

# Inside stories, memories from the Maze and Long Kesh Prison

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## Abstract

*In the audio visual recording of memories from political conflict, I look at how memory finds a narrative, how that is informed by location, how the participants perform while being recorded, how ownership of material influences authorship and who the audiences are for these testimonies. Inside Stories, the example that I use in this essay, contains the stories of three former occupants of the Long Kesh/Maze prison complex in the North of Ireland.*

## Keywords

prison memories  
location and  
performance  
collaboration  
The 'Troubles'  
a political prison

The Long Kesh and Maze Prison complex stands about 20 miles south of Belfast. An old RAF base, it was converted in 1970 to a prison when internment was introduced by the ruling Unionist Party, with the backing of the British government, in order to contain the civil rights protests and the subsequent armed insurgency, referred to euphemistically as the 'Troubles'. The Long Kesh layout and conditions resembled a Second World War prisoner-of-war camp, with Nissan Huts and relatively free association within each compound (Ryder 2000: 86). Political status was granted and prisoners organised their own social, political and educational activities. However, escapes and violent protests lead the government to build a cellular structure, named the Maze, next to Long Kesh and opened in 1976 in an attempt to regain the initiative by individualising the prison experience and reasserting control (Purbrick 2004: 96).

Intense conflict between prisoners and the authorities was to mark the 30-year life of the prison complex. This was the site of the first internment camp in the UK since the Second World War where the no wash protests began against the policy of criminalization, where ten hunger strikers died in 1981, including an elected Westminster MP, and from where the largest escape in British penal history took place in 1983. As a result of the cease-fires of 1994 and the Belfast Agreement of 1998, political prisoners were released and the Maze was finally emptied in 2000 and closed in 2004. A small number of political prisoners from dissident paramilitary groups are now held in Maghaberry prison.

## Research questions

My research journey in recordings from political conflict encouraged me to pay attention to how memory finds a narrative, how that is informed by location, how the participants perform while being recorded, how ownership of material influences authorship and who the audiences are for these



Figure 1: Watchtower.

testimonies (McLaughlin 2004: 103). The usefulness of such recordings can be extended beyond these questions to include a potential for healing. In the recording of oral testimonies from the political violence in Guatemala, known as *La Violencia*, the report *Guatemala: Never Again* notes that, 'Compiling testimonies is a key component of developing a collective memory that enables people to find meaning in what happened and affirm their dignity' (Recovery of Historical Memory Project 1999: 89). But caution needs to be attached to this potential, especially in the context of the fragmented peace process in Ireland, where no long term political settlement has yet been established.

The larger political conflict was mirrored inside the prison where space and association were constantly contested. This conflict over ideology, territory and narrative persists and is evident in the construction and direction of historical narratives. I have chosen to identify my recordings as *memories* rather than *testimonies*, and have chosen a life story methodology over a historical one, not because I doubt the veracity of the stories, but because a 'life story approach allows room for contradiction, a holistic richness and complexity. It gives the opportunity to explore the relation between personal and collective experience, by focusing on remembering and forgetting as cultural processes' (Leydesdorff et al. 2004:12). In the

context of pasts that involved violence, this approach acknowledges the inherent discontinuities and fragmentation of trauma memories.

The very terms of 'victim' and 'survivor' are contested in the North of Ireland, with some groups calling themselves 'Innocent Victims', implicitly suggesting its opposite of 'guilty' victim. A more fluid approach is taken by Meena Wardle of Shankill Stress, who explains that some of their ex-prisoner members were first 'victims' of republican violence, then became 'perpetrators' when they joined loyalist paramilitary groups, and then returned to the status of 'victims' when imprisoned (1).

Because I wanted to reflect the range of experiences inside this prison, I separately recorded the stories of a loyalist prisoner, a republican prisoner and a prison officer. But since up to 25,000 prisoners went through this prison and up to 15,000 prison officers were employed during its 30 years of operation, my sample could not claim to be representative (Coiste na n-Iarchimi 2003: 27).

## Protocols

A particular sensitivity is required in dealing with subjects who have experienced political violence. In the North of Ireland the government commissioned a report on the ethics of interviewing 'vulnerable groups' (Connolly 2003). It contained no recommendations for ex-prisoners, itself an interesting contribution, if negatively, to the debate on definitions of 'survivor' and 'vulnerable'. However, I have developed protocols that I agree with participants before recording in such scenarios and adapted these to the prison officer and ex-prisoners.

- The most important protocol, and from which most others flow, is that the participants are my collaborators, and they retain a veto over the material and its exhibition. They contribute to how the material is recorded, edited and where it is shown. Each project that I have been involved with has a different emphasis on ownership. In the case of the documentary, *We Never Give Up*, on reparations in South Africa, ownership remained with the producers, the Human Rights Media Centre in Cape Town (McLaughlin 2003: 173). In *Inside Stories*, I retain copyright, but they have a veto over its use.
- In this project, the agreement was that the participants were recorded separately. This mirrors a concern of most ex-prisoner groups who are wary of the forced confrontation between 'victims' and 'perpetrators', or 'enemies', so that journalists get the 'dramatic' story for their agenda. It also reflects the reality of segregation, the theme of most of the prison protests.
- Any questioning was to tease out the stories and reach clarification. There was to be no persistent interrogation, no criticising of motives. This is unlike broadcast journalism where you are required to challenge subjects who are talking about their 'criminal' past. The participants are to guide the recording by speaking only when they wish. In this case, the agreement beforehand was that the primary stimulant for their memories was to be the materiality of the landscape. I would ask questions in order to tease out a memory or to ask for clarification.

## The Other

I was striving for the personal perspective of the experience, not the political history, which most political ex-prisoners wrap their own experience inside and are keen to relate. There is also a very strong and understandable tendency to tell stories from the collective perspective, since this reflects the solidarity of the political organisation and of the prison community that helped prisoners through their incarceration. Sentences sometimes would begin with 'We' not 'I'.

All participants saw this conflict as a political struggle and the British government attempted to win this discursive battle by criminalising it, including the introduction of the individuating cellular structure at the Maze. My purpose was not to repeat this challenge on collective experience, but to render it recordable. Working on my own, it was difficult to record more than one person at a time and I learned from previous research that an intimate atmosphere is more conducive to trust, so setting subjects at relative ease in this sensitive work. The history of story telling, in all its guises, includes the use of metaphor, symbolism and individual experience to draw out the larger picture and pattern. I wanted the depth of the personal memory to give a rich texture to the collective story.

The question of the representation of 'otherness' is central to this project because everyone is the 'other' in this story. Can we bear to hear and see the other - the republican and the loyalist commander who were at war with each other, the prison officer who regarded both as enemies, the loyalist who may have seen me, living in a nationalist area of Belfast, as a target during his paramilitary days? How do the participants, audiences and I read the 'other' in each of these stories?

'I was one of them and I was not', wrote Courtney Brkic in her recollection of her work excavating war graves in Bosnia, referring to her father's Croatian roots (Brkic 2005: 100). My own insider/outsider dichotomy allowed an insight into the stories, but also coloured my responses. As the director and camera operator, I was the 'other' for each of them. I had a powerful position based on the ownership of the means of production, and I attempted to level the relationship by making my position of 'other' as transparent as possible. My name gave strong clues to my community upbringing, and the protocols offered accountability in the decision making.

## Long Kesh

Billy Hutchinson was a political representative of the Progressive Unionist Party in the Northern Ireland Assembly and is currently a Belfast City Councillor. He had spent sixteen years in prison, mostly in the Compounds, on a murder conviction. Political status had been granted in the early 70s by the then NI Secretary of State William Whitelaw as a result of hunger strikes by both loyalist and republican prisoners. This status was later taken away by a Labour government which built the cellular Maze structure alongside the older prison.

After an opening sequence of jump cuts between travelling scenes along perimeter walls within walls, Billy re-enters the prison for the first time in fifteen years. Beginning as a guide he introduces us to the different sections



Figure 2: Billy Hutchinson.

of the prison, making his way towards his old compound. Noticing the study huts, he reminds us of why the 'University of Long Kesh' got its name. Prisoners, who were already politically aware, used their time to further their studies. Billy achieved a degree with the Open University.

The sequence shows Billy's delight at his return and amazement at the ghostly quietness of the site, remembering 'the hustle and bustle of the place' during his incarceration. It also shows how the physicality of the place, its layout, its architecture and its spatial relationships trigger recognition and memory, in a way that would not occur if he was in another setting. I had previously directed another documentary on political ex-prisoners, *A Prisoner's Journey*, without any access to the prison and had felt hampered by the dislocation of the interviews (McLaughlin 2001). While the ex-prisoners had spoken poignantly of their experiences, the resulting film had lacked a rich visual relationship with these memories.

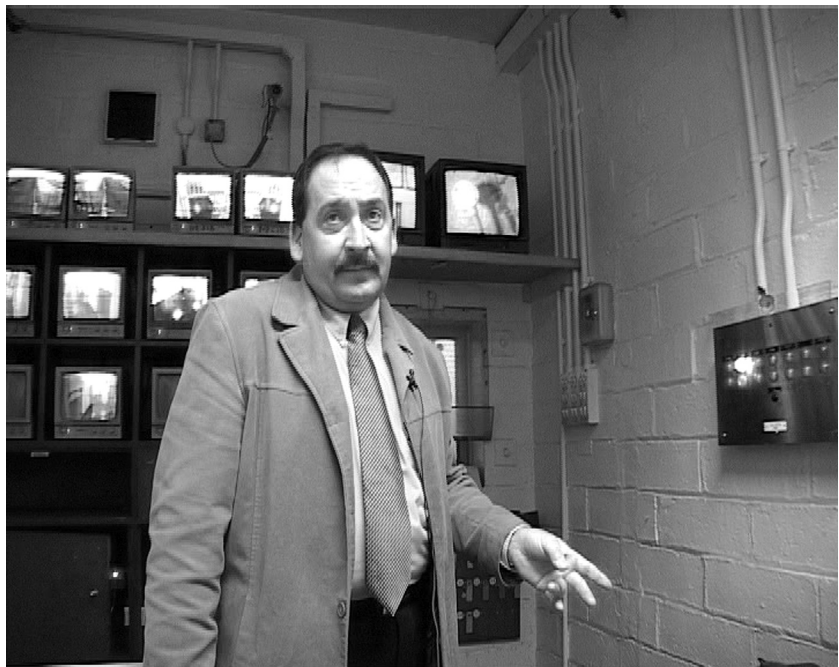
There is a playful tension between what Billy sees and what the camera operator wants to see. In a dance of direction there is a sense that Billy doesn't follow the camera but expects it to follow him. The mediation that is inevitable between a camera operator and the subject or participant

seems to be minimised with the participant contributing to the directing of the shots. We had discussed beforehand the autonomy of the participants moving freely about with radio microphones. At one point, the camera moves away from Billy and tilts up to the barbed wire, moves along and returns to eye level 180° from where it had left him. Billy is aware of where the camera might end up, and he continues talking as he moves around the back of me and meets the camera as it tilts back down.

In terms of Billy being my 'other', I had previously worked with him for a broadcast documentary a decade before and was intrigued with his struggle as both a loyalist and socialist, ideologies not easily compatible. I also was aware of, and felt 'safe' with, his journey out of violence. He was a strong advocate of the loyalist ceasefires and the peace process.

### **Fighting on all fronts**

In some ways the Prison Officer Desi Waterworth is the 'other' to most people in the North of Ireland, since his story is rarely heard. His was the most difficult recording. While the two ex-prisoners had 'done their time', Desi was still a serving officer and gained no such 'release'. Within a few months of the recording, Desi was to face prison protests over segregation by political prisoners at Maghaberry Prison. During the recording, he usually held his body still, kept his back to the wall and rarely moved, usually only on prompting. One way to break down this stiffness was to ask Desi to introduce us to the cellular H-Block. With apparent pride, he takes us into the control room and like a tour guide illustrates the surveillance of the block, its wings and cells. At a later point, Desi nostalgically laments the closing of this prison.



*Figure 3: Desi Waterworth.*

Desi's contribution is a challenge to anyone who has heard of the allegations of brutality and ill treatment of prisoners. While there have been film and literary accounts from the prisoners' perspective, it is unusual to have an officer's account (2). At one point, Desi enters a cell in order to explain the conditions under which prison officers worked during the no wash protest. He describes how they searched for contraband amid the smell of excreta smeared on the walls and the maggot-infested and urine-stained food by the door. He describes the petty hide-and-seek games that were played, in an attempt to undervalue the painful struggle involved. Clearly the prisoners took the brunt of that, but in the tension of Desi's 'fighting on all fronts', which he describes in another section, he reveals his own vulnerability through his frustration and anger at his employers. He was caught not only between the two factions inside but also with his employers who he feels betrayed him by their negotiations, or what he sees as vacillations, with the prisoners. His experience, his story, is an important element in the tapestry of memories from the Maze.

### **The collective experience**

Gerry Kelly has been the media's stereotypical 'other'. He is a leading republican, who endured a hunger strike and forced feeding for 200 days in Brixton Prison in the mid seventies and was one of the organisers of the largest escape in British penal history, when 38 prisoners got out through the main gates of the Maze in 1983. He is also an elected Member of the Local Assembly for Sinn Fein and is their spokesperson on Policing and Justice.



*Figure 4: Gerry Kelly.*

One of the striking aspects of the republican prison experience was the collective spirit, which Gerry describes as being central to their survival and gains over the authorities. This is similar to the Robben Island situation in South Africa, where attempts to break the collective and political nature of the resistance were unsuccessful (Coetzee and Otakar 2004: 86).

In one scene, Gerry describes what it was like to be forcibly removed from a cell while he was on the Red Book, a security classification that ensured 'high risk' prisoners were constantly moved around prison. Gerry uses an amused, and almost amusing, delivery to tell this anecdote of attack on his body. It is a good illustration of performative memory telling where he is able to reconstruct the pretence of reading a book to hide his fears, the ensuing struggle in a confined space, his being pinned to the ground and then forged-marched out of the cell.

Like Billy, Gerry emphasises the importance of education, both formal and informal, to the prisoners' ability to move beyond mere survival to enhancing their prison experience and to continue their resistance to the British government 'criminalisation' policy by developing intellectually and politically.

Whereas Billy's responses appear spontaneous and fresh, there is a rehearsed feeling about Gerry's storytelling. This may be partly due to his more recent return to the Maze since its closure to take part in a broadcast panel discussion. Also, the H-Blocks that we were given access to had been cleaned and maintained in a condition for reuse, should the ceasefires fail. There was little trace of the previous occupants and so less materiality for Gerry to work with than in the Long Kesh compounds.

### **Looking back**

How you tell a story of the past is strongly influenced by present circumstances. Both Billy and Gerry were elected representatives of political parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly at the time of recording. While there was little evidence of political progress at a parliamentary level, both men felt that the prison experience was of great benefit in teaching them skills of negotiation and empathy and shared an optimism for the future of their own careers and communities. Desi, on the other hand, was less optimistic. He regarded it as a mistake to release the prisoners and to close the Maze. He felt that too many compromises had been made and that lessons had not been learnt. His physical demeanour reflected this 'back against the wall' feeling, yet he maintained a strong sense of humour, if dry and deadpan. In contrasting political prisoners in South Africa and Czechoslovakia in the sixties and seventies, similar conclusions are drawn, 'There is undoubtedly a tendency to incorporate current conditions when evaluating past experiences. People's interpretations of past experiences of long-term imprisonment are tinted by their current political and material conditions' (Coetzee and Hulec 2004: 92).

### **Post production**

The privilege of working with these men engaged me to the extent that I broke one of the cardinal rules of student documentary making, 'Always allow time for cutaways'. I had no vision of how I might edit or where I



might show this material. I wanted the visual aspect to be highlighted in the participants' relationship with the landscape and camera, not in cut-aways. When I looked at the recorded material later, I felt that this had been achieved. The camera occasionally followed a look or a gesture, and even floated off, but mostly kept to the participants who guided us through the site and their memories. I did not want to cover these moments with 'cut-aways'. Yet, there was an aspect of the prison that was missing – its vastness, its walls within walls and its claustrophobia. I returned to the site for one half day's filming, mostly working outside, on roadways, in exercise yards and up watchtowers. This enabled me later to construct visual interludes to each section, some of which allow the audience to see the prison in a way that the prisoners were never able to but to which a prison officer may have had access, e.g. from the vantage point of a watchtower.

When I began editing, I made several attempts to shape the material according to my previous industrial practice of a single screen, intercut, linear narrative. Yet the results felt forced. Each story worked against, not with the others. They did not add to each other's stories but appeared to distract from each other and to undermine each other's integrity. I explored other possibilities. I was influenced by Humphrey Trevelyan's multi-screen installation at the 2003 PARIP conference in Bristol. He had been a cinematographer on a documentary on Iran's only female coach driver, and although satisfied by the final edit, felt that more was possible. Humphrey re-edited the material, including leaving all of a breakfast scene uncut, which became one of the exhibition's most popular screens.

I edited a thirty minute story of each participant, relying on the chronology of the journey through the spaces rather than a chronology of their time spent inside. I used jump cuts consistently, removing material that was repetitive and selecting that which added new insight to the experiences. I privileged movement, engagement with the materiality of the site and removed as many anecdotes as possible. Landscape images were used only to bookend each section, and they were edited according to a logic of opening up the space being dealt with or reflecting on what had just passed. Later I was to edit a separate ten minute loop of these landscape images.

The next step proved more interesting, especially in relation to the notion of segregation, an issue that prisoners had campaigned and died for and prison officers killed for. For most of the time, prisoners were separated into their own areas, claimed by their respective political organisations. A multi screen installation seemed worth exploring. Catalyst Arts in Belfast offered such an exhibition, and it ran for the month of April in 2005. Because of sound bleeding, the gallery constructed three separate rooms for the screens, with the ten minute landscape loop playing on a monitor in the foyer. The participants were shown in separate spaces within one overall space. Audiences were able to enter a discreet viewing area for each story, aware of other stories, and select which one to listen to and for how long (3). The opportunity and challenge of hearing and seeing the 'other' is made more possible by the peace process.

I also edited two other versions. For Northern Visions Television, a community broadcast channel in Belfast, I edited three half hour programmes,

running over three nights. For the Imperial War Museum's 'War, Memory and Place' film season, I edited a one hundred minute single screen documentary, consisting of the three stories in sequence. At London South Bank University's Digital Arts Gallery, the three screen installation was shown in one space, with directional speakers to avoid sound bleeding. When this structure was used at the PARIP 2005 International Conference in Leeds, one delegate, sound sculptor Adrian Palka, described the exhibition space itself as 'psychologised' because of the presence of competing stories.

### Postscript

Since these recordings, ownership of the site has passed over to the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister. With negotiations to form a devolved government stalled, the civil servants are not keen to allow more recordings in what is regarded as a politically sensitive area, mainly because the inmates were seen to be 'perpetrators' in a conflict that has not yet been resolved. I have recently recorded two female ex-Open University teachers, who taught Womens' Studies and Art History. Because they previously met up and travelled by car to the prison, we reconstructed this journey while they remembered their experiences of entering a male world of incarceration. One describes the teaching as the 'best in her career because of the hunger for education'. The gender and educational issues, as well as the aesthetic of a stationary camera, with a constantly moving background, will make for a contrasting screen at a future exhibition.

- (1) Interview by author in December 2003
- (2) The best known examples of the hunger strike's representation from the prisoners' point of view are Les Blair's feature, *H3* (2002), and David Beresford's *Ten Men Dead; the Story of the Irish Hunger Strike* (1987). A recent welcome contribution to prison officer's story is Louise Dean's novel *This Human Season* (2005).
- (3) A report on BBC2's *Culture Show* (12 May 2005) described the exhibition's structure thus, 'Perhaps this is the way forward, telling everyone's story, separately, but under the same roof'.

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