

MATTER OF MEMORY

Searching for the presence of Seán MacDiarmada in North Leitrim

Noah Rose

I AM AN artist based in Manchester, England and I have been travelling to and working in Ireland as an artist over many years. I have undertaken major public art commissions in Mayo and Derry and worked in Galway on several projects. This year I have exhibited in Leitrim, Sligo and Enniskillen. For the last two years I have been dividing my time between the North of England and the West of Ireland.

In late 2015 I found out that I had been selected by the Leitrim Sculpture Centre in Manorhamilton to undertake a residency there between March - June 2016. These residencies are funded by the Arts Council and Leitrim County Council. They are much in demand as they allow artists a period of time to immerse themselves in creating new work, with funding to support themselves and buy materials etc. They provide space for the artist to have a solo exhibition at the end, in their great gallery.

This is an invaluable opportunity for any artist. The facilities at Leitrim Sculpture Centre are superb - the residency provides an opportunity to experiment with different materials and processes and learn new skills from other artists who are experts in their own field. The centre provided me great support throughout my time in Manorhamilton, especially from Director Seán O'Reilly, who also curated my exhibition. This kind of facility is not common in Ireland or the UK. I often work on public commissions where the brief is usually very tightly defined



and the demands of the brief come before creative experimentation. This was an exciting opportunity for me to develop new work that was completely free from any brief, and which responded to my own artistic and philosophical concerns. I was excited at the prospect and looking forward to what my residency would bring.

In my proposal to the Sculpture Centre I had talked about my interest in stone as a material that was intrinsically tied to the

■ **Drawing at the MacDiarmada House — the view, the memorial, the drawing, etching process, the final print etc.**

landscape, and that had been used as a material for memorials down the ages. I have a longstanding interest in megalithic structures and the landscape of North Leitrim and the surrounding counties is incredibly rich in megalithic remains. I am fascinated about what these structures can tell us about the people who built



them, their culture, their beliefs, particularly in respect of their veneration of the dead. I wondered at the choice of stone as a material for commemoration from the earliest times and whether the nature of stone itself was that it acted as a repository for memory.

In addition, I had been studying Irish history for some time and of course 2016 is the centenary year of the Easter Rising. Through reading Diarmuid Ferriter, Charles Townshend and other historians, I became interested in Seán MacDiarmada and his role in the Rising. It seemed that for a long time he had been regarded as something of a minor player in the Rising and certainly had not been accorded as much interest as say Pearse or Connolly. Yet this view has recently been subject to much reappraisal and as Gerard MacAtasney wrote in his book of the same name, MacDiarmada could be seen as 'The Mind of the Revolution'.

Who was this man who came from humble origins in Kiltyclogher, and what was his legacy, what presence remained in the area? Before visiting Manorhamilton for the first time I realised from studying the map just how close Kiltyclogher was to Manorhamilton and also to the border with Fermanagh. The border and its often troubled history has fascinated me since my work in Derry during 2003-05, and of course its very reason for existing comes down to Partition and the War of Independence, direct consequences of the Rising which MacDiarmada planned, helped to deliver and was ultimately killed for.

As well as exploring stone as a material with the capacity to hold memory, I am interested in the process of memorialisation and have studied memorials around



the world. There are two memorials to Seán MacDiarmada — his formal memorial statue at the crossroads in the centre of Kiltyclogher, and also his family cottage at Coranmore, a few miles away, which has been preserved in more or less

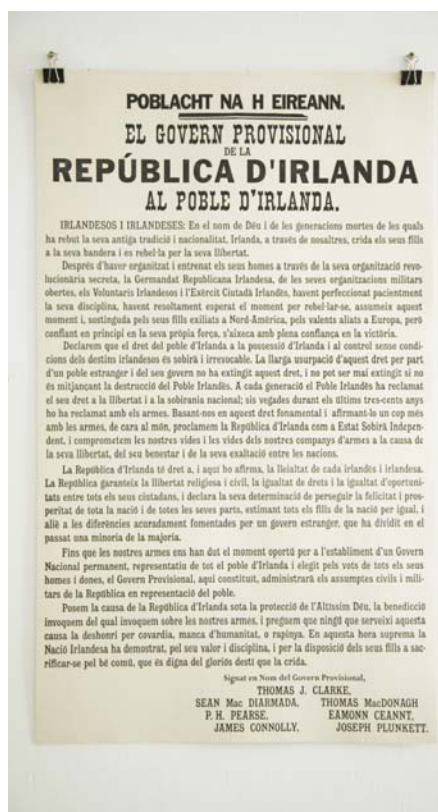


its original state as a national monument. I was intrigued to study both of them and make some sort of artistic response as part of my work. Although the focus of my work at the sculpture centre was sculptural, as an artist I work across many media and I wanted to include drawing and printmaking within this new body of work. I decided to make a series of studies of the MacDiarmada house and memorial, and see if I could capture something of the essence of both of these and set them alongside similar studies of megalithic tombs - memorial structures and houses of the dead from a much earlier age. As well as making studies of ancient tombs at Carrowmore, the Cavan Burren, and Prince Connell's Grave near Kiltyclogher, I spent a lot of time at the MacDiarmid House. I am hugely grateful to the Kiltyclogher Heritage Centre especially Paul Gibson and also Pat Fox for allowing me access to the house on several occasions. I spent time there walking around the house, making sketches, taking photographs and exploring different views before deciding on what would become the definitive view, of the hearth in the living room - with its stone flagged floor and of course the stone hearth itself. This would have been the central space of the family home and would have witnessed many conversations, stories, singing and celebrations over the years. During the course of three sittings on different days I made a detailed drawing which took in a particular view from the bench at the far wall, looking over the hearth with its cooking implements and ornaments on the mantelpiece to the open door and window, with its views over Leitrim and Fermanagh. During this time, many visitors came to see the place and I was struck by the way in which people are drawn to

the house that was owned by the MacDiarmada family before and after Seán's lifetime, which nurtured the young MacDiarmada and which has taken on some aspects of a place of pilgrimage, a place where people go to commune with the past.

In addition, I studied the stone memorial statue. It's a subtle and moving statue, with none of the pomp and glory that often is used to portray dead heroes. MacDiarmada looks quiet, determined but reflective, and it is on closer inspection that the statue reveals some interesting details. The stone wall against which the figure rests is of course the wall at Kilmainham Gaol where the seven signatories were executed, he stands leaning against it with one leg slightly pushed forward — MacDiarmada contracted Polio in 1910 and walked with a limp, which was in fact the way he was identified during the roundup by the British Army after the Rising. Most intriguing of all is the piece of cloth that MacDiarmada is shown holding in his left hand. This is the blindfold which he was given to wear at his execution but which he chose not to use, instead meeting the gaze of the firing squad with a determined challenge to the end. This detail interest me greatly as it says something of the way in which memorials can be said to embody virtues or noble ideals.

Incidentally, the memorial statue was made by sculptor Albert Power, an eminent Irish sculptor of the early twentieth century who achieved notable success with commissions for statues or busts of nationalist heroes including Terence McSweeney, Michael Collins, Arthur Griffiths, Cathal Brugha and Eamon De Valera. On the plinth of the MacDiarmada

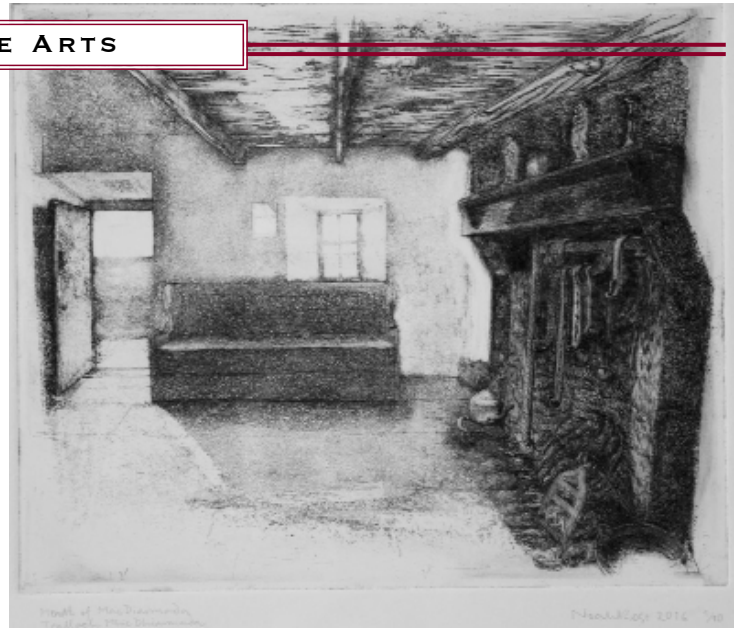
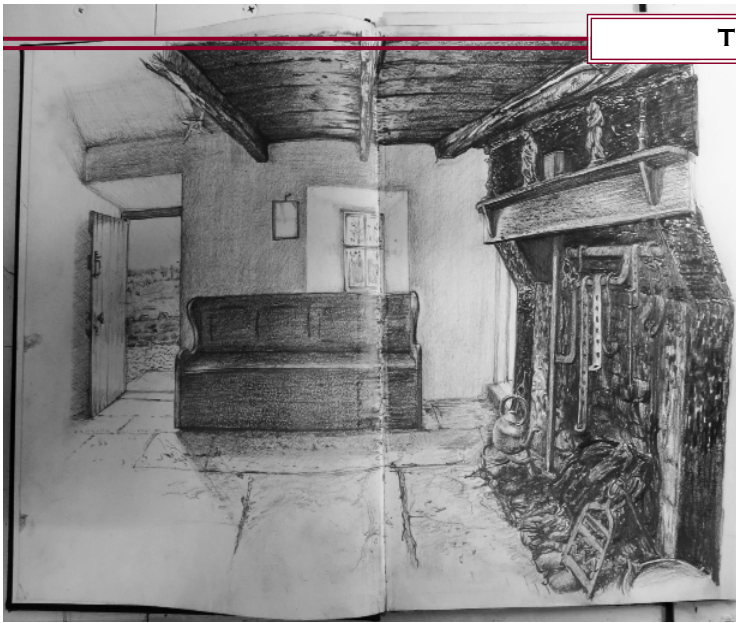


statue are several inscriptions including his name in English, John McDermott on one side and in Irish on the other. On the front face of the plinth, above the name and just below the feet of the statue is carved the single word 'Executed'. A bald statement, and still slightly shocking reminder of what happened and an exhortation to remember the man and what he stood for and what he died for. Albert Power himself died at the age of 54 as the result of an accident in his studio. I considered calling my drawing 'Executed by Power' as I liked the double meaning, but in the end settled for 'The Unused Blindfold' for its more suggestive qualities.

The process of converting these drawings into the finished work was interesting also. I made copperplate etchings of both these images using Hard Ground, Drypoint and Aquatint - all processes with many hundreds of years of tradition. I studied the work of great printmakers like

Rembrandt to try to learn how they had made this medium come alive with detail, capturing nuance, subtle gestures and atmospheres. The Leitrim Sculpture Centre also has a great printmaking workshop and I spent a lot of time in there with the various processes, trying to capture the atmosphere of the MacDiarmada Hearth and the memorial. Printmaking is a time-consuming business, with a number of distinct stages, from the original drawing to tracing the image onto the copperplate which has to be carefully prepared with Hard Ground wax and then delicately scratching away at the wax to reveal fine lines of bare metal which then go into the acid bath, which etches into the surface of the copper. Finally, the plate is cleaned, inked and printed onto specially prepared paper. Each of these processes is a kind of translation, a retelling of the idea or the story, and I liked the way this felt like a continuation of the process by which stories told about people continue their memory after they have gone.

A longstanding interest of mine which came to the fore in my work in Leitrim is with language and cultural identity. During the thirty odd years I have been travelling to Ireland, the Irish language to me has always seemed beautiful but unknowable, the words so different, the spelling and sentence structures so odd, the letterforms themselves so distinctive. During my time in Manorhamilton I had the pleasure of finally starting to learn the language and although still only a beginner, I began to understand some of the ways it works and to understand something of the relationship between the language and the culture and history of this island.



This sense of the language embodying the identity of a culture became integral to my work and I had a very fruitful collaboration with translator Caoimhín Ó Súilleabháin, who translated my poem 'What Matter'. This led to my main work for the exhibition in Manorhamilton, 'What Matter / Cén t-údar'— a large sculptural/ text-based installation comprising 41 pieces of found Leitrim limestone mounted on hand-curved steel poles installed in the floor of the LSC Gallery. These stones contained the words of my poem, translated into Irish by Caoimhín, and carved by me by hand in traditional Cló Gaelach script. I was very fortunate during my time in Manorhamilton to learn new skills from several of the expert artists and long-time associates of Leitrim Sculpture Centre - especially Jackie McKenna and Seamus Dunbar in the techniques of stonecarving and letter-cutting, and also Cróna Gallagher in printmaking. I made numerous other sculptural pieces and a series of prints in my time in Leitrim. Several of these were the previously mentioned etchings of megalithic tombs, but also of note was a very different type of print - a Letterpress print with an accompanying sound piece, 'La Proclamació de 1916/ Forógra na Poblachta i gCatalóinis'

The 1916 proclamation of the Irish Republic (of which Seán MacDiarmada was the second signatory and which he helped to write) is perhaps the best known example of a document which embodies Irish independence, the spirit of nationhood which was roused in the poetic language that was printed on a thousand posters and pasted on walls across Dublin during the Easter Rising in April 1916. Its words, still powerful and evocative today are well known, and this is partly due to the visual recognition associated with the image of the poster itself. Only a handful of the original documents remain intact and are preserved in, for example, the National Library as a valuable precious artifact, but the nature of the technology used to produce it, printing, was such that it was intended to be mass-produced, ubiquitous and to get its message across everywhere.

I researched the story of the design and printing of the original proclamations (in the basement of Liberty Hall on Easter Sunday 1916). It's a fascinating story and I was interested both in the early 20th century printing technologies and the artistic qualities of the letterpress print form and the way in which text-based posters have been used to mark historical

events. With this in mind I researched the design and production of the original proclamation in great detail (paper size, which fonts were used, how the lack of letters and the antiquated machine used produced 'errors' in the original prints, etc.) and reproduced it in a modern letterpress print (using a 1961 machine at the fantastic Barking Angels Press near Manorhamilton) that was as faithful to the original as I could make it, with one crucial detail: my new version of the proclamation is translated into Catalan. I had the text translated into Catalan by artist Azahara Cerezo, who I worked with in Girona two years ago. Azahara herself reads the proclamation in Catalan in the accompanying sound piece.

Catalan of course is a language associated very much with an independence movement, although Catalunya is still constitutionally a part of Spain, the majority of Catalan people have consistently voted for independence in recent years and this situation appears to be in flux again as I write this. What does this tell us about the role the nation state plays in the collective imagination in today's Europe? What does this tell us about the relationship between language and cultural identity? The Catalan lan-

guage is a crucible of culture and a source of pride for the Catalan people, partly because it was so deeply suppressed under the Franco dictatorship. In Azahara's reading, there is a clear sense of the sound, the rhythm, the feel of the Catalan language and perhaps of the universal desire to

be heard in your own voice, to ignite thought and feeling. It is when she pronounces the name of Seán MacDiarmada in a Girona accent that the full force of the ideas that were born in a small cottage near Kiltyclogher take on a new resonance in a 21st century European setting.

Biography: Noah Rose

Noah Rose's work crosses a range of art forms and disciplines including sculpture, drawing, printmaking, photography, furni-



ture/ architectural design, typography, linguistics, cartography, psychogeography and archival collection, and is developed through processes of research, dialogue and social engagement.

Trained at Manchester Metropolitan University, Rose has worked as a practising artist since 1991 completing over 50 projects made for public spaces outside the gallery in over 80 locations across Britain and Ireland, as well as across continental Europe. In 2014, he was selected to work

on the 'Changing Tracks' public art project, that took place in County Mayo in Ireland, Girona in Catalunya and Northamptonshire in England, and was part-funded by

the EU Culture Programme. Since then he has been working between England and Ireland, as well as continuing to develop projects and exhibiting in Catalunya. In addition to his own art practice, he has a parallel practice in creative education, as an artist and facilitator of Creative Education projects with schools and museums, and as a Visiting and Associate Lecturer in universities and art schools in England and Catalunya.

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SNIPPET

MARGARET OF NEW ORLEANS MARDI GRÁ FESTIVAL JULY 2016

Carrigallen was the town for the celebration of the first Mardi Grá Margaret of New Orleans Jazz, Trad and Food festival. It was a great success. Next year's festival, also to be held in July, promises to be even more successful! If you would like to be part of it, contact the committee via email or the website.

email: mardigra2016@gmail.com

www: www.margaretmardigra.com

Photos: Tony Fahy

