncomfortable experience.

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Political prisoners feature on every prison tour. Almost every jail in Ireland housed political prisoners, though they never accounted for a significant percentage of the prison population. Kilmainham Gaol held far more political prisoners than any other prison, but even there fewer than 15 percent of the prisoners were classed as political (and most of those were held in the period 1916–-1923). But it is the political prisoner that ensured its transformation from a derelict site to one of Ireland's most popular heritage sites. Indeed, Pat Cooke, the former director of the jail, has suggested that the site

> might well be either a dilapidated ruin or still a functioning prison if it were not for its extraordinary history. Through an uncanny series of coincidences, leading players in the key episodes of armed resistance to British rule in Ireland, the rebellions of 1798, 1803, 1848, 1867 and 1916 were fated to spend time or die within its walls.[39]

Kilmainham Gaol was rescued from dilapidation by a Restoration Committee and a group of volunteers – many of them former political prisoners who had been held in the Gaol. Those who took on the mammoth task of restoring the site did so with a particular goal in mind: to 'perpetuate the memory of the illustrious dead'. The volunteers restoring the building were told to 'enter the jail as you would a shrine'. The primary focus of Kilmainham Gaol for decades after it opened to the public was to reinforce a nationalist narrative of opposition to British rule in Ireland with a particular focus on those held there following the Easter Rising of 1916 and the War of Independence.[40] This resulted in a rather skewed history as almost no attention was paid to non-political prisoners, staff or victims of crime. Today, Irish revolutionary history remains a key part of the tour and museum at the jail but there is increasing attention paid to other stories including the Famine, imprisoned children, and the Civil War.

Kilmainham Gaol held Despite the small numbers, tales of political prisoners often dominate a site, even when their time in the prison was fleeting. The reason for this focus on political prisoners is twofold: firstly, some of them have had considerable impact on Irish history and telling their stories is one way of attracting visitors, and secondly, because the information exists – we know what led to their arrest, about their incarceration and what happened to them after their release (if they made it out alive).

The focus on famous prisoners is not restricted to Ireland. At Robben Island the draw is certainly the political prisoners, most notably Nelson Mandela but also men such as Walter Sisulu and

[39] Pat Cooke, 'Kilmainham Gaol: Interpreting Irish Nationalism and Republicanism', *Open Museum Journal,* 2, (2000): 1.
[40] Zuelow, 'Enshrining Ireland's Nationalist History Inside Prison Walls', 180-201; O'Brien, *The Darkness Echoing,* 253.

Govan Mbeki. At Alcatraz it's a very different type of prisoner, gangsters like Al Capone, Machine Gun Kelly and Doc Barker and the association with films such as *Escape from Alcatraz* that have captured the public imagination. Many visitors go to Old Melbourne Gaol as Ned Kelly was executed there (though his skull is no longer on display as it was stolen in 1978). The Irish 'celebrity' prisoners are not as well-known as many of their international counterparts and as the visitor profile changes this is not such a draw. In 2018 a quarter of visitors to Kilmainham Gaol came from the island of Ireland, 36 percent came from North America, 19 percent from Britain and 17 percent from Europe.[41] For many visitors Robert Emmet, Charles Stewart Parnell and Patrick Pearse mean very little. Time and again when I spoke to people who had just completed tours at prison sites, I heard how the stories that resonated with them were the stories of the ordinary prisoner.[42]

However, often we know little about the prisoners except for information in the prison register which provides the name, details of the crime and sentence, height, religion, occupation, physical description. Frequently there is no information about the circumstances that led to the crime they were convicted of and nothing of them after they were released. As Laura McAtackney has observed

> Generally, our understandings of how prisons work are guided and constrained by government records and official documents created by the regimes who police and administer them. While they contain a wide variety of information there are obvious limitations as to whose perspectives and viewpoints they represent and there are clear gaps in knowledge that limit their effectiveness.[43]

Gaps in knowledge and sources that provide a partial and slanted perspective make creating rounded portraits very difficult. Ordinary prisoners appear as mere sketches in the official record and material culture relating to them is also scant. In fact, there is only one artefact in the entire Kilmainham collection that is directly connected to an ordinary prisoner. It is a service medal presented to Henry Rance for his efforts in repulsing the attempted Fenian invasion of Canada in 1867. Later, Rance settled in Ireland and was imprisoned twice in Kilmainham Gaol.[44]

Despite considerable challenges prison sites do make efforts to tell a broad range of stories. They often highlight examples of sentences which we would now regard as unjust – stories of

[41] Figures based on online tickets sold in 2018, Kilmainham Gaol. Online sales accounted for over 70% of total ticket sales that year.
[42] Interviews with visitors at Kilmainham Gaol, Crumlin Road Gaol, Cork City Gaol and Wicklow Gaol conducted in 2018.
[43] Laura McAtackney, 'Bobby Sand's Bed and Long Kesh/Maze Afterlife', *Irish Times,* 3 October 2016. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/bobby-sands-bed-and-long-kesh-maze-s-afterlife-1.2814608
[44] Rance was imprisoned the first time in 1892 for threatening his wife, the second time a year later for attempting suicide (which was a crime in Ireland until 1993). 'Re-Cycle, Re-Purpose, Re-Imagine : Transforming Objects in Kilmainham Gaol' exhibition, 5 February-May 2020.

imprisoned children such as those locked up for annoying passengers on a train, stealing a cloak or shooting marbles, of torture, of transportation and of miscarriages of justice.[45] Prisoners are often presented as victims; of poverty, prejudice and the system. And this is often an accurate portrayal, though the victims of crime are rarely considered. In Wilson's study of Australian prison museums, she found a similar tendency 'to represent inmates of the distant past in more personal terms – far more empathy, and markedly more detail – than those more recently [incarcerated]'.[46] To some extent stressing the darkness of the distant past and the moves towards reform encourages complacency in visitors and, perhaps inadvertently, gives the impression that the penal system today is a fairer and more humane one. At times there is a levity around the discussion and description of prison life. There is an element of this at the Irish prison sites (and in many ways this is unsurprising for few will visit if the trip is unrelentingly grim). Those responsible for running these sites have to walk a fine line that balances education with entertainment.

Instruments of incarceration and punishment are displayed including handcuffs, cat o' nine tails, the crank, a treadwheel and an executioner's case containing all the paraphernalia of death including a hood and noose.[47] In an examination of Canadian prison museums Kevin Walby and Justin Piché noted that the artefacts associated with imprisonment are interpreted largely around the idea of penal reform.[48] The display of instruments of restraint and torture alongside the talk of reform, all builds to the possible interpretation that the prisons of today are both fairer and less punitive. To mitigate against that outcome, Walby and Piché have argued that 'dark tourism is not only a question of interpreting the past but one of producing meanings that inform contemporary understandings of penal sites'.[49] There is a clear issue when discussing prison reform particularly with regard to the huge gap between intention and practice. Former prisons need to be flexible in terms of allowing for interpretation to change as our understanding of both the past and present carceral systems evolves. As Wilson has pointed out there is a danger that prison sites and the stories selected 'can result in what may be termed 'frozen' narratives – the effective denial of the sites' alternative stories and the consequent negation of the individuals whose voices carry those stories'.[50] This is not exclusive to prison sites, but it is prevalent at them. One way to mitigate against this is explain how the information has been gathered, and note where there are gaps or bias evident in the sources.[51] Some prison sites have tackled this issue of 'frozen' narratives head on. In Philadelphia Eastern State Penitentiary's

[45] *Hard Lessons: The Child Prisoners of Kilmainham Jail.*
[46] Wilson, 'Australian Prison Tourism, 566.
[47] Some of these such as the handcuffs are original, many of the others are replicas.
[48] Kevin Walby, Justin Piché, 'The polysemy of punishment memorialization: Dark Tourism and Ontario's Penal History Museums', *Punishment and Society,* 13, 4, (2011): 453.
[49] Walby and Picheé, 'The polysemy of punishment memorialization, 453.
[50] Wilson, 'Australian Prison Tourism, 562.
[51] O'Brien, 'Beyond Storytelling', 5.

mission is 'to interpret the legacy of American criminal justice reform, from the nation's founding through to the present day, within the long-abandoned cellblocks of the nation's most historic prison'. Alongside the tours there is active engagement with former prisoners, prison officers and victims of crime.[52] There has been limited engagement along these lines in the prison museums in Ireland.

In Wicklow Gaol there is considerable emphasis on the business of the prison, how food and drink had to be paid for by the prisoners and how jailers were often bribed for preferential treatment. Many prison museums present a largely negative view of the prison staff and there certainly were brutal prison warders and governors. Using an example from York Castle Prison in England, Dan Johnson and Rhiannon Pickin argue that the presentation of one of the gaolers as a criminal and abuser of power persuades museum visitors to side with the plight of the prisoners in the exhibition'.[53] Beyond the prison officials, the prisons themselves are, as Alana Barton and Alyson Brown have observed 'the ultimate manifestations of state power'.[54] The editors of *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism* go so far as to state that 'it is hardly controversial to characterize many prisons as inherently colonialist institutions standing as emblems of iconic power and state violence.'[55] This representation of prisons has a strong resonance in Ireland where the prisons were operated at a time when the island was under the control of Britain. And this is an undercurrent at all the prison sites in the Republic[56] While not directly stated, the narrative at the sites often implies that the inmates were victims of British oppression, targeted not because they were guilty of a crime but simply because they were Irish. But the prison records for England, Wales and Scotland indicate that arrest figures for Ireland were, if anything, slightly lower than those in Britain. Perhaps this tendency to blame the state for crime and punishment is exacerbated in post-colonial nations where the state has changed hands and where the unspoken implication may be that it is better now because the colonial power has been removed. Richard Butler in *Building the Irish Courthouse and Prison* asks 'whose legacy is represented in the building of Ireland's courthouses and prisons? How 'Irish' are they? Are they the product of an imperial – even colonial – government, firmly forcing the mark of its authority on the urban landscape

[52] Interviews with Damon McCool, Research and Public Programming and Jerome Loach, Education and Partnerships, Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, August 2022.
[53] Dan Johnson and Rhiannon Pickin, 'Suffering on Display: An Argument for Historical Nuance in British Prison Museums', *Crime, History and Societies,* vol. 23, no. 1 (2019): 8.
[54] Alana Barton and Alyson Brown, 'Dark Tourism and the Modern Prison', *Prison Service Journal,* no. 199 (2012): 238.
[55] Wilson et al, *Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism,* 'Introduction', 5.
[56] The situation is different at Crumlin Road Gaol where some tours emphasise the prison system (and this is particularly evident on the self-guided tour). The tours I've taken with a guide have tended to focus quite heavily on the jail during the Troubles, highlighting prisoners from both the Republican and the Loyalist sides but focussing less on their politics or use of violence than on escape attempts and personal stories.

of the poorest and most troubled outpost of the Union, or do they have a more local meaning?'[57] This question has not really been addressed at any of the sites and it certainly merits greater consideration.

There are signs of flexibility and change in interpretation evident at some sites. Brian Crowley, the curator of Kilmainham Gaol, has noted that the stories told in the jail up until the 1990s focused on Irish nationalist heroes, the 'deserving poor' and 'reinforced the museum's dominant narrative of the British Crown's misrule in Ireland and the necessity for successive revolutionary movements to fight for Irish independence'.[58] When the State took over the running of the jail from the Restoration Committee in 1986 there was a widening of focus. Pat Cooke, the former director of the site, was determined to tell many other stories associated with the prison – stories of transportation, of famine, of imprisoned women and children and to move away from the political side of the story. While much of the museum has remained static since the mid-1990s, temporary exhibitions and tours focussed on specific aspects of the prison's history have broadened knowledge of the site and reflected contemporary interests. For example, in 2018 Kilmainham Gaol developed a queer history tour of the jail as part of the Dublin Festival of History and the following year LGBTQ+ stories associated with the jail were told in a 'pop-up' exhibition timed to coincide with the Dublin Pride Festival.[59]

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If public reviews are anything to go by it is clear that prison sites are viewed favourably by those who visit, with all four sites highly rated with 4.5 stars on TripAdvisor (see Table B). In the reviews the prison buildings are undoubtedly the main attraction. A recent visitor to Wicklow Gaol praised the 'amazing history in a creepy building'. Visitors to Kilmainham Gaol often noted the informative and knowledgeable guides and the 'fantastic tour'. Crumlin Road Gaol comes in for some criticism by returning visitors. The lack of a tour guide and out of order audio and screens are increasingly mentioned, but despite this the reviews are generally very positive. In my discussions with visitors at all sites the architecture and atmosphere of the site was always remarked upon, which is unsurprising given that the buildings were designed to create an impact – both to repel and intimidate Visitors also highlighted stories of crime and punishment, but also of redemption and they frequently regarded the accounts of escapes, of torture, of the imprisonment of children as the most memorable. People loved being able to go into a cell, close the door and imagine what it was like to be a prisoner a hundred

[57] Richard Butler, *Building the Irish Courthouse and Prison. A political history, 1750-1850,* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020), 337.
[58] Brian Crowley, 'Queering Kilmainham: Uncovering LGBTQ+ Stories in a National Shrine', *Studia Hibernica,* 46 (2020): 114-123.
[59] Crowley, 'Queering Kilmainham', 114, 116.

years ago. Most were sympathetic to all the inmates, and few noticed that there was very little mention of the victims of crime and the ways in which their experience was marginalised.[60]

Table B: TripAdvisor[61]

	Kilmainham Gaol	**Wicklow Gaol**	**Cork City Gaol**	**Crumlin Road Gaol**
Trip Advisor	• 27,217 reviews • No. 2 of 655 things to do in Dublin • 4.5 stars out of 5	• 661 reviews • No. 6 of 40 things to do in Co. Wicklow • 4.5 stars out of 5	• 1,834 reviews • No. 5 of 144 things to do in Cork • 4.5 stars out of 5	• 9,051 reviews • No. 10 of 229 things to do in Belfast • 4.5 stars out of 5

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Kilmainham Gaol is the only Irish prison site with a purpose-built museum. The other sites have few artefacts on display. This is in part because of the different ownership and management models at the sites. Kilmainham is the only prison site that employs a curator and archivist and holds a substantial archive alongside the material displayed in the museum. There are a number of difficulties in developing and maintaining a prison archive. Many fixtures and fittings of incarceration were left to decay and rot, much of them thrown out and in the case of Cork City Gaol auctioned off in 1934.[62] In addition, given the age and condition of the buildings it is a challenge to establish a museum space that would meet museum quality standards required to safely house an archive.

The ground floor of the museum at Kilmainham considers issues associated with crime and punishment and encourages visitors to reflect on their own opinions and in recent years Kilmainham Gaol has engaged with issues relating to the contemporary criminal justice system. In 1999 Kilmainham Gaol staged Samuel Beckett's play *Catastrophe*, which had been dedicated to Václav Havel, a Czech playwright, dissident and politician, when he was a prisoner of conscience.[63] Writing about prison museums in the United States, Eric Knackmuhs, James Farmer and Doug Knapp have noted that managers of these sites 'are faced with the challenging opportunity of not only preserving and presenting the past but also connecting the site's history to broader social and political issues like the relationship between crime, mass incarceration, race, class, sentencing laws, public policy, and their impact on the community.'[64] In that vein in 2018 'The Trial', a visual art installation about healthcare and human rights in the current Irish Criminal Justice System, was shown in Kilmainham

[60] Interviews with visitors to Kilmainham Gaol, Crumlin Road Gaol, Cork City Gaol, Wicklow Gaol 2017, 2018.
[61] TripAdvisor reviews. Figures correct as of January 2023. https://www.tripadvisor.ie/
[62] Butler, *Building the Irish Courthouse and Prison,*
[63] Cooke, 'History, materiality and the making of 1916' in Lisa Godson and Joanna Brück (eds), *Making 1916: Material and Visual Culture of the Easter Rising,* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 214.
[64] Eric Knackmuhs, James Farmer and Doug Knapp, 'Addressing Contemporary Criminal Justice Issues as Interpretive Outcomes at a Prison Museum', *Visitor Studies,* vol. 24, no. 1 (2021): 1.

Courthouse which is part of the Kilmainham Gaol experience.[65] In the same year the jail hosted an exhibition marking the centenary of Nelson Mandela's birth and, in 2019, the exhibition 'Living Inside: Six Voices from the History of Irish Prison Reform' made use of artefacts borrowed from the Mountjoy prison museum to reflect on personal experience from 'prisoners' protests against unhealthy living conditions to the psychological strain faced by prison officers'.[66] Kilmainham, Crumlin Road Gaol and the Punishment Block on Spike Island have all held exhibitions of art by prisoners and former prisoners.[67]

Irish prison sites do not have a clear public remit. Of the four prison museum sites under discussion only Crumlin Road Gaol has a mission statement and it makes no reference to the jail at all. Its mission is 'to provide the best possible customer focussed and accessible, tourist attraction and conference centre while striving to generate economic and social benefits for the local community'.[68] Perhaps the Irish sites could look to Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia which has a clear mission statement which recognises its role in interpreting the past for the public. The site 'interprets the legacy of American criminal justice reform, from the nation's founding to the present day' and through its 'innovative preservation, interpretation, and public programs [sic] will move visitors to engage in dialogue and deepen the national conversation about criminal justice'.[69]

There is much more work to be done on Ireland's relationship with institutional buildings be they prisons, asylums, workhouses, Magdalene Laundries or children's homes. Much of the scholarship around dark tourism has focussed 'largely on "supply" and "consumption" with far less attention to "production" – meaning this new terminology has remained focussed on what tourists are doing…rather than on how these sites should be professionally managed and interpreted.'[70] To some extent this has resulted in sites conforming to perceived visitor preconceptions – whether that is through an emphasis on punishment and execution or a focus on prisons in popular culture (particularly evident when a site has been used as a setting for a film or television show). But it is equally important that former prison sites also challenge visitor assumptions and preconceptions, whether that is by prompting discussions about miscarriages of justice both during the time the prison

[65] Deirdre Falvey, 'Screams that could be heard all over the prison', *Irish Times,* 15 April 2018.
[66] 'Nelson Mandela: From Prisoner to President', 'Living Inside: Six Voices from the History of Irish Prison Reform' https://kilmainhamgaolmuseum.ie/exhibitions/
[67] Cooke, 'Kilmainham Gaol', *Open Museum Journal,* 5; O'Brien et al, Spike Island Guide book, (2017); Gerry Moriarty, 'Former UVF Prisoners return to jail with artistic convictions', *Irish Times,* 30 March 2013..
[68] Crumlin Road Gaol Mission Statement, https://www.crumlinroadgaol.com/customer-service-charter/
[69] Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, Executive Summary, 2017
[70] Jessica Moody, 'What is "Dark Public History"? A Scholarly Turn to the Dark Side and What it Means for Public Historians', *The Public Historian,* vol. 38, (Aug 2016), 110.

was operational and more recently, debating the place of victims in the penal story or sparking conversations around poverty where modern comparisons could be made.[71]

The history of crime and punishment is important and complex and it is vital that historians become involved in assessing, developing, contextualising prison museums and heritage sites, both as observers and as collaborators. Most of the former prisons and other sites of incarceration in Ireland do not employ curators, archivists or historians and this is a weakness. As Jessica Moody has noted 'public historians should at least turn towards the dark side….to contextualise, complicate and politicise.'[72] Prison museums and heritage sites perform an important part of a country's heritage. They are significant architectural, historical and political sites. But the stories that are told by them and about them are partial. As Walby and Piché have observed 'penal museums…erase as much as they reveal'.[73] It's vital that these complex, often divisive, frequently distressing stories are told in a way that is scholarly, compassionate and not exploitative. Historians, and public historians in particular, could usefully engage with Ireland's penal past as a way of exploring difficult and complex histories associated with incarceration, the struggle for independence, and the treatment of marginalised people. Former prison sites also offer an opportunity to engage with discussions about crime and punishment in the past, present and future To fully understand these sites it is imperative that visitors know that there are many versions of the past and many paths we could chose to walk towards the future, that multiple perspectives are possible and that nothing is a simple as it might seem at first glance.[74]

[71] Dan Johnson, 'Incarcerating the Poor: Interpreting Poverty and Punishment in British Prison Museums', *Law, History and Crime,* 1, (2018): 99.
[72] Moody, 'What is "Dark Public History"? 114.
[73] Walby and Piché, 'The polysemy of punishment memorialization', 452.
[74] O'Brien, 'Beyond Storytelling', 5-7.