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ARCHIVES AS 'THIN PLACES'

Resurrecting ghosts of Australia's earliest refugees through poetics of resistance

Anne Casey

University of Technology Sydney
ORCID: 0000-0002-6146-2722

Abstract

Drawing on the Irish notion of a 'thin place' (where the veil between us and the spirit world is so thin that we can sense those on the other side), this paper outlines an approach to archival research and creative practice which seeks to reawaken and give voice to the ghosts of some of Australia's earliest refugees. This work uncovers new connections between the Great Irish Famine, a humanitarian crisis which halved Ireland's population and the cyclical incarceration and abuse of young women in New South Wales in the 1860s and 1870s—to highlight a small but significant, yet largely unwritten, chapter in Irish-Australian history. Employing poetics of resistance incorporating elements of these young women's outlawed native Irish language and culture, this work seeks to decolonise their memories and restore voice to those who suffered the brutal consequences of colonisation in both their native and adopted countries.

ARCHIVES AS 'THIN PLACES': RESURRECTING GHOSTS OF AUSTRALIA'S EARLIEST REFUGEES THROUGH POETICS OF RESISTANCE

Anne Casey

Introduction

'There is a special brand of human misery so steeped in hopelessness that it leaves its mark in time and place'. I wrote these words for the *Irish Times* in 2017, describing:

> Crouched in front of me is … 13-year-old Bridget McElroy from Falcarragh in Donegal. Her tiny frame filthy from huddling on the damp dirt floor, she has been raped, starved and unmercifully beaten. She is riddled with venereal disease. (Casey 2017, *Irish Times*)

I wrote of how, in places like the isolation cell at Port Arthur prison in Tasmania, in the darkest corners of Dubbo Gaol and in this dank recess of the Newcastle Lock-up in New South Wales, 'the walls are buckled with the painful histories of Irish exiles'. Bridget McElroy was one of 193 young girls, including many children of Irish famine refugees, I had found in the archives of Newcastle Industrial School for Girls (1867–1871). My first brush with these ghosts of Australia's earliest refugees came following a research and writing commission for an international art exhibition in 2017 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the school's opening. These girls' stories have haunted me since. Their continued presence in my life prompted me to commence a PhD in 2020 to resurrect their lost stories through archival research and creative writing in an effort to highlight this largely unwritten chapter in Irish-Australian history.

There is a concept in Ireland, particularly along my native rural west coast, of 'thin places':

> A Thin place is a term used to describe a marginal, liminal realm, beyond everyday human experience and perception, where mortals could pass into the Otherworld more readily or make contact with those in the Otherworld more willingly. In ancient folklore, Thin places were considered to be physical locations where it is easy to cross between two or more worlds. (Healy 2016)

It may be that I have carried this cultural memory of 'thin places' with me, allowing it to saturate my experience of other places where I feel the deep presence of vividly lived history. Ciara Healy noted that in west Wales and in the west of Ireland, there is an inclination to experience place as a multiverse. This concept is not uncommon in ancient cultures—and is deeply entrenched in the world's oldest continuous living heritage, First Nations Australia. Ambelin Kwaymullina described it most poignantly in telling the story of 'The girl, the rockpool and the stars': 'The universe isn't out there. It is here. Whatever is above our heads is beneath our feet. Whatever is in the sky is in earth. And whatever is in earth is in us' (Kwaymullina 2005). In poetry, I have attempted to signify the intersection of this concept with my Celtic heritage along these lines:

> I am here and not here: my missing time
> measured in lost dollars living on unlent land
> whose true custodians understand
> we coexist in all time, this earth
> converging through us:

> I live long ago and now, far away and here,
> which are the same, simultaneous
> in me; my people walk with me—all
> of my lost and found here together
>
> looking out at these trees, feet suspended
> in pulsing layers of decaying moments,
> a million green wings flapping in the buzzing
> air, their outstretched limbs holding up
> this blazing universe.
>
> (Casey 'On Sunday', *Some Days The Bird*, 2022)

Kwaymullina explained it as: 'The whole is more than its parts, and the whole is in all its parts. This is the pattern that the Ancestors made. It is life, creation, spirit, and it exists in country'. Eric Weiner suggested 'thin places' are locations offering 'glimpses of the divine, or the transcendent, or … the Infinite Whatever'. He concluded that 'Maybe thin places offer glimpses not of heaven, but of earth as it really is unencumbered. Unmasked' (Weiner 2012). Northern Irish writer, Kerri Ní Dochartaigh observed that in these places, it is:

> as if the veil between worlds has become as thin as moth-wing. The lines that are normally drawn for and by us—between here and there, between now and then—seem as though they have been washed away, on some days. (Ní Dochartaigh 2021)

As I researched the girls of Newcastle Industrial School, I found myself immersed in their life stories. When I visited a place they had been—the preserved cells of Newcastle Lock-Up, Maitland Gaol, Hyde Park Barracks, the laneways of Sydney's Rocks district—I felt their breath at my neck. They began to visit me at night:

> I wake in the dark. Eliza is standing over me. 'Almost there', I tell her. She nods gravely and turns away. I realise she is holding something. It is the ragged sleeve of another girl. She is so much smaller than Eliza. With her other hand, this girl is clasping an untidy bundle of calico rags to her skeletal chest. A stab as I realise there is a baby swaddled inside. (Casey '*Scáth*: Falling upwards', 2022: n.p.)

These ghosts of children whose families had fled the Great Irish Famine (1845–1849) had drifted wraith-like from the curling pages I had found in NSW State Archives, documents that bore witness to the brutal truths of their existence. Stories long lost to the archives, now coming to life before my eyes. And so, I have come to think of the archives I visit—immigrant ship indents; Colonial Secretary correspondence; admissions records for gaols and industrial schools; chronicles of births, deaths, marriages; newspaper, court and police reports—as 'thin places' also. From each, is freed another scrap of lived experience from a ragged girl whose story I now carry with me along with all the others.

On a page, torn at the edges and bearing a brown stain, in the meticulous script of Dr Richard Harris, the Newcastle Industrial School's physician, with trembling hands and pounding chest, I found:

> Maryann, aged seven who had been 'living with thieves' prior to her arrest and six-year-old Emma who had been 'living with prostitutes', both in good health … both with the 'usual' 'signs of virginity'. Meanwhile Jane and Eliza, aged 15 and 16 had 'none'

> of the 'usual signs of virginity', Eliza having evidence of syphilis (twice underlined for stress). (Casey '*Scáth*: Falling upwards', 2022: n.p.)

And so, Maryann and Emma, and Jane and Eliza joined Bridget who had been arrested in a Newcastle brothel in 1870. Bridget had spent fourteen days alone in the dark on barely enough bread and water to survive as punishment for daring to rebel against conditions at the school. And then there was Eliza O'Brien, my first famine ghost (admittedly my favourite). Eliza had spilled out in a bloodied squall onto the dirt floor of a smoke-blackened, single-roomed stone cottage lodged between the Five Crossroads and St Patrick's Well on the sprawling estate of Thomas Spring Rice, First Lord Monteagle of Brandon in Shanagolden, County Limerick in 1851. She had arrived in the still-reverberating aftershock of the devastating famine to a family already 'blessed' with six other young mouths to feed. At just 18 months of age when her mother died on board ship to Australia, 'Eliza's fate was already sealed—she ended up on the streets by the age of 13. There followed a string of arrests and incarcerations—including her seizure in a brothel aged 15' (Casey 2020, *Irish Times*). Eliza and Bridget would lead me to many other 'Irish' girls in the Newcastle archives. As my research uncovered, more than half of the school's inmates were of Irish descent; two in seven of the inmates were from families who had fled Ireland in famine-affected years.

History of Irish Famine Immigration to Australia and New Findings from this Research

Although the deep devastation of the Great Irish Famine is widely attributed to the potato blight which destroyed the native population's staple food crop, its impact was profoundly exacerbated by political and economic factors resulting from British colonisation and rule in Ireland. The native Irish subsisted on small tracts of land rented at high rates from English and Anglo-Irish landowners (Fitzpatrick 1995). Immediately prior to the famine, the Commissioners of Poor Law Inquiry had reported that 2.3 million Irish were living on the brink of starvation (Great Britain, Commissioners of Inquiry 1845). Throughout the famine years, the British government had been slow and ineffective in providing adequate aid and had failed to intervene as food supplies continued to be shipped out of Ireland by colonists while millions of native Irish starved (Fitzpatrick 1997).

During the five years of the famine, 1.2 million people died of starvation and disease and one million people fled the country (Kennedy 2014). Driven by the famine's impacts, the population of Ireland halved between 1845 and 1900—from eight million to four million people, a human toll from which the country has never recovered (Ó Gráda 2007). Up to half a million people were evicted across Ireland during the famine years—many for failure to pay rent, though there is evidence that colonists used the famine crisis as an opportunity to clear large tracts of land of small tenant-holdings and convert them to more profitable unoccupied pastoral land (Mullin 1999).

Ultimately, emigration became a principal, though not always dependable, survival tactic (Fitzpatrick 1997). The families of Eliza O'Brien, Bridget McElroy and 53 other girls incarcerated at Newcastle had fled Ireland during or immediately after the famine. They came seeking refuge and hope in Australia. They found a new world where sentiment was greatly prejudiced against their kind (Noone and Malcolm 2020), poor, Irish Catholic immigrants, who—amongst other issues—were suspected of being Fenians and potential rebels (Fitzpatrick 1989).

Amongst the Irish famine refugee children, I found at Newcastle, is a cluster of 15 girls who were daughters of Earl Grey Orphans. Their mothers were among 4,100 Irish workhouse orphans, mostly aged between 14 and 19, who were shipped to Australia in 1849 and 1850, intended as domestic servants and labourers' wives. Siobhan O'Neill wrote of the reception they faced on arrival to the colony:

> Expectations must have been high for their new life in the New World but, instead, they met a climate of fear and suspicion towards the influx of Irish refugees. As a result, the girls were widely criticised in the press and often subjected to abuse in the streets, with reports of exploitation and even mistreatment by unprincipled employers. Criticisms ridiculed their appearance, aptitude, abilities and moral fibre.

The daughters of Irish famine immigrants who were incarcerated at Newcastle had been doubly, triply cursed by the same colonial system. Their families had been dispossessed of their lands in Ireland, shackled to poverty as tenants to the colonists on those same lands and opportunistically ousted again during the famine era, only to endure further hardships due to colonial policies in their immigrant country of 'refuge', Australia.

Many of the poorest newly arrived famine immigrants settled in Irish enclaves in the larger towns, where they sought the comfort and support of their compatriots. Areas such as the Rocks in Sydney soon filled with ragged children who, for survival, often became embroiled in petty crime. In 1854, the Superintendent of Police in Sydney determined there were around 300 destitute children on the streets of the city, two thirds of whom were 'in moral danger' (Crawford 2009). Driven by complaints from the more affluent settlers, the *Destitute Children Act* of 1866 gave the police special powers to arrest children in the streets who were deemed 'at risk' and send them to newly created industrial schools where they would be re-educated and redirected into apprenticeships. Newcastle Industrial School for Girls was one of these borstals, its young female inmates amongst the first children to be removed from their families under the new police powers.

In many cases, the girls who came to stay at Newcastle Industrial School had been arrested for vagrancy, prostitution and petty crime, and sentenced to a minimum of 12 months. Despite appeals from their families for their release, few received early acquittal and many endured involuntary apprenticeships as domestic help for lengthy periods afterwards. Life at the school was not necessarily better than life on the streets, and in some cases proved considerably worse (Ison 2012). Letters between the Newcastle School authorities and the Colonial Secretary contained in the NSW State Archives include accounts of girls being dragged by the hair, locked in solitary confinement on restricted bread and water rations, subjected to a 'virgin' test as noted earlier (a physical examination by the male doctor, a practice which later came under scrutiny at the school) and regularly verbally abused, humiliated and threatened.

Not surprisingly, some of the more spirited girls rebelled against their treatment and were sent to adult gaols in attempts to break their 'refractory' spirits. Reports of their escape attempts, riots and disturbances appeared in the local newspapers, eventually making their way into the national press. The notoriety that followed led to an official investigation and the abrupt closure of the school in 1871 (Ison 2012). The remaining girls were transferred to the Bileola industrial facility for girls on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour, where even harsher physical punishments were meted out—including 'hair-cutting, confinement, bashings, indiscriminate caning, gags, straightjackets, and repeated "low diets"' (Scrivener 1996).

Poetics of resistance and giving voice to the silenced

Poring through the primary archives, I was often struck most deeply when confronted with the girls' own words, particularly in handwritten evidence preserved in the Colonial Secretary correspondence in NSW State Archives. As one girl blithely observed, she could yield to a life of prostitution or starve to death (the Newcastle doctor's records and police reports showed that girls as young as eleven were involved in the sex industry). The sister of another girl, responding to criticisms regarding their living conditions, said 'people get used to anything from constant suffering and misery'. The girls were also well aware that they were regarded as inferior: 'I would not pray because I did not feel fit to pray'.

Eliza O'Brien had launched the first of many daring escapes from the school. From her isolation cell following the first of these breakouts, she declared: 'I would rather be torn limb from limb and go to hell than go to school'. Eliza's fading words jumped off the grey page where I found them—I wondered if her breath had seeped into these pages whose faint must I was now inhaling. She and her cohort's determined and repeated revolts prompted questions from the colonial authorities in Sydney. The surviving correspondence between the school and the Colonial Secretary's office is a rich repository of handwritten testaments and witness accounts from the girls and their captors. While the school officials condemned the girls as 'pernicious', 'blasphemous' and 'ungovernable', the girls' own testimonies suggest they were rebelling against unjust handling, particularly of the younger girls. Added to this, girls 'with a past' were singled out for especially harsh treatment:

> I used improper language … at muster for which I was locked in a cell. I assisted the others in breaking out of the cell … My reason for saying I would strike Mrs Ravenhill was because she got me put in a cell … for interfering with the punishment of the younger girls. (Testimony of Elizabeth Morgan)

> I am now confined in the cell for that. My reason for so doing is because Mrs King … speaks unkindly to us and throws up our past life telling us we are the sweepings of Sydney streets. (Testimony of Eliza O'Brien)

Newspaper accounts also lend life and colour to the girls' all-but-forgotten history, though always tainted with sensation and a hint of 'scandal':

oaths and wild shrieks:
youngsters inside
the walls yell.

A stout girl of seventeen
or eighteen is
marched off by the police;

another
throws herself
on the gravelled roadway and
hammers the constable's feet.

Hammer! hammer! hammer!
at the yard gate,
at the back.

The authorities, paralysed,
consult together,
telegraph to Sydney
for instructions.

(Casey 'Bedlam in the Barracks', forthcoming in *Hecate*, 2022)

The most comprehensive secondary account of the girls' experiences at the school is in a database created by Newcastle historian, Jane Ison. There are a small number of other secondary sources, including writings by David Eastburn (2017), Ann Varelle Hardy (2014), Naomi Parry (2012), and the University of Newcastle Coal River Working Party Initiative (2014). Until now, there has been no correlation back to the significance of the Irish famine in the histories of more than one quarter of the girls.

My purpose in embarking on this project is to restore voice to those who had been 'silenced' in the archives—particularly the voices of the Irish famine-linked girls of Newcastle Industrial School, who seemed to me, a small, but important unwritten chapter in Irish-Australian history. The question was how to bring their complex history to light in a way that might be as impactful as their vivid manifestation to me though my experiences of the 'thin place' of the archives. After all, I could not take each person by the hand through the hundreds of tag-eared pages of cursive tied with fraying string scattered amongst row upon row of boxes in the basement of the state archives, or through every digitised police record, ship's manifest and gaol admission.

How to tell my ghosts' stories

In considering how I might best tell the complex history of 'my girls', the words of Arundhati Roy kept floating back to me:

> Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness—and our ability to tell our own stories. (Roy 2016)

This idea of laying siege to empire had a particular appeal given my upbringing in the 'rebel county' of Clare in the west of Ireland, and within a culture which has, since the times of the ancient Celts, used poetry as a tool of political resistance. Unearthing these girls' histories using direct quotations from the colonial authorities—now refracted through the prism of time—presented itself as a means of both reframing their stories and mocking or shaming the historical regime which had directed their abuse, humiliation and silencing.

Capturing the human story behind this history is at the heart of what I am about, not least as it is a narrative with threads that tug at my own family history. Jeanine Leane's discussion of 'memory politics' resonates deeply—how it can:

> examine ways in which the past still haunts us and maintains its influence on the present, particularly how the layers of meaning in events or texts previously consigned to history's shadows, can be exposed through creative expression. (Leane 2017)

This echoes Michel Foucault's observation that:

> there is barely a society without its major narratives, told, retold and varied; formulae, texts, ritualised texts to be spoken in well-defined circumstances; things said once, and conserved because people suspect some hidden secret or wealth lies buried within. (Foucault 2002: 220)

How, as Foucault noted:

> it is in squeezing the individual event, in directing the resolving power of historical analysis … that we gradually perceive—beyond battles, decisions, dynasties and assemblies—the emergence of those massive phenomena of secular or multi-secular importance. (Foucault 2002: 230)

Searching back through the archived layers—through newspaper reports, court proceedings, police reports and colonial correspondence—these girls' histories revealed a pattern. The vocabulary and attitudes applied to them exposed how they had been regarded and treated as lesser. As Kierkegaard put it, 'life at any given moment cannot ever really be fully understood; exactly because there is no single moment where time stops completely in order for me to take position going backwards' (Kierkegaard reprint 1997: 306). In a similar vein, Nardi Simpson has written how creating a written record 'complicates things':

> Writing down our transaction freezes the words. They grow cold quickly because, while the conversation lasts, the people who inspired it are missing, their energy is dispersed and the connection is paused … This is what usually happens when you try to keep things forever … What was real then may not be real now. (Simpson 2021)

It is only in revisiting the archive now, in light of all that has transpired since these records were first created, that we can see how the discrimination these girls faced as a result of their poor, Irish, Catholic origins resulted in considerably less favourable treatment. How that in turn led to fewer, poorer options and ultimately to repeated, intergenerational incarcerations. Looking back now, the archives reveal not only how those girls were overrepresented in the prison and industrial school records, but—particularly when viewed alongside the larger colonial history—why.

Writing the political

Leane explained the importance of the pursuit of truth and meaning through re-examining the archives of our past as a means of 'debunking myths … through excavating, resurfacing, and resurrecting and gathering buried, dormant links … through stories … to re-member and remember' (Leane 2017). This kind of revivification was also envisaged by Foucault: 'The archive is not that which despite its immediate escape, safeguards the event of the statement'. On the contrary, he argued that by revisiting archives whose meaning has been eroded by time, we 'may make possible the miracle of their resurrection' (Foucault 1972: 129). Simpson explained something similar: 'By allowing the context of giver, receiver, place and time to be outside yourself, you are free to think and to dream' (Simpson 2021).

In bringing 'my girls' back to life, I was seeking to decolonise their memories, their legacies—to do something akin to Leane's mission in releasing our ghosts from a double-imprisonment. As she pointed out, 'the "cardboard prison" of the state archive has been an active agent in the colonial structure, dispossessing and dismembering family histories, memories and stories'

(Leane 2017). As I worked to free 'my girls', other ghosts began to awaken in my personal archive, my own lived memories of conversations with my grandparents. Into the girls' stories, I began to interweave accounts passed down orally in my own family—the house I grew up in had been burnt to the ground by British soldiers in 1921, my 13-year-old grandfather and his family barely escaping with their lives; elsewhere, at 16, my grandmother had been held at gunpoint for failing to comply with a British soldier's instructions; decades later, my rural Irish accent and black clothes singled me out to be held at London airport for questioning on the day of an Irish terrorist's funeral.

In my earlier writing about 'my girls' for the *Irish Times*, I had taken a braided essay approach which is most effective, as Nicole Walker observed, 'where the political and the personal are trying to explain and understand each other' (Walker 2017). This was also useful in that, as Walker pointed out, this form of writing lends itself to resistance. The response to my essays had been resoundingly positive—the pieces featured in the paper's most-read items both in the weeks of publication and in the year of publication. Braiding has remained intrinsic to the way I am writing these narratives through poetry and lyric essay:

> Her bruises communing with mine to light a stony path between times. The more I see her blamed for her misfortunes, the more my heart races for her vindication. Each time I hear her words denied, her testimony rewritten, that old, too-familiar sour breath steals across my cheek: 'No-one will believe you', my truths as inconvenient as hers. (Casey '*Scáth*: Falling Upwards', 2022: n.p.)

In my previous essays I had written about being 'haunted' by these lost girls. Pondering the ghosts who had inspired her writing, Penni Russon said they 'represent unresolved histories and the stories that loop through time and involve themselves with the living' (Russon 2018). The human story behind my work loops from a time long before the famine in Ireland (when the Penal Laws permitted my people's lands to be seized, our language, culture and customs prohibited), winding through the injustices of the famine and the flight of Irish refugees to Australia, and on through the lives of their children and descendants here, to the present where echoes of Australia's earliest refugees and removed children still resonate. Threaded through this story are remnants of my own family's experiences during British occupation of Ireland—stories never before recorded. There are interconnected relationships of narratives here that still drive choices being made every day at every level of our society:

> if you were a Wollemi pine, say,
> it's five seconds ago, or a brain
> coral polyp, maybe last Wednesday.
> For a child in Sudan, it's today
> and every day since the beginning of time
> stretching in one long line until you die.
> For your child or mine, maybe not
> in their lifetime, but for their child maybe
> it's the day after tomorrow because
> the house I lived in burned
> to the ground as a reprisal by colonisers
> in my grandfather's time and half
> my country died or were exiled
> because of politics, climate or a mistaken

belief that good people won't fail
to do something, which boils
down to numbers no matter
what time you make it.
(Casey 'Small Change', *New Zealand Poetry Society Anthology*, 2022)

Truth Commission

Laura Wexler has observed that creative non-fiction writers are ideally positioned to be 'one-person "truth and reconciliation" commissions, to uncover "the small stories that have gone missing"' and to 'unearth lives at the margin of bigger events' (Wexler 2001). This perfectly echoes my purpose with the creative writing related to this research. Referring to the 'slow-motion suicide of scholarly history', Kiera Lindsey noted that 'history has always been influenced by both the scientific and the artistic' and that 'we need to find new, more flexible ways' of reviving history (Lindsey 2021). In grappling with the debate as to how far creative writing can or should go in supplementing history, Eleanor Sweetapple questioned 'whether we can make moral judgements about people in the past and whether even the most careful historian can tell an unbiased version of the past' (Sweetapple 2015). This issue is front-of-mind for me, as is Sweetapple's admission: 'at times I have struggled to find a voice that is suited to the story without being self-consciously "historical"' (Sweetapple 2015). I will return to this later in discussing my approach to writing research-based poetry.

In balancing the integrity of the research with the creative approach, I relate particularly to the assertion by Drusilla Modjeska that there is:

> an epistemological necessity for even the most literary of nonfiction writers to act as the lens through which we can trust, or evaluate, or revisit for ourselves the selection, presentation and interpretation of the lives and events put before us. The nonfiction writer might use the techniques of fiction to bring lifeness to her lives and to conjure the paradox of difference. But her pact with the reader, and her subject, returns always to the record, however patchy, however interrupted, from which she works. (Modjeska 2015)

My pact to truth-tell is not only with the reader: it is also with my research subjects ('my girls') and with my other ghosts, my family members who are also breathed back to life in this narrative. I have chosen to write a portion of this work in lyric essay form as a kind of 'dialogue' with the reader, allowing me to 'question' and observe as if we are collaborators sharing the journey. In this way, I can navigate gaps in the history without inventing answers, while maintaining trust with both the reader and my research subjects. I especially like how Nardi Simpson expresses this idea: 'You see, we have left space for you even though you are not here yet' (Simpson 2021). Here is an example of how I have tried to open that space for the reader:

> And the slowly spiralling calamity … how a small chain of unfortunate incidents—starting with a too-wet spring—led to Eliza's arrest in a brothel at fifteen and all the trouble that followed. How thin she was when I first found her, contusions still blooming in the translucency of her skin. How my own world had darkened, warped at the same age. Would it matter if I told you that Eliza is already dead? (Casey '*Scáth*: Falling Upwards', 2022: n.p.)

Language of Resistance

Returning to the issue of political resistance or protest, I felt I could embody this within the form of the writing in other ways. Katie Holten presaged how my approach took shape:

> In history class we were taught that British landowners took our food, exacerbating a natural famine with their ideology; evicted us from our homes, creating waves of immigrants … And beat Irish out of us … Our native language was seen as a threat. Like many minority languages, it is more than just a means of communication, it is an integral part of our indigenous consciousness. (Holten 2020)

Just as Holten has sought to 'decolonise language', I am integrating our native tongue (*Gaeilge*, Irish) into this writing as a political act. This also 're-members', as Leane put it, my grandparents' experiences and connects my heritage (and of course my positionality) with the family histories of my research subjects:

> In that shadowy aftermath, swaddling her newest born in their windblown shelter, did Elizabeth murmur A *chuisle*, *a chuisle* to soothe her hungry cries? All the while, gnawing at the raw nerve: how to feed one more mouth, however small? *A chuisle*, as my Granda McMahon had whispered to me, held high in his arms—uttered always under his breath because he had been beaten as a child for speaking our outlawed native tongue aloud. Another silencing echoing through our story. (Casey '*Scáth*: Falling Upwards' 2022: n.p.)

In the political context, I was struck too, by the need to recognise the vital significance of First Nations decolonisation in Australia. In doing so, it was important to acknowledge that—though historically subjected to colonial oppression also—my people and I are interlopers here. Doing this in my native language felt right, speaking both politically and personally:

We sit together in a biting wind
at Sydney Cove
while we talk of thin places
and we agree
that this is one of those

filled with the spirits of your people
who had lived here for millennia
and my people who had come
and gone

I say
Tugaim ómós do do sheanóirí a bhí
agus atá ann fós
my words carried on
the bitter breeze
in my native tongue
that was torn from my people
along with our true names,
stories, songs—

(Casey 'On the Eve of All Hallow's Eve', *Cordite*, 2022)

Poetry has been employed as a voice for political resistance in Ireland since ancient Celtic times—when *ard filí* (high poets) were sent into battle to use their superior linguistic skills as emissaries. Later, during British occupation, the *aisling* poetic form emerged, flourishing from the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth. Susan McCann described it as 'a genre that is itself bound up with the very notion of literary and political subversion' (McCann 2010). Pioneered by seventeenth century poets Aogán Ó Rathaille and Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin, the genre has been employed (and also parodied) in more recent times by writers and artists as diverse as poets, Eavan Boland, Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon; musicians, Shane McGowan and the Popes; author, Ciaran Carson; and filmmaker, Neil Jordan. The key feature of this genre is the personification of Ireland as a woman. Following in this grand tradition, I wrote an *aisling* too:

Eyes wide, blazing
hazel against the wild
ochre flame of your hair,
a falling wave—ebbing
of your rebel airs, the rising tide
of your keening

as your fields filled
with the black and fetid—
the bloodied knuckles of desperate
mothers reaping pestilence
from frozen muck to feed
their wailing children

(Casey 'Aisling', *Live Canon Anthology*, 2022)

Poetry and 'expressing the inexpressible'

Janette Hughes has commended poetry for its 'conciseness, its brevity, and its power to convey so much in such a limited space' (Hughes 2007). This sits uneasily alongside my struggle to condense such a lengthy and complex history, while attempting to do justice to 'my girls'. Research-based poetry can be tricky—finding the balance between including too much and saying too little; fine-tuning the voice without appropriating or misrepresenting; being true to my promise of 'witness'.

I took solace from the notion put forward by Maria Lahman, Veronica Richard and Eric Teman that research-based poetry 'can be used as an entry point into expressing the inexpressible' (Lahman, Richard and Teman 2018). I realised I don't need to create a finely detailed oil painting of the particulars—I just need to create a sketch that characterises the salient elements, but most of all that conveys the human impact, that emotes. On archival poetry, Lahman and Richard noted 'The ability to resonate with readers and expose them to a new experience is fundamental to poetry and to qualitative social science' (Lahman and Richard 2014). They suggested that research-based poetry can aim to help readers 'access the essence of the topic at hand' and may be composed of multiple elements 'to create a sense of many people talking or a collective voice' (Lahman and Richard 2014). I used this approach to construct the multi-part poem, 'Othering'.

Leane observed in relation to archival poetry: 'Of particular interest are the cultural metaphors used to describe otherness' (Leane 2017). I was struck reading this several months after writing my poem which I had coincidentally entitled 'Othering', and which had been inspired by recurring motifs I had observed in colonial voices within the archives. This is a long poem in eleven parts, a cento derived from many voices representing colonial authority figures, including police, judges, British authorities in Ireland, Newcastle School officials and the Colonial Secretary's office. By reanimating and echoing these many voices through the tunnel of intervening time, I sought to ring out their shallowness—to expose how their prejudices, their own assumed supremacy, their misguided righteousness and their then unassailable power had so tragically impacted my girls' lives:

Our great difficulty
is to maintain our principle
without starving some
of the perverse creatures—

women and little children
scattered over the turnip fields
like a flock of famishing crows,

devouring the raw turnips,
mothers half naked, shivering
in the snow and sleet, children
screaming with hunger.

[…]

On board the emigration vessels,
fatherless, seduced, one wretched
creature died soon after landing,
having been slung up by the waist
to the rigging when far gone
in pregnancy—by way of punishment.

[…]

Forty thousand pounds worth
of this commodity imported
and maintained at the public expense—
such degraded beings

[…]

Incarnate devils—
one of these girls
spoke freely of her past life:

sixteen months in Goulburn Gaol,
eleven in solitary—
a very small room
with very small grating

[…]

one of the four illused girls.
The same girl again attempted to abscond
by leaping from the dormitory window,
but hurt herself so severely
that, from necessity,
she has been quiet since.

(Casey ‘Othering’, Axon, 2023)

I had done as Leane outlined in creating ‘docu-poetry’ which ‘contains quotations from or reproductions of documents or statements not produced by the writer and relates to historical narratives’ (Leane 2017). Lahman and Richard referred to this as ‘archival or artefact poetry pulling heavily on literary poetry forms such as found poems, including the cento’, a ‘literary patchwork’ (Lahman and Richard 2014). ‘Othering’ is one example, amongst several, of my application of these techniques to revivify and rearticulate voices from the archives.

An essential element of the literary interweaving I am doing involves integrating the girls’ own voices (some are quoted earlier). But, of course, there is so much less material to work from in directly citing the girls—aside from their recorded testimonies from investigations following incidents at the school (which were no doubt culled, curtailed and coerced to some extent), small notations in school and gaol entrance books and very scant newspaper quotations from court appearances, few of their actual words remain. I sought to supplement their voices by occasionally, very selectively, writing in the ‘voice’ of one of the girls:

A bag of bones, she said
    Matron, Mrs Clarke
Leave her away, she said

Cold   as she was:
they thought I couldn’t hear,
but what did I   care?

(Casey ‘Tread Softly’, 2020: n.p.)

As another way of embodying the girls’ own voices, I researched streets songs, bush poetry and ballads, and rhymes from their time. I used these to construct poems in similar styles to reflect the patois and spirit of their era, often intertwined with direct quotes from the girls. I return here to Sweetapple’s discomfort with ‘being self-consciously historical’ (Sweetapple 2015), a threshold I worry I have crossed:

Rock-a-by baby in Darlinghurst Gaol,
When the wind blew, her baby did ail.
When the sun broke, her angel had died,
And Sarah Jane’s heart lay shattered beside.

Rock-a-by baby, sleeping in peace,
Far from the plight at her young mother's feet—
No-one to watch or hold her a spell,
Sarah Jane's rocking alone in her cell.

(Casey 'Lullaby for Sarah Jane', 2020: n.p.)

And from another poem:

This is the sound of the strangers come,
Their clomping boots, a cudgel and gun.
This is the sound of the children's cries,
Under the boughs where their mother lies.

This is the man, and these are the men,
Who have come to crush her over again.

[…]

This is the bed that Catherine made,
Under the boughs where the strangers paid,
For the choice she'd made for her children's sake,
The choice-that-was-no-choice she'd had to make.

(Casey 'Rags and Boughs', forthcoming in *Hecate*, 2022)

As part of my research, I have also undertaken site visits in Newcastle, Maitland, Sydney and Ireland—here I employ sensory observational techniques, journaling, photography and sound recordings to capture ephemeral impressions. I use these in writing both the poetry and prose, to help evoke a sense of the places where 'my girls' were alive and also where they had been interred (either imprisoned or buried). Sometimes, the journey itself became the poem:

beneath a stand
of sprawling figs,
last living witnesses
to Margaret's committal—
Young as this child is,
she was in a frightful state
of disease prevalent amongst
her sex and class of older years—
their broad glossy leaves
alert now in the unearthly
stillness, knuckled limbs
heavy with bequests
of sea-green teardrops,
some bursting, crimson-hearted,
sticky in the dead heat

(Casey 'Chasing Ghosts', *Some Days The Bird*, 2022)

Conclusion

This work of counter-memory espouses the notion that the ghosts of past transgressions remain adrift in the 'thin place' of the archive, ready to be awakened, to have their stories revoiced. Without textual distortion, by availing of the prism of time, poetics of resistance can reveal new truths to help decolonise these ghosts' stories. Since my first encounters with them, I have been haunted by the spectres of Australia's earliest refugees, Irish famine children who suffered a double jeopardy due to colonial injustices in Ireland and Australia. And so, I return over and over to the thin place of the archive, to the excavation and the resurrection. As Nardi Simpson wrote:

> I am training myself to look through its detail, to allow its greens and greys and yellows and pinks to blur together to create a great oneness … Somewhere in the tangle … a border between nations buzzes through the ground. The border is blind, but does not go unseen, so well-known is it in the minds of those living either side.

Notes

The words in the Irish language (*Gaeilge*) translate as follows:

Scáth—Shadow

A chuisle—My pulse

Tugaim ómós do do sheanóirí a bhí agus atá ann fós—I give tribute to your elders who were and who are here still

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About the author

Anne Casey is an Irish-Australian poet and writer, and author of five poetry collections. A journalist and legal author for 30 years, Anne has been ranked in the *Irish Times*' Most Read and is widely published and anthologised internationally. Anne has won literary prizes in Ireland, the UK, the USA, Canada, Hong Kong and Australia, most recently *American Writers Review 2021*. She is a PhD candidate at Sydney's University of Technology examining *The Second-Wave Impact in Australia of the Great Irish Famine*, funded by an Australian Government Research Training Program scholarship. anne-casey.com @1annecasey