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Women's history in Kilmainham Gaol Museum

Kilmainham Gaol Museum holds a collection of over 12,000 objects which relate to the Gaol's history and its prisoners, as well as to the history of Irish nationalism more widely. When the Museum began collecting in the 1960s, some of the very first items donated were presented by former prisoners, including some of the women who had been political prisoners there during the Irish Civil War. The collection has continued to grow ever since and a purpose built museum building was opened on the site in 1996 to interpret and display it.

In the 1990s, Kilmainham Gaol Museum hosted the ground breaking exhibition *Guns and Chiffon, Women Revolutionaries and Kilmainham Gaol 1916-1923* curated by Sinéad McCoole. The exhibition was one of the first to focus on the role of women in the revolutionary period. Many important historical items were given and lent to Kilmainham Gaol Museum for this exhibition, and in the years since we have continued to collect such material.

As a result, Kilmainham Gaol today holds a fantastic collection of items relating to the role of women in Irish history, from the Irish Ladies Land League in the 1880s, to the involvement of women in the 1916 Rising, the War of Independence, and particularly the Civil War. Highlights of the collection include a dispatch bag used by Countess Constance de Markievicz during the 1916 Rising, and a beautiful embroidery of the Virgin Mary by Grace Gifford Plunkett, made in Kilmainham Gaol in 1923. One of the most extensive collections in Kilmainham Gaol Museum relates to the women who were imprisoned during the Irish Civil War. These objects include autograph books, handed around for fellow prisoners to sign and illustrate, craftwork made in prison to pass the time, as well as letters and diaries. These objects, which often appear very ordinary at first glance, are used to tell the stories of the women prisoners. Researchers come from all over the world to view the women's collection in Kilmainham Gaol Museum. Some of these researchers include family members of former prisoners, who come to Kilmainham to learn about what their relative experienced there. The collection has also been used extensively in academic research and publication, exhibitions and television productions.

As a curatorial assistant, my role in the Museum is to look after the wonderful collection entrusted to Kilmainham Gaol. This a varied and diverse task. I manage the care of the collections, ensuring that they are stored and displayed in the correct

conditions, which guarantees that they can be enjoyed by generations to come. When we receive new donations, which we are fortunate to receive regularly, I document each object in detail on our museum catalogue. When researchers contact Kilmainham Gaol to ask questions about the building, its prisoners and the collection, I am responsible for answering their queries and hosting them for research visits to the site. Along with my colleague Brian Crowley, I am also involved in producing exhibitions, both as part of our permanent display, and our programme of temporary exhibitions. This involves writing informative and readable exhibition text, selecting which objects should be displayed, and working in consultation with experts such as object conservators and graphic designers. Our most recent temporary exhibition *'hearts ne'er waver' The women prisoners of the Irish Civil War*, was launched to mark the centenary of the imprisonment of hundreds of women during the Civil War. It will be on display at the Gaol until May 2024.



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