

**Speech by President Michael D. Higgins at the opening of the New Visitor Centre  
at Kilmainham Gaol and Courthouse**

Dublin, March 30, 2016

A Dhaoine Uaisle,

A Aire,

A Phríomh Bhreitheamh,

A Choimisinéirí Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí,

Ta an-áthas orm bheith anseo anocht, ag oscailt oifigiúil an ionad cuairteoirí seo i bPríosún agus Teach Cúirte Chill Mhaighneann, foirgneamh is ea í a bhfuil ina shiombail agus ina meabhrúchán orthú siúd a chuir a saoil i gcontúirt céad bliain ó shin, agus a cailleadh in a lán cásanna, ionas go mbeadh na glúnta a tháinig ina ndiaidh in ann marachtáil mar shaoránaigh i stát a mBéadh saor agus neamhspleách.

It is a great pleasure to be here this evening for the official opening of the new visitor centre in Kilmainham Gaol and Courthouse. This is a building which stands for many as a symbol and a reminder of those who, a hundred years ago, bravely risked, and in so many cases sacrificed, their lives so that future generations of Irish men and women might live as citizens of a free and independent state.

The history of the Gaol and Courthouse is of course a long and rich one, and it is for the greater part a history steeped in great sadness and human tragedy. Originally built in 1796 as the County Gaol for Dublin, these premises have witnessed the detention of many leading figures in Ireland's lengthy battle for independence from British rule, including Robert Emmet, Thomas Francis Meagher and Charles Stewart Parnell, as well as so many of the main participants in the Easter Rising of 1916, the War of Independence and the Civil War. This prison has also, of course, served as the place of detention for a much greater number of ordinary men, women, and even children, who suffered greatly within these walls.

Níl amhras ar bith faoi thábhacht Phríosún Chill Mhaighneann i stair na hÉireann. Tugann an músaem seo deis íontach dúinn dul i ngleic leis an stair ar bhealach atá cuimsitheach, eiticiúil agus macánta.

There can be no doubting the importance of Kilmainham Gaol in our nation's history. In its current life as a Museum it fulfils a new and essential role, in enabling all of our citizens to engage with history and commemoration in a way that is inclusive, ethical, and honest.

Decommissioned as a prison in 1924, perhaps when memory was raw, it was left to ruin for many years. The restoration and reincarnation of Kilmainham as a Museum in 1966 was a wonderful recovery of heritage and history and it ensured that this iconic building would continue to hold an important place in our nation's shared memory, preserved and made accessible to all. I am delighted to know that we have, amongst us today, some of those volunteers whose perseverance, dedication and commitment drove that important restoration.

This new chapter in the life of Kilmainham Gaol began to be written in September 1958, when a meeting at Jury's Hotel in Dublin led to the forming of the Kilmainham Gaol Restoration Committee. In fact, there had been some earlier attempts at persuading the authorities to take up the task of restoration, but the advocacy did not come to fruition. It was thus left to the community to take the initiative and undertake the task of restoration in a great spirit of generous citizenship and active participation, as obstacles were overcome and thousands of hours of voluntary labour offered to secure the future of Kilmainham Gaol.

The people of Ireland owe an enormous debt of gratitude to all those volunteers, many of whom had also fought in the Rising and the War of Independence, and who, decades later, so magnanimously gave of their time and skill in order that new generations of Irish citizens could visit this place and experience the powerful connection it provides to our history and our forbearers. That was a true project of citizenship, one which makes Kilmainham Gaol unique amongst Ireland's sites of historical interest.

This latest phase of the development of Kilmainham Gaol is a wonderful further enhancement of what is one of our great national heritage resources. It is also a recognition that places such as this one provide unique portals into critical moments of the past which have shaped the present, and informed our national identity.

The new facilities we are opening today are most impressive. May I commend the Office of Public Works and the management here, at Kilmainham Gaol Museum, on the completion of what is a transformational expansion of this great site of our collective memory. I want to take this opportunity also to pay tribute to the part played by the Court Services in facilitating the project, and to Chief Justice Susan Denham, for her role in recommending that the Courthouse be handed over for this citizenship purpose.

On reading about the various elements of the project, I was most interested to learn about the exhibition and Interpretation Centre which, through photographs, artefacts and also the diaries and autograph books of those who were held here during the War of Independence and the Civil War, connect us to the past with an immediacy which our academic work might not achieve.

These personal perspectives of those incarcerated are of such great value. Many of the entries contained in the material available here are simple, even self effacing, but they indicate a selflessness, echoing the valiant courage which so defined those who fought with commitment for an Ireland of justice, equality and freedom, as well as allowing a unique access to the emotions and the insights of those detained here.

Hannah Moynihan, who was imprisoned here for her role in the War of Independence, described Kilmainham Gaol, in October 1923 as a “dark, gloomy place with long, dreary passages...”, but added, “Sis (Power) and I have been making our “house” beautiful, and on the door we have chalked “The Invincible” – rather conceited!”

Sis Power herself, with her sister Jo, recorded how their sinking spirits on arriving at the Gaol were,

“Somewhat revived by the strains of the hymn “Hail Glorious St Patrick”.

Patrick Gilligan, writing from Cell 16 during the Civil War wrote philosophically,

“Tis not who can inflict most, Tis who can endure most will triumph in the end”

While Peter Radcliffe, that same year, simply wondered:

“Why were prisons built, and what was man's intent, in building for his fellow man, such places of torment?”

They are such quiet words, but words that echo so evocatively across the decades that now separate us from the events of the early twentieth century.

I was also greatly impressed to learn that the beautifully preserved central courtroom has now been re-envisioned as a space within which various forms of creative activity will be made possible, including theatrical performances, literary events and film displays. Such innovation demonstrates how our historic places can evolve in ways that will allow us to better understand ourselves through our cultural past and to shape a better future through the cultural present. These are facilities which we did not have in 1991 when we celebrated here the 75th anniversary with the events titled – The Flaming Door.

The high standing which the museum now enjoys, especially with visitors from overseas, is a testimony to how you have created here a unique site of memory, benefitting from the guidance of expert guides to this stunning and affecting building.

The manner in which the building has been restored, including the new visitor management system, is very interesting too, tracking as it does the story of Kilmainham Gaol and Courthouse, allowing some parts to remain in their early state, while others reflect the changes made over many years, and thus it allows us a greater understanding of the long and rich life of this historic place.

Of course the main interest for many of your visitors is the connection between Kilmainham and our nation's long battle for independence. The number of leading figures in the fight for Irish freedom who were, during various periods, imprisoned, and in some cases, executed, here is remarkable. Kilmainham Gaol's first political prisoner of note was Henry Joy McCracken, a founder of the United Irishmen, who was detained here in 1796, and one of its last was Éamon De

Valera, who was released from the gaol in 1924 following the Civil War - and who also, of course, officially opened the restored museum fifty years ago.

In between, the Gaol played an important role during the brief rising of the early 19th century, including housing Robert Emmett prior to his execution at nearby Thomas Street. During the final years of the Irish famine, an increased number of prisoners were incarcerated here resulting in serious and dangerous overcrowding. The prison was then a focal point during the Fenian uprising of the late 19th century, and some short years later, when Parnell and his followers rejected the Land Act.

We have, in this year of centenary commemorations, been involved in much reflection on the Easter Rising of 1916 and on the audacity of vision which defined a revolutionary generation who dreamt of a new and re-imagined Ireland. As we gather here this evening, we meet together in a place that represented both an ending and a great new beginning for the leaders of 1916.

On Sunday, I participated in a most moving ceremony here in the Stonebreakers' Yard, to remember and reflect on the executions which took place in 1916. The monument to those shot confronts all of the visitors to this place with the final moments of the leaders of the Rising, in a most arresting and affecting manner.

From the archive material here we learn the personal and political aspects of their final moments: Joseph Plunkett, for example, who had married Grace Gifford hours before his execution, told the priest attending him:

“Father, I am very happy. I am dying for the glory of God and the honour of Ireland”;

We learn, too, of incidents that bring home the horror and pathos of those days: Eamonn Ceannt falling with a crucifix in his hand; Thomas McDonagh handing out cigarettes to the firing Squad – brave men facing death with a calm confidence that, from their military defeat, would grow a moral victory that would lead to a greater Ireland. Indeed as they faced execution, the leaders of the Rising were sustained by the hope that they had created the foundations for a new and independent Ireland. This hope was articulated by Patrick Pearse, in his final letter to his mother, when he wrote that he was dying a “soldier's death for Ireland and for freedom.”

As well as the prisoners, we must remember also their families that suffered the great loss that follows the imprisonment of a loved one. In particular, let us not forget the women who were brought here to make their final farewells to beloved husbands, brothers, sons, sweethearts and friends, the courage and heartbreak of those moments best described in their own words.

Kathleen Clarke, wife of Tom Clarke thus wrote:

“During the whole interview, my mind was concentrated on not breaking down. I knew that if I broke, it would break him...”

She added:

“A baby was coming to us, but he did not know. I had not told him before the Rising, fearing to add to his anxieties, and considered if I would tell him then, but left without doing so .”

Eily O’Hanrahan, whose brother Michael was executed, recounted that he:

“was not in any way agitated. The only thing that worried him was what was to become of my mother and us... we tried to reassure him that we would be all right ...”

While Madge Daly, sister of Ned, remembered how:

“The soldiers called to us: ‘Time’s up’, so we kissed and embraced our boy ... and then the cell door banged on us all.”

Today we are grateful to those historians whose endeavour have enabled a new and necessary understanding of the multifaceted-era of the Rising. We can appreciate that, for many Irish citizens, the idea of rebellion against the perceived unassailability of English power was simply inconceivable at that time. While the Rising became remembered as a brave action in pursuit of Irish freedom and independence, public reaction in 1916 was of course much more complex. We can even perhaps understand how those who, for example, having brothers, sons and husbands fighting in France and who relied for survival on the Separation Allowance, viewed the Rising, prompting them to try and dismantle rebel barricades, to cheer the British soldiers and to spit at rebels on the streets of Dublin. May Gahan recounted, for example, how the women were pelted with bottles as they were marched from Richmond Prison to Kilmainham.

However, the execution of the rebels, the courage they showed in the face of death – those powerful human stories of loss and sacrifice –soon came to elicit much public sympathy, turning Irish public opinion in favour of the Rising and, combined with the threat of conscription, contributing significantly to the irreversible momentum towards a War of Independence that would encompass the island of Ireland.

Those pivotal events are remembered here in Kilmainham, not with rancour, chauvinism or triumphalism, but with pathos, compassion and respect. The deep commitment of the historians at Kilmainham to historical authenticity makes you worthy custodians of one of our most important national monuments.

An important element of this year’s centenary celebrations has been the inclusion, indeed the restoration of the contribution of women, of their pivotal role in our struggle for independence. Let us not forget, today, the many women who, over many years, were incarcerated here in Kilmainham Gaol.

After the Easter Rising, approximately eighty women were held here, including Countess Markiewicz, Nellie Gifford, Kathleen Lynn, Madeleine Ffrench Mullen and Helena Moloney. All of the women detained in Kilmainham Gaol at that time recalled the torment of hearing frequent gunshots from the stonebreakers’ yard, and not knowing which of the leaders had just been executed.

During the Irish Civil War, more than 300 women were imprisoned in Kilmainham Gaol, including Annie O'Farrelly whose papers, now held in the National Museum, describe B Wing, where she was incarcerated as 'a dreadful part of the Prison which has been condemned.' She also speaks of how the clergy refused to give absolution to women, and of conflict between female prisoners and prison and military authorities here in Kilmainham Gaol. In the Summer of 1922 there was a general excommunication of those fighting on the anti-treaty side.

Indeed, in relation to the Civil War more generally, we face ahead of us, perhaps, more difficult and painful processes of remembering and commemoration – and Kilmainham will again be central to that process of reflection as we recall how some anti treaty forces were held, and some executed, here. That tragic and deeply divided time continues to inform the political landscape of Ireland today.

Agus muid ag comóradh céad bliain ón Éirí Amach, tig linn ómós a thabhairt do na ceannairí cróga a cailleadh i bPríosún Chill Mhaighneann i 1916, le meas agus le tuiscint ar a saolta agus ar a mbearta, agus ar an gcomhthéacs inar tharla siad.

As we commemorate the centenary of the Easter Rising let us do so in a spirit of determination to honour the deaths of those brave leaders who died in Kilmainham Gaol in 1916, and with respect for a full appreciation of their lives and action, and the context in which these were transacted. They died imagining a brave new Ireland, and we must continue the work of building a Republic of which our founders would be proud; a nation rooted in courage, vision and a profound spirit of generous humanity. In the commemorations to follow in the coming decades we will be called to summon up forgiveness and achieve a healing.

The various commemorative events and occasions held to mark this significant and vibrant period of Irish history have allowed us to re-engage with the Ireland of the early 20th century in all its complexity, with the many different traditions, ideas and ideologies that impelled the stories of bravery, vision and determination that would build a nation.

In that process of re-engagement we can, across a distance of years, understand 1916 as being about so much more than military or political actions. It was also of course an act of imagination, a social as well as a national revolution, whose leaders were inspired by the idea of creating a very different and much improved Ireland.

It was an Ireland of equality and social justice that was sought; an Ireland of democratic citizenship and of collective participation that, in the words of the Proclamation:

“Guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally...”

I thank you all very sincerely for welcoming me here today. Finally may I congratulate and commend all of you – OPW, Kilmainham Gaol Museum, the Courts Services and the builders, the Ireland 2016 Team, contractors and historians and other professionals and experts – who, through

this new Visitor Centre, have given us a valuable new space which will provide a wealth of information on the background and circumstances which have shaped our history and our nation.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.