

# EMPIRE AND ITS DISCONTENTS: AN EXAMINATION OF KILMAINHAM GAOL AND AAPRAVASI GHAT

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**Abstract:** Despite being separated by over 6,339 miles, Kilmainham Gaol and Aapravasi Ghat are inextricably linked as artefacts documenting the legacy of the British Empire. This essay shall consider the geo-historical and socio-political dimensions of each by examining them under a lens for both form and function. Chronologically, it shall consider events across the long nineteenth century (1789-1914).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, it shall enable an understanding of the role of these events' contextual impact upon the British Empire by birthing the related, nascent independence movements; the shaping of its legacy; and recasting of its identity.<sup>2</sup>

The apparatus and framework of the British Empire was vast, unwieldy and heterogeneous. Ranging from Ireland, since antiquity; it sprawled to India, in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century; and beyond to the New World.<sup>3</sup> Residing in relative isolation, the island histories of both Gaelic Ireland and multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic Mauritius (intimately linked with India) have been shaped by the imperious agenda of the British Empire. Their relatively peripheral geographical locations belie their major role within the Empire and its dictates. Kilmainham Gaol and Aapravasi Ghat (a Hindi term, meaning 'immigration depot') are stark symbols of the British Empire. Visually; aesthetically; architecturally; the form and functional components of the built environment of each reflect the aims and objectives of the Empire. Furthermore, they inform both its own identity; those of its former territories; and its unwitting legacy, the consequence of unintentional outcomes. By examining each at a granular, detailed, micro level, the essay's critical analysis combines perspicacious information and discerns pertinent data, thereby enabling a more sophisticated exposition regarding the macro level: Irish-Anglo; Anglo-Indian; and, tangentially, Irish-Indian relations.

**“HE WHO WOULD WIN ENGLAND, MUST WITH IRELAND BEGIN.”**

(UNATTRIBUTED) SIXTEENTH CENTURY PROVERB<sup>5</sup>

The County of Dublin Gaol, known as Kilmainham Gaol, “the dismal house of little ease”, was built in 1796, during the prime ministership of William Pitt the Younger, and monarchical rule of George III.<sup>6</sup> It replaced a dungeon that occupied the same location. Critically, given it closed in 1910, Kilmainham's working life effectively bracketed the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. Accordingly, Irish history pivots around its scenes: Kilmainham Gaol is of immediate and impressive historical

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Porter (Ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p.20

<sup>2</sup> For reasons of conciseness, the term 'Empire' refers to the British Empire, unless noted otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Please note, references to 'India' denote its pre-partition guise, consistent with the sub-continent in its entirety, termed 'Bharat' (from the Sanskrit term).

<sup>4</sup> P.J. Marshall, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) p.7

<sup>5</sup> R. Hylton, *Ireland's Huguenots and Their Refuge, 1662-1745: An Unlikely Haven* (Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2013) p.90

<sup>6</sup> Frieda Kelly, *A History of Kilmainham Gaol* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1988) p.12

importance. Whilst ostensibly functioning as a working jail, it was a working artefact documenting Anglo-Irish interactions; now it is a memorial to Anglo-Irish relations past. Attendant upon Kilmainham, the defining feature of the Anglo-Irish relationship was the struggle for Irish independence. Consequently, its narrative mirrors the history of the Irish independence dynamic. The spectrum of Irish nationalism bridged the chasm between complete independence, typified by a tradition advocating force; to a measure of 'Home Rule', as espoused by constitutional movements.

Kilmainham was founded only two years preceding the desperate but stifled rebellion of 1798, known as *Éirí Amach*.<sup>7</sup> Henry Joy McCracken, a founder of the United Irishmen group responsible for this uprising, was imprisoned at Kilmainham in its founding year. His group initially sought parliamentary reform, as a liberal political organisation, consistent with the Age of Enlightenment and Lockean ideals. However, allied to the French revolutionary movement (1787-1799) and drawing inspiration from the American revolution of the same broader period, they engendered a rebellion against the occupying British Empire. McCracken was later hanged for his role in orchestrating it. Consequently, the Empire sought to protect its flanks, its Irish territories, by legislating the contentious 1800 Act of Union, thereby creating the United Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> Therein, this examination of Kilmainham provides a tangible link between the micro and macro.

Subsequently, Ireland's experience under the British Empire in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was punctuated by agrarian agitation exacerbated by absentee landlords, as exemplified by the Tithe Wars of the 1830's; sectarian violence (particularly in Ulster); and penal laws suppressing the majority Catholic population (and campaigned against by Daniel O'Connell). The built environment of Kilmainham reflects Britain's domination of Ireland. From the exterior, it forms an imposing, grey monolith: there is little aesthetically pleasing to redeem it. Its interior is equally muted and cold. Compounding this, the gaol initially operated without glass in its windows, and was thus exposed to the bitter elements. Further compounding this, it functioned with little lighting – instead, prisoners were given a small candle every fortnight.<sup>9</sup> The ensuing pervasive darkness encapsulates the antithesis of the burgeoning Enlightenment.

The defining event of the Irish experience was the Great Famine (1845-1850), under the Peel and Russell governments.<sup>10</sup> It saw a large increase in the number of prisoners entering Kilmainham. People were desperate enough that they sought refuge there via acts of (oftentimes justifiable) petty theft and criminality; actions motivated by mass starvation. Severe overcrowding occurred, with the prisons inspectorate noting it as running up to five times capacity. Compounding this, segregation of prisoners by gender or age was largely absent: records indicate that the youngest prisoner was but a seven-year-old child.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporaneously, the Young Irelanders, a nationalist group, rose to prominence. Their cause was ignited by the famine, and imbued by the spirit of revolution which captured continental Europe in 1848. Their rebellion (or uprising, contingent upon one's perspective) of the same year was swiftly quelled by the Empire's forces. Accordingly, their pair of leaders, William Smith O'Brien and Thomas Francis Meagher, were imprisoned at Kilmainham.<sup>12</sup> This

<sup>7</sup> Dennis L. Dworkin, *Ireland and Great Britain, 1798-1922* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 2012) p. xii

<sup>8</sup> M. Brown, P.M. Geoghegan, J. Kelly, *The Irish Act of Union, 1800: bicentennial essays* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003) p. 17

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.heritageireland.ie/en/media/39954%20KilmainhamGaol.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Leslie Williams, *Daniel O'Connell, the British Press, and the Irish Famine: Killing Remarks* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2003) p. 44

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.heritageireland.ie/en/media/39954%20KilmainhamGaol.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Paul R. Wylie, *The Irish General: Thomas Francis Meagher* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012) p.64

process of aborted, nullified revolution, stamped by the devastating *an Gorta Mór* ('great hunger'), bracketed the first half of Ireland's eighteenth century experience, under British rule. It aptly illustrates the cyclicity of history, as propounded by P.R. Sarkar.<sup>13</sup> Discontent was rife, a thematic thread that ran through the historical Anglo-Irish narrative. In Kilmainham itself, the head guard, Edmund Wellisha, was convicted of undernourishing those who supported the rebellion.<sup>14</sup> Critically, on a macro level, some activists and scholars, such as John Mitchel then and Professor Francis Boyle now, consider the implementation and execution of Britain's policies during the famine as a genocidal (or rather, democidal) act.<sup>15</sup> This coupling of microcosm and macrocosm certainly reflects with clarity the banal, blithe brutality of the machinery of the British Empire.

Borne of this, Irish militancy grew. A group named the Irish Republican Brotherhood, in league with its American counterpart, the Fenian Brotherhood, swore to overthrow British rule in Ireland. Their organised uprising of 1867 against the aristocratic 'locust' oligarchy stood in contrast to the spirited but ineffectual 1848 movement.<sup>16</sup> It resulted in many imprisonments at Kilmainham, following the suspension of habeas corpus (which in itself is a further indictment of the Empire's government and rule of law).

The relatively more sophisticated Irish National Land League was a more evolved organisation still. Its president, Charles Stewart Parnell, coordinated and directed it, in tandem with his position as leader of the Irish Parliamentary party at Westminster. Ostensibly owing to his party's open rejection of Gladstone's Land Act of 1881, he was imprisoned at Kilmainham under the controversial Coercion Act, Protection of Person and Property Act 1881.<sup>17</sup> Further, many of his colleagues in the Commons were also incarcerated, evidencing the Empire's limiting, non-progressive approach to addressing genuine issues and grievances, despite them being advocated in a formal arena, namely parliamentary legislature. Gladstone, relatively progressive and liberal, acknowledged this shortcoming, noting that "we are bound to lose Ireland in consequence of years of cruelty, stupidity and misgovernment".<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the most striking motif that the Gaol possesses is at its entrance. There, five snakes entwined with chains are chiselled from stone. According to local legend, they represent the view that crime is under control. But, equally, they might also readily be interpreted as Britain's subduing of Ireland, "that stormy cloud in the west", and its peoples, "brutal savages in an unknown island".<sup>19</sup> They are evocative of Celtic imagery, and reminiscent of the legend of St Patrick banishing snakes from the emerald isle.

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Craig (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Index* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1998) p. 523

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.heritageireland.ie/en/media/39954%20KilmainhamGaol.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Gribben (Ed.), *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America* (Massachusetts, University of Massachusetts Press, 1999) p. 122

<sup>16</sup> Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule, 1867-1921* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) p. 312

<sup>17</sup> R.H. Baylor (Ed.) & T.J. Meagher (Ed.), *The New York Irish* (DC: JHU Press, 1997) p. 358

<sup>18</sup> Helen Rappaport, *Queen Victoria: A Biographical Companion* (Connecticut: ABC-CLIO, 2003) p. 207

<sup>19</sup> Quotes from William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli, respectively.



Given that Kilmainham was a gaol (rather than a prison) the notion of redemption and reform, as outlined by Alexis de Tocqueville, was somewhat lacking in its original mandate.<sup>20</sup> Its exterior structure – foreboding, gray and unremittingly bleak endorses this view. However, counterbalancing this perspective, one must consider that replacing the original dungeon, an icon of concealed cruelty and tyrannical power, was a step away from the Cromwellian pathological brutalisation of Ireland.<sup>21</sup> So, whilst Kilmainham was typically consistent with popular conceptions of Victorian values as unrelentingly severe, austere and Spartan; there were, in time, elements of relatively progressive, pragmatic measures and practices, which is semi-congruous with the development of the Empire.



This is best represented by the gaol's East Wing, which opened in 1862. It was resplendent in featuring a striking panoptic structure, closely correlated with Jeremy Bentham's conceptualization, "a mill for grinding rogues honest".<sup>22</sup> It was, in turn, based upon HMP Pentonville (built in 1842) and echoed Potemkin's architecture in Russia.<sup>23</sup> Structurally, its design was consistent with Victorian modernity and encompassed the aim of the 'all seeing eye', a requisite reflecting the need for monitoring within the Empire. The skylight at the top of the

<sup>20</sup> The distinction between this pair of oft-confused terms is succinctly made by Alexis de Tocqueville in his seminal work of 1833, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and Its Application to France* (co-authored with Gustave de Beaumont).

<sup>21</sup> Micheal O' Siochru, *God's Executioner: Oliver Cromwell and the Conquest of Ireland* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008) p. 51

<sup>22</sup> John Skorupski (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 362

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013) p. 134

building mirrors Enlightenment era values such as justice and freedom, and is a marked departure from its dungeon predecessor. However, there was a dystopian purpose: whilst architecturally sound, its use was manipulated, if not abused, by the Empire, a critique referenced by Augustus Pugin.<sup>24</sup> From this genesis grew the post-modern, Orwellian ‘surveillance state’; a distinctive legacy of the British Empire.

The East Wing reflected the Victorian sentiment that architecture was imperative in the effective reform of inmates. Accordingly, the prison operated on “the principles of silence and separation”.<sup>25</sup> This notion may be overlaid with the British Empire as, figuratively, silence and separation were key instruments employed by the establishment in manipulating and managing its peoples and territories via mendacious machinations and divide and conquer tactics, as evidenced by actions in the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 and the Boer War too.

**"...IF WE ARE TO GO ON PEACEABLY AND HAPPILY IN INDIA...NOT TRYING TO TRAMPLE ON THE PEOPLE AND CONTINUOUSLY REMINDING THEM AND MAKING THEM FEEL THEY ARE A CONQUERED PEOPLE."**

QUEEN VICTORIA, IN A LETTER TO LORD SALISBURY, 1898

A distinctly different, but equally profound experience of British colonial rule was its dominion at Aapravasi Ghat, located in Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius. For over three quarters of a century (1849 to 1923), in an episode known as ‘the great experiment’, half a million Indians passed through the Immigration Depot.<sup>26</sup> They did so as indentured labourers. This was a form of contractual debt bondage whereby individuals exchanged their labour for being kept in (basic) accommodation and sustenance, for a fixed term, in the hope of a better life typified by passage to a ‘new world’.<sup>27</sup> And thus it was so that Mauritius was the first British colony to receive indentured, or bonded, labour from India. The most profitable commodity was sugar. Its crop was harvested on an industrial scale – the legal abolition of slavery necessitated the procurement of a replacement workforce to fulfill this role. Consequently, the modern subcontinent diaspora began, as an alternative labour source following the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, under Charles Grey’s Whig government (1830-34) and William IV’s reign. In terms of its efficacy as a proxy supply of labour, it proved cheaper than the emancipated slaves and equally abundant. As a result, it gave rise to a nascent form of today’s capitalism, founded upon globalisation. It was a historic phase in capitalism, consistent with Eric Hobsbawm’s *Age of Capitalism*.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of etymology, ‘Aapravasi’ is the Hindi word for "immigrant". ‘Ghat’ translates, literally, as "interface". Contextually, it aptly captures the sweeping passage of immigration between the old world and the unfolding new world, as facilitated by the Empire. The history of Aapravasi Ghat is pivotal to explaining the economic development of the Empire, and the shape of its social and cultural composition too. Located at a junction of (the perhaps aptly named) Abbatoir Road and Immigration Square, it sits on the east side of the bay of Trou Fanfaron. The aesthetic appeal of Aapravasi Ghat is largely unremarkable, as illustrated in the photo below. This emphasises the fact that (understandably) form, function and efficiency were prioritised by

<sup>24</sup> David R. Green, *Pauper Capital: London and the Poor Law, 1790-1870* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2010) p. 118

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.heritageireland.ie/en/media/39954%20KilmainhamGaol.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> M.L. Stefano, P. Davis & G. Corsane, *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2012) p. 63

<sup>27</sup> Ana Lucia Araujo (Ed.), *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 65

<sup>28</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital: 1848-1875* (London: Abacus, 1998)

the British Empire, over aesthetics and visual appeal. The most symbolic feature of the compound is its fourteen steps, from the wharf to the land. These represent the movement and transition of the subcontinent peoples.



Fundamentally, the built environment of Aapravasi Ghat is “among the earliest explicit manifestations of what was to become a global economic system and one of the greatest migrations in history”.<sup>29</sup> In terms of the building complex itself, it blends a ‘Mauritian’ style of architecture with Gallic flair, owing to the prior French colonisation of the islands. The Mauritian features included “walls of stone with lime mortar or latanier wood, and roofs of argamasse mortar over shingles (a technique imported from India) or latanier leaves”.<sup>30</sup> A UNESCO world heritage site, experts estimate that only about 15% of the original site still authentically exists today. Nevertheless, a veritable tapestry survives to document daily life for the immigrants: in evidence are kitchens, housing, lavatories and hospitals. Prior to this century, Aapravasi Ghat lay in a state of disrepair and erosion – reflective, perhaps, of the transient, fleeting nature of the immigrants’ stay there. Several efforts endeavour to preserve the period features of the Ghat. For example, the original lime mortar alluded to comprised yoghurt, butter, egg whites and "gingely" oil in its recipe. Fundamentally, it is used for restoration work on Aapravasi Ghat today.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the buildings possessed clay tile roofing, to enable improved ventilation and insulation. Whilst this might be perceived as the Empire expressing a humane concern for its subjects (as distinct to its citizens), it is also a reflection of the fact that the Empire sought to protect its commodities, namely the labour-force and its intrinsic worth.

The bonded labourers were filtered and funneled, put to work in Mauritius itself, or ultimately dispersed to similar plantations throughout the British Empire. It came to pass that the trade in human capital (i.e. labour) surpassed that of the sugar crop. In obeying Newtonian laws - for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction - the ‘great experiment’ entailed great consequences. Equally, the rule of unintended outcomes was in evidence too, as a legacy of

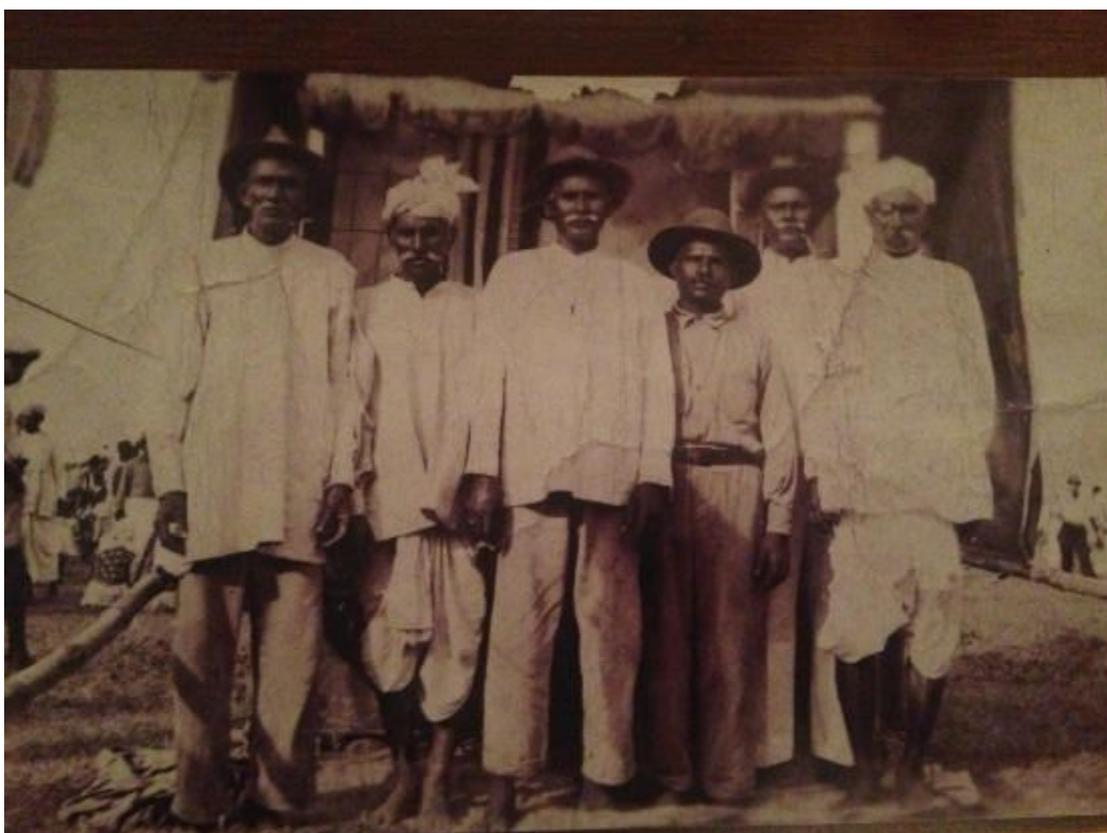
<sup>29</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1227>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

British colonial rule.<sup>32</sup> The diaspora fundamentally and irrevocably altered both the economies and societies of British colonies in every conceivable corner of the globe: from Fiji to South Africa to Guyana (as depicted in the picture below); countries in which ethnic 'Indians' comprise a majority or substantial percentage of their populations. As such, over two thirds of the current population of Mauritius itself is of Indian ancestry.

The sheer scale of the system operated was unprecedented. The British model rapidly spread. Critically, it was reproduced and emulated by other European powers, principally France and Holland.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, the British Empire's action had a 'multiplier' effect. It permanently altered every aspect of multiple colonies, as well as the occupying countries themselves too, via 'reverse immigration', effectively constituting a reciprocal feedback mechanism.<sup>34</sup> Whilst unheralded profit and wealth were generated for the colonisers, the human effects entailed were equally vast. Indentured labourers were often pejoratively termed, most often labelled by the epithet, 'coolie'. Subsequent to the waves of immigration, progeny of interracial relationships were (and still are) labelled 'dougla', which originates from the Hindi-Bhojpuri word, 'doogala'. Such a negative framing prompted concerns surrounding cultural heritage and provoked unresolved questions of identity, owing to the displacement of people from their native lands. More positively, however, a rich vein of art and literature documents this struggle and evolution, the legacy of which has served to transform global societies.



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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/jhamlin/4111/Readings/MertonSocialAction.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Richard B. Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Labourers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p.26

<sup>34</sup> Nuala Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies: London and the Atlantic Economy 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) p.173

## CONCLUSION

In deconstructing this coupling of artefacts, this essay has analysed the geo-historical, socio-political and different cultural dimensions of their legacy within the Empire. Kilmainham Gaol is a monument of chief importance in documenting Anglo-Irish relations; Irish history; and the struggle for Irish independence from the British Empire. Its history is firmly intertwined with this movement, whilst its legacy was echoed a hundred years later, in the closure of HMP Maze, and the Good Friday Peace Agreement of 1998. ‘The great experiment’ at Aapravasi Ghat quietly shaped both the Empire and the globe; its ripples generated seismic, dynamic changes. Whilst superficially different, there are shared similarities to each experience, upon examination. Ireland and India formed fractious outposts of the British Empire. Furthermore, Irish-Indian relations were nurtured and solidified by both their shared struggles for independence; and their respective diasporas, thereby enabling a sense of unity. Such events provide insight into the Empire in its relatively benign guise today, as the Commonwealth. Equally, they proffer a reference point for cultural identities, and a focal point for understanding the Empire.

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