

# Interview with Former Political Prisoner, Irish Republican Activist, and Playwright Laurence McKeown

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*Abstract:*

This is an interview with former IRA prisoners, 1981 hunger striker, and Irish Republican activist Laurence McKeown. He received an Open University Degree in HMP Maze and went on to conduct a PhD at Queen's University Belfast. McKeown is now a playwright who lives in the Republic of Ireland. In this interview, he speaks about growing up in the North of Ireland, how he became an Irish republican, the conflict in the North of Ireland, his prison experience in the H-Blocks of HMP Maze, the prison protests that led to the hunger strikes, and his life after prison, studying at university during the conflict, the sectarianism, and his life as a playwright. The interview was conducted during the conference "Irish Society, History & Culture: 100 Years After 1916" at the European University Institute, Florence, 12 October 2016.

*Keywords:* Interview, IRA, Irish Republicanism, Northern Ireland, Prisons

## *1. Introduction*

Laurence McKeown was born in Randalstown, County Antrim, in 1956. In the 1970s, he joined the Provisional Irish Republican Movement, which was one of the various Republican factions at that time. In 1969/70, the Irish Republican Movement had split into the Provisional – and the Official tendency; later renamed itself from Official Sinn Féin to Workers Party and abandoned Republicanism while the Provisionals became the main Republican organisation with its political party Sinn Féin and the armed group Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army), commonly referred to as just IRA (Bell 1997; White 2017).

In April 1977, Laurence was sentenced to life imprisonment. He spent 16 years in prison, from 1976 to 1992, and joined the blanket – and no-wash pro-

tests in HMP Maze prison, also known as the H-Blocks, in the late 1970s. He also took part in the hunger strike in which Bobby Sands and nine other Irish Republican prisoners died in 1981. McKeown was on hunger strike 70 days until he faded into a coma and his family took him off the strike (Beresford 1987).

From 1987 to 1989, McKeown was in charge of prisoner education in the H-Blocks. He also started a prison magazine, *An Glór Gafa* (The Captive Voice), and began learning the craft of writing. In prison, he took an Open University degree in sociology. He gained a doctorate from Queen's University Belfast when he got out. His thesis was called *Unrepentant Fenian Bastards*. The thesis was later published by Beyond the Pale Publications under the title *Out of Time: Irish Republican Prisoners Long Kesh 1972-2000* (McKeown 2001). He also co-edited a book with recollections of former Irish Republican prisoners (Campbell, McKeown, O'Hagan 1994).

Laurence McKeown is now a playwright and filmmaker. He recently returned from the National Arts Festival in South Africa, where his play about dealing with the past, "Those You Pass on the Street", was performed. In this interview, McKeown speaks about this experience, growing up in 1960s Ireland, joining the Republican Movement, his memories of imprisonment, protests, and hunger strike, as well as his life since release as a PhD student and playwright.

This public interview was the inaugural event of the Conference "Irish Society, History & Culture: 100 Years after 1916" (12-14 October 2016), organised by Lorenzo Bosi of the Scuola Normale Superiore, Fiorenzo Fantaccini of the University of Florence, and myself. I, as the conference co-organiser (R), and Alexander Etkind, Mikhail M. Bakhtin Professor of History of Russia-Europe Relations at European University Institute (EUI) conducted this conversation with Laurence McKeown (M) on Wednesday, 12 October 2016, at the Badia Fiesolana of the EUI. What follows is the *verbatim* transcription of that interview; it has been left in the format of spoken language; only long pauses, silences and interruptions have been edited out.

## 2. Identity and self-understanding

*R: Laurence, you were a member of the IRA. You joined the IRA in the 1970s. You were in prison where you joined the blanket protest, the no-wash protest and, later, you went on hunger strike. But after that you did an Open University degree while still in prison, and upon your release you defended a PhD at Queen's University Belfast. You presented some papers at academic conferences and now you work as a playwright. So, how would you describe yourself? Who are you?*

*M: How many days do we have here? Well firstly, thank you, Dieter and Lorenzo and your colleagues for inviting me here and it is good that, yes, this issue is still being discussed and discussed widely in terms of the North of Ireland and the struggle and prisons. I find it hard to describe myself. I have*

played about with that idea – I’m an academic because I have done a doctorate, I don’t teach in academia. I try to speak slowly, too, also because I know I have a particular accent. So I have been involved with education, academia, but I don’t really class myself as an academic. I am an activist also, but I am not a member of Sinn Féin. I think the struggle has widened on that also. And I work in the arts as a playwright and filmmaker so I see it as all part of the one person. I think that education can be enjoyable. I think you can use art to deal with some very difficult situations, and I think that particularly using theatre, as I have been doing, allows an audience to engage with a story and with characters that they would never meet in real life, probably would not want to meet in real life, would not have a conversation with in real life and I think that probably over the last ten years, certainly over the last five years, it has been the arts, I think, in Ireland that have allowed people to take part in that conversation. And, I do think, increasingly within academia – and Niall’s here and I was down in Galway recently, thanks to Niall (Ó Dóchartaigh) and Giada (Laganà) for the invite down there – and I think it was a great example of universities opening up to the public and opening up to students about other topics. Actually, what they have had in Ireland, both North and South, often is often a reluctance to talk about the big issues, you know – the elephant in the room? Like why there was a conflict and what is happening now? What’s happening to conflict survivors? What’s happening to former political prisoners? And I think that unless these issues are discussed then we are almost doomed to repeat history in a signal.

So, back to your original question: I’m all of those things. I enjoy life also, but part of that is about dealing with the past that lives on in the present, and while I say that it’s not about the ‘big events’ like Bloody Sunday the Ballymurphy Massacre or other big events that people at the moment are engaged with trying to get to the truth about, but the past in terms of the people we would know, the places we would go to, the places we don’t know, don’t go to, or the people we don’t know, all this is very much influenced by the past, and yet things have changed so dramatically that sometimes people don’t move without change. We were just talking briefly there about memory, because today people often live with a memory that’s there in the past, so even though the situation may have changed dramatically, their view of the present is still very much dominated by that thing of the past, and I think that’s why we need to discuss it and get it out in the open to actually maybe free people up to move forward.

### 3. *Growing up*

*R: Randalstown, for those who don’t know Ireland or the North of Ireland, is a small town north-west of Belfast, a pretty rural area; so how did a boy growing up in this environment end up in the IRA in the 1970s?*

M: Yes. I grew up in a very rural area. My daughters are now tired of hearing the story about growing up in a house that didn't have electricity, didn't have indoor sanitation, didn't have a phone. We could just go on and on, but that was normal life and it wasn't regarded as rare because everybody around you lived in the exact same sort of condition – that was life in rural Ireland in the Fifties and Sixties both North and South. Really, I suppose it was a very mixed area, Protestant and Catholic. I've never seen the conflict as being about religion, it was about politics, but religion has been used in it. It's been used to divide and conquer the way that imperialists have used ethnic difference, skin colour, religion, whatever down through the decades and centuries, I think to divide folks in their colonies. So, it was a very idyllic, peaceful upbringing, and I remember when I was twelve it was the start of the civil rights protests, which at the time I was unaware of, but also around just the time that the civil rights campaign really started, with a collection of different people, and involved both radical Protestants, liberal Protestants and Catholics, but basically it was about discrimination in housing and employment against Catholics in the North of Ireland. And it's very simple, their two demands were: end to discrimination in housing; end to discrimination in employment; and one man, one vote. It was one man, I don't know what they meant to do with the women – but at least that was at the stage – well it was very minimal demands. And basically, they were battered off the streets and then eventually shot off the streets. But I was just twelve, thirteen, fourteen at that time.

We moved from where we had lived because there was a new motorway being built and it went straight through our house so we had to move and where we moved to, we now did have access to TV, electricity and such like and that would have been around the time when my father would have been watching the debates on TV by a number of the people who were civil rights campaigners and they would have become better known in the new year like John Hume and others, Bernadette Devlin particularly. And I remember always seeing my father very excited when he was watching the programmes. My family wasn't political in any way. They didn't get involved in politics outside. It was really just, I think, I suppose looking back on it what my father was hearing on television was people articulating his own experience and the experience of Catholics and Nationalists at that time about employment and discrimination. And I suppose because of those things I started to become more interested in the debates on television and then people who I had been at school with, who were maybe two or three years older than me, were being imprisoned. We also had internment without trial, which meant that people were just imprisoned without any trial; so, I think I was more and more interested in what was happening and reading a bit more about Irish history, though I think a lot of that only came in later years. I finally came to the decision. I wanted to become involved in the struggle, in the armed

struggle. And I think probably what was the turning point in that was the impact of the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR). The UDR was a locally recruited basically Protestant militia but they were part of the British Army; they were a regiment of the British Army. And again, this is about, when you look at any of the colonial situations first – Kenya, Cyprus, Aden – wherever else – the exact same policy. But I remember then just going to the dances, I would have been fifteen, sixteen, and being stopped during the night by the UDR by people who I knew, knew well – had I played football with. And I can still recall like the first night I was stopped by this person who knew me and he asked me my name. And I think he was even embarrassed because he said to me: “Now, what’s your name?”. We knew one another, and we knew one another well, and where I was coming from, where I was going to. But the second and third time that it happened, the embarrassment had gone and now it was just the hostility. I think it was around that time, and I wouldn’t have necessarily have articulated this way at the time, but I think I became aware there were really two communities and it wasn’t about religion. It was about one having the power, as in the rifle and the uniform, to wave on the streets and stop me and basically do as they wish as they then did; you could be held for several hours, you could be arrested and taken to the barracks, you could be kicked over a hedge and at this time I wasn’t involved in anything. So, I think for me that it was the psychological point; it was a combination of coming to a growing awareness of the North of Ireland and the history of it, a growing awareness of what people were demanding in terms of just basic civil rights and then really the impact of this armed militia on the streets – all of that contributed to me when I was sixteen.

Making the decision to join the IRA and then the big difficulty was: “How do you actually join and get into the thing? How do you let it be known that you want to join?”. And I ended up speaking to someone who had gone to school with me, who I thought might have connections because of where he lived. And I still don’t know to this day if that’s what happened, but I told him what I was thinking and several months later I was approached by someone one night who said: “I believe you want to join the IRA”. And then it was a process after that. I was taken to meet two people who surprised me at the time – two older people and one of them was a woman – and I was basically told: “Look, you want to re-think this? If you join the IRA you’re probably going to end up in prison or end up dead. You’re only sixteen, so think about it”. I didn’t really think more about it. It was definite what I wanted to do. But that was the process. The IRA didn’t accept people who just came along and very quickly accepted them into the ranks. They wanted to see if you were really committed to it. So, several months later, by the time I was seventeen, I then was accepted into the ranks of the IRA.

#### 4. *Writing a PhD as an activist*

*R: And in a relatively short time, within a few years later, you were in prison. I want to speak with you about your prison experience, since you wrote the PhD about your prison experience, about the history of the prison you were held in for sixteen years. Why did you decide to write a PhD about this experience and not a memoir or a novel like so many other prisoners? Why a PhD thesis?*

M: Well, following on from the hunger strike and just located even within the prison there were big, massive changes within the jail. I know there's a lot talked about the hunger strike itself, which is important, but I think what's actually probably more important is the years later, and I can go into that later, about the change within both the politics and the structures, the command structures, that we operated in, the type of education programme that we had within the jail which was very much influenced by Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which we could smuggle into jail in 1982, and a very extensive programme of education within the jail in terms of politics, world politics, guerrilla armies, whatever, as well as academic education. So, I was, as you've already said, I was in charge of it for a number of years. So, on one hand when I got out of prison, I thought maybe that's it – that's my days of education over, but I found once I was out a few months I sort of missed that obligation to study and such like, and I actually was in a conversation with the person who became my supervisor, Mike Tomlinson, Professor Mike Tomlinson, he wasn't a professor at that time. He was a lecturer at Queen's University in Belfast. He wrote a lot about prisons and about torture and torture in interrogation centres, shoot-to-kill-policies and there were very few academics at that time writing about those types of issues and those who did their careers didn't really blossom in any particular way. And it's interesting that then post-ceasefire their careers really took off and they became professors and heads of school and such like. But at that time Mike was just a lecturer, a senior lecturer; he had come into the prisons to teach. And we were having a discussion one night in a pub, which is always a good place to have a discussion, where the best ideas always come up – and you'll write them down because you'll forget about them the next day – and I said that I wanted to write a book about the experiences because I think, or I thought, that what had happened within the Republican prisoner community itself was important for the Republican community to understand rather than just focusing on the hunger strike because there was a massive change from, let's say, the imprisonment in the early 1970s – this was when IRA prisoners would have been very, and certainly their command staff, would have been very conservative, very right-wing, very Catholic and that's the reflection of the community and the IRA at that time, whereas in later years very much more left – studying Marxism, very much more col-

lective leadership, very much more de-structuring of command structures. So, in terms of the internal change that had taken place, I felt that was important to record that and make people aware of it. And as Mike said: "Well, why don't you do your PhD and you'll have your book and you'll have your qualifications as well"; and that were as simple as that.

I started in '94, I think it was, to do the PhD and, I suppose, it was interesting going to Queen's University, despite my background in the jails, background in the IRA, background in education. I found it a sort of an intimidating place. Probably like a lot of those institutions you almost think they are built to be intimidating, they're meant to be intimidating, you know. And remember that was a time when Catholics weren't there and certainly not Nationalists. Today, the university is overwhelmingly Nationalist. It was interesting to be there and that intimidating element of it, and, probably, I suppose the process of academia challenged me a bit because our whole process of education in the prison, as I said, was very much based on Paulo Freire's outlook whereas the teacher is the pupil, the pupil is the teacher and it's all about getting relevance, hierarchy, within academia. And I suppose there were times when I was doing my own, doing the PhD, that you almost think the doors are going to open some day and someone's coming in and saying: "Hey! You're a fraud. Get out of here because this is just a story you're telling here". Because I was locating myself within the story, so interviewing myself. And largely it was based on what I ended up using, the feminist methodologies within the prison. I had been involved for a number of years with doing a programme, for two years, which is an informal study carried out in conjunction with Joanna McMinn, who became Dr Joanna McMinn later, and she came into the prison as an Open University tutor for a course I was doing and it was called "The Changing Experience of Women". Myself and another couple of guys that studied it and thought it was fascinating and we should develop this programme asked Joanna would she come in and do informal classes around masculinity and whatever which she agreed to do if I or another guy, Jackie McMullan, co-facilitate. So, there had been this study within the jail, it was on feminism and feminist politics, and I really liked feminist methodology because for me what it did it was challenging this idea of objectivity versus subjectivity, and I suppose probably what now are very outdated theories within academia that you've got to be objective and apart, somehow, from the story that they're telling. So, my victim, who am I, who was someone who's very much a part of the story, able to write about the story in a way which is still the same as authentic, and I actually struggled with that for many years, but at the end of the day, obviously I succeeded because I got my doctorate. But yeah, but it was new to me. So, I suppose what I was delighted about was that I could get the story that I wanted, but at the same time I would have, I would be given if you want, a standing within academia.

I remember I presented it and it was only in the last stages before submitting that I was trying to think of a title and I came up with this one: *Unrepentant Fenian Bastards*. For people who don't know the terminology, in Ireland 'Fenian bastards' is always seen as a derogatory term used by Unionism which I could never work out because republicans very much admired the Fenians who were an armed insurrectionary group around the 1860s and I think when you put 'unrepentant' in front of it, it really changes the tone. And, it actually was the title of a song by an American, Irish-American, rock band originally called Black 47, they took that title from the famine, which was the blackened potatoes, and then they became Seanchaí and they had come to Belfast to play in a festival and this was a song they wrote and people were going around with T-shirts – so I just thought ...

I was delighted going into Queen's and presenting it and I remember the person taking it, looked at it, turned it around with their fingertips and looked at the title and pushed it back to me again and said: "No. They couldn't accept that". And I said: "Why not?". They said: "We can't accept that title". But they did accept it a week later. So, a long answer to your story. I could do the book and at the same time also get the qualification which I found was really helpful if you were stopped at a checkpoint and say you're 'Doctor McKeown' as opposed to 'Laurence McKeown'. It's amazing the difference that suddenly happens – he was someone in a uniform – so I have seen it be a bit of subverting the system as well, you know?

*R: The feeling is that Queen's University was an intimidating place, but you still went on to write your PhD there, and in your book you mention also a number of security issues you had going to seminars at Queen's University at that time. Laurence, you said you started your PhD in 1994. It was before the start of the ceasefire of the IRA and the Loyalist paramilitary organisations. Could you tell a bit about the security issues you had going to seminars?*

M: Well, the first thing about Queen's, well, during the conflict, and as you said, I started studying at Queen's while the armed conflict was still going on, there had been a young woman, a member of Sinn Féin, very bright and I don't mean that in any condescending way, but really in terms of electoral strategy. She was one of the people, Sheena Campbell, we called her, who had devised this particular approach to campaigning for elections which then had been adopted by Sinn Féin across the board as their way of approaching elections. It was very methodical, very thought out, and Sheena was studying at Queen's University and she was executed by Loyalist paramilitaries a few years previously; I'd say quite deliberately, because she was seen by, say, British security services as someone who was a major threat, a young person coming through in this way with this type of approach. So,

that had happened, I mean, very close to the grounds of the university – the conflict still going on. Queen’s University doesn’t sit within a Republican area. West Belfast was a Republican area and I lived in West Belfast at that time, in Ballymurphy. For a lot of people, the thought of going over to the university area just wouldn’t be something they would do and a lot of people advised me not to be going there because I would be recognised, because I was doing media interviews, etc. Because I was doing the doctorate in later years it meant I didn’t have to attend any formal classes. I just had to have meetings with my supervisor but in that first year, it was obligatory to attend a number of classes that were on research methodology.

And I was also studying at the same time as Anthony McIntyre. I had been in prison with him, he probably is well-known to people in terms of some of his writings. He would be at the opposite end of the spectrum from myself but at that time we started at the same time. And basically, sometimes we didn’t go into the class, we’d come in half-way through. We would never sit in the same seat in the classroom. We would sit at an angle to each other so that if anything happened, if anybody had come through the door, that one or the other of us could intervene, so it was. We just didn’t stroll into the university and do the studies and, in particular, in that first year. After the first year, the ceasefire was already in place and I didn’t have to attend formal classes. But it’s just interesting. But, also, Queen’s was very different at that time. The majority of the students would have been from Protestant/Unionist areas. I think it’s regrettable that a lot of them now don’t go to Queen’s – they go abroad. The majority of students now at Queen’s would be from a Nationalist area. And it’s interesting going about Queen’s today, in a relatively short period of time from my attending, and now what you constantly see is people with Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) jumpers on them. GAA is the Nationalists football game in Ireland. At one time they would have been banned from Queen’s University. The other thing that happened around the time that I got into Queen’s was that they then introduced a ban on ex-prisoners, on political ex-prisoners, which I think it was just highlighted by the fact that myself and Anthony had started. I don’t think they previously had anybody that fit that profile and Queen’s attempted to bar ex-prisoners and there had to be a legal case taken. And their argument was that it would disrupt the ‘neutral’ atmosphere or climate of the university. Obviously, that was an interesting terminology, the ‘neutral’. They thought our university campus was not a place for debate and discussion, the sharing of knowledge and the development of knowledge. It didn’t work. Legally they weren’t able to do it. But it just showed at that time what you were talking in terms of an establishment that has dramatically changed and you’re looking now at the various departments, people who are in various positions, loads of them are from the Nationalist perspective and such like.

### 5. *The Prison Experience*

*R: So, let us go back to your prison experience. When you were in prison, in charge, there was a protest going on in the H-Blocks. The political prisoners had lost special category status in 1975 and they refused to be classified as ordinary criminals. They refused the prison uniform and wrapped themselves in blankets, and theirs was called the 'blanket protest'. And when you came into prison you immediately joined the blanket protest. How was it for you? You were about nineteen, twenty years of age at the time. What were your first impressions? What are your memories of going to prison, joining the protest? How was it for you?*

M: Yeah, well, as Dieter said, in the early 70s, Republican prisoners were regarded as political prisoners, they didn't have to do prison work, you wore your own clothes, you were housed with your own group and you had your own command structures, etc. And as part of a very elaborate counter-insurgency programme, the British introduced a policy which was called officially, 'criminalisation', which meant anyone convicted even on political charges was considered criminal. We rejected that. And in fact, if you look at their policy, I mean we were arrested under special legislation, we were interrogated under special laws, we could be interrogated for a week without lawyers. We were sentenced in special courts, one judge, no jury. So, we went through this very special process and then what they were saying afterwards was: "Well, you're just the same as ordinary criminals. But we didn't go through that process".

I remember when the protest started; the first guy was Kieran Nugent. We were very politically naive about this policy. We thought it was something that, you know, the British introduce now, we'll challenge it and it'll probably disappear within six months or a year. It didn't. By the time, I was sentenced there were about one hundred prisoners on the protest and basically, as you said, how the protest started was that the first prisoner was told to wear a prison uniform and he refused and therefore he was naked until he was given a blanket to wear and that's what became known as 'the blanket protest'. At its height, there would have been like four hundred prisoners on it. It developed into a no-wash protest. I didn't wash for three years from 1978 until 1981. So, when I was sentenced in April, there already was, as I said, about a hundred prisoners on it, basically you were taken from remand court or remand prison in Belfast to Long Kesh to the H-Blocks. You were told about prison gear. You said: "No, I'm not going to". My experience was I was taken into what was the reception area of the H-Block, it was H-Block 2, it's called the 'circle area' even though it's a rectangle, so it's part of the terminology. We had already heard at that time a lot of reports of brutality as people were going down to the prison because, obviously, the prison authorities were trying to dissuade people from going on the protest. I was told to strip and put my clothes into a brown bag, and I stripped down to

my underpants and it's bizarre because you're in the middle of this square and there are other activities going on around you, there are prison guards and orderlies going back and forward, there's the Governor going about, and you're standing in the middle of this stripped down to your underpants and then somebody said: "Group", and a group of them gathered round, and I thought there was going to be a lot of physical abuse. But there wasn't and somebody said: "We said strip. Get the fucking heap off". So, I ended up totally naked in the middle of this circle. And probably thinking back it was done to degrade you or humiliate you or whatever in some way.

But I didn't get physically beaten. People in later months, in later years, did get very severely beaten at that point with entering into the prison. And I was taken down a wing and I was held there for a few days. And then I was moved to join other comrades on it. As I said, in 1978, it intensified and we had much more extreme conditions where basically you're in a cell 24/7 that was covered in excrement. We had no access to books, TV, radio, magazines – nothing. I mean it's easier to say what we had which was a piece of sponge for a mattress, we had a piss pot because we had no toilet in the cell and we had a water container and, oh yes, a Bible, in case we wanted some light reading. And that was it. And you had one visit a month for a half an hour if you were prepared to wear the prison clothes and some people died on the hunger strike who hadn't even taken visits for four or five years.

I've often said that even though I did go on to various studies and get a doctorate, I consider those years being the most educational of my life because it was about unlearning. It was unlearning of a lot of the nonsense probably that was in your head that you'd just soak up from parents, teachers, the state, the church. You know, you suddenly discover just from doing dialogue with people, because that's all we had was discussions, we didn't have this academic reading. So, therefore, the only thing you had was discussing ideas, but what I suddenly realised was that you had these opinions that you never had really sat down and consciously thought out, you just thought this. And then when someone challenged you and said: "Well, why do you think that?" and it could be about anything, colonialism, racism, sectarianism, issues like divorce, abortion, you name it. You suddenly realised: "Yeah, I have these opinions but I never had any time, I never sat down and thought: What am I thinking and maybe there's a contradiction between what I think there, what I think here. Maybe there's a contradiction between my Republican politics". And then there is the challenging of all Republicanism itself. So, that period became one of the most educational and it really influenced what happened in the jail after the hunger strike because by then, I think people had developed a critical approach and critical also of Republicanism and critical of Republican structures which then, I think, led on to the formation of: Well, if we're critical of the old what is it that we want the shift to be the new?

So, the protest, yes, was harsh in all of its other features. You had the casual brutality on a daily basis, you had the hunger strike, but in the midst of it all there was the learning process and not only in terms of politics, was the other thing that particularly developed during that times: the Irish language. That's where I learned to speak Irish. I never learned it at school even though the teacher tried her best. So, it was a very vibrant period as well as a very extremely brutal one.

#### *6. Unrepentant Fenian Bastards, Reconciliation, and Post-Hunger-Strike-Imprisonment*

*R: I want to ask you both as Dr. McKeown and Laurence: what happened after this extraordinary experience? And I want to broaden the conversation a little bit because my specific interest is in the memory of the Stalinist era – you know, what happened after the gulag with the prisoners and with those who were thinking about and writing about them – of course, in music, shooting films about all that, and also I've been doing a comparison to the Holocaust Studies. And it seems that in the holocaust studies there is an idea that with the military defeat of Nazi Germany it's an entirely different situation – every situation is different, of course, in Ireland, in Russia, in Germany with the Jews – but the theory basically says that three generations should pass before repentance would work. You wrote about “Unrepentant Bastards”, but you know, repentance on one or both sides would work. Consolation plays an important part, making people shake hands, working together and doing things together. So how did it work on that grand scale?*

M: Well, in Ireland there's actually a saying that it's seven generations, so we're just about at fifty percent. There is a poet, I think Seamus Heaney, I think at some point he said that it was seven generations before there's change. I think it was two different periods there and yes, I called my thesis that but at the moment the engagements I would have with former police, Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), former British Army – I have them regularly in fact. I have a new play coming out in two weeks' time which is based on the transcripts of interviews from former RUC and former Guards (Members of the Republic of Ireland's police, An Garda Síochána) in the South. So, it's interesting company I've been in these days and the fact that they have no problem with me writing their story in a sense.

I think probably our situation in the blocks was very different from that what you're talking about there in the gulags or the concentration camps during the Second World War, and I don't think there is any comparison between what we would have been having during the period leading up to the hunger strikes in the later years, then and what was going on in the likes of the gulags elsewhere. We also had a community on the outside that was very much supportive of us. We had very strong links to them so it changed our whole approach, I suppose, inside. And also because what did happen during the hunger

strike meant that the prison authorities obviously were very wary of getting into any head-to-head confrontation with us in the later years. We were able to use a whole range of other, different devices, techniques, to overcome. And that's why I said it's an interesting period. Like I look back on the time in prison in 1981 as, I think, the end of rebellion and the start of revolution in that narrow cliché of left-wing sloganizing, but the hunger strike and the five years that preceded it brought to an end that head-to-head confrontation, that sort of in terms of being equal – it's not those who can inflict the most but those that can endure the most – and I don't really believe that quote now but really we did at that time. There was never again going to be a physical protest within the jail that was going to exceed the hunger strike or the blanket protest. At the end of the hunger strike we had had five demands; we only got one of them which was the right to wear our own clothes so we still had four demands, of course. It was the most significant demand, the right to wear our own clothes, because on two levels, in terms of it was the stigma – so on a subjective level, we never had to wear the prison uniform and so we never had sort of 'criminalised' ourselves as we seen it – what we would have been doing wearing this uniform, this badge of criminality. But on a more practical level it allowed us, for the first time in five years, to get out of our prison cell and actually congregate with one another in the prison yard and the canteen and start to plan and strategize about how we were going to move forward and achieve our outstanding demands and that meant a lot of soul searching because basically what we decided to do and what we knew we had to do – because there was no other option – was that we were going to have to go into the system. And what that meant was actually saying to – we were still regarded as 'non-conforming prisoners' because we refused to do prison work – but what it meant to do was say: "Yes, I prefer to do prison work" – even though our problem was we wouldn't do it. We would go down to the workshops and we would destroy them and we would sabotage them which is what we ended up doing. But even to make that decision, because this was coming one year after, ten comrades had died because they refused to do prison work and wear prison clothes, and some of the prisoners refused to do it. And I can remember the day that we came off the protest and the prison governor had come to my door and – because you were asked regularly every two weeks: "Are you ready to do prison work?". And I said: "Yes", and he stood and looked at me and he did it deliberately; and he asked me again: "I'm asking you, Laurence: are you prepared to do prison work?". And I knew what he was saying: "Are you prepared to do prison work given that ten of your comrades died last year, that you were on hunger strike for seventy days, you're now saying that you're going to do prison work?". It was like a stroke and I said "Yes" and at that time the "Yes" somehow came out "Fuck" – didn't want it to come out but... So, it was this battle between knowing in your head this is the right decision to do but your heart doesn't feel it and you want to say something else to this prison governor. So that changed.

That was a significant change and I was then starting to say how do we actually get around obstacles, over them, under them – whatever way rather than this: Bring it on. We can take it. We're tough. And that really changed, I think, dramatically, the whole situation within the jail. And then that experience of during the blanket protest and the solidarity that built up – it was a big leveller during that period of time – that's the term I use for it – it didn't matter who had been on the outside, as in the IRA, it didn't matter how long you were sentenced to prison, it didn't matter how long you'd been there – it didn't matter any at all. The only thing that mattered was that you were on the protest. So that period built up a great solidarity amongst people, which is why ten people died on hunger strike – because there was that bond, that comradeship – and that again influenced in later years how we treated one another, dealt with one another as opposed to hierarchical structures, or any elitism, or militarism or whatever – and then that started to dribble to the outside.

And I think then also as we looked further into our education it was about – and I've had this discussion with people who had a different experience of say the Soviet Union, but obviously we looked very much to Marxist groups, whether it was in Mozambique or Angola, Cuba, the Soviet Union. I was studying Marxism which was really the opposite of what republicans in the early stages would have done. In fact, they weren't allowed to study Marxism. But for us it was, we had a saying: *A concrete analysis of a concrete situation* – as opposed to the old attitude of Republicanism which was very simplistic, very principled, idealistic – not really thought out – so, I suppose in a sense our whole approach in the period after the hunger strike was that things have to be very methodically and objectively thought out – Okay, if I'm going to do this what's that going to lead on to? What's going to be the implications? So why do this? Am I supposed to do this – so developing that very critical thinking? But then as it developed on it became more, as Dieter has mentioned, in the creative writing – it's certainly more expressive and I mean, the jail situation changed also. I would have been on first name terms with the prison guards, so even people who had brutalised us during that period – again, because you had to now work with them and come into contact with them – and that, in later years on the outside – I got very much involved, and I still regard myself very much as an Irish republican, but I see part of the process now that I was in the conflict and that is about engagements. And I sometimes think that the word 'reconciliation' has become meaningless because it means everything, or it meant anything to anybody or whatever. And actually, when I was in South Africa, Albie Sachs, you know, was mentioned at a conference: why should we ask people to reconcile if there's never been conciliation in the first place? So, I think the word needs to be sort of deconstructed. But I do think what is needed, and I say this from a Republican point of view, is that it doesn't matter if someone who was in the Loyalist group or in the RUC police group or in the British Army if they live in Ireland then I regard them as Irish regardless of

how they see themselves. And my Republican politics would be that I engage with them as I would engage with anyone else and I have learned through those engagements, as I mentioned earlier, how the arts, particularly, have helped out there. I've engaged with, as I said, with numerous people – I kept track of their stories. I filmed them. I've made it available online. So, there is, I think, a lot of that already going on in the North. Sometimes if you were to look just at the political situation you would think maybe not a lot has changed, but I always thought there were two parallel processes going on: there's the political process at one level – which is Stormont and the administrative level, but below that there's the peace process level which basically is communities come together. I think the amount of dialogue that goes on if you want a cross-community between people who were once sworn enemies it's amazing the amount of that goes on and it's probably why we have the level of peace that there is at the moment. I think there's still a lot of big issues to be dealt with, but I think that what they're talking about in terms of, if you want to use the word, reconciliation, that there is a lot of that going on, even though, I say to myself, it is driven by the Republican side of it. I think the Unionist side fear engagement because I think they fear that they don't have the arguments sometimes. I think that they're the ones who are going to continue to try to still maintain a situation of inequality, and there are those who want equality, and whether it's about gay marriage or whether it's about anything else that there's that very different politic being worked out, but at least it's being worked out now in an unarmed way, in a bloodless way, whereas in the past it was through war.

### 7. *Brexit and EU*

*R: I have a final question. So much has changed and now we have Brexit. So how do you feel your political experience is relevant now and what do you think will happen next?*

*M: Yeah, well, there were actually a lot of protests at the weekend there on the border. And then again, using the arts because close to where I live – I live just south of the border now between Dundalk and Newry. I lived in an area that was very heavily militarised during the conflict and now you wouldn't – right across the border, you wouldn't be aware you have crossed the border unless you see the road signs are different. But at the weekend they put up a border post. The activists put up like a mock customs post and put up barriers at all – you're now leaving the European Union or you're now leaving Britain – you're now entering – depending on what direction you were coming from, from Belfast or Derry, which is good to see them using that type of approach. But, yeah, Brexit has raised lots of questions and I think no one knows at the moment just where it will go. It's interesting, the people I suppose who were really promoting it, Farage and Boris Johnson, as soon*

as the vote was taken they walked away from it and were sort of like: “Well, you deal with it now”. In the North of Ireland a majority voted to remain as part of the European Union and I suppose the interesting thing is that vote wasn’t confined to one community the vote is one of the few issues that can’t be simply divided into what is either a Republican issue or Unionist. Because Scotland also voted to remain, I would imagine that they will have another vote, a referendum, on independence, which I would imagine this time will go through. In a sense, it has thrown up. So I begin to question: if Scotland actually became independent and that would start the break-up of the United Kingdom, it would have lots of implications. In the sense that if they left the UK, I think the UK’s seat on the Security Council and such like goes with it. I didn’t realise until a few years ago, I suppose it was at the time of the last Referendum in Scotland. In the North of Ireland, Unionists would often look to Scotland as being somehow their connection with the Ulster-Scots. So, if Scotland actually leaves the UK, how does that impact the Unionists? And then what does the land border be like? I know that, at the moment, there are all sorts of reassurances being given by British ministers that they don’t want to return to what was evidence in terms of border checkpoints during the conflict. But, as other people are pointing out well, how else do you impose the border? How else do you? Because the big issue with them was immigration. This means that in fact there’s going to be some sort of checkpoints. So, I suppose, without knowing all of the nitty-gritty of it – what Brexit has done is confusion. With everything up in the air, republicans have called in for a border poll – as in people voting about whether there should be a united Ireland – I think that’s going to happen but certainly, it’s anyone’s guess what is happening.

I suppose at the moment one of the impacts of it is a lot of the work that has been done over recent years, in particularly there were the terms of the EU peace funding. The European Union has put an awful lot of money into Ireland with the three peace programmes. The peace programme was originally for peace and reconciliation – then it became Peace I, as it was known; and then Peace II because there was a second round. There was a third round and now there’s now going to be a fourth round which was meant to be from 2016 to 2020 because they complained in the past with all these preconditions it wasn’t a long enough period to actually get projects firmly established within two years or three years as part of a five-year programme. Because of Brexit, it means that there’s uncertainty about the funding beyond December 2018. Probably a lot of the work that has been done which has, I think, probably supported the peace process has been that EU funding. If the EU funding hadn’t been available a lot of work that I do with ex-prisoners groups wouldn’t have happened because there wouldn’t have been that level of funding, that level of engagement. So, in terms of Brexit, I mean at the moment there is no answer to it. All there is, is loads of questions about what is going

to happen once that they trigger that clause that actually starts the whole process of the Brexit.

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