## Kilkenny jail artists

The artwork around the border of the souvenir given to Rev. Holland was not the only piece of artwork that Seán Quilter and Peter Quinlan managed to do while they were prisoners. They were frequent contributors to the autograph books that somehow managed to circulate within the jail at the time. Their sketches vary from humorous, to caricatures of guards, an unflattering image of a visiting justice or sketches of other prisoners. Those presented here are just a small sample and show a jovial side to the artists nature and to prison life while lampooning the jailors and other dignitaries.
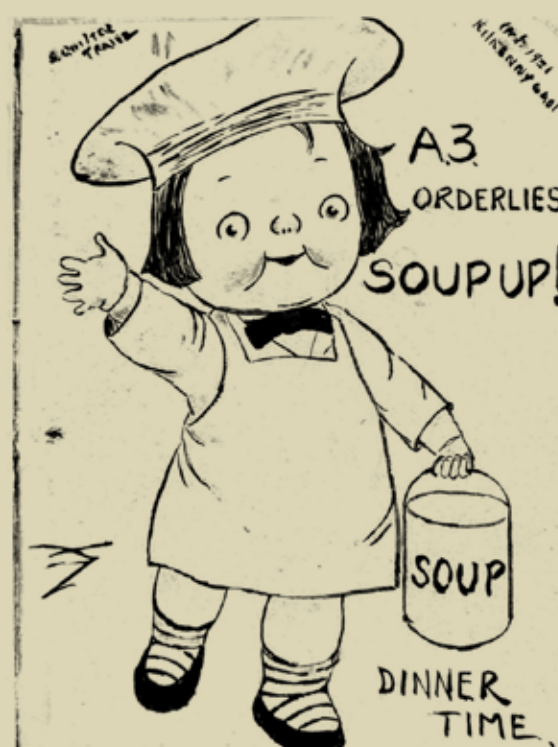
Kilkenny jail autograph books

Three autograph books survive in the archives of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society in Rothe House, while at least one more is known to survive in a private collection. These are the Donoghue Doyle, Shelley and O'Liahain autograph books or albums. The Donoghue Doyle volume is the one with the clearest selection of dates with many of the entries dating to November 1921. The Shelley book is dated on the cover to 12 October 1921 with some of the individual entries undated with others dated between September and October. Finally, the O'Liahain book postdates the War of Independence with many of the entries dated to November or December 1922. These autograph books seem to have been handed around the jail and the prisoners wrote short notes, poems, limericks, brief comments or included sketches. Among those who wrote in the books were Fr Delahunty and Thomas Brennan.
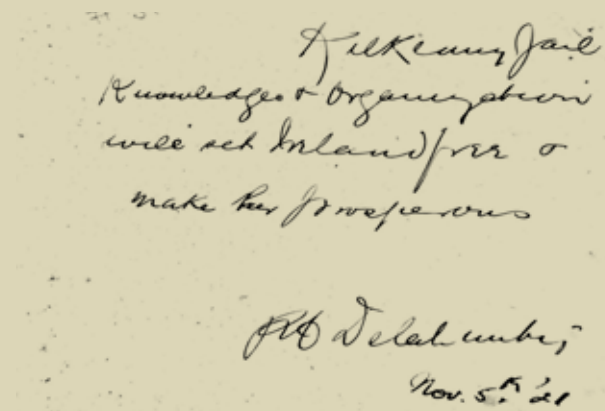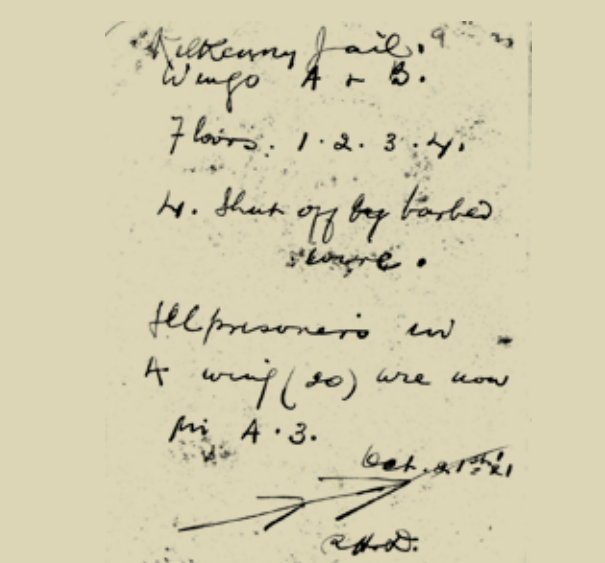
This is one of the entries by Fr Delahunty. The quote reads 'Knowledge and organisation will set Ireland free and make her prosperous'. It is dated 5 November 1921.
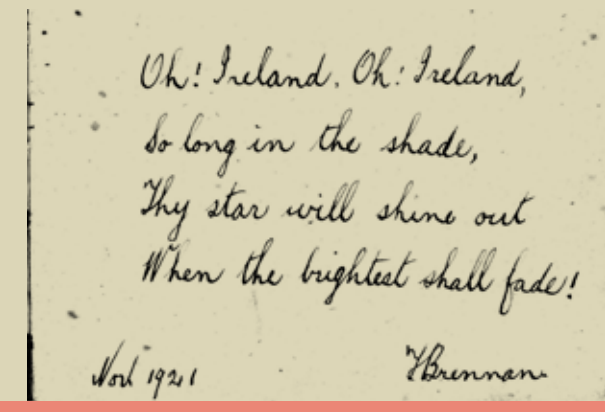
Thomas Brennan's entry contains a short poem. 'Oh Ireland, Oh Ireland, So long in the shade, Thy star will shine out, When the brightest shall fade!'. His entry is dated November 1921.

Another entry describes in brief the layout of the wings of the jail. It shows that both A and B wing had four floors and that the basement floor was shut off by barbed wire. This ties in with the oral evidence from the bureau of military history which states that access to this floor was completely cut off. It also states that 'All prisoners in A wing are now in A3'. They also had access to the cell directly over the basement area from which they would make their escape. This entry is dated 21 October 1921, just one month before the escape and it is simply initialled P.H.D., this was Fr Delahunty.

Perhaps this was a message to someone on the outside, perhaps it was just a coincidence, either way the fact that prisoners were recording this information and it was making its way outside the walls of the prison is another indicator that security was lax in the months before the escape.

Kilkenny jail escapees

The following is a list of the escapees from Kilkenny jail on the night of 22 November 1921. It is compiled from a variety of sources. The spelling of surnames, and the county of origin varies amongst the sources, any errors or omissions are unintentional. The most complete list is in the surviving jail registers where the annotation 'escaped from jail' is noted. This is the list used below.

Edward Balfe, Enniscorthy.
Thomas Barry, Co. Wexford.
Thomas Brennan, Kilkenny.
Michael Burke, Co. Tipperary.
Frank Byrne, Ballyporeen.
Thomas Carrick, Co. Sligo.
Laurence Condon, Fermoy.
David Connolly, Clonee.
Cornelius Conroy, Cork city.
P.H. Delahunty, Mooncoin.
William Donoghue, Co. Carlow.
Lawrence Fraher, Dungarvan.
Daniel Gibbons, Armagh.
John Grehan, Naas.
James Hanrahan, Co. Kilkenny.
Thomas Hyland, Portarlington.
Martin Kealy, Gowran.
Thomas, Kearns, Co. Limerick.
James Kelly, Geashill.
Joseph Kelly, Lusk.
Gerald Kenneally, Youghal.
John Keogh, Kells Co. Meath.
Michael Kirwan, Enniscorthy.
Thomas Leonard, Athlone.
William McNamara, Ennis.
Michael Murney, Co. Down.
Henry Meaney, Limerick city.
Timothy Murphy, Co. Limerick.
Timothy Murphy, Co. Cork.
Joseph O'Connor, Co. Wicklow.
Edward O'Dwyer, Limerick city.
Patrick O'Halloran, Co. Tipperary.
William O'Leary, Clonee.
Patrick O'Neill, Chapelizod.
James Pollock, Cork city.
Patrick Power, Co. Waterford.
John Power, Waterford city.
James Power, Kilmacthomas.
Edward Punch, Limerick city.
Séan Quilter, Ardfert.
Jeremiah Ryan, Thurles.
James Thompson, Cork city.
John Tobin, Carrigtouhill.

Kilkenny Jail
22 November 1921

COUNTY
AND
CITY GAOL

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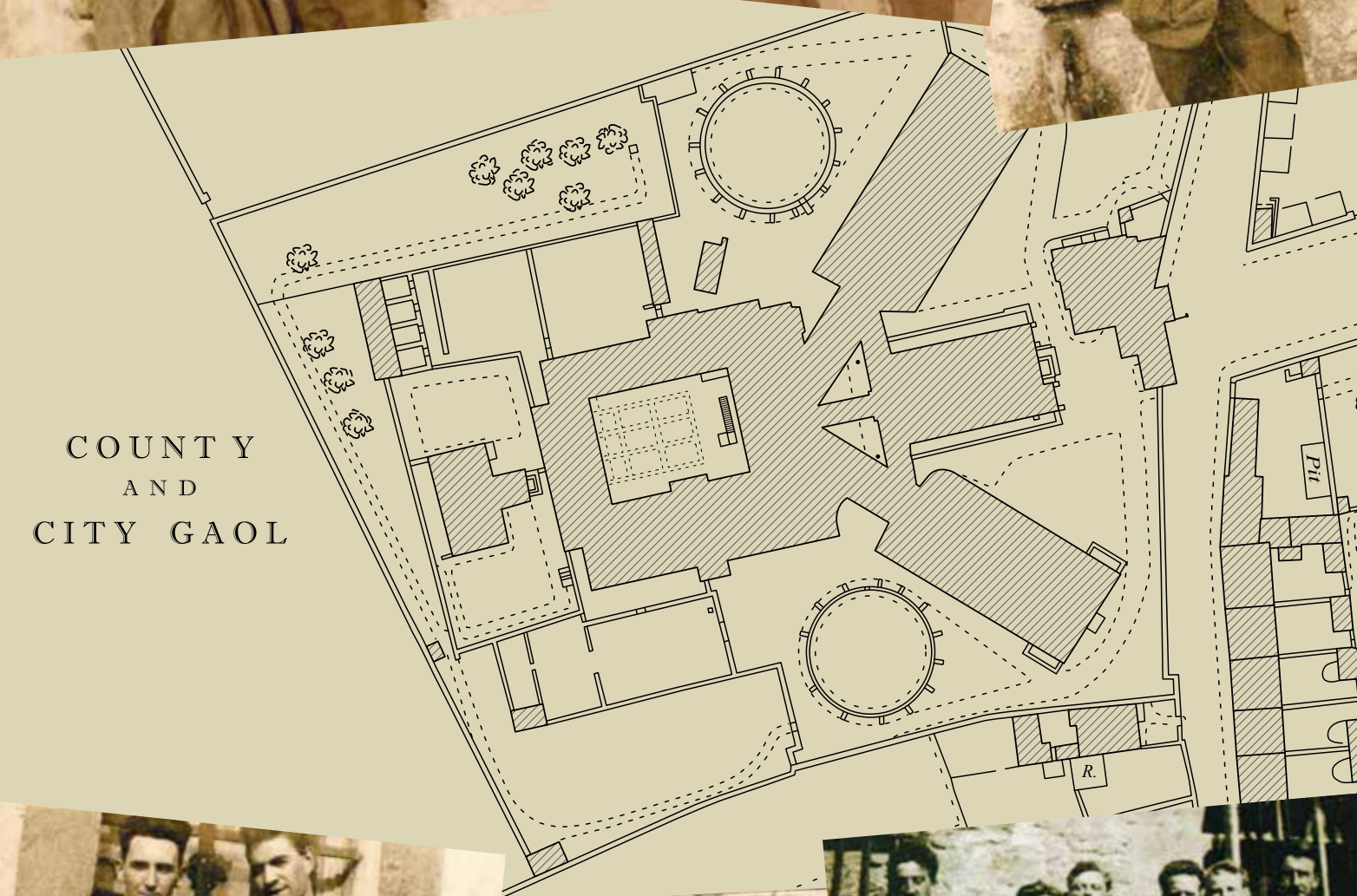
On the night of 22 November 1921, forty-three prisoners escaped from Kilkenny jail.

Kilkenny Jail

On the night of 22 November 1921, forty-three prisoners escaped from Kilkenny jail. This was not the first time that prisoners had escaped from the city or county jail, but it was certainly the most audacious of jail breaks and the largest. It is also one that lives on to this day in folklore, family history, and the written record. The escapees were all political prisoners during the War of Independence and due to a slew of recent arrivals from Spike Island, came from all over Ireland. At the time of the escape, the county jail was at the top of Gaol Road, on Stephen Street, close to the modern fire station. While nothing remains of jail today, its history can be traced, and the surviving plans show what the jail looked like. The oral evidence from the bureau of military history, in combination with the surviving maps and plans, also reveals a lot about the escape and the approximate location of the exit point of the tunnel can be established.

The first recorded escape from a Kilkenny jail occurred in 1770 when a prisoner escaped from the county jail. At this time, the jail was located under the courthouse on modern day Parliament Street, then known as Coalmarket. By 1801, the city Grand Jury had decided to build a new jail, albeit away from the centre of the city. William Robertson would eventually be awarded the contract. There are many of Robertson's buildings still extant in the city, with his best-known work being the remodelling of Kilkenny Castle *circa* 1826. In total it is thought that he worked on at least eighty buildings in the city. When completed in 1807, his jail on Stephen Street was described as having 'nine yards, forty-eight separate cells, six day-rooms and six work rooms with a marshalsea'. Forming a large square in plan, it was by all accounts a large, secure, imposing edifice, and is shown as such on the unpublished five-foot town plan of 1842. From 1808 onwards it was also referred to as the county jail to differentiate it from the city jail that remained close to Coalmarket.

By the early 1840s there was a need for a new jail due in part to a rising crime rate and an increasing population. Plans for a new jail were approved by the Grand Jury in 1842, initially these were based on a design by a Cork architect Charles Frederick Anderson. However, it was not until the late 1840s that any work began on the new jail and a new tender sought with new plans submitted. The winning design was by William Deane Butler and by 1852 the new jail was 'rapidly approaching completion'. The principal alterations to the jail involved the addition of three new multi-storey wings, two of which were over basement, to Robertson's original design. These wings were to the front of the building, with the two largest projecting at slight angles with the third being considerably smaller and radiating centrally from the old jail. It was from one of these wings that the escape occurred on 22 November 1921. A radial design such as the one used in the Kilkenny jail was very common in nineteenth century jail architecture. This new jail was closed in 1929 and stood until *circa* 1948 when it was demolished, and the rubble used in the construction of a stand at Nowlan Park.

Plan.

Kilkenny jail escape

The jail continued in use into the early twentieth century. By November 1921, the War of Independence had been underway for almost two years although an end was in sight, with a ceasefire in operation since 11 July and Treaty negotiations starting in early October. In spite of these negotiations, there were still hundreds of IRA prisoners in jails all across Ireland and Kilkenny jail was no exception to this. The average number of prisoners in the jail was thirty and this number naturally varied over item as sentences were completed and new prisoners were admitted. Descriptions of life for the prisoners in the jail is scarce and somewhat contradictory. William McNamara was one of the few prisoners who commented on the living conditions of the prisoners. He stated that, 'Conditions in Kilkenny were very bad. The military guards there were a bad lot and gave us a tough time'. The commandant of the prisoners was Martin Kealy paints a slightly different picture. After several meetings with the governor of the prison the rules and regulations were modified to suit the needs of the inmates who also had their own rules which were, 'generally complied with'. Kealy's evidence also shows how lax security in the jail had become. Items were regularly smuggled into the prison including 'messages and articles'. This could be one way in which the three autograph books known to survive made their way into the jail. The prisoners also had access to a camera and a number of photographs taken inside the prison have survived. Life inside the jail is also illustrated by the poems, sketches, and limericks, recorded in the autograph books, now part of the collections of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society.

This was the situation towards the end of the summer in 1921. The number of prisoners was swelled greatly by an influx of about eighty to eighty-five prisoners from Spike Island on 18 November 1921 with the precise number of additional prisoners that were transferred to Kilkenny on that date varying in the surviving oral testimonies. While the number of additional prisoners varies in the written record what does not is that these oral histories all refer to the fact that plans were in place to escape the jail by means of a tunnel. Escape plans had been in place since August or September 1921 and a number of possibilities had been thought through by the prisoners. In the end, it was decided that a tunnel was the best course of action. Logically, the shortest distance possible was needed for any tunnel to succeed and reduce the risk of collapse or detection. To do this, the prisoners needed access to the unused solitary confinement cells. These cells were slightly below ground level and the distance from here to the outside was at least forty feet. This is also recorded in some testimonies as forty to fifty yards. The old solitary confinement cells in the jail were in the basement level. Access to this part of the jail was cut off as there were rows of barbed wire across the stairway leading down to the cells.

To gain access to the cell, the prisoners pried up the floorboards of the cell immediately overhead, using a hacksaw they were given from a warder, and they dropped down into the cell below. They only had rudimentary tools to work with but managed to loosen the stone wall by using a series of makeshift tools made from pokers and cutlery, Balfe comments that they used dinner knives, while they also had access to a trowel that they had managed to acquire from the prison stores. The next problem that the prisoners were to face was disposal of the earth from their tunnel. They used blankets as bags tied to a rope to pull the earth back to the cell and the same system was used to return the bags to the men working in the tunnel. This spoil was then disposed of in adjacent cells as the wardens and prison guards never went down to this level.

As the tunnel was at a depth of approximately twelve feet, it had to be shored up to prevent any possible collapse. The men had access to candles which they used in the tunnel so that they could see what they were doing old bed boards were used as props and the men worked in shifts over a period of weeks to gradually inch forward to their escape point. The exit of the tunnel was excavated at a forty-five-degree angle to make egress easier and about eighteen inches were left to prevent the entrance collapsing due to passing traffic until it was time to make their escape. On the evening, or night, of 22 November 1921, the prisoners made their daring escape. When the time arrived, a warder was invited to a cell to play draughts, this was not uncommon, he was then gagged and tied up and the stage was set for the prisoners to break free. Priority was given to those serving the longest sentences and those who remained under a sentence of death. This included thirteen of the recent arrivals from Spike Island. The precise number of prisoners that escaped that night is recorded as twenty-seven or twenty-eight in the testimonies of Kealy and Balfe, while those of Fraher and Brennan record forty-three or forty-four. The larger numbers are those often remembered today. The names of twenty-four prisoners are then recorded in the *Kilkenny Moderator* on the Saturday following the escape, with the headlines 'Stone walls do not a prison make' and 'Forty-four prisoners free'. Forty-three names are then listed in the *Kilkenny People* on 9 April 1955 in an article on the passing of Fr Delahunty who is noted as being the first through the tunnel by Balfe. Fr Delahunty apparently turned this opportunity down and insisted that those under the most severe sentences were allowed through first. The first men to escape were to take up watch outside the warder's houses while the other escapees then dispersed through the city streets into the countryside and freedom. The escape was well organised both inside and outside the jail with one source suggesting that a number of pony and traps were waiting for the escapees. The organisation required to affect the escape is at odds with the suggestion that more men would certainly have escaped that night had it not been for the fact that one of the men unwisely decided to try and bring his suitcase with him. The tunnel allegedly got blocked as a result, the guards were alerted shortly afterwards, and the escape of anyone else was unfortunately thwarted. While this story survives in some of the oral evidence, it is more likely that the passage of forty-three men through a makeshift tunnel caused it to collapse prematurely, given the organisation and work required to undertake the task, it seems unlikely that someone would be allowed to enter the tunnel with a suitcase.

The aftermath of the escape is well documented elsewhere, but life inside the jail is less so. It is possible, however, to get some insight into life in the jail due to the survival of photographs and the contents of several autograph books.
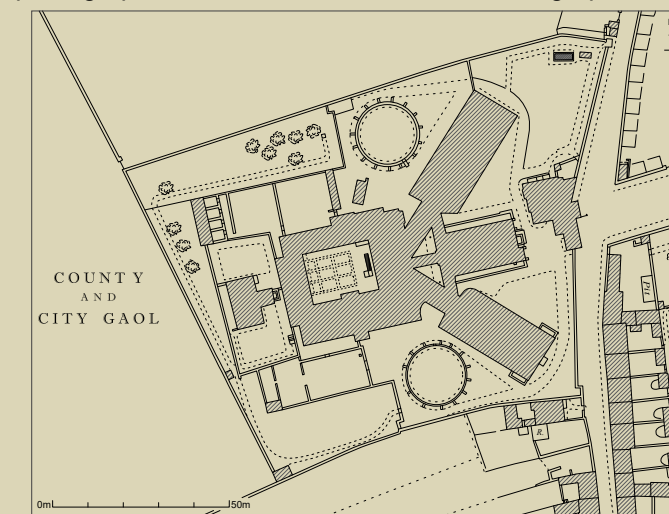
Map redrawn courtesy of Philip Kenny.

Kilkenny Jail Photographer

In his testimony to the bureau of military history Edward Balfe records that he had the use of a camera inside the prison. Some of these photographs are now in private collections with nine of them owned by the Brennan family in Waterford who have gratefully given permission for them to be used here. Balfe records that 'the want of a dark room made the work of developing films very difficult'. A quite ingenious solution was devised by the prisoners to overcome this difficulty. A pane of window glass was cut with some scissors under water, probably to magnify the glass slightly, and thus make it easier to work on. This was then framed with an old piece of a bedboard and this allowed for the film to be developed, most likely with materials that the prisoners had to hand. Balfe further describes a 'souvenir' given to the prisoner's chaplain, Rev. P. Holland on his transfer to Ballyfoyle. This is a large sheet of white paper, roughly between A3 and A2 in size, consisting of head and shoulders shots of twenty-eight prisoners with Fr Delahunty centred at the top. The artwork on the outside of this piece was done by Peter Quinlan and Seán Quilter with the photographs taken by Edward Balfe. The original of this souvenir survives in the archives of Rothe House and it is reproduced here. The artwork on the outside of the portrait is reminiscent of designs from the Book of Kells and other Early Irish manuscripts with its intricate knotwork and mythical animals. The photographs that have survived are a variety of shots of individual prisoners, or of pairs of men, with three group shots of eight to thirteen individuals. The names of most of these men are not known. The prisoners all tend to strike a very relaxed pose. The photographs are not dated, but they have to pre-date the escape as both Thomas Brennan and Fr Delahunty were amongst those who got out in the early evening of 22 November.

Group of thirteen prisoners, identities unknown, photograph is courtesy of the descendants of Thomas Brennan.

Two prisoners, identities unknown, photograph is courtesy of the descendants of Thomas Brennan.

Group of ten prisoners, Fr Delahunty is centred, Thomas Brennan is in the back row second from the right, photograph is courtesy of the descendants of Thomas Brennan.

Prisoner, identity unknown, photograph is courtesy of the descendants of Thomas Brennan.

Edward Balfe, Kilkenny jail photographer.

Two prisoners, identities unknown, photograph is courtesy of the descendants of Thomas Brennan.

Group of eight prisoners, identities unknown, photograph is courtesy of the descendants of Thomas Brennan.