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The Knutsford Hotel

Irish Volunteer Prisoners in Knutsford Gaol in 1916

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Abstract

The events following the Easter Rising in 1916, the executions in Dublin and incarceration of the volunteers in Frongoch have been examined and published on multiple occasions. What remains missing are studies of the experience of prisoners in British gaols as they waited for the British Government to decide what to do with them. The most important studies of their prison experience have been completed by William Murphy and Seán McConville.¹ Knutsford was a military prison and unlike the more relaxed regimes of civilian prisons where photographs of notable prisoners including Michael Collins were taken no such records for Knutsford exist. The words and memories of the remaining volunteers remain largely unpublished other than in one or two fleeting sentences. Although the cohort sent to Knutsford did not contain any of the leaders of the Easter Rising significant figures were incarcerated there, including William X. O'Brien, Richard Mulcahy, Oscar Traynor and W.J. Brennan-Whitmore. The Witness Statements, letters and poems of those who endured their imprisonment at Knutsford reveal an intimate story of abuse, stress and support of the Irish in Britain, in what, with gallows humour, they called the Knutsford Hotel.

Keywords: Ireland, prison, 1916, rising, Knutsford, historiography

Résumé

Les événements qui ont suivis le soulèvement de Pâques 1916, les exécutions à Dublin et l'incarcération des Volunteers à Frongoch ont été étudiés et ont fait l'objet de multiples publications. Il manque cependant des études de l'expérience des détenus dans les prisons britanniques alors qu'ils attendent que le gouvernement décide de leur sort. Les études les plus importantes de leur expérience en prison ont été menées par William Murphy et Seán McConville. Knutsford était une prison militaire et contrairement aux régimes plus souples des prisons civiles où les photographies de prisonniers célèbres comme Michael Collins ont été prises, il n'existe pas de telles données pour Knutsford. Les paroles et souvenirs des Volunteers restants n'ont jamais été publiés pour la plupart si ce n'est une ou deux phrases en passant. Bien qu'il n'y ait pas eu dans la cohorte envoyée à Knutsford de grandes figures du soulèvement de Pâques, certains de ces acteurs importants y furent incarcérés comme William X. O'Brien, Richard Mulcahy, Oscar Traynor et W.J. Brennan-Whitmore. Les dépositions des témoins, les lettres et les poèmes de ceux qui ont enduré leur emprisonnement à Knutsford révèlent une histoire intime de maltraitance, de stress et du soutien des Irlandais en Grande-Bretagne, dans cette prison, qu'avec humour noir, ils avaient baptisé l'Hôtel Knutsford.

Mots clés: Irlande, prison, 1916, soulèvement, Knutsford, historiographie

The Knutsford Hotel

*Poor men and rich men all on the mash,
No need for money, no need for cash:
Only polishing your boots and scrubbing your cell,
This is the way at the Knutsford Hotel¹*

Following the defeat and surrender of those that took part in the Easter Rising the British Government found itself in legal quagmire.² They had to decide how to deal with the prisoners using either a military or civil legal framework. It was decided that they should be detained under section 14B of the Defence of the Realm Act. DORA would become the primary component in the British legal tool-box when it came to Ireland between 1915-1921.³ This was a decision of dubious legality but did allow, on the surface at least, for the indefinite detention of those charged.⁴ Before and after being charged, those involved had to be placed under guard and suitable locations needed to be found that would be fit to hold large numbers of men. The decision was made to transport the prisoners to Britain and to place them in available gaols. A total of 1,836 were interned in British prisons.⁵ These were either civilian prisons with convenient space for large numbers, or those that had been commandeered by the military for the purposes of military discipline or to hold conscientious objectors. They were dispersed to Glasgow, Knutsford, Lewes, Perth, Reading, Stafford, Wakefield, Wandsworth and Woking.⁶ Female prisoners were sent to Aylesbury.⁷ It is from within Stafford and Reading that we get the most famous images of this period, including that of Michael Collins and some of his fellow inmates.⁸ As many of the leading figures were absent from Knutsford, there is something of an assumption that little of note occurred. Due to this the experiences of lesser known individuals following their deportation to Britain remain under-researched. The accounts of the prisoners not only contradict the view that little happened, but provide a fascinating narrative of life for an Irish prisoner and the reactions of their gaolers and the wider British population. The

1. *Knutsford Hotel*, written by an Irish rebel in Knutsford, June 1916, The National Library of Ireland, EPH A243.

2. W. Murphy, 'Nowhere Else Does One Learn to Know a Colleague So Well', *Political Imprisonment and the Irish 1919-1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), [Oxford Scholarship online accessed August 2017].

3. Murphy, *Political Imprisonment and the Irish 1919-1921*, p.34.

4. D. Foxton, *Revolutionary Lawyers Sinn Féin and crown courts in Ireland and Britain, 1916-1923* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), pp.88-107.

5. Foxton, *Revolutionary Lawyers Sinn Féin and crown courts in Ireland and Britain, 1916-1923*, p.68.

6. *1916 Rebellion Handbook* (Dublin: The Mourne River Press & Colour Books Ltd, 1998), pp. 67-96.

7. Foxton, *Revolutionary Lawyers Sinn Féin and crown courts in Ireland and Britain, 1916-1923*, p.93.

8. C. Townshend, *Easter 1916 The Irish Rebellion* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), plate 21.

prisoners that were dispersed to Knutsford with dark humour named their new location the Knutsford Hotel.⁹

Work on the Knutsford House of Correction began in 1817 and it was described in 1822 as containing yards that were 'spacious and well flagged' and with three radiating wings already completed and a fourth in progress which would result in a final total of 176 cells. The new house of correction would not just hold those convicted of crimes, but also the 'the maintenance of vagrants, many of whom, from various infirmities, cannot be employed'.¹⁰ It was constructed to meet the latest ideas concerning prison reform. In 1843, the conditions and regime experienced by Chartist prisoners resulted in questions being asked in the House of Commons.¹¹ However, by 1915 its population had declined to such a low level that the Secretary for the Home Office decided to turn the prison over to military authorities to be used as a detention barracks for soldiers sentenced for military offences.¹² The few remaining civilian prisoners would be transferred to Strangeways in Manchester.¹³ It would later be used to house conscientious objectors who refused to serve in the British military following the 1916 Military Conscription Act.¹⁴ Knutsford would become a work centre for those who had their status as conscientious objector rejected by local tribunals.¹⁵ As it was no longer a civilian prison those who were sent there would find a much tougher regime than those incarcerated in Reading, Stafford or any of the other locations still under civilian governorship.

The number of prisoners recorded in Knutsford varies from source to source. Seán McConville in his work, *Irish Political Prisoners 1848-1922* records a total of 624.¹⁶ In his account of the Easter Rising and its immediate aftermath W.J. Brennan-Whitmore recalled approximately 200 being sent to Knutsford on 30th April and he was sent with a further 308 on 3rd May.¹⁷ The first Irish prisoners arrived in Knutsford on 1st of May 1916 and the final cohort arrived in Knutsford on 7th June. *The Irish Rebellion Handbook* records approximately 600 being transfer-

9. *1916 Rebellion Handbook*, pp. 67-96; *Knutsford Hotel*, written by an Irish rebel in Knutsford, June 1916, The National Library of Ireland, EPH A243.

10. *The Fourth Report of the Committee of the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline, and for the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders* (London: T. Bensley, 1822).

11. *Hansard*, HC Debates, Vol.69, cc817-41, 23rd December 1843.

12. D. Woodley, *Knutsford Prison the Inside Story* (Northwich: Ann Loader Publications, 2007), p. 75; *The Manchester Guardian*, 'The Future of Knutsford Gaol', 1st October 1915; *The Observer*, 'New use for Knutsford Gaol', 17th October 1915.

13. The Future of Knutsford Gaol, *The Manchester Guardian*, 1st October 1915.

14. *Military Service Act 1916*, HMSO, *The National Archives*, Kew.

15. C. Barrett, *Peacemakers War Resistance 1914-1918 An Anglican Perspective* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2014), p.142.

16. S. McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922: theatres of war*.

17. W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, *Dublin Burning: The Easter Rising from Behind the Barricades* (Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1996), p.125.

red to Knutsford.¹⁸ When William X. O'Brien arrived at Knutsford he estimated there were already approximately 500 Irish prisoners already in the gaol.¹⁹ This was not a pleasant journey for them. The language and threats made by British officers and NCOs on the way to board the boats to Holyhead gave some indication of what could be expected, with one man recalling the 'barbarous' language used by the soldiers.²⁰ Once on board, they were placed either into the hold of the vessels, or into cattle pens. A British Officer on one of the boats, drunk, declared he was Irish and berated the prisoners for not waiting until the war was over, after calming down, he offered the men cigarettes.²¹ There was little room to move, sit or sleep. Many could only sleep when overcome by exhaustion.²² The crossing to Holyhead turned into a rough, miserable journey, and the seasick prisoners were happy to leave the cramped conditions on ships that stank of vomit.²³

Upon arrival at Holyhead they were met by some of the local population, many of whom made it clear that they viewed the prisoners as traitors and murderers.²⁴ Although they had been given simple provisions of bully beef before leaving Dublin, the prisoners received nothing when they arrived in Holyhead. The situation was different for the soldiers that guarded them who were provided with tea and sandwiches by the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.²⁵ The soldiers guarding the prisoners took a mixed view of the prisoners, some taunted them, others were aggressive and a few passed cigarettes and tea to the prisoners on the train journey from Holyhead.²⁶ Such acts of kindness by individual soldiers acted as reminders to the prisoners that 'there were still human beings among the soldiers of the British army'.²⁷ Few had any idea of where they were, or their final locations, some sharp eyes noticed the livery on the trains suggested that they were somewhere in Cheshire. Arriving in Knutsford the men had little opportunity to get a good view of the town, the prison was only a few yards away from the railway station. What little they did see gave the prisoners a favourable impression as they were marched into the gaol. The prisoners arrived early in the morning and received little attention from local population who were too busy making their way to work. The local press also showed little interest. They were far more interested in the role played by Sir Roger Casement and the unfurling scandal of

18. 1916 Rebellion Handbook, pp. 67-96; 'More Prisoners, List of over 300, Nearly 800 Deportations', *The Freeman's Journal*, 13th May 1916.

19. William O'Brien, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 1,766, BMH Dublin.

20. Thomas J. Doyle, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 186, BMH Dublin.

21. John McDonagh, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 352, BMH Dublin.

22. Oscar Traynor, T.D., *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 340, BMH Dublin.

23. Frank Robbins, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 585, BMH Dublin.

24. Ibid.

25. William James Stapleton, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 822, BMH Dublin.

26. Colonel Joseph V. Lawless, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 1043, BMH Dublin.

27. Frank Robbins, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 585, BMH Dublin.

his involvement in the Easter Rising. The shock and potential disgrace of a peer of the realm being involved in an act of treason against the crown was far more interesting for the local press than the rebellion itself.

The first weeks in Knutsford were harsh. Prisoners were immediately placed into solitary confinement. In the gaol itself the prison guards were something of a motley collection. Each wing of the prison was under the control of a staff-sergeant, each landing was supervised by a sergeant. They were from a variety of regiments. Some had been sent for home service due to wounds suffered on the front line. Others had no experience of the front and it was these who had the severest attitude towards the prisoners. They made use of the British military prisoners to fetch and carry meals to the prisoner's cells and other menial tasks.²⁸

The cells that the prisoners occupied were small, sparsely furnished, and uncomfortable. The contents of the cells would often vary from wing to wing. One prisoner found his cell contained no bed or bedclothes.²⁹ Those that had beds found that they were a simple affair made from three planks and no mattress.³⁰ Only a lucky few found blankets.³¹ Other than this, the prisoners had brushes to scrub their cell, a tin wash basin, a stool, chamber pot and a bible.³² The cells had changed little since the prison was built and they were designed to conform to 18th and 19th Century prison reforms. The conditions in Knutsford still reflected the old ideas of 'hard labour, hard fare and a hard bed'.³³ The idea of this was to encourage prisoners to use their solitude to reflect on their crimes.³⁴ One volunteer even found a copy of *Think Well on It* by the Right Reverend Richard Challoner in his cell. The motives for providing this book was not lost on the volunteer, to encourage him to reflect on his 'criminal habits', it did not work, but he was glad of the reading material, no matter the reasons for its provision.³⁵ For this volunteer, this attempt to encourage moral reflection on his actions and the justification for them did not act as a deterrence or motive enough to abandon his political beliefs. However, regimes and ideas such as those at Knutsford were now increasingly regarded as old fashioned and ineffective. The final stages in reform would come too late the Irish Volunteers in Knutsford as it

28. Thomas J. Doyle, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 186, BMH Dublin; Michael Lynch, *Statement by Witness*, W.S. 51, BMH Dublin; Frank Robbins, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 585, BMH Dublin; Colonel Joseph V. Lawless, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 1043, BMH Dublin.

29. Oscar Traynor, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 340, BMH Dublin.

30. Michael Lynch, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 511, BMH Dublin.

31. Sean Kennedy, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 885, BMH Dublin.

32. Colonel Joseph V. Lawless, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 1043, BMH Dublin.

33. M. Ogborn, 'Discipline, Government and Law: Separate Confinement in the Prisons of England and Wales, 1830-1877', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 20, No.3 (1995), pp. 295-311.

34. T. West, *The curious Mr Howard: legendary prison reformer*, (Hook: Waterside Press, 2011), p.182.

35. Captain Seán Prendergast, *Statement by Witness*, Document, No W.S. 755, BMH, Dublin.

would not be until 1931 that new prison rules would finally remove separation and initial periods of solitude from prison regimes.³⁶

Food in Knutsford was terrible and at times barley deserved being categorised as such. The quality and lack of sustenance sapped morale during the first weeks. The prisoners were given dry bread, very poor quality (black and green) potatoes and a thin oatmeal soup called Skilly. All the prisoners hated the Skilly and only consumed it out of desperation. During the first weeks in Knutsford some prisoners even resorted to eating grass, salt, lime from the walls and anything discarded by visitors.³⁷

Initially when the prisoners were allowed out of their cells for exercise, this was done in silence which was rigorously imposed by the guards, each in full kit, armed with a rifle, with bayonet attached and issued with 100 rounds of ammunition.³⁸ Some of whom were quick to punch or strike any prisoners that attempted to communicate with each other.³⁹ During exercise periods prisoners were kept apart as they trudged in a ring around the prison yard. While they were exercising their cells were often searched and when they returned to their cells they would find that what personal possessions that they had managed to keep had been confiscated or stolen by the guards.⁴⁰ Even the presence of guards from Ireland did not prevent such things occurring. The NCO in charge of E-Wing was Sergeant-Major Abbott from Dublin and he was not the only one, with a Corporal Marshall also from Ireland.⁴¹

The prisoners in Knutsford initially found it difficult to obtain information about events in Dublin. It was not until the prison authorities began to relax the regime and their own personal attitudes towards the prisoners that news began to arrive. Slowly, some had become aware that a number of the leaders of the Easter Rising had been executed but lacked detail. As visitors arrived in Knutsford, the prisoners began to learn the true extent of the executions and the changing feelings of the Irish population towards those that had taken part in the Easter Rising.⁴² The news of the executions in Dublin came as a severe blow to the morale of the prisoners in Knutsford.⁴³ However, thanks to supporters from Britain and Ireland, it was not enough to break it.

36. I. O'Donnell, *Prisoners, Solitude, Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1-33.

37. W. Murphy, 'Nowhere Else Does One Learn to Know a Colleague So Well', *Political Imprisonment and the Irish 1919-1921*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), [Oxford Scholarship online accessed August 2017], p.259.

38. Michael Lynch, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 511, BMH, Dublin.

39. Joseph Good, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 388, BMH, Dublin.

40. William James Stapleton, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 822, BMH, Dublin.

41. Thomas Doyle, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 186, BMH, Dublin.

42. Colonel Eamon Morkan, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 411, BMH, Dublin.

43. Thomas Doyle, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 186, BMH, Dublin.

As soon as they were allowed, the prisoners in Knutsford began to receive assistance from the Irish in Liverpool and Manchester. As the prison regime was slowly relaxed, visitors reported that it was improving and that if relatives wanted to send parcels to the men in Knutsford, then they could send them to Manchester and that they would ensure they were distributed to the men in Knutsford. The Irish in Manchester wanted the relatives of the prisoners to know that 'their Irish friends in Manchester are doing everything they can to comfort them'.⁴⁴ Liam McMahon, who was a member of the IRB in Manchester and later the Irish Self Determination League would recall the organising visits to the prisoners in Knutsford every Sunday with extra food.⁴⁵ Volunteers would later 'recollect with sincere thanks the great solace they were to us'.⁴⁶ One unforeseen consequence of these visits was that Rosaries which belonged to the prisoners became collector's items and such a buoyant market for these was created in Manchester that guards would often do favours in return for the payment of a Rosary.⁴⁷ This was not the only support available to the volunteers in Knutsford, the Irish National Relief Fund was set up to provide support and assistance for the prisoners and their families with its headquarters in Holborn, London and by July 1916 it had raised £350, most of which had been spent on buying clothes and food for those volunteers imprisoned in Britain.⁴⁸ This was not the only organisation, The Irish National Aid Association and the Irish Volunteer Dependent's Fund were based in Dublin.⁴⁹

From Ireland, they also had political support in the form of Alderman Alfie Byrne MP from Dublin. The visit of Byrne was popular with some prisoners, who carried him shoulder high. He brought with him cigarettes and cooked chickens for the prisoners. One prisoner remembered being very thankful for the 'few Woodbine' that Byrne gave him.⁵⁰ In the prison chapel, one volunteer in full uniform played the organ and the prisoners sang 'Hail Glorious St Patrick'. Byrne arranged for an extra priest to visit the prison so that all could attend mass and take Holy Communion. One prisoner, Michael Lynch, organised and conducted the singing of Hymns with such skill their singing became so popular with the local population they would gather outside the prison on Sundays to listen.⁵¹ Mass and the ability to attend confession was popular with the volunteers but not

44. 'Life in Knutsford', *The Kerryman*, 3rd June 1916.

45. Liam McMahon, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S.274, BMH, Dublin.

46. Colonel Eamon Morkran, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S.411, BMH, Dublin.

47. W. Murphy, 'Nowhere Else Does One Learn to Know a Colleague So Well', *Political Imprisonment and the Irish 1919-1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) [Oxford Scholarship online accessed August 2017].

48. 'The Irish National Relief Fund', *The Herald*, 22nd July 1916.

49. Murphy, 'Nowhere Else Does One Learn to Know a Colleague So Well', *Political Imprisonment and the Irish 1919-1921* (2014).

50. Robert Holland, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 371, BMH, Dublin.

51. Sean Kennedy, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 885, BMH, Dublin.

all were Catholic, there were a few Presbyterians and Church of Ireland in their numbers, sadly the exact numbers of whom seem not to have been recorded.⁵²

However, Alfie Byrne MP was not popular with some volunteers. Volunteer Thomas Pugh had been acquainted with Byrne prior to the Easter Rising and still held bad feelings towards Byrne after previous arguments concerning the Osborne judgement.⁵³ Byrne got a sharp response when he offered cigarettes to Pugh.⁵⁴ Another prisoner recalled contrary to the public version of Byrne's visit, the MP was attacked by the prisoners and that they only calmed down when it was revealed he had condemned the executions of the Rising's leaders in Parliament.⁵⁵ Michael Lynch also regarded the reception of Byrne by the prisoners very cold. However, he warmed to him when Byrne complained to the prison chaplain about the lack of spiritual provision for the volunteers.⁵⁶ The personal accounts of the visit of Byrne reveals something of split between the prisoners in Knutsford over his visit. Those that had been part of the Citizen Army, and had been longstanding supporters of Connolly and Larkin, did not welcome Byrne because of his previous links with the Irish Parliamentary Party and his attitude towards the Irish Transport and General Workers Union during the Dublin lock-out.⁵⁷ Others viewed Byrne's visit as cynical, an opportunity to impress his Dublin constituents that he was on the rebel's side.⁵⁸

Byrne was not the only MP to visit the volunteers in Knutsford. Laurence Ginnell MP, also visited Knutsford and he too received a frosty reception from the prisoners.⁵⁹ However, Ginnell improved his popularity by smuggling uncensored letters in and out the prison, when this was discovered he was banned from making further visits to Knutsford.⁶⁰ The visits of Ginnell would cause a minor scandal as he was later fined for continuing to visit Knutsford, Stafford and Wandsworth by using the Gaelic spelling of his name to confuse the guards. His efforts resulted in a £100 fine and a suspension from the House of Commons.⁶¹

However, these divisions were not made public and at times a somewhat rose-tinted picture of prisoner moral was provided for public consumption in Ireland.

52. Captain Seán Prendergast, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 755, BMH, Dublin.

53. The Osborne Judgement and the Taff Vale Railway Case were landmark moments in British Labour history, concerning the funding of political parties by Trades Unions and the protection of Unions from prosecution during industrial disputes; see H. Pelling, 'The Politics of the Osborne Judgement', *The Historical Journal*, Vol.25, 4, 1982 and J.G. Moher, 'The Osborne Judgement of 1909: Trade Union funding of political parties in historical perspective', *History and Policy*, Policy Papers, 2nd December 2009.

54. Thomas Pugh, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 397, BMH, Dublin.

55. Joseph Good, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 388, BMH, Dublin.

56. Michael Lynch, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 511, BMH, Dublin.

57. Frank Robbins, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 585, BMH, Dublin.

58. Colonel Joseph V. Lawless, *Statement by Witness*, Document No, W.S. 1043, BMH, Dublin.

59. Liam O'Carroll, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 594, BMH, Dublin.

60. Captain Seán Prendergast, *Statement by Witness*, Document, No W.S. 755, BMH, Dublin.

61. 'Sequel to visit to Knutsford Prison, Irish MP fined £100, *The Guardian*, 4th August 1916.

One thing that was not made public was the boredom and monotony of prison life, and the effects this had on the mental health of the volunteers. Volunteer Robert Holland described the numerous ways he filled his days, he counted the bricks in his cell, improvised a calendar and even made a sundial.⁶² Volunteer Thomas Pugh recalled;

‘There was not very much happening in Knutsford except the usual prison regime. We were badly off in this respect—we were nobody’s children, we were neither prisoners of war nor convicts and they did not know what to do with us or how to feed us. We could not blame the prison Commandant for this, who was rather a decent chap. I used to read his stories over and over again, he wrote stories for “The Boys’ Own Paper”. The worst thing that ever happened was when they to the bible and prayer-book, as well as some other religious tracts from my cell. They were a terrible loss.’⁶³

When he was initially searched one volunteer was particularly happy that the guards missed a tiny pencil which became his ‘great friend’ as he marked of the days of his confinement. It was a great loss when it was discovered and confiscated four days after arrival.⁶⁴ After the loss of the pencil, Michael Lynch took comfort in his memory of having previously read Tom Clarke’s experiences in prison and followed the advice set out by Clarke. Following the observations of Clarke he;

‘realised that a man could keep sane, under these conditions, only as long as he was able to keep his mind revolving on something or other. If the mind when blank, or if you started worrying about your loved ones at home, madness was staring you in the face’.⁶⁵

Lynch remembered the darkness of night being especially traumatic with little to distract the mind, he would often hear the silence broken by ‘a heartrending sob from some distant cell.’⁶⁶ One volunteer described the shock of being placed in a cell at Knutsford;

‘It had an effect on me. One felt that the world had somehow ceased to be, that human kind no longer existed, that individualism as a quality of human progress was a thing of the past and that the only value of one’s relationship with life was represented by a card index system epitomised by a medley of alphabetical signs. To be suddenly thrown into a cell and

62. Robert Holland, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 371, BMH, Dublin.

63. Thomas Pugh, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 397, BMH, Dublin.

64. Michael Lynch, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 511, BMH, Dublin.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Michael Lynch, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 511, BMH, Dublin.

to become aware of your insignificance and helplessness was forsooth an experience and no small moment'.⁶⁷

Whilst the poor quality of the food in Knutsford meant that the volunteers were constantly battling hunger, most found that it could be overcome but more importantly it was that 'the mind also needs something to feed on'; the body could be trained to endure physical discomfort, but sitting alone in a cell was 'pretty deadly after the first few days'.⁶⁸ Some prisoners used repetitive tasks to alleviate boredom, others were showing signs of involuntary compulsive behaviour. One volunteer was observed standing in one corner, folding a piece of paper, walk to the next corner, drop the paper, rub his hands together and repeat the same routine time and time again until the exercise period ended and he was returned to his cell.⁶⁹ Whilst his comrades were concerned about their friend, the volunteer received no sympathy from the guards who viewed his behaviour as a source of amusement.

Whilst these guards and others seemed to enjoy the discomfort of the prisoners, the volunteers found that their guards were a mixed bunch, some capable of acts of kindness, others seemed to enjoy treating the prisoners with brutality and cruelty. Robert Holland was bound and tortured by Scottish Soldiers after he lost his temper and struck a Scottish guard.⁷⁰ On one occasion the volunteers had the opportunity to see that this barbarity was not just reserved for them. One British soldier under sentence, possibly from the Non-Combatant Corps, unable to face the violence of the front had slashed his foot tendons with a razor. Unable to walk without assistance, the prison guards kicked and beat the man until he got to his feet. Despite their own conditions and treatment received at the hands of the guards, the volunteers were shocked and disturbed by what the conscientious objectors had to endure.⁷¹ The hatred shown to conscientious objectors extended to civilian population in Knutsford. The Easter Rising and the Irish prisoners was regarded as something of a curiosity. As conscientious objectors began to arrive in greater numbers, the civil population protested at their presence. This lingered into 1918 when this exploded into violence and a gang attacked conscientious objectors in the town.⁷² The response in Knutsford was typical of that found throughout the United Kingdom during the war. This reaction was due to several reasons which when taken in totality ensured that conscientious objectors were

67. Captain Seán Prendergast, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 755, BMH, Dublin.

68. Colonel Joseph V. Lawless, *Statement by Witness*, Document No, W.S. 1043, BMH, Dublin.

69. Robert Holland, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 371, BMH, Dublin.

70. Ibid.

71. Michael Lynch, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 511, BMH, Dublin.

72. 'Attack on Knutsford C.O.'s', *The Manchester Guardian*, 18th May 1918.

not just viewed as cowards, but represented a rejection of the national character, their objections to the war were a rejection of their Britishness.⁷³

The attempts at separation and reflection at Knutsford did not break the morale or spirit of the prisoners. When the death of Kitchener was announced some openly celebrated. News from home and their new-found status as heroes, now accepted as the most recent entry in the history of Irish rebellions also boosted morale. The volunteers in Knutsford also found other ways to keep up their spirits. William O'Brien managed to collect autographs of those who were with him in Knutsford and later Frongoch.⁷⁴ This was given to him as a gift by Lillie Connolly.⁷⁵ Many of those signing his book would also leave a small defiant message to show that the fight would continue.

Some turned to poetry, which also reveal something of the spirits of the volunteers. A nationalist handbill published, *Life and Death*, which contains the following lines 'What is it ye'd be askin, God! there's life in us still'. The final verse is as follows:

Man! d'ye hear them prayin?
For the lads beneath the sod,
Who have answered their names in Heaven,
And rest in the sight of God.⁷⁶

Although the authors name is missing from the printed version, William O'Brien's autograph book reveals the author as John MacDonagh, brother of Thomas MacDonagh.⁷⁷ There was clearly political life left in MacDonagh and the above verse reveals that the prisoners were aware of the changing attitude of the Irish to the Rising. In the poem, those that were doing the praying were those back home in Ireland, MacDonagh knew they would be going home as heroes. There is also a hint of pride in these lines, that they had answered Pearse's call for a sacrifice for the nation. MacDonagh was showing that, in the aftermath of the Rising and the executions, it was not just the prisoners in mourning for fallen comrades, this was the nation turning its loss into the spark capable of igniting the next rebellion.⁷⁸ Another poem from Knutsford shows that what silent reflection that was taking place was a determination for their battle to continue:

73. L.S. Bibbings, *Telling Tales about Men: Conceptions of Conscientious Objectors to Military Service During the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

74. William O'Brien, *Autograph Book*, National Library, Dublin, MS 15, 662.

75. The autograph book contains the dedication, 'From Mrs James Connolly to Wm O'Brien, Richmond Barracks, Dublin, 2nd June 1916'.

76. *Life and Death*, National Library, Dublin, EPH B427.

77. William O'Brien, *Autograph Book*, National Library, Dublin, MS 15, 662.; Thomas MacDonagh was a signatory of the Proclamation of the Republic and was executed for this role in the Easter Rising. John MacDonagh would later become a significant figure in Irish theatre and film.

78. S. Cole, *At the Violent Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.137-138.

Come, take a turn around this sun-rayed yard;
Forget awhile that egress here is barred;
Survey the world, with Knutsford as Grand Stand;
With mind-lit eyes hold one trump card.⁷⁹

The author of another poem, the *Rubaiyat of Knutsford*, followed the original style of Omar Khayyam, constructing his work in four-line verses.⁸⁰ *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* had become popular on a global scale following the championing of Edward FitzGerald's translation by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Ruskin.⁸¹ This popularity quickly found its way to Ireland and multiple copies and translations were advertised in local and national newspapers. FitzGerald's mother came from Ireland and could trace her lineage from the Earls of Kildare.⁸² In 1908 it was translated into Gaelic and printed in the *Sinn Féin* Newspaper.⁸³ Although no author is listed it is probable that the translation is by Tadhg Ó Donnchadha.⁸⁴ He would be a key figure in the Gaelic League and would work closely with Padraig Pearse.⁸⁵ Its influence would later appear in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.⁸⁶ As with the original *Rubáiyát*, this poem offers mysteries for the reader to solve. The author leaves blank the names of some of his fellow prisoners and adds further mystery comparing one fellow inmate to 'Rory on the Hill'. Further, he then links the volunteers in Knutsford with older Fenian traditions and heroes such as John Mitchel.⁸⁷ One Knutsford poet, from County Meath chose to pay homage to the most recent Irish martyr, Padraig Pearse. This was a call to 'Lament an honoured soul', 'whose life-long thought', was 'Ireland a Nation—untrammelled—unconfined'. The author used Pearse's own words once again as a warning that 'Ireland unfree shall never be at

79. *Rubaiyat of Knutsford*, National Library of Ireland, EPH B289.

80. O. Khayyám, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1996).

81. E. Z. Behtash, 'The Reception of FitzGerald's *The Rubáiyát of 'Umar Khayyám by the Victorians*', in, A. A. Seyed-Gohrab (ed), *The Great Umar Khayyám: A Global Reception of The Rubáiyát* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012), pp. 203-205.

82. S. Goldfarb, 'FitzGerald [formally Purcell], Edward (1809-1883), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

83. 'The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám', *Sinn Féin*, 26th December 1908.

84. A. G. Potter, *A Bibliography of The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám: Together with Kindred Matter in Prose and Verse Pertaining thereto* (New York: Georg Olms, 1994), p.139; P. O'Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881-1921: Ideology and Innovation* (University Park (PA): Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), p.374.

85. Tadhg Ó Donnchadha would become an important figure in the Gaelic League which was established in 1893 by Douglas Hyde for the promotion of the Irish language. He would become the Irish language editor of the Freeman's Journal and the Gaelic Journal. He would later become Professor of Irish at University College Cork.

86. C. Brown, 'Omar Khayyam in Monto: A Reading of a Passage from James Joyce *Ulysses*', *Neophilologus* 68 (1984), 623-636.

87. *Rory on the Hill* is a poem by Charles J Kirkham (1828-1882), the main character of which is waiting for the next rebellion to take place. John Mitchel was a member of the Young Irelanders and later elected as MP but disqualified due to his previous conviction under the Treason Felony Act 1848, his *Jail Journal* would become immensely popular.

peace'.⁸⁸ It is the poem *The Knutsford Hotel* that brings together all the themes of the encountered by the prisoners into a single text. The first verse is a satirical attack on the conditions experienced by the prisoners, it lists all the things the prisoners miss and would expect to find at the best hotels including Lipton's tea, Scottish marmalade, bacon and eggs. The author, with acidic wit, wondered why popular musical hall entertainers such as George Lashwood did not stay at the Knutsford Hotel when on tour.⁸⁹

One prisoner used his skills as a commercial artist to record his own contribution to the recollections contained within O'Brien's autograph book. Patrick Lalor had been a Lieutenant in 'B' Company, the Irish Citizen Army.⁹⁰ In common with the poets in Knutsford, he also used his art to imagine the participants of the Easter Rising as the inheritors of the traditions of previous rebellions. However, he chose to go even further back in Irish history beyond the Fenians and Tone. He produced a pen and ink sketch of a mythic Irish warrior calling to the spirit of Shane O'Neill.⁹¹ The sacrificial motif remained an important theme within the prison art produced in Knutsford, Lalor continued this trend, calling to Ireland's dead generations.

The witness statements, press reports and poetry reveal that Thomas Pugh was correct in his description of his fellow prisoners as 'nobody's children, we were neither prisoners of war nor convicts and they did not know what to do with us or how to feed us'.⁹² These first weeks were an involuntary languishing in a British purgatory. During this time they were isolated, ill-fed and allowed almost no chance to exercise. They were confined to cramped cells, with little or nothing to occupy their time and personal items were either confiscated or stolen. Maintaining morale was difficult for the volunteers, during the first weeks, especially after news began to filter through of the executions in Dublin.

The prisoners had mixed experiences of their captors. Some treated the volunteers with standard military discipline, others seemed to relish being able to physically and mentally abuse the prisoners. The guards themselves also seemed unsure of the volunteers. Some soldiers regarded the prisoners with contempt, others thought that they had fought for their beliefs and had earned respect. This would be something that would never be shown to the conscientious objectors. Despite the harshness of the prison regime at the start, the volunteers in Knuts-

88. 'Lines to Patrick Pearse', *Meath Chronicle*, 31st August 1918.

89. George Lashwood was a famous musical entertainer, known for his distinguished dress and was dubbed the Beau Brummell of the music hall.

90. Patrick Joseph Lalor, *Military Service Pension Records*, W24SP8028, Dublin; Shane O'Neill was a significant figure in the Tudor campaigns in Ulster for further reading see C. Lennon, *Sixteenth Century Ireland: The Incomplete Conquest* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd, 2005).

91. William O'Brien, *Autograph Book*, National Library, Dublin, MS 15, 662.

92. Thomas Pugh, *Statement by Witness*, Document No W.S. 397, BMH, Dublin.

ford did not suffer brutality on the scale that had previously been the experience of the suffragettes or what the conscientious objectors such as Fenner Brockway would endure.⁹³ Unlike British conscientious objectors, the volunteers would never have their masculinity questioned or their bravery doubted. They would return home heroes, whereas conscientious objectors would return to a society that not only shunned them but also at times utterly rejected any attempts by them to re-enter British civic society.

There was universal praise for the support that they received from the Irish living in Manchester which was organised by Father O'Hanrahan who created a prisoner aid programme with the help of the local Cumann na mBan.⁹⁴ One of the Volunteers wives with great affection regarded Father O'Hanrahan as 'simply marvellous'.⁹⁵ Contrary to the fondness shown for the Manchester Irish, those politicians that visited Knutsford were not so well remembered. Some of the prisoners remembered previous political allegiances and philosophy of both Alfie Byrne and Laurence Ginnell, however even those volunteers that did not agree with their politics were appreciative of Byrne's and Ginnell's gifts of food, cigarettes, attempts at letter smuggling and later efforts in Westminster.

The witness statements, reaction to MPs visits and poetry also unwittingly expose the character of the prisoners. These were relatively well-educated individuals, capable of considered, deliberative political thought. They were also able to produce sophisticatedly structured poetry, understanding literary rules and rhyme schemes, even if the message their work contained varied in its subtlety and content. This was not a cohort of rebellious urban peasants, they were intelligent individuals that would later be reunited with the remaining leadership at the 'University' of Frongoch.

Despite the privations of incarceration, the attempts at isolating the prisoners so that they would reflect on their 'crimes', the determination of the prisoners to remain true to their cause was never broken as was shown in the final verse of the *Knutsford Hotel*:

We are facing the future, Oh! what shall it send?
Can it break the spirit that never can bend,
Can law and its arm make Irishmen fear,
Or hard labour's lot from us drag a tear?
Oh! no, Mother Erin, that will never be,
We're willing to suffer, my darling for thee;

93. A. Kramer, *Conchies: Conscientious Objectors of the first World War*, (London: Franklin Watts, 2014), pp. 27-31.

94. Colonel Eamon Morkan, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 411, BMH, Dublin.

95. Mrs Phyllis Morkan, *Statement by Witness*, Document No. W.S. 210, BMH, Dublin.

For Pearse and his heroes our hearts they do swell
Although we're locked up in the Knutsford Hotel.⁹⁶

This final verse supports Edna Longley's conclusion in her analysis of Yeats 1916 poetry, that whilst Ireland had changed utterly, the rebels themselves remained unchanged.⁹⁷ However, the Knutsford poets show none of doubts or guilt that can be found within Yeats own work. There is no room for scepticism, Knutsford's prisoners are determined to continue the fight. These were not the poems of the national bard or an attempt to provide a link to the public mood.⁹⁸ They are a window for the public on the experience of incarceration in British prisons. The authors, in the words of George Bernard Shaw knew that 'will now take their places beside Emmet and the Manchester martyrs'.⁹⁹

Although Knutsford did not contain any of the most famous or romantic figures from the Easter Rising, it is unsound to regard it as a mere stepping-stone to the 'university' of Frongoch. The prisoners were not detained long enough for them to establish anything resembling the commonality and organisation established in Frongoch. However, to ignore their story reduces the dignity of their struggle to resist prison regime that never broke their moral. Some would return to Ireland and continue to fight. For others such as William X. O'Brien this would not be their final experience of England. He would return and contest the 1920 Stockport by-election.¹⁰⁰ He would stand as the Independent Republican candidate, this would be notable for two reasons. First, it would become one the first attempts to raise the saliency of Ireland in British politics by having single issue candidates stand in British constituencies. They would all fail as the Irish in Britain became embedded in British politics choosing to support mainstream British political parties. Secondly, it would expose the difficulties that the Labour Party would face as it attempted to create a coherent policy regarding Ireland.

The poems and statements of the volunteers in Knutsford are a written dedication, a literary promise to endure the degradations of the *Knutsford Hotel* and to continue the struggle.

96. *Knutsford Hotel*, EPH A243.

97. E. Longley, *The Living Stream Literature & Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, 1994), p.83.

98. J.W Foster, 'Yeats and the Easter Rising', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 11, No.1 (June 1985).

99. J.W Foster, 'Yeats and the Easter Rising', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 11, No.1 (June 1985).

100. M. Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish in Interwar England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.56-57.