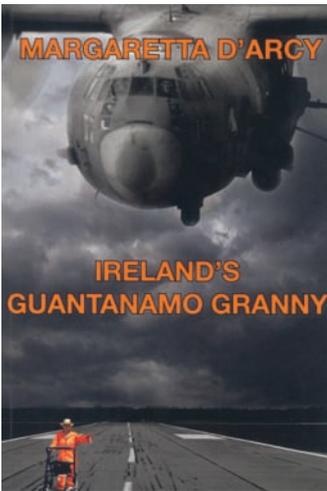


Ireland's Guantanamo Granny

Margaretta D'Arcy



On Easter Sunday, 2016, the centenary of Ireland's Easter Rising and its Proclamation of Independence from British rule, a US Navy C-130T Hercules aircraft was under Irish guard at Shannon Airport. Not that it had been detained by the Irish authorities for compromising Irish neutrality in international relations. Rather, it was the latest in a long line of US military flights, carrying cargoes unknown, stopping over en route to war and rendition hotspots in the Middle East and elsewhere. The Irish authorities were protecting the aircraft from inspection by Irish citizens such as Margaretta D'Arcy and her colleagues in Shannonwatch, who have long campaigned to highlight Ireland's illegal collusion in conflicts worldwide. Following a short walk on the runway at Shannon, Margaretta, age 82 years, was eventually sent to Limerick Jail in January 2014. She recounts her experience there in this excerpt from Ireland's Guantanamo Granny, her recently published account of unfinished business on Ireland's Atlantic coast (Women's Pirate Press, ISBN 9780952820611).

Limerick Jail

'The Irish prison governor has no control over the number of prisoners being committed to jail, no control over the numbers of prisoners accommodated in his prison any day or night, no power to transfer or release prisoners out of his prison, no power to refuse to take prisoners ... no control over the number of staff assigned to his prison, no control over the staff assigned to search prisoners and visitors.'

John Lonergan, The Governor

The Irish Prison Board has a centralised bureaucratic approach to management. It has no authority. All authority rests with the Minister of Justice Dysfunction.

When I arrive at the office to the women's section of Limerick Jail, the elderly, grey-haired prison officer says: 'You'll be out in a couple of hours, just sign the bond and you're out'. 'Will it have Shannon on it?' I ask. 'Oh no, it's just the general one you sign at the garda station to keep the law.' 'That would be no problem for me,' I say. 'I normally keep the law, going on the runway was keeping the law.' 'Just wait and it will be sorted out,' she says. My heart lifts. I can catch the bus home. I have my travel pass. I'll be home in a couple of hours.

I'm in a small waiting room for children visiting their mothers, toys in one corner. 'Can I leave the door open so I can see out?' I ask. I see the women coming in to visit, babies in their arms, staff arriving, a building site in the middle for a new men's wing. In half an hour the prison officer returns. The Department says no. 'Is that Shatter?' I ask. It is very curious that at no time am I shown the bond paper. As I go to be processed in the office a sheepish group of well-dressed people and a priest pass me by, they must be the prison visitors. They pretend not to notice me or the other woman sitting there. A young prison officer comes through the door and leads me away into the bowels of the jail. We wind our way through a labyrinth of stairs and corridors, eventually arriving at the reception area.

I am brought into the receiving office. There is another woman there, middle-aged. We sit beside each other. I think she must be a prison officer but no, she is being processed for not paying a TV licence fee. She has five children, her son lives with her. She was exempted from the fee because she was disabled but now her son is living with her she has to pay. I never see her again and wonder if she got temporary release.

Wilfred Scawen Blunt noted in 1888 while serving time as a political prisoner in Galway Jail: 'There had been a pleasant feeling between prisoners and wardens due to the fact that they were much of the same class, peasants born, with the same natural ideas, virtues, vices and weaknesses.' It feels pretty much the same today.

My watch is taken along with the rest of my few belongings: phone, purse, travel card. From now on they own my time. There are no clocks in the jail so we never know the time but rely on the prison officers' word when we are locked up or let out. We are allowed one phone call of six minutes every day, one visit a week. We have to call officers by their surname.

Miss D studied at university. When she left she took temporary work as

a prison officer and has stayed ever since – she needs the money. Her advice to me is: ‘Don’t believe everything you hear from a prisoner and keep your cell locked when you leave’. Otherwise it is pretty much like being in a boarding school. When asked the age of the prisoners, to my surprise she says they are on average about 40. She lets slip that they have the largest illegal cannabis house-grower in Ireland awaiting trial, she is Vietnamese.

Limerick was built as a high security jail. It was never meant to be a women’s jail so the women are shunted off to a corner far from the main building, more like a dungeon with dark narrow corridors. I am on the ground floor. There are four cells, then a cell for the prison officers. It’s all cooped up. Nothing like the grandeur of Armagh or even the open spaces in Holloway, not even India was so cramped.

My cell is a narrow space with the window blocked out leaving a tiny dial in the stone wall, which I can open to get some air through the grids. Wood broken down from what looks like packing cases is nailed together for a cupboard which also serves as a table. A steel barrier separates the wash basin and the toilet (also steel, no lid) from the bed and eating place. There are two bunk beds, mine is the bottom one. There is a small TV (no remote), a kettle and a radio.

Learning the Ropes

I am not given any details about the routine of prison life. ‘You’ll catch on,’ I’m told. I sit there. No bedding. I think that the reason for giving no information is that I will need to rely on the other prisoners to show me the ropes. You earn brownie points for integrating with one’s cellmates: it is one of the criteria for early release. Going on courses also earns brownie points. You get paid €1.75 a day, more if you are serving longer than a month, extra for working, that is sweeping and cleaning the corridors, serving food, taking the laundry to the washing machine.

I am locked in. After a while the door opens. Bedding, clean clothes, tracksuit, t-shirt, runners, toothbrush, soap, plastic plate, and a plastic knife and fork are brought in by a prisoner who tells me it’s teatime. I join the queue. Someone helps me up the narrow stairs as I need to use a stick. There are cells upstairs. I pass them and go through a door where I see women with trays. We line up. On coming in, I said I was vegetarian. A cardboard plate is given to me with a salad, some bread, two tabs of butter and a carton of milk. There is a basket full of tea bags, another of sugar sachets and one with jam and marmalade. A row of officers flank the exit. A young woman is serving: she has a black eye. No one speaks. The line

moves along. A woman asks if I need help to go down the stairs. I manage alone.

I am locked up. After a while the door is unlocked again. I go out into a narrow yard flanked by the grey prison walls, with a couple of picnic tables and a small shelter. It is cold. Fortunately, before I left the house I grabbed a warm coat and a woolly cap – a woman says I'm lucky to be able to wear a cap. Hoodies are forbidden. It seems most of the 28 or so women prisoners are here. They surround me and seem to know my business. They think I'm mad not to have signed the bond. They feel quite aggrieved as if I am demeaning them by having a choice; they didn't have a choice. For a moment I think there might be a mini riot and they will go to the Governor and ask for my removal as not being suitable to be with them. Who was I to try and get rid of the Americans – they are needed in case of war. I am surrounded.

Who has told them? Prison officers are not supposed to tell prisoners about other prisoners. I am a bit deaf and I can't catch what anyone is saying. The sound bounces off the concrete walls. Were they put up to it so their hostilities would force me to sign the bond? One of them to placate me says 'You should sign the bond and you can always break it'. I don't say anything except that she has a right to her opinion. It is freezing. The women huddle together like birds, to keep warm. After a bit we are told we can go inside to the association room, a room with a large TV, a table, a few chairs. The women sit on the table. Because there are not enough chairs I crouch on the floor. My problem is I can't hear what they are saying. They speak very fast with various Munster accents and the sing-song sound of Cork and the surrounding areas. There are fewer women here, only about ten. I don't understand the procedure but do catch on later. I find out that you don't have to spend all your allocated time outside: you can go back to your cell and be locked in if you want. So ends my first night.

In the morning the routine becomes clearer. I visit the Governor who says I can be free if I sign the bond or I can appeal if I want to. I get the feeling that he is embarrassed by my being there. I am supposed to have a hospital appointment to check my cancer. Leaving jail to go to hospital could attract the press. Prison governors are terrified of the press. I could go to Mountjoy Prison's Dóchas Centre in Dublin, but as my case in Ennis is still ongoing, it is more convenient to stay in Limerick so I can discuss my case with Ed Horgan, John Lannon and Zoe Lawlor who all live in Limerick.

On the question of the appeal he has a point. I am out on bail for my

second charge, it would have been more sensible to have charged me with both offences after the second trial. The rules concerning the release of prisoners have changed. Before it was the governor who had authority, now it is the prison service.

Outside, Niall [Farrell, peace activist], by not going to jail, is able to work with Ed on publicising my imprisonment and flagging up my cancer. The big C terrifies everyone who doesn't understand the different types of cancer. But maybe I am near death's door, I don't know what the hospital says. Another supporter says I have Parkinson's disease because of my tremor. But in fact my tremor is caused by an old injury from the RUC in Belfast when they gave me a savage triple somersault, putting pressure on my neck. I know Shatter is getting deep into a mess in the Dáil and feel perhaps the Governor supports my stance.

I am told I am allowed two visits a week to prepare my case. Then onto another little cubbyhole, the officers have offices the size of rabbit hutches. I say that I didn't think I could remain in the cold for two hours, yes I need open air, but going round in circles for two hours is too long. The officer agrees and says I can come in when I want. Next the psychiatrist. A civilised man. He says Limerick is wrong for women as it was built and caters for men. He thinks of himself still as a radical and supports my stance. He tells me to keep a diary of everything that was going on.

The prison doctor has been there for 28 years and looks burnt-out. I later hear horrendous stories of the medical treatment women had received. I have a short interview with him where I speak about my cancer and my hospital appointment due in the middle of January. I say I do not want to be treated in Limerick as they would not know anything of my case.

The male prisoners cook and deliver the food to us. At dinner time when I am handed salad on the cardboard plate there is a message in biro written under it: 'Fair Play to you Missus Airport Woman!'

The organisation of my phone calls takes place in another little cubbyhole. The middle-aged officer seems to love sitting there, fascinated by the telephone calls to all over the world. I have my list. He phones each number to see if they will accept my call. If the phone is not answered it is taken off the list. The phone bills must be huge.

Rose

That afternoon my guardian angel peers over the slit in the door. Rose Lynch, Republican prisoner serving 12 and a half years, the only political prisoner here. She is a leading member of the Real IRA, who don't accept the Good Friday agreement and carry on the armed struggle. She shot a

man called Patrick Darcy and her case received the tabloid treatment. It was all entangled with a feud in Dublin over the killing of one of the leaders of the Real IRA. There was some doubt if she in fact had been the gunman or she was taking the rap for others.

She's smiling. Rose always smiles. She's in her fifties, with a round angelic face and a soft Limerick accent. She runs the library, which is only a cupboard in the association room with a few shelves of books. She tells me there is going to be a demo outside the jail in support of me. She had been in the Dóchas Centre when Maura Harrington and Izzy Ní Ghraidm from the Rosspoint campaign were there. She says I should get permission from the Governor to visit her in her cell. I think that if she knows Irish she could help with the translation of Gabriel Rosenstock's Guantanamo poems from Irish into English.

Her cell is upstairs in the last part of the old jail, a single cell. The walls are completely covered with Republic pictures of demos, her father, her children and grandchildren. It is a cosy home for her. She is amazing. She organises the women's section and has brought in Red Cross classes. She tells me about what courses I can do and about the gym and music classes. She prefers Limerick because of the rigid timetables for locking in and out.

She is careful not to mix too much with the others. She rarely goes out to the yard and will only make brief appearances in the association room, for fear of being attacked. Many of the other prisoners also do not mix, preferring to stay in their cells only leaving for food or if they are going to a course.

Rose trained and practised as a community worker in Belfast. She has been a Republican since she was four. On her cell wall is a picture of a merry little blond girl waving a flag. She has a small coterie of women embroidering Republican handkerchiefs. We avoid talking politics.

She has no self-pity and knuckles under to serve her sentence. It could have been shortened if she had renounced the armed struggle and her role in the shooting. She had been studying community relations in the University of Cork; here she is taking an Open University degree in social management of traffic but has no internet to help her. She has a very good tutor and passed all her exams, the tabloids got hold of that and the headlines were dismissive of her. The tabloid papers do a lot of damage to prisoners. They are avidly read inside, particularly the local papers and headlines can create tension.

Rose keeps in touch with one of her daughters who is expecting a baby at any moment. Her daughter is pretty strong and is doing a five kilometre run every day to bring on the baby. Rose hopes the Governor will let her

out to see the baby in hospital, even if she is handcuffed.

One day Rose comes into the association room with a tennis ball, throws it to one of the women and says: 'We never say anything nice about each other. Why don't you throw it to someone you like while saying why you like them?' The women quickly take to the game. I notice that a rather broody overweight woman is always with a really beautiful younger woman. She throws the ball to her saying 'I really like you', the younger woman blushes. I realise that Rose is right. The women here never express themselves as to why they like each other. Rose slips away after one round of the game.

I suggest to Rose that International Women's Day should be celebrated. I go to the Governor, who agrees. Rose swings into action and devises a programme for a week's celebrations. There will be poetry from Galway poet and playwright Rita Ann Higgins who gives poetry classes to the men, a karaoke evening, a quiz, a talent concert, a football match between the women and the prison officers and a lecture on drugs.

Rose unfortunately doesn't speak Gaelic, so I begin the translation of a Guantanamo poem by Shaker Aamer using a dictionary.

Fighting for the sake of peace

Peace they say

Spirit of peace

What kind of peace?

Seems they all talk, argue

All at loggerheads.

What kind of peace do they want?

What planning?

What causes the slaughter?

What is the reason?

It is not difficult to murder,

Arguments lead to slaughter.

They quarrel about peace.

www.shannonwatch.org