



Bruck, J. (2015). 'A good Irishman should blush every time he sees a penny': Gender, nationalism and memory in Irish internment camp craftwork, 1916-1923. *Journal of Material Culture*, 20(2), 149-172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183515577010>

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**'A good Irishman should blush every time he sees a penny'<sup>1</sup>: gender, nationalism and memory in Irish internment camp craftwork, 1916-1923.**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores how the craftwork created in Irish prisons and internment camps in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising through to the end of the Civil War allowed prisoners to negotiate changing concepts of political and social identity. Items such as bone crosses and harps reveal the tensions inherent in discourses of religious identity and cultural nationalism, while the reworking of prison-issue objects illustrates how a sense of personal agency was maintained in a profoundly disempowering context. Macramé handbags and children's reins gave internees a continued sense of involvement in and control over their homes and relationships, while mantle borders, tea cosies and table centres conjured idealised notions of domesticity. Fundamentally, the creation of such objects allowed prisoners to engage with the troubling and often contradictory experiences of masculinity that lay at the heart of camp life.

**Keywords**

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<sup>1</sup> Pearse, 1915: 152

Nationalism, gender, internment, memory, craftwork, Ireland

## **Introduction**

On Easter Monday, 1916, a small group of militant republican men and women captured a series of significant buildings in Dublin city, including the General Post Office, outside of which Pádraig Pearse famously read the Proclamation of the Irish Republic. So began the Easter Rising and ultimately, 6 years later, the end of British rule in most of the island of Ireland. Although the history of the Rising and subsequent events has been well-studied (e.g. Hopkinson, 1988; 2002; Townshend, 2005; Foy and Barton, 2011), the associated material culture has not been a focus of sustained academic enquiry, even though Irish museums hold significant collections of objects from the period, including badges, uniforms, commemorative postcards and other memorabilia. One particularly striking body of material is the craftwork produced by Republican prisoners in internment camps and prisons between 1916 and the end of the Civil War and it is this that is the focus of the current paper. In the aftermath of the Rising, its leaders were court-martialled and executed, and some 1800 other Irish men and women were interned at Frongoch in North Wales and in English jails (O'Mahony, 1987; Ebenezer, 2006). Between 1919 and 1921, as the War of Independence took its increasingly brutal course, Republicans were again interned, this time predominantly on the island of Ireland, for example at Ballykinlar Camp in County Down (Orr, 2012; Durney, 2011). During the

subsequent Civil War, those who opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922 were interned by the new Free State in a tragic series of events that pitted friends, families and former comrades against one another. Here, I will explore how objects made by internees over the 1916-1923 period helped them to cope with the social and psychological challenges of imprisonment and to engage with the changing social and political conditions of the day.

Recent years have seen increasing archaeological interest in internment and prisoner of war camps and their associated material culture (e.g. Myers and Moshenska, 2011; Carr and Mytum, 2012; Mytum and Carr, 2013). Saunders (2003: 1) has commented that relationships with objects are especially intense in times of conflict. Their materiality provides a reference point and creates a sense of ontological security as the traumatic events of war transform familiar bodies and landscapes; at the same time, the looming spectre of loss heightens the emotional charge of personal belongings. Internment camps and prisons are contexts in which people experience profound feelings of dislocation and powerlessness. Making objects allowed prisoners to put order and meaning on the world, providing a sense of control over at least a portion of their experience and environment (Mytum, 2013a). A productive act in what was otherwise a reductive and deeply depersonalising context, craftwork helped people to limit the sense of alienation they experienced in harsh and difficult surroundings (Carr, 2011; 2012; cf. Moshenska, 2008), allowing 'fear, worry and despair [to be] contained and navigated' (Dusselier, 2008: 132) and providing a coping mechanism which made it possible to bound and transcend the pressures of confinement (Mytum, 2013a). In such contexts, the creation of

objects was not only an expression of intellectual freedom and personal capacity (Dusselier, 2012), but was intimately bound up with the construction and expression of changing concepts of selfhood, including individual and collective identities both within and beyond the boundaries of the camp.

For the purposes of the current project, 134 objects made between the end of the Easter Rising and the end of the Civil War were examined. Most of these are held in museums, notably the National Museum of Ireland and Kilmainham Jail in Dublin. However, artefacts in museum collections often lack detailed contextual information, so access was also sought to craftwork in private ownership via advertisements in the media: 23 items owned by internees' descendants were located and examined, and these often proved particularly interesting in terms of the stories that surround them. The objects made in the camps and prisons of this period were mostly decorative (unlike, for example, the practical and escape-oriented items made by English PoWs in Germany in World War 2: Doyle, 2012). The most common items in the database are macramé objects (predominantly ladies' handbags (25), but tea cosies, mantle-borders and belts were also produced); brooches (17) and rings (13); bone harps (14); crosses, chalices and fonts of bone, wood and metal (16); woolwork table centres (9); and wooden photo frames (7). The lack of direct reference to conflict in the decorative schemes applied to these items is interesting, given the political commitment of most internees to militant republicanism: a finger ring decorated with beautifully-executed engravings of tiny revolvers (museum accession number NMI EW1971b – see end of paper for key to

abbreviations) is one of only a few examples observed in this project. The creation of art and a concern with aesthetics has been noted amongst internees in other cultural contexts (e.g. Carr, 2012; Dusselier, 2012), and it seems likely that the lack of conflict-related imagery was a means of countering and coping both with legacies of physical violence and the experience of sensory and emotional deprivation.

### **Constructing the nation**

The internment camp at Frongoch in North Wales has often been termed the ‘university of revolution’: the experience of internment helped to transform what had previously been an ideologically fragmented group of people from different backgrounds and with variable knowledge of military and political strategy into a cohesive and organized movement for Irish independence (O’Mahony, 1987). It was perhaps inevitable that a strong sense of shared national identity and cultural heritage should emerge amongst those interned in the wake of the Easter Rising and that this should be reflected in the use of nationalist symbols on craftwork (cf. Mytum, 2013b). Motifs that referenced the antiquity of Irish culture – such as roundtowers, high crosses and Celtic interlace – are particularly common. The Gaelic revival of the 1840s had stimulated popular interest in the past (Sheehy, 1980) and this was reflected in internment camp craftwork of the 1916-1923 period. Crosses of bone, wood and metal were common items made by internees, for example, and were almost invariably fashioned in the form of Early Medieval high crosses, while most brooches imitated the Early Medieval ‘Tara’

brooch – an item that generated enormous public interest when it was found in 1850. Such objects overtly celebrated the achievements and sophistication of Gaelic Irish culture prior to the Norman conquest, while their imagined links to Early Irish kingship underpinned claims for the legitimacy of self-government. Bone harps were another type of object frequently produced in internment camps: the scenes created on these objects incorporated roundtowers (often ruined), high crosses (frequently leaning) and the rising sun, so that the tragedy of cultural degeneration was effaced by the potential for national renewal (Morris, 2005).

{Insert fig. 1 around here}

Crosses were not the only religious motifs employed, and it is interesting to note that the religious symbolism employed on camp craftwork takes a particularly Catholic form.

Protestants had long been involved in Irish nationalist and independence movements, notably in the 1798 rebellion, as well as the Celtic revival of the late nineteenth century which saw renewed interest in the Irish language, Irish literature, art and sport. After the 1916 Rising, however, a growing ideological link was made between Republicanism and Catholicism (Wills, 2010: 108-113), and the Catholic church immediately assumed a role in the hagiographical commemoration of the executed leaders of the Rising (for example in the pages of the popular magazine, *The Catholic Bulletin*). Although there were Protestants amongst those interned in the years that followed the Rising, the camps were configured as dominantly Catholic spaces. In Frongoch, for example, men pinned holy images over their beds (O'Mahony, 1987: 44),

while a Catholic priest blessed the huts at Ballykinlar (Walsh, 1921: 46) – as if exorcising the camp of its former occupants, British soldiers training before being sent to fight in the first world war (Philip Orr, pers. comm.).

The specifically Catholic character of the religious imagery employed on internment camp craftwork can be seen in a variety of objects. Bone and wood crosses were often inscribed with the letters IHS, a contraction of the name Jesus Christ commonly found on Catholic gravestones and other monuments (see, for example, Mytum, 2004). Two dimensional bone depictions of a chalice surmounted by a monstrance (for the display of the host – the consecrated bread eaten as part of the Catholic mass) were also produced (e.g. NMI EW5013), and these were decorated with religious symbols such as the Sacred Heart and dove representing the Holy Spirit. Some items, such as a bone cross from Frongoch (KJ 18RO-3H12-01), incorporated holy water fonts into their base, while others, such as a bronze pendant made at Newbridge camp (NMI EW242), included the symbols of the four evangelists, referencing Irish Early Christian art. Religious symbolism is most commonly found on objects made in the immediate aftermath of the Easter Rising (30% of items) but was less frequently employed during the Civil War (8% of objects), presumably because during the latter period religious identity could no longer be drawn on to construct a sense of difference between political adversaries, as both sides in the conflict were now predominantly Catholic.

{Insert fig. 2 approximately here}



The 'thorn' motif used to decorate the monstrosities referred to above is particularly interesting, as it identifies the barbed wire that surrounded the camps with Jesus's crown of thorns, explicitly linking the sacrifice of the rebels with the death of Christ<sup>2</sup>. Other objects make similar statements. A bone cross (CPM 1945-145) made during the War of Independence in Cork Jail was fashioned in the style of an Early Medieval high cross and decorated with Celtic interlace and the IHS monogram; its shaft incorporated a framed tricolour and photograph of a young man, alongside a memorial inscription, 'Joe Murphy, died 25.10.20 on hungerstrike'. The key role of the rhetoric of blood sacrifice in Irish Republican ideology has long been a focus of discussion (e.g. Farrell Moran, 1998; Wills, 2010), and is perhaps best known from the writings of Pádraig Pearse, one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising. In the immediate aftermath of the Rising, postcards, souvenir publications and mass cards featuring photographs of the executed leaders were produced for popular consumption (ibid.: 105), and some of these showed halos around their heads. It is not surprising, therefore, that similar conceptual links should be made in the craftwork produced in internment camps during the period, legitimating political violence as an effective means of national redemption through blood sacrifice.

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<sup>2</sup> For the use of barbed wire as a decorative motif in a very different context, see Carr, 2011: 138.

The iconography of national identity during this period is complex, however (Morris, 2005), and the suitability and definition of national symbols was not uncontested. The Irish tricolour had been used only sporadically before 1916, but the raising of this flag over the GPO during Easter week meant that it was soon adopted as a key symbol of republicanism; prior to 1916, a gold harp on a green background was the most common national flag, but its association with constitutional nationalism and what were perceived as the unsuccessful endeavours of the Home Rule movement meant that it fell out of favour amongst militant republicans (ibid.: 34-38). Tricolours occur on a range of items made in internment camps during the period. They were embroidered on handkerchiefs and table centres, and engraved and painted on wooden objects such as photo frames; other items such as a macramé belt from Frongoch (KJ 18EF-3N21-08) and a woolwork table centre from the Curragh (KJ 20EF-3D51-04a) were also worked in the national colours of green, white and orange. Occasionally, gold was used in preference to orange: several decorative elements on a handkerchief from Hare Park were worked in orange but the tricolour itself was rendered in green, white and gold (NMI EW929): the colour orange is associated with Unionism and Protestantism and its exclusion from the tricolour can be interpreted as a politically-motivated act (ibid.: 63).

Other national symbols had longer but equally problematic histories in Irish nationalist culture. During the Civil War – as already mentioned above – internees in Hare Park and Tintown produced large numbers of bone harps decorated with motifs such as Celtic interlace, roundtowers, high crosses, wolfhounds, the rising sun and figures of Éire (a female

personification of Ireland). Shamrock motifs occur on a range of different types of object, and lettering was often rendered in Gaelic forms of script: for example, the wooden inkstand made by Joseph Duffy in Frongoch and beautifully decorated with Celtic interlace had both the name of the camp and the recipient engraved in Gaelic-style lettering (NMI EW121). Symbols such as the harp, shamrock and roundtower had been associated with popular nationalist politics since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries at least (Morris, 2005), but it is interesting to note that by the end of the nineteenth century, they were often linked – at least in the minds of the middle classes and the intelligentsia – with hackneyed and sentimentalized versions of Irish identity (Sheehy, 1980: 92): they were used, for example, to decorate shopfronts, pubs and the bog oak souvenirs bought by Victorian tourists. The ownership of these symbols was likewise contested and they were incorporated into unionist as well as nationalist decorative schemes: the Royal Ulster Constabulary crest, for example, featured a harp and shamrocks surmounted by a crown, while recruiting posters for the British Army in World War 1 employed the same range of national symbols to appeal to Irishmen to join up (Morris, 2005: 34). It is interesting, therefore, that the heaviest use of these symbols on internment camp craftwork was during the Civil War at a time when what it meant to be Irish became highly disputed; in this context, familiar and longstanding national symbols were recontextualized and re-envisioned to legitimate the political ideals of those who opposed the Free State government.

### **Memory and temporality**

Memorial inscriptions like that on the cross from Cork Jail are not unusual in this corpus of material; in fact, the importance of remembering and commemoration is a theme that is constantly revisited in internment camp craftwork. Almost a quarter of the objects examined for this project are inscribed with both the camp name and date, creating souvenirs around which memories could be retraced and re-ordered (cf. Stewart, 1993). In many cases, craftwork was made from items such as spoons, blankets and wooden window shutters which evoked embodied experiences of camp life. Objects that had a clear synedochal relationship with their place of origin are likely to have made especially effective souvenirs. The embodied character of experience has long been recognised (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and is acutely evident in circumstances of physical privation, so that memories of internment had a distinctly visceral character (cf. Olsen, 2010): objects whose sensory qualities could instantly evoke the experience of internment were therefore particularly potent. The inkstand mentioned above, for example, was made from a whiskey vat; the buildings initially used to house internees at Frongoch had originally been part of a distillery. Moreover, the inscription of dates and placenames on craftwork from camps that – like Frongoch – played an iconic role in the formation of Republican identity allowed individuals to engage in the creation of collective memory (cf. Saunders, 2003; Parkin, 1999). Craftwork was often brought home after the prisoner was released: objects such the matching pair of bone harps made at Newbridge Camp (CPM 1972-37 and 38) were mounted on stands that are clearly later in date and it is not hard to imagine them displayed in their maker's home, perhaps on a mantelpiece. Such items

allowed experience to be authenticated and mythologized (cf. Stewart, 1993: 133-134; Somma, 2012: 272) and can perhaps be viewed as much as trophies as souvenirs – evidence of having survived the brutalities of camp life. Displaying craftwork in the home domesticated the experience of internment (Saunders, 2003: 51). This was an act of control, in which the moment of internment could be abstracted, memorialized and consigned to the past; at the same time, it allowed individuals to incorporate ‘history into private time’ (Stewart, 1993: 138), so that their own particular role could be recounted and confirmed.

It is interesting to contextualize the drive to create souvenirs of internment. The collection of souvenirs was a key element of Victorian cultural history and was a common activity amongst soldiers throughout the First World War (Saunders, 2003). This obsession can perhaps be linked with the pace of contemporary social change; in the face of urbanisation, industrialisation and large-scale warfare, there was an inevitable nostalgia for the past, so that the search for authentic experience and stability via the materiality of memory objects – that might themselves at any moment be lost – became especially poignant. The 1916 Rising saw the immediate creation of a souvenir industry: an array of memorabilia including postcards, badges, song sheets and photographic booklets (including different editions for a unionist and a republican readership) was speedily produced for sale (Wills, 2010: 105). There was an interest in the actual material remnants of the Rising too: Seán MacDermott, one of the leaders of the Rising, cut the buttons from his tunic the night before his execution to be given to his friends (ibid.: 14). Such items perhaps have more in common with relics than with

souvenirs: they referenced personal relationships, and condensed loss, mourning and remembrance in material form. Other items collected in the aftermath of the Rising embodied the more voyeuristic and sensationalist aspects of souvenirs. In the days that followed the Rising, for example, members of the public sifted through the rubble of the GPO – still hot from the fire that destroyed it – searching for objects that might make interesting keepsakes (ibid.: 105).

Souvenirs of prisons and camps were equally alluring. Madge Calnan writing to James Ryan in Stafford Jail in 1916, asked 'If you have got your uniform with any Sinn Féin buttons on it, will you please send us on a few as some of us, I for one, want a souvenir of the rising, and of the Irish patriots' (UCD P88/19). In a subsequent letter (UCD P88/20), she thanked him for the buttons, saying 'When I get rich I am going to get one of them dipped in gold and made into a brooch for myself'. A letter from a female friend to Edward Leonard, interned in Ballykinlar (NLI Ms 15,353), thanks him for the macramé handbag he made for her: 'its lovely, especially when its from Ballykinlar I think far more of it you know Mr Leonard I will have it when I'm an old woman, and have to show what I got from our own soldiers, and that is something'. Joe Good (1996: 85), held at Knutsford Prison in 1916, describes how he gave old Irish pennies, each with 'an heroic history' to women visitors who brought parcels of food.

As we shall see below, the relationship between male prisoners and the women who wrote to them or visited them was often flirtatious and sexually-charged, and this is nicely expressed in

the gifting of objects worn on the body. Here, then, the social function of the souvenir is slightly different to that of the relic, facilitating the eroticisation of the body. In the same way that the collection of souvenirs can – in general terms – be seen an element of imperialist discourse that worked to objectify and appropriate the other (Barringer and Flynn, 1998; cf. Gordon, 1986), the acquisition of objects such as buttons from internees was part of a complex sexual politics of power – a means of fetishizing the body that reflected tensions and changes in the relationship between men and women in the early years of the twentieth century. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Peadar Kearney, writing to his wife from Ballykinlar, described a belt he intended to make for her as ‘a curio’ (Kearney, 1976: 29) – a term we might more usually associate with nineteenth century antiquarian or ethnographic collections. As such, souvenirs must be seen as occupying an ambivalent position – they facilitated the maintenance of personal ties but were also centrally implicated in processes of objectification that allowed people to face and to cope with disruptive events by facilitating control over the other (cf. Moshenska, 2008). In this guise, they even became commodified: warders at Knutsford Prison begged the prisoners for rosaries because ‘rebel rosaries’ fetched a high price amongst Irish Catholic emigrants in Manchester (Good, 1996: 83). The catalogue of a ‘gift sale’ held in 1917 by the Irish National Aid and Volunteer Dependents’ Fund (founded, amongst other things, to provide financial support for the families of internees) included items such as a pair of gloves belonging to James Connolly, one of the executed leaders (NLI Ms 35/262/27(1)). Here, it was literally possible to buy into the symbolic potency of particular events and figures. At the same time, by categorising, bounding and appropriating such objects, it became

possible to cope with the vicissitudes of history. By the time of the Civil War, internees were themselves making items such as woolwork table centres for sales of work to raise money for Republican causes (e.g. letter KJ 2012.0198); here too, souvenirs evoked the potency of absence while at the same time signalling a fundamental need to confront and control unmanageable events.

The passage of time was a concern for other reasons too. Imprisoned without charge and without trial, internees had no idea how long they would be detained for. Letters clearly illustrate the existential anxiety engendered by this sense of uncertainty (e.g. Kearney, 1976); in the face of this, of course, memories of life outside of the camp needed to be carefully nurtured and sustained. A wooden cross carved by Patrick Ronan in Kilworth Camp during the War of Independence incorporates a frame into its shaft in which a lock of hair belonging to both the maker and his wife were placed (NMI EW1342). Photograph frames made from packing crates were carved with motifs such as birds and flowers (e.g. KJ 19EF-3H12-03), evoking memories of happier times – the very act of framing ensuring the coherence and integrity of spaces beyond the camp and providing a mechanism for coping with the profound sense of loss experienced by many internees (Saunders, 2003: 81-83; cf. Mytum 2013b). Inscribing objects with a date demonstrated an eye to the future – a commitment to survival and to life beyond the barbed wire – and acted as a way of marking, bounding and transcending the uncertain temporalities of internment (cf. Dusselier, 2012: 83; Somma, 2012: 271). In such a context, it is hardly surprising that prisoners produced objects such as the



watch pendant made from a spoon in Kilmainham Jail and engraved with the message 'Seosamh ón a Athair' ('Joseph from his father': NMI EW216). Here, the effects of the passage of time could be mitigated by evoking personal memories and affective bonds, and disengagement from normal temporal rhythms could be countered by a strong sense of personal history (cf. Rachamimov, 2012: 293). In this way, the intensely depersonalising and disempowering experience of imprisonment could be offset with enduring structures of sociality that transcended the physical boundaries of the camp itself, and that – in this case at least – had survived the terrible destruction of civil war. These sorts of items can perhaps be seen more as mementoes than souvenirs – they did not function to objectify the other, but condensed memory and emotion into artefacts that gave material form to enduring interpersonal relationships (cf. Saunders, 2003). In such conditions of uncertainty, making mementoes for friends and family, particularly if these were inscribed with date and camp name, can perhaps also be considered as 'a rite of anticipatory mourning' (Parkin, 1999: 314), for it was unclear how, when and whether an internee would be free again. Memorials are 'life-sustaining yet death reckoning' (ibid.: 316) and in this sense, craftwork drew past and future together in a narrative that fused disruption and continuity, hope and despair.

### **The challenges of camp life**

Histories and memoirs of internment camps during this period describe how prison guards often struggled to keep discipline amongst their charges. Internees at Frongoch, for example,

found a variety of effective ways of challenging the camp authorities. While a count of prisoners was being conducted one morning, one man got a fit of coughing (O'Mahony, 1987: 105). The officer in charge of the count shouted 'Stop that damn coughing', whereupon all of the other internees started to cough too. In a similar way, craftwork was used to subvert the norms of camp-life (cf. Carr, 2012). Camp-issue material culture was frequently turned to new ends. For example, spoons were made into Tara-style brooches at Tintown and Hare Park (e.g. NMI EW 4854). The women interned in Kilmainham Jail during the Civil War made slippers and skirts from prison-issue blankets, and reworked objects of this sort became a focus of tension between the prisoners and their guards: Siobhán and Máiréad de Paor recount how 'It was a sad day when the fruits of our labours were captured by the prison authorities and there was often a round-up for the purpose' (UCD P140, 15). Such conflicts over the ownership and definition of objects reflected wider concerns regarding control of prison space and the regulation of bodily practice. The de Paor sisters (ibid.: 19) quote a verse from an autograph album from the Jail:

'An annihilated blanket,  
A new skirt appears,  
Government stuff re-captured,  
Sis [sister] reduced to tears'.

{Insert fig. 3 approximately here}

We have already seen above how wooden shutters and even a distillery vat could become refashioned to create new objects, and sometimes such acts were overtly provocative: lead torn from the roof of Belfast Jail when the prisoners took control of part of the jail for several days in 1918 (O'Donoghue, 2010) was recast to create commemorative Tara-style brooches, many of which were inscribed with the words 'A little bit of Belfast Jail' or similar (e.g. NMI EW28a). As Stewart (1993: 135) puts it, such items 'display the romance of contraband, for its scandal is its removal from its "natural" location'. In other words, transforming objects into other objects allowed prisoners to rework the sets of values and social relationships implied by an artefact's original function. During the Civil War, internees in camps such as Ballykinlar made rings and brooches from coins. The camp authorities banned this activity, which they viewed as the defacing of legal tender (MA BMH Witness Statement 908; Jim Higgins, pers. comm.) – hence the quote in the title of this paper: indeed, a brooch made from a coin in Spike Island prison has had the king's head carefully cut out (CPM 1988-1). Inevitably, however, prisoners found ways of working around the system and acquiring the materials they needed. Internee Michael O'Brien's wife baked a silver half-crown into a cake that she sent to him at Ballykinlar so that he could make a brooch (Myra Heffernan, pers. comm.). In other cases, prisoners deliberately chose coins minted in 1916 to make into rings, placing the letters 'IV' (Irish Volunteers – one of the main organisations involved in the Easter Rising) on either side of the year (Jim Higgins, pers. comm.), and redirecting the commemorative purpose of inscription from the reign of George V to an act of rebellion.

Craftwork, as this paper argues, clearly had a significant social and psychological role in allowing internees to cope with camp life (cf. Moshenska, 2008; Moloney, 2011). The materials and tools for the production of craftwork were not always easy to come by, of course, and prisoners had to be inventive in their sourcing of supplies. Items such as macramé bags could be made using nothing more complex than a few nails and a piece of wood from a packing box or crate, although the twine itself had to be obtained by post from family or friends. The bags themselves were often highly standardized, with many virtually identical objects produced in the same camp; it is clear that internees were following particular patterns and that these were widely borrowed, copied and circulated. Even objects that required no pattern – such as the bone harps made from sheep and cattle scapulae at Tintown and Hare Park – were often very similar to each other, and it is interesting to reflect on how such crafts might have helped to create a sense of community and common purpose. The inscription of the camp name and date on objects likewise referenced shared experience, instilling a feeling of belonging and comradeship (cf Carr, 2011; 2012), and it is clear that particular styles of object are characteristic of particular camps. Humour was used to similar effect (cf. Mytum 2013b): a medal made from lead removed from the roof of Belfast Jail was embossed with the words ‘Fellowship of felons’ (NMI EW37). Of course, the subversive character of craftwork that involved the illicit appropriation and reworking of camp objects is likely to have worked in a similar way by accentuating the divide between prisoners and their captors.

{Insert fig. 4 approximately here}

This is not to say, however, that the creation of craftwork was always an exercise in camaraderie or that it was universally seen in a positive light by internees. For some, craftwork became synonymous with the boredom, frustration and strain of imprisonment: these were activities that internees knew they wouldn't be doing at home. A poem in one autograph album expresses this well ([www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~irluie2/Ballykinlar/16.htm](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~irluie2/Ballykinlar/16.htm)):

'When over life's path you tread  
And new friends around you linger  
And you cease to worry about macramé thread  
Don't forget the three-plank bed  
Or the lazy life you led  
In God-forsaken Ballykinlar.'

For others, craftwork encapsulated a sense of desperation – and perhaps even degradation. A cartoon (on display in Kilmainham Jail's museum and reproduced here) showing a 'group of zealous macramé workers' crowding around a single light-bulb in a hut at Ballykinlar depicts men who are making themselves ridiculous. The camp magazine produced by internees in Ballykinlar exhorted prisoners to employ themselves in more useful ways. In an article entitled 'On the morale of the camp', one writer describes how 'For the express purpose of keeping themselves occupied, a large percentage of men in the Camp are making rings, macramé bags, etc. This, of course, is good in its own way ... Still, we can occupy our minds in other and better ways – the soldiers among us by regularly attending lectures and drill, the citizens by learning

their native language and attending any other classes they think necessary' (MA BMH/CD/134/4/3, page 2). Sometimes, craftwork became an arena in which a sense of discord could be expressed. A considerable degree of factionalism was experienced in many of the camps, partly because of existing political differences within Republicanism, but this was doubtless exacerbated by the difficulties of living in close quarters with so many others (cf. Mytum 2013b). Attitudes to craftwork provided a means of expressing and negotiating such tensions, and craftwork could itself be seen as disruptive and troublesome. A verse in another autograph book from Ballykinlar (NMI EW 2711) laments the difficulties of communal living:

'Oh for a cell all to myself

A clean white floor – a tidy shelf

A book to pass spare time away

To rise and work at dawn of day

Far from the bloke who hammers rings

Far from the "can" who *thinks* he sings

Far from this den where rumours dwell

If it *must be jail* – give me a cell.'

### **Gender relationships and concepts of the home**

Perhaps one of the most curious features of craftwork from internment camps during this period is the dominance of objects associated with women. On first examining the

Kilmainham Jail collections, I was surprised to find that it included a large number of ladies' evening bags, their style immediately conjuring the 1920s – hardly the kinds of object one might have expected male rebel fighters to be making! In fact, as we have seen above, macramé handbags are the most common type of item in the database. We can suggest that the production of items such as these allowed internees to address the considerable ambiguities around the definition and performance of masculinity in the all-male context of the camp (cf. Rachamimov, 2012). In most camps, internees did their own washing, mending, cleaning and cooking, and this disruption of normative gender roles appears to have provoked a considerable degree of disquiet – a sense of uneasiness that was often addressed through humour. An autograph book from Rath Camp includes a cartoon of a dishevelled-looking man standing over a washtub with the caption 'She can never say I didn't do any washing' ([curragh.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=contacts&action=display&thread=638](http://curragh.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=contacts&action=display&thread=638)), while Edward Leonard writing home to his wife tells her that 'I can wash my shirt now as good as any woman could do it' (NLI Ms 15,353). In a light-hearted letter to James Ryan (UCD P88/21), Frances Kelly comments that she has heard 'you were all going through a course of charring, I hope you don't develop "house-maid's knee".' The production of craftwork is drawn into concerns over the transgression of gender boundaries through its association with the home (more of which below), as is illustrated in a poem from an autograph book from Ballykinlar (NMI EW1059):

'If you want a young man who can mend his own socks,  
Or your stockings (perhaps), an' 'as cookin';

An' washin'; an' sewin';  
Who can make fancy furniture out of a box,  
An' macramé bags, that you see in a book,  
In a manner as neat and so knowin';  
Well, you'll find one up here  
Anyday o' the year  
In the camp out at Baile Cionn Leóra [Ballykinlar],  
Where the boys from all parts  
Learn housekeepin' arts  
With the gentle assistance of DORA<sup>3</sup>.

It is not hard to read into such comments anxieties over the potential emasculation of internees through their performance of what would normally have been identified as women's work; this was doubtless exacerbated by the profound sense of disempowerment engendered by internment.

{Insert fig. 5 approximately here}

The ambivalences of masculinity behind the wire were explored in plays, shows and other events in which men took on female roles (both exotic and familiar) to ribald response: the

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<sup>3</sup> The Defence of the Realm Act (1915) allowed prisoners to be detained without charge and suspended the right to trial by jury.



fancy-dress competition held at Halloween in Frongoch, for example, included internees dressed as a Frenchman chaperoning his two daughters (O'Mahony, 1987: 76), while a photo in the autograph album from the Rath Camp mentioned above shows three young men dressed as women outside a hut: activities such as these allowed 'the anxieties, hopes and vulnerabilities' of internees to be given material form (Somma 2012, 264). A letter from Harry Boland describes the Frongoch event thus: 'we had three "ladies for a night" who were very much sought after' (UCD P88/39). Such tongue-in-cheek responses to cross-dressing helped internees to cope with frustrated sexual desire. Craftwork was co-opted into these discourses on the troublesome definition of masculinity: a spoof advertisement in the Ballykinlar Camp magazine sought a 'Principal boy and other well-shaped ladies for panto. Send waist measurements to this office. Bring own tights unless prepared to wear macramé mantle border as substitute' (private collection). Here, ideas of domesticity (as epitomized in particular craft items) were mapped out on a sexualized but ultimately artificial female body. On the one hand, camp theatricals eroticised the male body by allowing the normative boundaries of masculinity to be challenged and transgressed; yet, by playing to stereotypes, female characters in effect reinforced gender norms and relationships. It is not clear to what extent craft items such as macramé bags were used in theatrical productions, yet the quantity of such objects made in camps of the period certainly speaks of a concern to engage with and work through gendered concepts of identity both within and beyond the wire.

Ultimately, however, most craftwork was made to be sent out of the camp rather than to be used inside it: objects were made by internees as gifts for friends and family in the outside world, particularly wives, mothers, sisters and other female friends and admirers. Documents such as personal letters and parcel record books show that women sent in parcels of food, cigarettes and other necessities (including wool, macramé twine and other materials for craftwork). In return, men made rings, brooches, macramé bags and other items for them; almost all of the postal receipts that survive from Hare Park are for craft objects sent to women (MA CW/P/09/06). In a letter from Ballykinlar camp, Peadar Kearney tells his wife, 'I'm glad you got the beads alright, they're a nice keepsake I think. I've two bags and a ring which if I'm going to be here for good I'll ask leave to send you. However, you never know what might happen' (Kearney, 1976: letter 7 August 1921). A bone brooch made by Edward Leonard has his wife's name, Rose, inscribed on it (NMI EW3218), but he made many other items for female friends and relations: writing to Rose from Ballykinlar, he says 'Well I am glad she [a friend] likes the rings and bags I sent out you can tell Peg that I have one of the silver rings I think she got a good supply Did she give you one of them Liz was saying that the striped bag was the nicest well we could make them all that way if we thought you would like them but we thought the plain ones was the best tell Peg to send me on 4 balls [of macramé twine] at once and I will make a cosey for her that will last a long time' (NLI Ms 15,353, letter dated 25 August 1921). When Michael O'Brien's wife sent a silver half-crown baked inside a cake to Ballykinlar, the brooch he made for her from this was inscribed with the motto 'May God above increase our love'; later, his daughter wore it for her Confirmation (Myra Heffernan,

pers. comm.). This was an economy of love and remembrance – a means of ensuring the continuity of affective bonds and intimate relationships in the face of spatial and physical disruption.

I have already noted above that many of these objects were worn on the body or intimately associated with it, such as rings, brooches and handbags, and the written discourse around these objects (in letters, for example) was often erotic in tone. One letter from a female friend thanking Edward Leonard for some macramé handbags commented ‘of course all the girls are jealous over them I hope you will bring me home as nice a boy’ (NLI Ms 15,353). Here, sexual longing was expressed in the desire for objects, and Leonard was bombarded by letters from women with requests for rings, bags and ‘boys’. Notwithstanding the ambivalences of masculinity behind the wire outlined above, it is evident that internees were widely viewed as sexually desirable precisely *because* they had taken up arms (Will Murphy, pers. comm.; the link between manliness and militarism will be explored further below). A letter from a female friend to James Ryan derides those that took no part in the Rising: ‘The very least of us wouldn’t be bothered with those that are left. An ordinary “beardless” boy has no attractions for us now’ (UCD P88/23). Another young woman asks him to share the contents of his food parcels with ‘other fellows who are not in the fortunate position of having a crowd of female admirers’ (UCD P88/17). There was an influx of young female visitors to the men held at Knutsford Prison immediately after the Rising and some 50 of them came to see the prisoners off when they were transferred to Frongoch (McConville, 2003: 461). These women brought

food parcels for the men and in turn, as we have already seen, were gifted small personal objects. A poem in an autograph book from Frongoch dedicated to a Miss Phillips who sent in food and cigarettes captures the relationship between internees and their female supporters well (NMI EW 2531):

‘To thank you I can’t find a rhyme

And if I were allowed to chose

I couldn’t do it e’en in prose.

Indeed, my dear Miss Phillips,

To thank you I should want your lips.’

Ultimately, the exchange of objects and food facilitated sensual connections between internees, their families and admirers, particularly where objects (such as buttons and brooches) involved intimate engagement with the body.

{Insert fig. 6 here}

It is notable that alongside decorative personal items such as handbags and rings, internees made many objects associated with the home. Tea cosies, mantle borders and woolwork mats (used as table centres or to protect the arms and backs of easy chairs) all speak of a poignant nostalgia for domesticity. Models of traditional cottages (complete with half-door) were made from peat (John Byrne, pers. comm.), although none of these has survived in the collections examined for this project. Doubtless, internees made an effort to create some sense of

comfort and homeliness in camps and prisons (cf. Rachamimov, 2012): Edward Leonard describes how ‘everyone is trying to make his hut nicer than the others’ (NLI Ms 15,353). Yet, for most, the camp could never be synonymous with home: the huts themselves were cold, cramped and airless, while in a letter to his mother from Rath Camp in 1921, Todd Andrews (UCD P91/1/18) recounts how ‘Some nights the military guard comes and bashes and kicks at our huts with the sole object of keeping us awake. Dictaphones or electrophones have been found in huts’. These were places in which it was hard to feel at ease, and almost impossible to feel at home, and this helps to explain why – despite Leonard’s comment – surviving drawings and photographs of hut interiors show extremely spartan surroundings: a deliberate choice not to invest in these spaces was a means of rejecting them as a reviled and transitory mark of forced detainment (cf. Parrott, 2005). In contrast, the romanticized home of the internee’s imagination was usually figured as both geographically and ontologically distant from the spatial surrounds of the camp (cf. Rachamimov, 2012: 294): home was a central element in Irish nineteenth and early twentieth century discourses of identity and belonging. A poem in an autograph book from Belfast Jail, for example, conjures just such a sentimentalized image (NMI EW2605):

‘As I lie on my old plank bed

‘Tis in vain I woo slumber or rest

For I can’t sit or sleep for a-thinking I keep

Of my darling old home in the West’.

In fact, most 'domestic' objects were made for wives, mothers and other female relatives and friends outside of the camp. This provided male internees – who in most other ways must have felt profoundly disempowered – with a continued sense of involvement and engagement in domestic and family life. For many families, the internment of the male head of household provoked serious financial difficulties, and women had to take on roles that had previously been carried out by absent fathers and husbands. In early twentieth century Ireland, this is likely to have been difficult for men – many of whom came from a conservative background – to witness; in popular thought, male power and status was in part predicated on their ability to provide for their families (Kelleher and Murphy, 1997). The desire to exert continued control over the domestic domain – as a means of emphasising the resilience and continuity of male power despite the challenges to ideals of masculinity outlined above – is nicely illustrated by a set of macramé child's reins made in Frongoch (NMI EW532). Here, an absent father continued to exert bodily discipline over his family. Indeed, the materiality of macramé and woolwork – technologies that involved the knotting or weaving of fibres – spoke metaphorically of the endurance of inter-personal ties and masculine control, binding the internee into broader social and familial networks. Doubtless, such existential anxieties were exacerbated by the threat of raids on Republican homes by the police and armed forces. Raids carried out both during the War of Independence and the Civil War involved the perpetration of physical violence on people and objects and often resulted in the deliberate destruction of a family's treasured belongings (see, for example, correspondence between Lily O'Brien and her sister: UCD P13/34(1)). Such acts undermined the ontological security of the home, and in the

face of such risks it is hardly surprising that the objects made in prisons and internment camps should focus on bolstering the home as a bastion of independence, safety and comfort.

Ultimately, the creation of domestic objects helped to maintain a continued sense of security, selfhood and continuity in an insecure world (cf. Carr, 2011; Dusselier 2012), allowing fears, longings and emotions to be expressed in a context where both normative cultural expectations of masculinity and an ideology of militarism required men to contain such concerns (Rachamimov, 2012: 299).

Of course, objects like tea cosies, brooches, mantle borders and handbags can be construed as 'decorative' rather than 'functional' and, as such, reflect particular attitudes towards women and understandings of femininity. Items such as table centres placed women firmly in the home and in doing so conformed to late nineteenth century gender ideologies which upheld male power over the active, public world of politics and economics by relegating women to the domestic domain (e.g. Kelleher and Murphy, 1997). An issue of the Ballykinlar camp magazine describes how 'We have made up for the absence of the superior sex here by attempting their conceits: the making of vanity bags, rings and other knick-knacks is now all the rage' (MA BMH/CD/134/4/3: page 3). Here, women are portrayed as interested only in trifles. This narrative, of course, is countered by the copious evidence for women's involvement in militant Republicanism during these years (e.g. McCoolle, 1997; 2003; Matthews, 2010). Republican women risked internment, physical and sexual violence and death – see, for example, Elizabeth O'Farrell's extraordinarily hazardous journey to bring the order of surrender to the

various republican garrisons around Dublin in the final hours of the Easter Rising (Matthews, 2010: 140-142). In fact, both cultural nationalism and Republican politics had provided opportunities for new forms of heterosocial mixing: clubs such as the Gaelic League, for example, allowed unmarried women to socialize with men in a way that in other contexts would have been considered unthinkable (ibid.: 9).

Yet, male attitudes towards women remained ambivalent. The active role of women in the Republican movement was often downplayed by their male contemporaries: in 1914, for example, Eoin MacNeill (leader of the Irish Volunteers) commented that ‘now embroidering colours and making flags will be an arduous if pleasing task’ for the members of the newly-established Cumann na mBan (the Republican women’s council; quoted ibid.: 103) – as if women’s role in the fight for independence could be reduced to needlework. The poetry in camp autograph albums tends to represent women either as sexually-untouchable mother-figures or as devious temptresses diverting men from the Republican cause (cf. Valente, 2011; Somma, 2012). Often, it reinforces norms of passive femininity, as illustrated by a poem written in Belfast Jail in 1918 (NMI EW 5838):

‘Oh, Dora, dear! I often think  
How naughty you have been  
To lock me up where I can see  
No blue-eyed sweet colleen.  
One small request I have to make



(Oh Dora! Please give ear)

Arrest some pretty little girls

And lock them up in here.'

Valente (2011) has commented on British perceptions of Irish masculinity at the height of Empire. The activities of militant Republicans over the course of the nineteenth century had long been regarded as evidence that the Irish were a barbarous and sub-human race, lacking the discipline necessary for self-government. In a similar way, although Irish soldiers serving in the British army in World War 1 were valued for their supposed martial traits, they too were considered disorderly, impulsive and in need of firm, paternal leadership (Bourke, 1998). Yet, Irish men were caught in a double-bind: if they demonstrated aggression, they risked being caricatured as savages, but if they showed restraint, they were considered submissive, weak and feminized (Valente, 2011): imperial discourse feminized the subject, for example in the Anglo-centrism of certain aspects of the Celtic Revival which romanticised the Celts as artistic and emotional. In either case, Irish men were seen as deficient in the essential attributes of manhood as it was idealized in Victorian Britain (Sisson, 2004). The perceived need to defend Irish manhood is perhaps best demonstrated in the writings and educational philosophy of Pádraig Pearse whose boys' school, St Enda's, attempted to inculcate such core Victorian values as courage, honour, duty and obedience in its pupils (Sisson, 2004). Although his interest in the heroic myths of Early Medieval Ireland forged a link between martiality and Irish national identity, Pearse's rhetoric of discipline, endurance and sacrifice for the greater good

had much in common with the ideals of English public schools during the same period: both had at their foundation essentially patriarchal and imperialist concepts of masculinity. Demonstrating a capacity for manly self-control and virtue was one way of legitimating the call for political self-determination. In order to achieve this, however, Irish men had to conform to the gender norms that lay at the heart of imperial ideology (Valente, 2011).

Doubtless, the feelings of impotence experienced by internees proved a challenge to this ideology of manhood, and retaining a sense of identity and effectiveness as *men* was a particular focus of concern in prisons and camps. This can be seen in the ongoing urge to demonstrate discipline, cleanliness and honour – key components of the ideology of martial masculine culture. Life in Frongoch was ordered along military lines, with daily drill routines and fatigue duties organized and monitored by the internees' own military command (O'Mahony, 1987: 42-3; Ebenezer, 2006: 112). Michael Hayes' (doubtless somewhat idealistic) description of life in Ballykinlar describes how 'constant and strict adherence to the rule' and 'scrupulous cleanliness' were the order of the day amongst internees: 'their attitude towards their officer custodians', he tells us, 'was not going to be one of servility or abasement' (UCD P53/117). These men were presenting themselves as soldiers on a par with those in the British army. Set in this context, the production of objects such as handbags and tea-cosies was a way of validating this normative conception of manliness by placing it in opposition to an ideal of femininity as passive, superficial and inextricably bound up with the trappings and trivialities of the home. By representing women as submissive and weak – and by locating them firmly in

the home – Irish men could counter the feminising tropes of imperialism and lay claim themselves to the characteristics that epitomized Victorian manliness. Making objects such as handbags and brooches allowed internees to vicariously reassert their dominance (Somma, 2012: 271) by establishing Irish women's need for the protection of self-disciplined and chivalrous men.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to demonstrate the emotive power of objects. Craftwork made by internees was an effective agent of change that shaped (rather than simply reflecting) emerging concepts of social and national identity (cf. Boivin, 2008; Olsen, 2010). The visceral links between internees, their families and the objects that bound them together demonstrate the centrality of the material world in the relational construction of personhood: craftwork created and defined concepts of self-worth and inter-personal relationships both within and outside of the camp. In some cases, the physical properties of the materials themselves had a profound effect on how identities were formed: wool and twine, for example, facilitated technologies of knotting, weaving and binding that reinforced the inter-dependence of familial and personal ties.

Moreover, these objects had a significant impact on the course of nationalist and republican history. The curation and display of 'relics' (sacred objects with their own agency) associated

with those who had lost their lives in the conflict played an important role in turning the tide of popular opinion in the aftermath of the Easter Rising – support for the rebels had initially been low among the general public. Likewise, the objects made for female relatives and friends can be implicated in the extraordinary reversal in the position of women in the Free State and the early years of the Republic: in contrast to the increasingly active role that women had played in the world of politics, art and public discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the institutionalisation of the relationship between the state and the Catholic church re-established a highly conservative vision of femininity that relocated women firmly in the home (Valiulis, 2011). In this sense, then, both people and objects were mutually implicated in the shaping of history.

Irish internment camp craftwork can therefore be seen to have directly engaged with the social and political issues of the day – from debates around the meaning of ‘Irishness’ to changing gender relationships. Making items such as brooches and tea cosies countered the harsh and dehumanising experience of internment; in addition, they helped internees to nurture memories of the past and hopes for the future, providing coping mechanisms for difficult moments of social, psychological and physical transition. These objects provide a rich source of evidence for the varied perspectives and ideologies of those involved in the nationalist and republican movement during this period. As such, items such as macramé handbags, crosses and rings provide a unique perspective on personal experiences of conflict, as well as the social impact and emotional toll of internment. Perhaps most clearly, they

demonstrate how objects embody and articulate hopes and fears, love, loss and longing. The layered stories in which they were originally embedded have – a century on – often been lost, but they continue to speak in affecting and powerful ways: although now rarely displayed in the homes of their owners (most often the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of combatants), they are nonetheless treated with care and reverence – periodically removed from their places of safekeeping to be viewed and handled and, as the centenary of the Rising and subsequent events draws near, to be bound anew into narratives of personal and national identity.

### **Abbreviations**

NMI National Museum of Ireland

KJ Kilmainham Jail

NLI National Library of Ireland

MA Military Archives, Cathal Brugha Barracks

BMH Bureau of Military History, Military Archives, Cathal Brugha Barracks

UCD University College Dublin

CPM Cork Public Museum

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## Captions

Figure 1: Bone harp from Hare Park featuring Éire, roundtower, greyhound and Celtic interlace (courtesy of Kildare County Council)

Figure 2: Bone cross on wooden stand (referencing Early Medieval high cross) from Newbridge Camp (courtesy of Kilmainham Jail/Office of Public Works, 20RO-3H12-02)

Figure 3: Tara brooch fashioned from a spoon and a coin by John 'Blimey' O'Connor in Tintown (courtesy of Cáit Niclónnraic)

Figure 4: 'Solving the lighting problem in Ballykinlar: a group of zealous macramé workers making the best of the only available light to work overtime' (courtesy of Kilmainham Jail/Office of Public Works)

Figure 5: Macramé lady's handbag made by Pat Moran in Kilmainham Jail (courtesy of Kilmainham Jail/Office of Public Works, 20EF-3L21-07)

Figure 6: Macramé tea cosy made by Pat Moran in Kilmainham Jail (courtesy of Kilmainham Jail/Office of Public Works, 20EF-3L21-07)