**Kilmainham Gaol**

Opened in 1796 as the County Gaol for Dublin, Kilmainham Gaol has, at crucial moments, held within its walls many of the key personalities involved in the struggle for Irish independence.

Opened in 1796 as the County Gaol for Dublin, Kilmainham Gaol has, at crucial moments, held within its walls most of the key personalities involved in the struggle for Irish independence.

The 18th Century

When Kilmainham Gaol opened in 1796, it was one of the most modern prisons in Ireland. The rectangular west wing of the Gaol dates from this period. In the early years, debtors comprised over half the prison population. Others were detained for beggary, stealing, assault, prostitution and drunkenness. Conditions were harsh. For the first fifty years the building had no glass in the windows and no lightning. Prisoners were allowed one small candle every two weeks. Bread, milk, oatmeal and soup were among the food listed on diet sheets.

But there is much more to Kilmainham's story: the gaol functioned for most of its life as an ordinary prison, and the fate of ordinary men, women and children as convicts is a compelling story in its own right.

The 19th Century

Women made up a significant portion of the Gaol's population until 1881, when it became an all-male prison. In 1821, women to be hanged at the Gaol in 1821. The first executions under the new law were of five people in cells designed for one. Most women were hanged at Kilmainham Gaol. The last female hanged at the Gaol in 1865. Bridget Butterly was sentenced to death after being convicted of stabbing in Dublin.

The 20th Century

The last 1916 prisoners were released from 1916 to 1924. The War of Independence (1919-21) was closed but was later used to house political prisoners during the period from 1916 to 1924. The last 1916 prisoners were released under a general amnesty in June 1917. In the period since the Easter Rising, a dramatic change had occurred in the attitude of Irish people towards those who fought in the rebellion. On their return from internment in Britain, the released prisoners were given a hero's welcome. Sinn Fein, a radical republican Parliamentary Party at Westminster, and many of his fellow MPs were detained in Kilmainham after their open rejection of the Land Act introduced by the British government in 1881. Pearse was imprisoned in Kilmainham from October 1881 to May 1882.

The Young Irelanders (1848)

The Young Irelanders, a 19th Century Irish nationalist group, were arrested for their involvement in the Young Ireland uprising in 1848. It was typical of the Victorian penal institution that prison architecture was cruel to the reform of inmates.

During this period the gaol was run on principles of silence and separation. Communication between prisoners was forbidden and they spent much of the time alone in their cells. The prison authorities hoped that they would use this time to read the Bible, contemplate and repent their crimes.

The Fenians (1867)

The Fenians were a secret oath-bound group sworn to overthrow British rule in Ireland. Following the failure of the Fenian rising in 1867, many were imprisoned in Kilmainham Gaol. The gaol was cleared of common prisoners and security was strengthened.

The last prisoners to be interned were the leaders, Joseph Plunkett, was given permission to marry his fiancée, Grace Gifford, in the chapel of the Gaol just hours before his execution. The final execution was that of James Connolly, the leader, on 21st January 1919. On the same day the first shots of the War of Independence were fired. Diamatically different
from previous rebellions, the War of Independence saw the introduction of guerrilla warfare between the Dáil’s military wing, the Irish Republican Army, and British forces. Kilmainham was now used to hold captured Irish Republican Army members. The War of Independence effectively ended with the declaration of a Truce in July 1921.

The Civil War (1922-24)
In June 1921 the six county state of Northern Ireland came into being. Following negotiations, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed on 6th December 1921. This provided for the setting up of a twenty-six county Irish Free State. Bitter disagreement over whether to accept the Treaty split Sinn Fein. The main subject of disagreement was a condition in the Treaty obliging all members of the Free State Parliament swearing an oath of allegiance to the British monarch who would remain Head of State. This proved unacceptable to Eamon de Valera and those republicans who followed him. The pro-Treaty, or Free State, side took the more pragmatic view that although not perfect, the Treaty gave them “the freedom to achieve freedom”. The anti-Treaty or Republican side felt anything short of an Irish Republic was a betrayal of their cause and of those who had fought and died for Irish independence. The tensions eventually erupted in civil war in June 1922. Kilmainham Gaol was taken over by the Free State Army. Of seventy-seven Republicans to be executed by the Free State Government during the Civil war, the first four took place close to where the leaders of 1916 had been shot. From February to September 1923, Kilmainham housed over 300 women and girls aged between twelve and seventy. The Civil War eventually came to an end and its very last prisoner, Eamon de Valera, later Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and President of Ireland, was released from the Gaol in 1924.

Abandonment and Restoration
After a period of neglect, the voluntary Kilmainham Gaol Restoration Committee was established in 1960 to preserve the Gaol as a monument of Irish nationalism. The voluntary work lasted for almost thirty years until the Gaol was handed over to the State in 1986. Today Kilmainham Gaol receives visitors from all over the world.