



A TREATMENT OF THE RADIO DOCUMENTARY

DMAPP

“**Dorothy Macardle’s *Prison Notebooks*** is a 43-minute radio documentary which follows theatre artists Sharon McArdle and Declan Gorman on their quest to investigate the prison experiences of Irish revolutionary and literary artist Dorothy Macardle, through her own personal jail diaries.

A broadcaster, historian, author and Hollywood screenwriter, Macardle was a woman of immense importance and achievement in the first half of the twentieth century, in Ireland and overseas, and yet, unlike many of her male contemporaries in public life, she is not a household name. Sharon McArdle is an actor and academic researcher, from Dundalk, the town of Dorothy's birth and upbringing. Along with playwright Declan Gorman, Sharon has embarked on a journey through rare and seldom accessed archive materials to discover just who was this exceptional woman. She has uncovered hitherto unpublished materials at, among others, the UCD James Joyce library; the National Archives; the Abbey Theatre, and Alexandra College, Dublin where Dorothy once taught, all of which give insights in Dorothy's own words and those of her peers into her thinking and achievements. One particular set of these papers, a series of diaries kept in secret by Macardle during her time in prison in 1922 and 1923 have now become the basis of a one-woman theatrical performance which Sharon has been developing in collaboration with Declan.

It is *this* story, the quest of these two living artists to gain an understanding of Dorothy Macardle and bring it to the public in a live, site-specific theatre performance at Kilmainham Gaol, which is the core of our proposed radio documentary: Who was Dorothy Macardle? What is already known about her? What do her prison diaries reveal about her, her fellow female rebels and detainees, and the politics of the Irish Civil War? How do the contemporary artists deal with fragile matters of memory, legacy and private testimony? How do we then forge the lyrical and mundane intimacies of a secret diary into a vivid public event which can allow this generation to appreciate the heroism of women so often brushed out of the narrative of Irish history?

This documentary therefore falls under the "Arts and Culture" category. It touches upon "aspects of Irish heritage and experience which have not been previously recorded". It reflects diversities long overlooked in the founding narrative of the Irish State – documenting in intimate detail not only the role and heroism of women generally but the complexity of Macardle's own heritage (her mother was an English Unionist; she taught at Alexandra – "a microcosm of Anglo-Irish ascendancy"). It also hints at the internationalism of this pioneering Irish woman, noting that Dorothy went on to broadcast for BBC, write horror for Hollywood and travel Europe extensively where she documented the plight of Post War children affected by the Holocaust.

Some of the archives visited by the artists, namely the *National Archive* not only hold the most important documentary evidence relating to the struggle for Irish Independence and the Civil War, but they hold the memory of the State. We as artists will be taking inspiration from the collections and the historical sites where they are housed to explore the power of the arts as a form of creative expression to not only interrogate and understand history but to re-interpret it. And we do this with a view to bringing it into the public domain in new and imaginative ways in the hope that it will encourage reflection and debate over the remaining few years of the Decade of centenaries. We are particularly interested in illuminating the life and legacy of Dorothy Macardle, through responding to her Civil War gaol journals, penned 100 years ago (1922-1923) and we wish to commemorate her and all the women who contributed to the events that occurred during this period as we attempt to reclaim their voices after a century of silence.

So, who was Dorothy Macardle? A playwright, historian, Gothic novelist, Hollywood screenwriter and international human rights rapporteur, she was imprisoned without trial during the Irish Civil War, accused of Anti-Treaty propagandism. She spent six months in total in prison, initially at Mountjoy, later at Kilmainham and ultimately, briefly, at the North Dublin Union. Already an accomplished Abbey Theatre playwright at the time of her arrest, she wrote her secret, scribbled diaries 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 the diaries capture the daily life and politics of the jails 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.

Having previously worked together on a staging of “Ann Kavanagh” one of Dorothy’s early Abbey plays, actor Sharon McArdle and playwright Declan Gorman have now embarked on a journey to find out more about the life, times and legacy of Dundalk-born Dorothy. They determine us to begin with her prison diaries, which have been seen previously by only a tiny handful of intrepid historians, and never transcribed. The diaries, it is hoped, might form the basis of a one-woman theatre performance to take place at Kilmainham Gaol Museum, in the very spaces where Dorothy was once incarcerated.

Thus begins a remarkable adventure. Sharon travels to various archives in Dublin where she converses with knowledgeable archivists and keepers, and finds herself on more than one occasion left alone with precious papers or microfiche records which open up apertures to the past: windows to the cells, corridors and gantries of Mountjoy and Kilmainham during the chaos of the Civil War; into the mind of a forming artistic genius; and into the world of women incarcerated for their political beliefs and convictions.

Sharon’s journey begins in the UCD James Joyce Archive where the diaries themselves are stored. In the documentary, this sense of voyage is conveyed with sound effects: footsteps on the corridors; doors opening; she is greeted by archivist Kate Manning who welcomes Sharon and explains a little about the archive. Kate discusses the state of the Macardle papers; the arrangement of the jail diaries and offers some words about previous research into them, referring to the handwritten journals as ‘Holy Grail’ material. Sharon asks a few questions. It is made clear from this exchange that the diaries would have been written in poor light, at times secretively and always in conditions of deprivation.

Left alone with the diaries, Sharon is confronted with what seems initially an impenetrable mass of indecipherable scribbles; diaries written back to front, confusing datelines and notes scrawled sideways along the margins of earlier entries. But gradually she comes to grips with Dorothy’s handwriting and shorthand style, and an extraordinary, untold narrative begins to unfold as she goes through the early pages.

She reads a section aloud to herself, and gradually, imperceptibly shifts to “performer mode”, speaking the story of Dorothy’s arrest already with the restrained dramatic empathy of the actor who will one day play the part.

The documentary travels over and back between the UCD archive vaults, Sharon’s home study and the theatre rehearsal room. Within the archive library and at home, she proceeds with the monumental task of transcribing and committing to type, 50,000 words of dense handwriting, the original diaries having been photocopied and provided to her by the UCD team. A large volume of the files is available only on microfilm or in original manuscript form. Some parts are indecipherable. Sharon has to cope with handwriting variability, calligraphic letters, and long ornamental character strokes, all of which are particularly difficult to decode. The volume of the diaries, as well as undigitised letters, notes, manuscripts, postcards, drafts of her writings etc. presents an almost overwhelming challenge. However, on the positive side, much of the material seems relatively untouched, giving the researcher a sense that she is breaking new ground as well as the constant sense there may still be hidden aspects of Macardle’s life yet to be discovered.

Sample sections of the diaries are brought to the rehearsal room where Sharon and Declan begin workshop explorations. We hear them trying out verbatim journal pages as internal monologue material, and discussing where dramatic dialogues and humorous banter among prisoners can be extrapolated. Constant attention is paid to veracity. It is critically important to them that the voice is

always that of Dorothy. Where other historic sources, such as books by Sinéad McCoole or a contemporaneous account by her spirited fellow detainee Sighle Humphreys, offer additional context, this new information is welcomed. But a key objective of the artists is to remain rigorously true to Dorothy's first hand experiences as captured in her own script in her own jail diaries.

Along the way, a problem arises. Dorothy is known to have written six diaries, but only three remain extant, the rest understood to have been destroyed after her death in 1958. One critical time period, between March of 1923 and the date of her release on health grounds in May of 1923, is not covered at all. Furthermore, there are oblique references within the diaries that are not contextualised and beg further archive research. At one point, Dorothy expresses frustration at what she perceives as craven moves by her father, the eminent brewing magnate and supplier of beer to the British army, Thomas Callan Macardle to intercede with the authorities on her behalf.

Sharon heads off on a further round of archive visits, taking in the National Archives at the National Library and Alexandra College. The Dorothy Macardle Imprisonment Files at the Library reveal a suite of letters exchanged between Thomas Callan Macardle and his wife Minnie Macardle on one hand, and Free State President WT Cosgrave, his secretary, Mr Baker, and General Richard Mulcahy, Minister for Defence on the other, with additional pleas for clemency from a family friend J.J. O'Neill: Editor of the Manchester Guardian.

Dreams feature strongly in Dorothy's prison diaries – described in colourful detail, sometimes charming and escapist but almost always leading to either nightmares or waking horrors in which the miserable, cold conditions of her confinement intrude. Through the walls she hears many horrible and haunting sounds, and these will feature strongly in our radio documentary soundscape – as they will in our theatre show: the doleful singing in Spanish of her fellow prisoner, Breton Noreen Cogley lamenting her separation from her small children; the appalling roaring and wild shooting of drunken Free State soldiers outside the jail on the night of the execution of Erskine Childers; the sound of a woman wailing in the throes of a nervous breakdown, but also occasionally the humorous banter and even home-made concerts as the brave prisoners keep their spirits up through culture nights and card games.

The artistic work in the rehearsal rooms keeps apace, the artists occasionally reminding themselves and the listeners that they are theatre makers not historians. They see their role to remain true to not only the stories of courage and the political context of the prison, but also to Dorothy as a caged bird, an artist of conscience whose lyrical accounts of her dreams prefigure some of her great writing to come in the decades ahead, when she will achieve fame as a dark horror novelist and screen writer. Conversations cover such topics as expressionist lighting; multi-layered soundscapes and how to represent crowd scenes and dreamscapes through movement and dance.

The missing diaries remain a challenge to the artists. From second hand accounts and speculation it is understood they were burned by a distressed family member after her death, in an eerie post-mortem echo of a recurring trope in Dorothy's life. Her literary work was burnt on a number of occasions: in the famous Abbey Theatre fire of 1951, but also – as recorded on one page of her prison diary – where she transcribes a letter from Maud Gonne telling her that soldiers have ransacked her room at Stephen's Green, and made a bonfire of her beloved manuscripts. This wanton event, which Maud Gonne tells her was witnessed by some of Dorothy's students, has a traumatic effect on the young imprisoned writer. Declan and Sharon decide to include her visualising of the episode in the play and comment that she has both uncanny abilities to tell what is to come but also seems to be a lightning rod for uncanny occurrences in her own turbulent life.

The gap in the diaries between March and May of 1923 is particularly problematic, as it is known from secondary sources that Dorothy undertook a nine-day hunger strike in that period, in support of serial

hunger striker Mary MacSwiney. The protest is known to have damaged her health, but there is scant record of it anywhere and none in her own hand. What does turn up, however, is a propagandist article she smuggled out in early May, concerning a violent assault on the women prisoners who were protesting a decision to move them en-masse from “Kill-and-maim-them” Gaol to “Dante’s Inferno” or the “hell hole” of the North Dublin Union. While Dorothy’s account, entitled “The Kilmainham Tortures” differs in emphasis to others’ of the same event, it is an astounding testimony that relates acts of barbarous violence visited upon the women by their guards and brave acts of resistance by the prisoners. A final act for the play will be drawn from this primary source: not a diary entry but a heartfelt and hugely dramatic account by Dorothy Macardle of a violent riot, intended to stimulate public outrage. The combined factors of hunger strike, injuries and shock sustained in the transfer fracas, the trauma of losing her life’s writings in the soldiers’ fire and the various indignities she witnesses take their toll, and she is released from the North Dublin Union on health grounds on May 10th, six months and one day after her detention.

The artists now make one final and vitally important visit: to Kilmainham Gaol itself, with the intention of both completing the atmospheric aspects of the play script and also planning and mapping out the site specific performance. They meet with OPW curator Brian Crowley who gives a guided tour to Dorothy Macardle’s 1922 prison cell (passing 1798 graffiti which inspired Macardle to write ‘The Prisoner’ a short story published in her jail collection, *Earthbound*). Sharon steps into the cell to perform a short extract from the story which captures the strange, repetitive nature of Time in prison.

...The worst thing was losing the sense of time... a crazy notion would come that there was no such thing as time in prison at all...I used to think that time went past outside like a stream, moving on, but in prison you were in a kind of whirlpool, time going round and round with you, so that you’d never come to anything, even death, only back again to yesterday and round to today and back to yesterday again..

From the adjoining cell she seems to hear the voice of Noreen Cogley singing a Spanish song called “Rosario” – mentioning that Macardle records in her diary ‘the music melts away the prison walls...’ The voice is in fact, that of Dundalk Based folk singer Sophie Coyle.

While a “detached” narrator will introduce the programme and provide occasional third person, objective links, the narrative style is one of intimacy. The listener follows the actor/researcher as she travels deeper and deeper into the conscious and subconscious world of Dorothy Macardle, uncovering as perhaps only the engaged artist can do, the ground-level perspective of a historic figure unaware as yet that she is a historic figure. We believe that this approach can bring a hidden history – that of Dorothy Macardle; that of the women of the Revolution and the turbulent formation of the nation a century ago – to vivid life in the imagination and conscious intelligence of the listener. As well as the three archivists mentioned above, there will be cutaways to conversations with historian Leeann Lane, (Macardle’s biographer 2019), and to noted academic Luke Gibbons, who places her artistic achievements in their rightful perspective. But it is in the quest of the artist researcher and her collaborators back in the rehearsal room that another perspective is gained on Dorothy Macardle the imprisoned artist, the soon to be – but not yet – Hollywood scriptwriter and international broadcaster. And that perspective is Dorothy’s own: her own voice, her own words, her own dreams, her own emotions as expressed in her own words: not a third party interpretation but an empathetic channelling of the spirit of Dorothy Macardle herself. That, we hope is a fresh perspective on Irish history.