‘Tá mé ag imeacht’: the Execution of Myles Joyce and its Afterlives

Margaret Kelleher

In his 1907 article, ‘Ireland at the Bar’, James Joyce (2000: 145-7) gave new currency to the historical figure of Myles Joyce, one of the men accused of the Maamtrasna murders of 1882, whom he depicted as a ‘bewildered old man, left over from a culture which is not ours, a deaf-mute before his judge’, and ‘symbol of the Irish nation at the bar of public opinion’[1]. His account of the interrogation – ‘at times comic and at times tragic’ – of the monoglot Irish speaker is quite frequently cited in Joycean commentaries; less often noted is the account of Myles Joyce’s execution given by the 25-year old and Trieste-based journalist, who was born in the year the Maamtrasna events took place:

> When the interrogation was over the poor old man was found guilty and sent before a high court which sentenced him to be hanged. On the day the sentence was to be carried out, the square in front of the prison was packed with people who were kneeling and calling out prayers in Irish for the repose of the soul of Myles Joyce. Legend has it that even the hangman could not make himself understood by the victim and angrily kicked the unhappy man in the head to force him into the noose.

The injustice of Myles Joyce’s conviction in November 1882 continues to be a matter of public concern and agitation: as recently as 2012 a campaign was launched to declare him victim of a miscarriage of justice and a commemorative ceremony held in Galway, including a wreath-laying by President Michael D. Higgins, to mark the 130th anniversary of his hanging in Galway jail.[2] As part of these commemorative activities, details of Myles’s ‘botched’ public execution have an especially potent power, as have reports of his last words on the scaffold; yet how these accounts are known, shared and agreed as authoritative is a more complex and intriguing process. This essay will explore the mediation and remediation of the scene of Myles Joyce’s execution – both as visual spectacle and aural trace – in official and popular accounts; these sources range from contemporaneous news coverage and the official state inquiry which immediately succeeded the execution, to ballad and oral history, leading to the influential depictions in journalism by James Joyce, Jarlath Waldron’s bestselling local study *Maamtrasna: The Murders and the Mystery* (2004) and the ongoing commemorative practices.

I

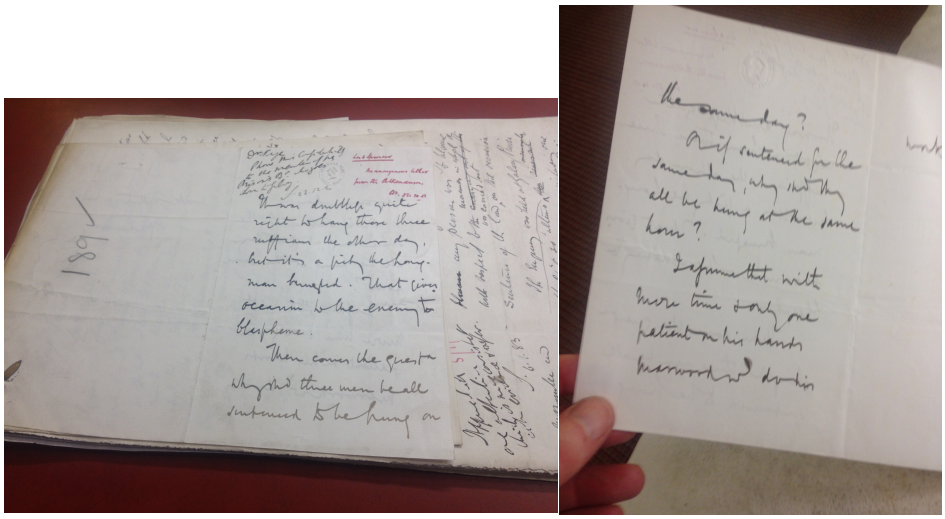
On 22 December 1882 Lord Lieutenant of Ireland John Spencer received a short handwritten anonymous letter, forwarded to him by the editors of the London *Athenaeum*, and which survives in the Chief Secretary papers in Dublin’s National Archives.[3] The full text of the letter (figures 1 and 2) reads:

It was doubtless quite right to hang those three ruffians the other day, but it's a pity the hangman bungled. That gives occasion to the enemy to blaspheme.

Then comes the question why should three men be all sentenced to be hung on the same day?

And if sentenced for the same day, why should they all be hung at the same time?

I assume that with more time and only one patient on his hands Marwood would do his work without a hitch.



figures 1 and 2 (National Archives: CSORP 1883/189)

In the previous week local and national newspapers had carried detailed reports of the 'bungling' of the execution of Myles Joyce who, along with Patrick Joyce and Patrick Casey, had been condemned to death for the Maamtrasna murders of August that year and whose executions had taken place in Galway on Friday December 15th. As documented in the Chief Secretary's papers, 'the attention of the Lord Lieutenant having been called' to these reports, Spencer and his Under--Secretary William Kaye then directed that a 'full enquiry' be held into 'all the circumstances' connected with that execution, 'with the view of ascertaining if any person was to blame with respect to the manner in which the sentence of the law was carried out on that occasion'. The enquiry, held at Galway Prison on 29th and 30th December, was conducted by Charles J. Bourke, Chairman of the General Prison Board, and Dr Charles Croker-King, a member of the local Government Board, and examined ten witnesses, nine of whom were present at the execution. The ten witnesses comprised Doctor Kinkead, the Prison's Medical Officer (who was unable to attend), Doctor Rice, the substitute medical doctor, Fr Greaven the jail's Roman Catholic chaplain, Mason the Prison Governor, Redington the subsheriff and five prison warders named Evans, St George, McGann, Coen and Sammon.

The evidence of Doctor Rice was first tendered at the inquest held in the prison hospital immediately following the execution and was by far the most contentious within the subsequent inquiry. Rice testified as to the differing causes of death for the three men as follows:

> The cause of death in Patrick Joyce and Patrick Casey was dislocation of the second cervical vertebrae from the first and third; the spinal cord being pressed in consequence by the body of the vertebrae pressing them. The vertebrae was pressed forwards and consequently pressed on the cord. Exactly the same injury in both cases.
>
> Was standing on the ground when the execution took place at right side of platform, could not see into the pit.
>
> The cause of Myles Joyce's death was strangulation, no dislocation or pressure on the spinal cord.

On the question of when death occurred, Rice was more equivocal:

> I would say from the nature of the injuries of the spine that death was almost instantaneous.
>
> In the case of Myles Joyce from my own knowledge I heard him breathing for half a minute after the bolt was drawn.
>
> I was separated from Myles Joyce about sixteen feet. I formed my opinion from what I heard and the examination of the bodies afterwards. After the half minute I heard no more, but it does not follow that he was dead when I ceased to hear him breathe, but I could not say whether he was dead or alive at the expiration of that time – it is only a conjecture.

Like the other witnesses present, Rice attested to a 'disarrangement of the rope' having occurred in the case of Myles Joyce's hanging and attributed blame to 'the culprit' for moving: 'I attribute the disarrangement of the rope to the culprit having turned round to address the people present and also to the fact of Marwood having adjusted the rope on Myles Joyce first who was the most unsettled and talkative instead of doing so last of the three culprits.'

The testimony of Greaven, the chaplain, expounded on the details of the 'disarrangement':

> Immediately as the drop fell I looked down into the pit. I saw that Myles Joyce was caught by the rope round the neck and left wrist and that his body was in a slanting direction.
>
> Immediately after this I saw the Executioner go immediately to the place where Myles Joyce was suspended by the rope. I saw him lower his hand in order to disengage the rope. I also remarked him placing himself in such a position that his feet descended towards the pit. The Executioner then made an effort with his hands to disengage the rope, he made efforts also with his feet, I could not say that he touched Myles Joyce with his feet. I believe he was endeavouring to unloop the rope off the man's wrist. He (Marwood) appeared to be much excited and breathing very hard in his exertions to free the rope. Heard no other breathing. I looked very hard and

sharply and I believe death was instantaneous as I did not observe the slightest movement of the body.

Greaven was one of only two witnesses who attempted to relay what the 'talkative' Myles Joyce was seeking to express; though, like Rice, he attributed blame for 'any mishap' firmly to the executed man:

> I understand Irish and distinctly heard and understood what Myles Joyce said. As far as I recollect he stated in Irish that he was as innocent as the Priest on the Altar, and there was no greater injustice from the commencement to the end of the world.
>
> I consider everything in connection with the scaffold was in perfect order, and that every precaution was taken by the authorities here to mark the Execution as humane as possible. Any mishap that may have occurred I attribute entirely to the action of the prisoner.

One other witness, a 'warder in prison service' named Patrick Coen, also testified as to the dying words of Myles Joyce:

> I accompanied Myles Joyce to the execution I was within a yard of him on the scaffold, saw the bolt drawn. Joyce shifted his position from that in which Marwood had placed him. He was talking all the time and was very fidgety. Saw the hitch round back of his right hand when the drop was lowered. His head was on the one side before Marwood got the rope clear. He appeared to be dead….
>
> I understand Irish.
>
> Myles Joyce declared his innocence to the last. He said he was glad he was dying innocent and said he was as innocent as the child unborn, and repeated it over and over again. Did not hear him say he was as innocent as the priest on the altar, but he might have said it in the Hospital before I took charge of him.
>
> Heard Marwood, when he was taking the rope off the wrist, say 'Bother it.' I think.
>
> Saw the bodies after they were cut down. Myles Joyce's face was more swollen than that of the other two prisoners, and was more flushed in the face. Did not observe his hand at all. The Reporters were in the yard the time of the execution, one of them came up to the scaffold afterwards.
>
> They could not have heard Marwood make use of the expression attributed to him. Nor can I say that any other officer heard it.
>
> Did not hear Myles Joyce blow or breathe very hard after the drop fell, or make any motion. I had full opportunity of seeing him.

The remaining witnesses reiterated that the responsibility for 'any hitch that has taken place' should be attributed 'to the excitement of Myles Joyce' (Redington), while most refuted the suggestion that Marwood had made any expression or that any groans or sounds had issued from Myles Joyce. Mason, Governor of Galway Jail, deposed as follows:

Heard no expression from Marwood such as that attributed to him.

Did not hear him make any expression at all.

I cannot trace how such as report as that referred to as I have asked the Officers on the scaffold none of whom heard such an expression.

Did not see the bodies after the execution.

I heard no heavy breathing after the bolt was drawn.

In their concluding report, the leaders of the inquiry, Bourke and Croker-King, both took care to distance themselves from Rice's findings. Croker-King, in a detailed discrediting of evidence which he described as 'unsatisfactory and unreliable in every respect', emphasized Rice's inability to see the bodies after the withdrawal of the bolt and commented that the injuries noted 'even supposing that they to have occurred, could only have been detected, by a careful and minute post-mortem examination'. Terminating the formal inquiry, Spencer and Kaye together formulated carefully worded conclusions which contained some deliberate prevarication as to what had occurred, could have occurred and might occur in the future:

> His Excellency is satisfied from the reports and the evidence as to the completeness of the arrangements in respect of the scaffold and to the precautions taken by the Prison Authorities to make the execution as humane as possible. It appears however that after the bolt was drawn, and the bodies had fallen the rope by which Myles Joyce was suspended became entangled in his arm and wrist and that the Executioner felt it necessary to exert himself to put it in the proper position. It was not proved that this prevented immediate death in this case, but it is clear that a similar accident might lead to a painful protraction of life.[4]

II.

The holding of executions in public ceased as a practice in England and Ireland in 1868: under the Capital Punishment Amendment Act of that year, executions were henceforth confined to behind prison walls.[5] This was part of a series of measures designed to improve the 'humane' quality of the manner of execution but, as V.A.C. Gatrell notes in his definitive study *The Hanging Tree*, 'even after the introduction of the long drop in the 1880s, designed to dislocate the cervical vertebrae and rupture the spinal cord, consciousness was thought sometimes to be lost only after two minutes "or thereabouts"; the heart could beat for several minutes longer, while muscular convulsions could set in after a few minutes' pause' (1994: 46). As early as 1836, John Stuart Mill had drawn attention to the manner in which 'the spectacle, and even the very idea, of pain, is kept more and more out of sight of those classes who enjoy in their fullness the benefits of civilization' (1836: 12). 'All those necessary portions of the business of society which oblige any person to be the immediate agent or ocular witness of the infliction of pain', Mill continued, ' are delegated by common consent to peculiar and narrow classes: to the judge, the solider, the surgeon, the butcher, and the executioner' (1836: 12-13).

The closing lines of Gatrell's 600-page work provide a powerful rejoinder, however, to any readerly assumption that the history of execution closed in 1868 (1994: 610-1):

> Appeals to humanity encased their policy, but the state's retributive power continued to override imaginative compassion, and the horror continued behind prison walls for a century yet…When all is said and done, these final verdicts must bear as strongly on our sense of ourselves as they do on past times: that Victorians' civility only veneered the state's violence over; that in hiding penal violence they consulted their own feelings and not those of the punished; and that within the secret prison power was to be – and is – wielded more efficiently than ever it had been at Tyburn.

Such a consolidation of the 'secret prison' also meant the elimination of public audiences and consequently a drastic reduction in the number of ocular and aural witnesses. As Elaine Scarry observed in her classic 1985 study, 'Through his ability to project words and sounds out into his environment, a human being inhabits, humanizes, and makes his own a space much larger than that occupied by the body alone. This space, always contracted under repressive regimes, is in torture almost wholly eliminated' (1995: 49). Since the hanging of Myles Joyce, Patrick Joyce and Patrick Casey took place within the confines of Galway jail, the number of eyewitnesses – and sources for future accounts – was limited to the nine official representatives mentioned above, and also a group of some twelve reporters. Their reports, published in local newspapers such as the *Galway Express* and national newspapers including the *Freeman's Journal*, *Irish Times and Belfast Newsletter*, offer graphic witness to the circumstances of Myles's death and played a key role in shaping public reaction. The detail of these accounts, of which some examples will follow, is difficult to read and disturbing to analyse closely; as one acknowledges and seeks to advance beyond that hesitation, Gatrell's eloquent indictment of *squeamishness* – the most developed form of denial with respect to executions in the nineteenth century – is a useful caution (1994: 267):

> Empathy and sympathy are democratic emotions, extending their generous warmth to all. Squeamishness by contrast refuses to accept the pain which sympathetic engagement threatens. It denies material reality or others' emotions and blocks the echoes of these within the self. It is a colder, more distanced, more aesthetic emotion, defensively fastidious in the face of the rude and the unsightly.

III

In the opening chapter of *Body in Pain*, 'The Structure of Torture', Scarry remarks: 'What assists the conversion of absolute pain into the fiction of absolute power is an obsessive, self-conscious display of agency. On the simplest level, the agent displayed is the weapon' (1985: 27). In Gattrell's words, 'the scaffold is the site of physical pain' (1994: 45). On 16 December 1882, the *Belfast Newsletter* devoted a half-page of its broadsheet to coverage of the executions, including a detailed description of the constituent 'ghastly paraphernalia':

> The gallows had been created in the corner of a small quadrangle, almost in the centre of the prison, and when it is considered that the contingency of many more than three victims of the law being executed had been provided for, it will be readily understood that the scaffold was a most substantial structure…. It was about twenty feet long and eight feet wide, while the uprights about the platform were about 10 feet high, which, with the height of the platform added, made the height of the whole structure about 20 feet. Leading up to the platform was a wide flight of steps, with a hand rail on each side, the whole being built of timber that was quite new. On the cross-beam were fixed three stout iron clamps, having rings on their nether sides, through which the halters were fastened with three half hitches. Below was the fatal drop, which was so arranged that by simply touching a lever at his side, the executioner could secure the instantaneous and simultaneous precipitation of the three victims below the level of the platform, allowing for a fall of nine feet. All of this ghastly paraphernalia was ready for use when the three miserable culprits made their appearance in the yard.

According to the *Galway Express* (16 December 1882) the severity of the weather resulted in the 'number of spectators who on such occasions congregate in front of the gaol' being 'confined to a few stragglers, who altogether did not amount to more than sixty or seventy'. The reporter also noted the absence of 'Government pomp', with 'the exception of a half-dozen of the Royal Irish Constabulary who merely kept back the few idlers from the entrance gate of the prison.' The correspondent for the *Evening Telegraph* (15 December 1882) wrote: 'In vain I looked for a single relative of the wretches who had that morning risen never to sleep again, but not one of their kinsmen had come to learn the mournful tidings which the black flag conveyed.' Public interest among newspaper readers had been heightened in the preceding days by widely disseminated news of the reprieve of the five other accused and by the rarer publication of a letter written on behalf of Bridget Joyce, attesting to the innocence of her husband Myles (*Freeman's Journal*, 13 December) and in which she asserted that 'the five prisoners that pleaded guilty will declare that he is innocent'. Writing from Galway on the eve of the executions, the *Freeman's Journal* reporter relayed that 'it is said that the two men, Patrick Joyce and Patrick Casey, are positive that Myles Joyce had neither "hand, act, nor part" in the Maamtrasna murders' but, in the same report, also conveyed news of the Lord Lieutenant's refusal to issue a reprieve in his case (*Freeman's Journal*, 16 December 1882).

The first accounts of the executions appeared in the Friday evening newspapers: the *Dublin Evening Mail* and the Freeman's Journal sister paper the *Evening Telegraph*. The headlines of the second edition of the *Evening Telegraph* ran as follows: 'Execution of the Maamtrasna Murderers. Hitch on the Scaffold. Declaration of Innocence by Myles Joyce. Hopes of a Reprieve. The Last Hours of the Condemned.'[6] For its coverage, the *Dublin Evening Mail* reproduced a series of telegraph reports, containing two versions of Myles's final words. The first, 'from our reporter', relayed his repeated attempts to declare his innocence:

'Myles Joyce turning to the knot of spectators made a number of exclamations in the Irish language to the effect that he was entirely innocent of the crime…. Myles Joyce even then did not cease speaking and continued thus "I am going before my God, and I am as innocent as the child unborn. I neither raised hand or foot against the people. I had neither hand, act, or part in the murder"' (*Dublin Evening Mail*, 15 December 1882).

The second account, a press association telegram, provided a fuller rendition of the dying man's words, adding fuller dramatic effect through the use of indented text:

> When the others were beneath the drop, Pat Casey looked up and gave a pitiful moan. As soon as the caps had been adjusted on the heads of the unfortunate men, Myles Joyce protested his innocence speaking in Irish, a translation of which is as follows
>
> > 'I am going before my God. I was not there at all. I had not hand or part in it. The Lord forgive them that spoke against me. I am as innocent as the child in the cradle. It is a poor thing to take this life away on a stage, but I have my priest with me.'

The linguistic otherness of Myles's speech, and its inaccessibility to most of those present, was most fully acknowledged by the *Irish Times* reporter (16 December 1882), who included a translation similar to that circulated by the Press Association but deleted reference to those who had spoken 'against' the executed man:

> It was impossible to gather the meaning of much that fell from him, even by Irish-speaking persons who were present; but the following sentences have been interpreted for me by one who understands and speaks the language thoroughly, and who was close enough to the scaffold to hear the greater part of what he said. These sentences were:- 'I am going before my God. I was not there at all. I had no hand or part in it. I am as innocent as a child in the cradle. It is a poor thing to take this life away on a stage; but I have my priest with me.' The other culprits were silent and passive, and made no statement of any kind from the scaffold.

Earlier in the *Irish Times* article, brief physical portraits of the three men had included a remarkably unsympathetic description of Myles Joyce before the surprising 'natural dignity' of his speech' and gestures was ceded:

> The two first-named, both of them young men, were really favourable-looking specimens of the class to which they belonged. The third, Myles Joyce, some years the senior, who could not be actually be considered villainous, had, at the same time, a face and head that indicated a very low type of intelligence – low, retiring forehead, coarse mouth, and dull, expressionless eyes. After his sentence, Myles Joyce, with particular vehemence, in his native Irish, and with gesture, the natural dignity of which struck with surprise those who had formed opinions of him from his personal appearance, protested his innocence.

By far the most sympathetic contemporary account came from the local *Galway Express's* reporter who would appear to have had an understanding of Irish and was likely to have been the source for his fellow but monoglot English-speaking journalists. His account, published on Saturday 16 December, ran to almost three long columns and began by observing that 'the spectacle is one which will be long remembered by those who, in most instances, were compelled, owing to their positions, to witness it.' The article is distinguished in particular by the journalist's phonetic transcription in Irish of one of Myles's repeated phrases (italicized in the original), and by the incremental transcription of the condemned man's words; thus each of the grotesque physical acts within the scene is punctuated by a strong verbal protest rendered with particular narrative power.

> On arriving at the foot of the scaffold Myles Joyce looked up, and repeating in Irish '*Arrah thawmay glimmacht'* ('I am going') darted from the hands of the two warders, and rapidly ascended the steps leading to the platform, on mounting which he turned towards the reporters and prison officials, and in a loud and firm voice declared he was going towards his God, and had not been at the murder at all. He had neither hand, act or part in it, and was as innocent as the child in the cradle.

Following Marwood's putting on of the noose: 'No sooner did the condemned man feel the touch of the fatal cord than he again turned round, and speaking to Marwood said "Why should I die. I am not guilty."'

Then, following the putting on of the white cap:

> at the moment Myles Joyce again turned in the direction of the reporters, the white cap still over his face, and judging from the working of his body, his mind must have been terribly excited. He said 'I had neither hand or foot in the murder. I knew nothing about it, but God forgive them that swore my life away. It is a poor thing to die on a stage for what I never did.' This movement on his part again caused the knot to become displaced and necessitated Marwood to adjust it the third time, and it might be admitted on this occasion he used the poor fellow rather roughly.

And finally, after the third attempt,

> Having, as he believed, successfully completed his work for the third time, he proceeded to bind the man's legs, after which he moved toward the lever which regulated the fall of the trap, on which he placed his hand, Myles Joyce still continuing to attest his innocence. He was saying 'I never did it, and it is a poor case to die. God help my wife and her five orphans. I had no hand, act, or part in it, but I have my priest with me.' At this moment the bolt was drawn and the three men were launched into eternity. Myles Joyce was actually protesting against his being executed at the moment the drop fell.

A composite of these words was reproduced over 50 years later by another journalist who was present, the 23-year old Englishman Frederick James Higginbottom, then on an 11-month posting to Ireland on behalf of the English Press Assocation. In his 1934 memoir, *The Vivid Life: A Journalist's Memoir* (1934: 38) Higginbottom writes:

> I had only been in Ireland a fortnight when I was called upon, in the course of my duties as a special correspondent, to undergo a harrowing ordeal…. This triple execution was my baptism of blood in Ireland, and its horror was accentuated by an incident so dreadful that its details have never faded from my memory.[7]

To accompany his six-page recollection of the hanging, a special plate is included in the 1934 volume entitled *'Focla déigheanacha Mhaolmhuire Seoighighe air an g-croich'*, translated as 'Myles Joyce's Dying Words on the Scaffold'. Interestingly, the Irish-language words are reproduced in Irish script with an accompanying autograph translation, connoting an 'original' textual source, as in figure 3 below.

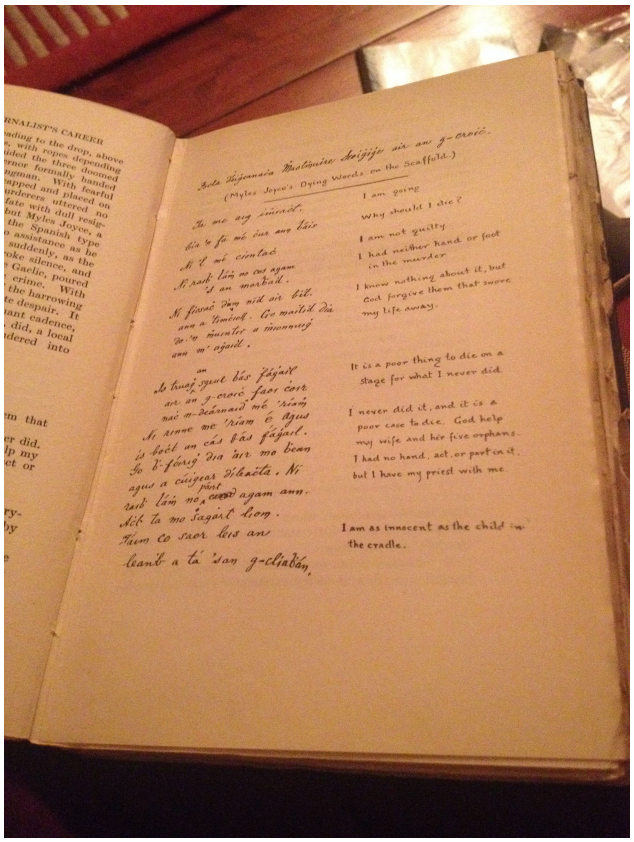


Figure 3: plate from Higginbottom, *A Vivid Life* (1934)

IV

According to the *Galway Express* of 16 December, 'After hanging an hour the bodies were cut down'. The formal inquest then began at 12 noon,

commencing with a formal viewing of the bodies lying in 'shell deal coffins, placed on the ground, within a few yards of the scaffold'. The Galway reporter recounted in graphic detail the appearance of the dead Myles Joyce and the sharp contrast presented with the 'placid' expression on the face of the dead Patrick Joyce: 'not so, however, was the case of Myles Joyce, for his features were much distorted, apparently with pain, swollen and blackened. His clothes were much blood-stained, and on his right forearm there was an extensive bruise, and the skin was torn.' The evidence of Dr Rice was given considerable space, including his deposition that 'Myles Joyce died from strangulation, no fracture of the neck bones having taken place at all. I consider death took place between one and two minutes after.' Later in the article it was reported that 'In reply to Mr O'Mara (a juror) the doctor stated that Myles Joyce must have been alive from two to three minutes after the trap fell.'

When asked as to what he would attribute the difference in the cause of death, Rice was reported as replying: 'Myles Joyce was addressing the reporters present, and naturally turned to where they were standing, and Marwood fixed the rope around his neck first… My impression is that it was Marwood's fault, because seeing that Myles Joyce was not so passive as the other two he should have fixed the noose around his neck last.' Although a number of jurors requested that Marwood be called, the Coroner declined to do so, deeming his evidence 'unnecessary'. One juror raised with Governor Mason the issue of Myles Joyce's protestation of innocence:

> Another Juror – It is remarked outside that Myles Joyce asserted his innocence, and the two other men also said he was innocent as well as the five others who have been respited. I want to know would the Governor give us any information on the subject, and is it true he did not send forward a representation of it to the Government.
>
> Captain Mason – That is a question I cannot answer.

The recorded verdict of the jury was that Patrick Joyce and Patrick Casey had 'died from fractures of the neck, the result of hanging; and that Myles Joyce died from strangulation', with the addition of a strong closing criticism:

> Before signing the verdict, Mr O'Mara said he had been desired to express on behalf of the other jurors their disapprobation of the manner in which the coroner had acted in refusing to examine Marwood. Marwood had not done his duty properly, and great blame attached to him in this matter.
>
> The Coroner having stated that he did not consider it necessary to examine Marwood, the matter dropped, and the proceedings then terminated.

A lengthy editorial in the *Freeman's Journal* also Saturday 16 December, i.e. the day following the execution, signaled not only the existence of prior public unease as to the absence of an reprieve but also its rapid compounding by the circumstances of Myles Joyce's death, the latter reaction shaped in part by the gruesome details included in this very issue:

> the impression prevails that his innocence was formally affirmed by a number of the men sentenced for the awful crime at Maamtrasna. At all events, he died with a declaration of innocence upon his lips. It has so

> happened that this man, Myles Joyce, met a crueller death than either of the other two executed. In the vehemence of his protestation on the scaffold he seems to have disarranged the awful preparations made by Marwood, who was obliged to strangle him by personal force in default of the ordinary vertebral dislocation. This incident adds a new element of horror to the tragic sequel to an awful massacre.

Part of the compelling power of the *Freeman's Journal* leader is its voicing of the hesitations and doubts of readers, intensified by longstanding popular belief in the truthfulness of a gallows speech : 'It would, of course, be improper to lay down that because a man goes to the scaffold declaring his innocence he is therefore innocent, and ought to be reprieved. Yet it is hard to conceive how a man religiously prepared for a death, from which he is assured there is no escape, would elect to die with a lie upon his lips.'

A particular fascination with the figure of Marwood as quasi-inept – but all the more ruthless – executioner is evident throughout the contemporary journalistic coverage. The reporter for the *Evening Telegraph* of 15 December noted with particular emphasis how 'Marwood got through the pinioning work as only Marwood can, adjusting the straps with an ease and alacrity that shows too plainly what a perfect artist he is in his horrible calling.' The *Belfast Newsletter* of the following day gave considerable space to Marwood's response, in the immediate aftermath of the controversial events:

> On being questioned afterwards as to the cause of the hitch which seemed to have occurred in the hanging of Myles Joyce, he replied that 'It was nothing. The rope had just caught the arm of the man as he fell, and he had had to disengage it with his foot.' The common hangman further remarked in reference to the vociferated statements of Myles Joyce that he 'would be bound he was abusing everybody,' although he admitted that he did not understand a word of what the wretched man had said. He hesitatingly said, when asked whether eight men could have been hanged on that scaffold, 'Yes, it would have been a close fit, but I could have done it,' seeming to take it as a reflection upon his professional skill that the possibility of such an accomplishment should have been doubted.

Writing in *Discipline and Punish* of the ceremony of public executions, Foucault observes (1977:51) that the scene of the execution 'also included, as a dramatic nucleus in its monotonous progress, a scene of confrontation: this was the immediate, direct action of the executioner on the body of the "patient"…. The executioner not only implemented the law, he also deployed the force; he was the agent of a violence applied, in order to master it, to the violence of the crime. Materially, physically, he was the adversary of this crime: an adversary who could show pity or ruthlessness.' Given that the execution itself was hidden from view, the extent of public interest and curiosity in Marwood, most especially in his angry reaction to the resisting Myles Joyce (which, by the time of James Joyce's version had become an account of his having 'angrily kicked the unhappy man in the head') demonstrates a continuing fascination with this merciless 'adversary'.

V

Writing of the significance of post-execution 'apocrypha', Foucault (1977: 66) further observes:

> In one sense, the broadsheet and the death song were the sequel to the trial; or rather they pursued that mechanism by which the public execution transferred the secret, written truth of the procedure to the body, gesture and speech of the criminal. Justice required these apocrypha in order to be grounded in truth. Its decisions were thus surrounded by all these posthumous 'proofs'.

Given the largely hidden location of the Maamtrasna hangings, such apocrypha were of even greater potential impact; however a surviving broadsheet and accompanying ballad, 'Lamentable Lines on the Execution of the Maamtrasna Murderers',[8] (figure 4) is significantly at odds with contemporary journalistic reportage and its posthumous 'proof' is of guilt rather than innocence. The broadsheet illustration, drawing from conventional images of executions, suggests an exterior, public scene with a large military presence, very different to the actual situation in the yard of Galway jail, although the ballad text provides a more accurate account: 'The officials of old Galway Jail a painful sight did view/The execution of three men upon the gallows high'. Emphasis is put on the lingering 'lasting sad disgrace' for the 'City of the tribes', with care taken to give primacy to the original crime, 'The crime is more lamented than the hanging of the three/And may we again such a tragedy in Ireland never see.' With respect to three executed men, reference to the 'unremitting care' of the clergy is a detail emphasized by many journalists at the time but no allusion is made to the protests of innocence by Myles Joyce or his 'bungled' execution:

> We hope their penitence and prayers to heaven has been sincere,
> And that they may find favour before the throne on high,
> Their sentence was a fearful one in manhood's prime to die.

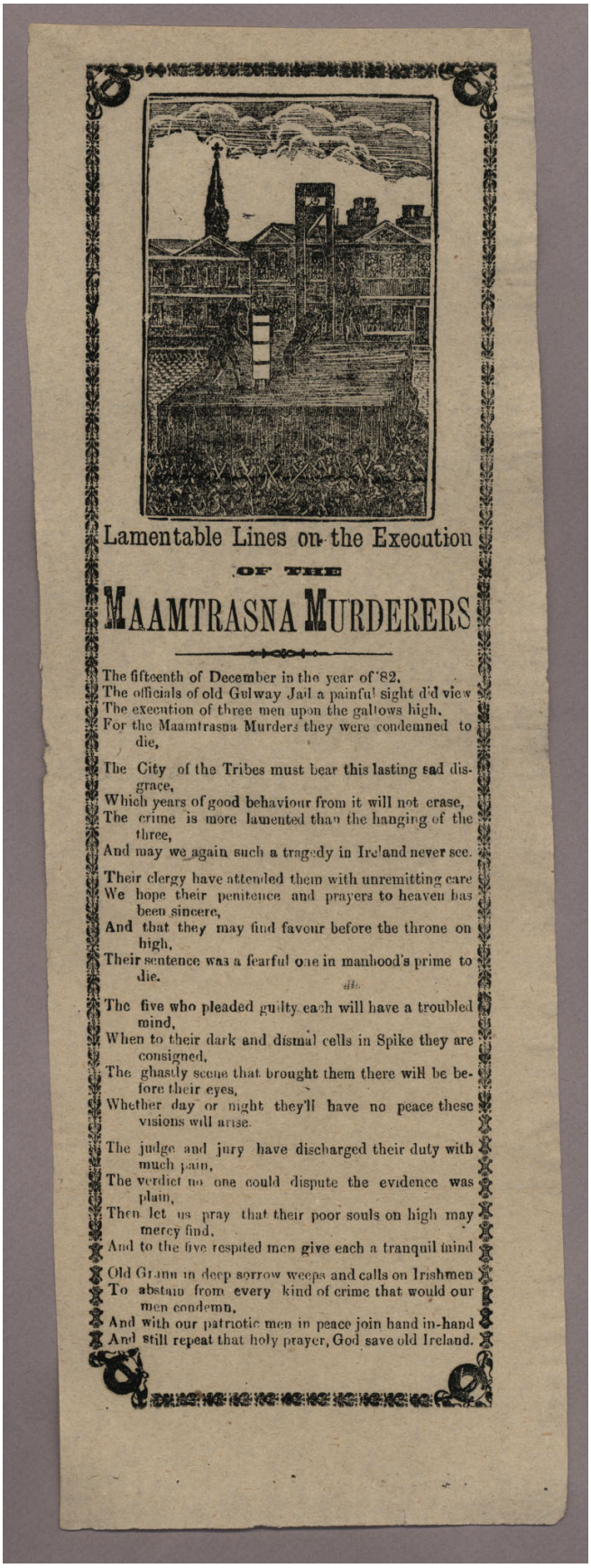
And, in a notable quietist gesture, given contemporary newspaper accounts of the prisoner memorials and sought reprieve for Myles Joyce, the Maamtrasna trials are presented as uncontentious: 'The judge and jury have discharged their duty with much pain /The verdict no one could dispute the evidence was plain.' In further contrast to most other contemporary reports, the most detailed individual attention is paid to the surviving five men, sentenced to life in prison:

> The five who pleaded guilty each will have a troubled mind,
> When to their dark and dismal cells in Spike they are consigned,
> The ghastly scene that brought them there will be before their eyes,
> Whether day or night they'll have no peace these visions will arise.

Somewhat ironically, the closing lines, in calling for an abstention from crime, deploy the Manchester Martyrs' cry 'God save Ireland' (first issued in the dock by

Fenian Edward O'Meagher Condon, in October 1867, and whose sentence was commuted on the eve of his execution):

> Old Grania in deep sorrow weeps and calls on Irishmen
> To abstain from every kind of crime that would our men condemn.
> And with our patriotic men in peace join hand-in-hand
> And still repeat that holy prayer, God save old Ireland.



Lamentable Lines on the Execution

OF THE

MAAMTRASNA MURDERERS

The fifteenth of December in the year of '82,
The officials of old Gulway Jail a painful sight did view
The execution of three men upon the gallows high,
For the Maamtrasna Murders they were condemned to die,

The City of the Tribes must bear this lasting sad disgrace,
Which years of good behaviour from it will not erase,
The crime is more lamented than the hanging of the three,
And may we again such a tragedy in Ireland never see.

Their clergy have attended them with unremitting care
We hope their penitence and prayers to heaven has been sincere,
And that they may find favour before the throne on high,
Their sentence was a fearful one in manhood's prime to die.

The five who pleaded guilty each will have a troubled mind,
When to their dark and dismal cells in Spike they are consigned,
The ghastly scene that brought them there will be before their eyes,
Whether day or night they'll have no peace these visions will arise.

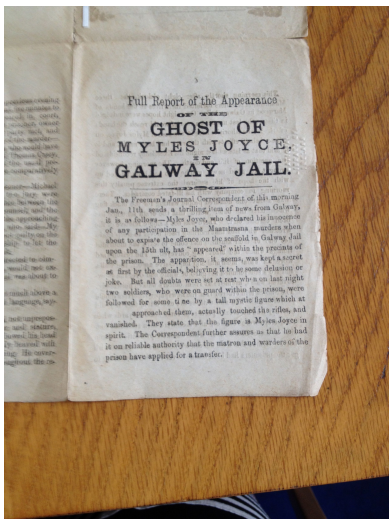
The judge and jury have discharged their duty with much pain,
The verdict no one could dispute the evidence was plain,
Then let us pray that their poor souls on high may mercy find,
And to the five respited men give each a tranquil mind

Old Grann in deep sorrow weeps and calls on Irishmen
To abstain from every kind of crime that would our men condemn,
And with our patriotic men in peace join hand in-hand
And still repeat that holy prayer, God save old Ireland.

figure 4: from National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin

A contemporary pamphlet, held in the National Library Dublin (figure 5) provides a strikingly different 'acocrypha'. Entitled 'Full report of the appearance of the ghost of Myles Joyce in Galway Jail', it comprises a broadsheet folded into an eight-page pamphlet and was printed by Nugent and company, High street, Dublin. The text derives almost verbatim from the *Freeman's Journal*[9], including the account of the execution in December and most compellingly the following account from 11th of January 1883:

> The Freeman's Journal Correspondent of this morning Jan 11th sends a thrilling item of news from Galway, it is as follows – Myles Joyce, who declared his innocence of any participation in the Maamtrasna murders when about to expiate the offence on the scaffold in Galway Jail upon the 15th ult, has 'appeared' within the precincts of the prison. The apparition, it seems, was kept a secret at first by the officials, believing it to be some delusion or joke. But all doubts were set at rest when on last night two soldiers, who were on guard within the prison, were followed for some time by a tall mystic figure which at length approached them, actually touched the rifles, and vanished. They state that the figure is Myles Joyce in spirit. The Correspondent further assures us that he had it on reliable authority that the matron and warders of the prison have applied for a transfer.



figures 5 and 6: title page and page 3 of pamphlet *Full Report of the Appearance of the Ghost of Myles Joyce in Galway Jail* [1883]

The continuing circulation of stories about Myles Joyce's ghost are attested to, many decades later, by the Joycean critic John Garvin in his 1976 work *James Joyce's Disunited Kingdom*. Garvin (1976: 164), writing of the 'Ireland at the Bar' article, surmises that Joyce 'must have obtained the bones of the material which

he used in this account from Nora Barnacle. Even the "bones" are inaccurately articulated and they are fleshed with the folklore growth of twenty years.' He then continues by relaying his own personal receipt of the 'folk tale' as a student in 1924 in Galway (1976: 164-5):

> Seventeen years after Joyce wrote his story (further touched up, no doubt, by his artistic pen) I was given a version of part of the folk tale when I was a student in University College, Galway. My landlady was a thin, elderly spinster, her naturally lively intelligence coloured by superstition and a penchant for the sensational. Of the execution of Myles Joyce, she had this to say:
>
> > The Governor of the jail he was a Captain Mason and the night before the hanging didn't his wife wake up in a sweat and she woke the Governor and let you, says she, have nothing to do, says she, with the death of that innocent man. From the awful mixings I had in my sleep, says she, I warn you agin having any hand, act or part in his execution, says she. But the Governor wouldn't budge and Myles Joyce was hung. With that Myles Joyce's widow stripped her stockings down from her knees and she knelt on the bare ground and she keened her man and she cursed the captain and she keened and she cursed so high and so hard that he met an idiot's death within in his quarters, shouting and roaring and bidding the dead man's ghost to keep away from him.'

Garvin goes on to note the parallel between his landlady's tale and the dream of Pilate's wife regarding John the Baptist (Matthew, 27) before observing: 'It seems that the folk version of Myles Joyce's end, as told to me in Galway in 1924 was known to Nora Barnacle twenty years previously, that she related it to Joyce, as her most memorable association with his name before she met him and that he used the praying crowd scene and the hangman's allegedly brutal *coup de grace* for his 1907 journalism. Inheritor then of this thread of folk-tale, Garvin in turn inaugurates a further line of Joycean enquiry as one of the first Joyce scholars to speculate on the influence of Myles Joyce's execution on the later *Finnegans Wake* (1976: 165-6, 168-9) suggesting that Joyce 'seems to have known at least the first phrase of his namesake's last words, tá mé ag imtheacht [*sic*] (I'm going), and to have appropriated it (with variations) as a motif of departure at successive changes of scene in *Finnegans Wake*.'

In political terms, the most influential indictment of the Maamtrasna trials was the 1884 pamphlet published by M.P. Tim Harrington (friend of John Stanislaus Joyce) and which delivered an impeachment of the trials of two years before, in resounding terms. Over a hundred years the murders, trial, execution and aftermath were the subject of Jarlath Waldron's bestselling *Maamtrasna: the Murders and the Mystery*. On the back cover of Waldron's work, Myles Joyce's 'cry from the scaffold' is reproduced in Irish and English: 'Níl mé ciontach. Ní raibh lámh ná cos agam sa marú…. Táim chomh neamhchiontach leis an leanbh atá sa gcliabhán./I am not guilty. I had neither hand nor foot in the killing…. I am as innocent as the child in the cradle.' Waldron's treatment of the execution and its

aftermath includes the passing on of a local tradition that Bridget Joyce 'had given birth to a baby girl the day her husband was executed and that as soon as she was able to, she made her way to Galway. She positioned herself at the western end of the "Salmon Weir" bridge, outside the main gate of the Jail, and there, it is said, she spent nine days keening her husband' (1992: 155).

As recently as 2013, in his social history of the British liberal state, *The State of Freedom* historian Patrick Joyce deploys the figure of Myles Joyce – via James Joyce and Jarlath Waldron – as 'a symbol of the reality of British justice in Ireland and of the organized violence of the state generally'. 'The cradle of the British state engendered the grave of Myles Joyce' writes Joyce, and he continues later to observe that 'Myles Joyce's was a culture the difference of which is starkly indicated in the figure of his grieving wife, "keening" outside Galway Gaol for nine days after his execution' (2013: 305-6). This is one of many recent instances of allusion to the Maamtrasna murders and consequent executions, and their incorporation into a broader narrative of the history of the British state, or of the shift from an Irish-speaking to an English-speaking linguistic majority, or of the rapid change in culture in late nineteenth-century Ireland. It need not dilute the potency and poignancy of the fate of Myles Joyce to seek to differentiate folklore, journalistic witness, media report and state-sponsored enquiry from within the diverse mediations and re-mediations of his dying words and the grotesque spectacle of his execution.

References

Chief Secretary Papers CSORP 1883/189, National Archives.

Dunlop, Andrew. (1911) *Fifty Years of Irish Journalism*. London and Dublin: Simpkin and Marshall and Hanna and Neale.

Foucault, Michel. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translation of *Surveiller et punir* 1975. London: Penguin.

Full Report of the Appearance of the Ghost of Myles Joyce in Galway Jail [pamphlet] [1883] Dublin: Nugent.

Gattrell, V.A.C. (1994) *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770-1868*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Garvin, John. (1976) *James Joyce's Disunited Kingdom and the Irish Dimension*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

Harrington, Tim. (1884) *The Maamtrasna Massacre: Impeachment of the Trials*. Dublin: Nation Office.

Higginbottom, Frederick J. (1934) *The Vivid Life: A Journalist's Career*. London: Simpkin Marshall.

Joyce, James. (2000) *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing*. Edited with an Introduction by Kevin Barry. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Joyce, Patrick. (2013) *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

'Lamentable Lines on the Execution of the Maamtrasna Murders', broadsheet ballad, National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin.

Mill, John Stuart. (1836) 'Civilisation: Signs of the Times', *London and Westminister Review* XXV: 1-28.

Scarry, Elaine. (1985) *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Waldron, Jarlath. (1992) *Maamtrasna: The Murders and the Mystery*. Dublin: Edmund Burke.

Wolf, Nicholas. (2014) *An Irish-Speaking Island: State, Religion and the Linguistic Landscape in Ireland, 1770-1870*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Notes

[1] Contemporary newspaper accounts describe Myles Joyce as a man of 40 years or so.

[2] For information on this campaign, see http://davidalton.net/2011/11/01/maamtrasna-murders-and-the-execution-of-an-innocent-man/ (Accessed 15 March 2015)

[3] This and subsequent references to the state enquiry into the circumstances of the execution of Myles Joyce are taken from Chief Secretary Papers CSORP 1883/189, National Archives file.

[4] The last third of this passage had originally read: 'the Executioner had considerable difficulty in getting it again placed into proper position. If he had not succeeded in doing so without delay it is possible that a serious failure in carrying out the execution might have occurred.' The manuscript shows that this text was struck out by Spenser and reworded by him from 'felt it necessary . . . .

[5] In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault notes that, in comparative international terms, 'England was one of the countries most loath to see the disappearance of the public execution' (1977: 14). The last fully public hanging conducted in England was that of Fenian Michael Barrett at Newgate in 1868. For some recorded uses of Irish on the executioner's platform, see Wolf (2014: 52-3). .

[6] The special correspondent for the Freeman's Journal was Andrew Dunlop who attended the execution and provided a very brief account of the event in his 1911

memoir *Fifty Years of Irish Journalism* (207-10). According to Dunlop, stories of the appearance and reappearance of the ghost of Myles Joyce were 'assiduously circulated by the Nationalist Press' (208). In his memoir Dunlop was more equivocal about Joyce's innocence, arguing that the statement by the two other executed men 'implying that Joyce was innocent', 'probably only meant that he was not one of the actual perpetrators of the crime' (207-208)

[7] Higginbottom (1859-1943) was later a journalist with the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1900-1919) where he briefly served as editor (1909-1912), and journalist with the *Daily Chronicle* (1919-1930).

[8] A copy of this broadsheet is held in the National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin, and is believed to be a contemporary ballad. For a digital image of another copy, held at Notre Dame library, see http://rarebooks.library.nd.edu/collections/ead_xml/images/BPP_1001/BPP_1001-004-F2.jpg (accessed 20 March 2015).

[9] See *Freeman's Journal*, 11 January 1883, p. 3. In the newspaper article, 'tall mystic figure' is placed in quotation marks and the line reads 'they state that the the figure is Myles Joyce in the spirit'. A later article in the Freeman's Journal (17 August 1885), describing the 'Arklow Bazaar', refers to 'a very telescopic arrangement', entitled 'The Mystery of Dublin Castle', which 'came in for a good deal of attention': 'It showed when at proper focus the ghost of Myles Joyce as seen by Earl Spencer in a dream.'