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The Prisons Memory Archive: A Multi-Disciplinary Lens on Northern Ireland's Peace Process

Julia Volkmar

Mairs Dyer, Jolene, Conor McCafferty, and Cahal McLaughlin, eds. *The Prisons Memory Archive: A Case Study in Filmed Memory of Conflict*. Wilmington, DE and Malaga: Vernon Press, 2022. 276 pages. ISBN 978-1-64889-440-4. £65.

Northern Ireland, its conflicted past, and its peace process since 1998 have been at the center of a variety of publications. At the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the peace treaty bringing a formal end to over three decades of violence, *The Prisons Memory Archive: A Case Study in Filmed Memory of Conflict* offers new insights into the topic. It is a refreshing book presenting a variety of different angles on what can seem like a messy and entangled post-conflict environment.

Due to Northern Ireland's contested memory landscape, the adopted piecemeal approach to reconciliation and dealing with the past has resulted in a plethora of different legal and non-legal mechanisms that frequently have not been successful in bringing conflicted communities together. The Prisons Memory Archive (PMA) constitutes a societally beneficial exception. The project successfully combined the filmed testimonies of ex-prisoners, prison officers, university tutors, chaplains, and others associated with the contested prison sites of Armagh Gaol and Maze Prison/Long Kesh in one place. By adopting an approach based on the pillars of inclusivity, co-ownership, and life-storytelling, interviewees were able to freely recall their memories of the prison sites, most of them whilst walking through them. Participants from all groups of society were then allowed to retain the rights over their own recordings. As a final product, the project has created an accessible archive allowing anyone to access memories and evaluate their own experiences without judgment or privilege. Fifteen years after the filming of the project, this book, edited by Jolene Mairs Dyer, Conor McCafferty, and Cahal McLaughlin, allows for a reflection on the project's many impacts. The editors have all worked on the project and the book often reads like an intimate self-reflection. As such, it is also a commentary on the on-going debates around dealing with the past in Northern Ireland, showcasing the

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current state of play as much as contemplations on the recent past and possible future avenues.

As Laura McAtackney notes in her prologue, the contested Northern Ireland prisons are part of collective memory; their "long and entangled connection to the conflict" is present to everyone in Northern Ireland (xx). Seeing the variety and breadth of contributions to this book, the impact of the PMA has also touched upon all levels of society. Through the window of an initially contested prisons project, it reflects on recent social developments in Northern Ireland. With chapters contributed by ex-prisoners (6, 7), project workers (1, 2), different film makers (1, 8, 9, 14), an artist (5), a barrister (4), archivists (13, 15, 16), and academics giving glimpses into their research (3, 10–12), the book is widely inter-disciplinary. It makes a contribution to the field of film studies, provides insights into memory studies and transitional justice, employs gender studies and the fine arts, and allows for personal cogitations of coping with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland. Across the sixteen chapters, the impact of the archive is assessed from different perspectives, often considering individual experiences. Authors use plain language, making the book widely accessible to both academic and non-academic audiences. Even the unknowing reader will intuitively understand the symbolic power the PMA holds.

In general, the chapter structure is broadly chronological and allows the reader to understand how the PMA has developed. The first two chapters, written by archive director Cahal McLaughlin and Lorraine Dennis, who has long worked for the archive, provide an insider perspective on working with a variety of potentially conflicted stakeholders. The careful explanations of strategies, project development, and personal feelings working with the PMA draw the reader in and transport a personal understanding of Northern Ireland. Hickey's third chapter on the changing prison architecture allows the reader to understand how Northern Ireland's architectonical landscape has mirrored the country's troubled past. The following four chapters (4–7) turn to direct experiences of life in prison and its impact on the writers' lives. Chapters four and five describe the experiences of a barrister and an artist temporarily visiting the prisons. Their outside experience of accessing the sites during the Troubles brings the reality of lived conflict closer to the reader. The following two chapters focus on two prisoners' stories which show, despite one being republican, the other loyalist, remarkable similarities. It becomes clear why the PMA's filmed material is so impactful: both contemplations are touching in their intimacy and vision. Chapters 8 and 9 then describe film making from the archived material, with chapter 10

emphasizing how it is received by audiences, contributing to reconciliatory work. Chapter 11 emphasizes through the example of audio-description how long-term accessibility with such contested material can be achieved. Lenox's chapter 12 serves an international comparison to a prison site in Germany. With this stage of showing the immersive impact of the archive on society in Northern Ireland and beyond, the last four chapters, 13–16, elaborate on these opportunities and their future potential. They are, however, mindful of the remaining sensitivities and contestations around the material. Keane's chapter 13 speaks of the transformative potential of archival spaces whilst ensuring to safeguard victims and survivors. McSorley's chapter on film making shows how new generational views (in his case on making the prison experience humorous) might not be shared across the board yet. Chapters 15 and 16 explain how the archive is stored, guaranteeing that marginalized experiences are preserved long-term.

The chapters are drawn together by incorporating the methodological pillars of inclusivity, co-ownership, and life storytelling. Each chapter mentions and evaluates these principles, showing how important they have been for everybody working with and participating in the PMA. Most chapters are followed by reflections of participants of the PMA, comprised of a couple of pages. Offering their thoughts on how the process has had an impact on them, their lives, and their wider communities, these considerations provide a connecting thread. They allow the reader to understand the participant-focused agenda better and offer glimpses into the enormous socio-political developments Northern Ireland has seen in the past decades.

As is often the case with edited volumes covering such interdisciplinary topics, most readers will not be equally interested in all chapters. Due to its simple language and well-constructed sections explaining the purpose of the archive, even the casual reader will gain important insights. The limited scope of the chapters and the emphasis on personal evaluation will however be restricting for those aiming to immerse themselves in academic debates. For these readers, the book merely offers a starting point, similar to an encyclopedia. Its relevance for international readers is thus also the shortcoming of this book. It provides an insight into the variety and differences between ways of dealing with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland without requiring much previous knowledge of the region: the book's many perspectives highlight the different narratives and contestations in society well. It makes for an interesting and enjoyable read but does not offer

a sustained critique of specific academic theory. In general, the book's academic contribution to conflict studies lies in its self-critical assessment of memory in post-conflict societies. It is a great starting point for anyone looking to get to know Northern Ireland and its post-conflict developments better.

The Queen's University Belfast

Julia Volkmar, PhD candidate and Early Career Researcher Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Fellow at the School of Law, the Queen's University Belfast, does research on the impact of archives and archivists on the theory and practice of transitional justice. In her multidisciplinary research, she employs oral history methodology.