





## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

All of the text used in the performance of “Prison Notebooks” is taken directly from writings by Dorothy Macardle, with the exception of a short Interlude which draws from commentary by other persons. The main body of the drama (Acts 1 – 4) is taken verbatim from three diaries, out of a total of six kept by Dorothy Macardle during her six-month incarceration at the time of the Irish Civil War. Only three notebooks survived. The other three are lost, most probably among a set of papers burned by her brother Donald, shortly after her death in 1958.

The surviving diaries are stored at the UCD Archive. While quotes have been included previously in essays and books, most notably by historian Leeann Lane in her biography of Dorothy Macardle (UCD Press: 2019), the journals themselves, have never been published. The handwritten originals were transcribed in full and committed to type for the first time in 2018-19 by Sharon McArdle, as part of the research towards this drama.

In 2018, while transcription was still in progress, Sharon and I began a process of exploring Dorothy’s life and milieu through dialogues and workshop improvisation, referring not only to the diary texts but montages of images and other conceptual materials developed by Sharon. Following these shared explorations, I proceeded to write up certain diary entries as dialogue and movement scenes, and we presented a selection of these as experimental work-in-progress in Dundalk in December 2019.

From the outset, it was helpful that Dorothy’s journaling style included character evocations of her fellow prisoners and gaolers, as well as reflections on her evolving political philosophy. What struck us particularly, however, was the extraordinary private revelations of her fears, her dreams and uncanny experiences. This led us to explore soundscapes and movement with choreographer Ella Clarke and singer Sophie Coyle, referring occasionally to dance and film of the 1920s as well as Dorothy’s own later Gothic novels and broadcast scripts.

As we moved to complete a drama relying exclusively on her own words, we were faced with the dilemma of what to do when Dorothy’s gaol diaries suddenly ran out. The surviving journals cover the period November to March only. There is no personal record of her final months of imprisonment. Helpfully, a vivid account exists in her own hand, of her forcible transfer on April 30th 1923 from Kilmainham to the North Dublin Union. An article she wrote was smuggled out and appeared in the Éire newspaper. Entitled “The Kilmainham Tortures” it is regarded by historians as a propagandist intervention. Accounts by other protagonists have somewhat differing emphases. We chose, nonetheless, to include this document (slightly abridged) as the final act of our drama.

We also know from secondary sources that Dorothy embarked on a hunger strike in April 1923, and that she suffered ill health as a consequence. While some of her contemporaries spoke of it in later years, no surviving first-hand account by Dorothy exists of her time on hunger strike. This undoubtedly traumatic episode is therefore not captured in our drama. Instead, a short Interlude, “Trauma”, is presented that includes verbatim texts (including some actual archive recordings) of persons commenting upon the span of Dorothy’s later life and death. In her prison diaries and her later novels, Dorothy Macardle wrote about – and appears to have been possessed of – clairvoyant sensibilities and uncanny powers of foresight. A visionary, she sensed and dreamed both political and personal trends and events before they occurred.

**Declan Gorman : 2022**

### LIST OF SOURCES

**PROLOGUE: “Memory”:** from “The Whirligig of Time”, a radio memoir written and spoken by Dorothy Macardle, broadcast by Radio Eireann in 1956

**ACTS 1 – 4: Diaries of Mountjoy and Kilmainham:** from prison journals kept by Dorothy Macardle in 1922 – 23

**INTERLUDE: “Trauma”:** Various – including broadcasts, print statements and eulogies from Éamon De Valera; BBC World Service; Radio Éireann; Lennox Robinson (former Abbey Theatre Manager) and Paramount Pictures

**ACT 5: The Kilmainham Tortures:** Article by Dorothy Macardle smuggled out of gaol and published in Éire newspaper, May 1923.

**EPILOGUE: “Release”:** One-line dialogue: no primary source referred to.

## PERFORMANCE AND CONTEXT

This performance of “*Prison Notebooks*” is part of a wider set of artistic and documentary undertakings by Sharon McArdle and Declan Gorman along with diverse other artists, collaborating under a loose banner, “Dorothy Macardle Archive and Performance Project” (DMAPP).

“*Prison Notebooks: The Making of a Performance*”, a radio documentary tracing the five-year process of archive research, transcription and workshop development towards this production will be broadcast by Lyric FM on 6th November 2022. A short film, as yet untitled, is currently in development with Film-Artist in Residence at An Táin, Colm Mullen, and will be shown in 2023.

The work of DMAPP is in turn part of a wider movement to reclaim memory and focus attention on the contribution of women to the events that led to and flowed from the formation of the Irish State. As the Decade of Centenaries draws to a close in 2023, there is a belated acknowledgement of diversities long overlooked, with more and more research and documentation providing hitherto unseen detail of the role and heroism of women.

The loss of memory and visibility in the matter of women’s history reflects not only the common misplacing of non-official records and disregard for oral tradition; it has often been deliberate. A recurring horror in the life and aftermath of Dorothy Macardle is the burning, both accidental and deliberate, of her works. Her papers were maliciously incinerated on the street by Free State soldiers after her arrest in 1922; her typewriter was mangled in a German bombing raid in London in the 1940s; her playscripts were rescued, part-damaged, from the great Abbey Theatre fire of 1951. Upon her death, many of her remaining papers were burned by her brother, Donald.

Historians, archivists and curators have led the recent excavation of women’s history in Ireland. Artists have also played a central role. Live performance can “bring history to life”, not by dutiful enactment but in acts of reimagining and empathy. Dorothy Macardle’s gaol diaries are particularly precious in this regard. She scribbled by night as well as day in conditions of poor light and sensory deprivation, recording her own personal experience of detention, hunger strikes and beatings, while also documenting the resilience, political intelligence and humour of her fellow female detainees. Not only do her diaries capture the daily life and politics of the gaols in which she was held, they provide extraordinary insights into the imagination and troubled mind of a woman who would later rise to prominence as a writer of Gothic Horror fiction and chronicler of the plight of orphaned and separated children in Post Holocaust Europe.

In devising a drama based on Dorothy’s diaries, we were required to make difficult choices based ultimately on the natural duration of a performance. Those who attended our work in progress event in 2019 may recall a particularly shocking scene where Dorothy and her fellow detainees overhear the summary execution by firing squad of four male prisoners, friends of theirs, in the yard at Mountjoy. In the final months of development, we dropped this sequence and many others. There is so much of rich history, traumatic witnessing and also remarkable political insight in the diaries that we simply could not include in a 90-minute performance. It is hoped in due course that the diaries may be published in full and we recommend them as vital reading.

Furthermore, as artists undertaking to bring Dorothy’s inner thoughts to a wider public, we were acutely aware of certain ethical considerations. While some of her journaling reads as though part-intended for some future readership, the diaries are also peppered with intimate confessions of doubt and deeply personal accounts of dreams with which she is fascinated. We have shared some of these one hundred years on with due care, and have been helped in this process by conversations with archivists and academics who grapple regularly with such considerations when making private material available for study and display.

In making our editorial choices we held on to one core guideline. Éamon De Valera in his eulogy declared that “Dorothy Macardle was a lover of Truth”. We were concerned that what we would show should reflect Dorothy’s truth. We use only her own words across 99% of the drama. The perspective is Dorothy’s own: her voice, her words, her dreams, her emotions as expressed in her own writerly style. We found it helpful to read secondary sources, such as retrospective statements by fellow detainees to the Bureau of Military History, a marvellous personal essay written in the late ’20s by the lively Sighle Humphreys and of course volumes of fine histories by academic scholars. But we used these only as context. It was our hope that this should not be a third party commentary but an empathetic channelling of the spirit of Dorothy Macardle herself. In this we hope to offer fresh insights into Irish history, not only of macro politics but into the evolving consciousness of Irish women and of self, as written down by a young artist encaged and seeking freedom.