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## "Then to death walked, softly smiling": Violence and martyrdom in modern Irish Republican Ballads

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# “Then to Death Walked, Softly Smiling”: Violence and Martyrdom in Modern Irish Republican Ballads

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**Abstract.** This article critically considers the representation of death within the song tradition of modern Irish Republicanism. I explore how such representations have changed in parallel with the various ideological metamorphoses that Irish Republicanism has undergone, specifically in the twentieth century. I argue that the centrality of self-sacrifice has resulted in the development of ballad narratives that deliberately obfuscate on the issue of Republican violence, resulting in the deaths of all Republican militants (regardless of cause or context), ultimately portrayed as a form of heroic self-martyrdom.

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**Achoimre.** San alt seo, déantar anailís chriticiúil ar léiriú an bháis i dtraidisiún amhránaíocht Phoblachtach na hÉireann. Tugtar faoi deara na hathruithe a déirigh don léiriú seo mar throradh ar na claochlaithe idé-eolaíochta éagsúla a tháinig ar an bPoblachtachas le linn an fichiú haois go háirithe. Maítear ann go maolaítear foréigean Poblachtach sna bailéid atá faoi chaibidil d’aon ghnó, chun bás an mhíleataigh Phoblachtaigh a chur in iúl mar fhéiniobairt laochúil, beag beann ar chúis nó ar chomhthéacs.

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Since the late eighteenth century, the political ballad has proven to be one of the most enduring and popular genres within the traditional song canon in Ireland, with output documenting the national struggle displaying both longevity and ubiquity (McCann 1995:52–54; McGimpsey 1982:7; McLaughlin and McLoone 2012:2; Zimmerman 1967:9–10). Historically, such narratives have displayed a broad and diverse sociocultural and political scope, with works documenting the deaths of militants occupying a notably prominent position within the tradition. This article examines how specific ideological tropes evident within modern Irish Republicanism have been represented and interpreted

within the broad canon of Republican death ballads.<sup>1</sup> An overview of some of the more dominant ideological tenets of Irish Republicanism is presented in order to provide a framework within which these death narratives may be contextualized. An analysis of a diverse body of musical work is undertaken so as to evaluate the representation of these ideological tropes via the medium of the popular political ballad in Ireland. Particular attention will be paid to time frames in which the motifs of martyrdom and self-sacrifice have predominated in Irish Republicanism, such themes being particularly prevalent during the various periods of Republican hunger strikes. The research will also demonstrate that such representations of sacrificial death are not solely restricted to ballads that detail acts of self-immolation; instead, these representations enjoy a significantly broader commonality across the canon, thus reflecting the widespread elevation of the tropes of sacrificial endurance and heroic martyrdom within the modern militant Republican tradition.

### **From Disaster to Triumph: The “Perverse Psyche of Republicanism”**

While established commercial, social, and cultural links between the islands of Ireland and Britain have been documented from the fourth century onward (English 2006:29), the landing of Anglo-Norman forces in 1169 is traditionally regarded within popular Republican narrative as marking the initiation of a protracted campaign for the overall conquest of the entire island (Boyle 2011:93; Jackson 1971:23, 36–40).<sup>2</sup> The centuries of war and plantation that ensued would ultimately lead to the complete displacement of the old Gaelic *clann* structures and the consolidation of British rule throughout Ireland.<sup>3</sup> Campaigns—armed and otherwise—in opposition to the British politico-military presence in Ireland have been well documented within scholarly discourse and do not require further attention within the parameters of the current research. However, such campaigns (particularly those from the early twentieth century onward), along with the intervening periods of relatively uneasy peace, have been regularly characterized by ideological splits within the armed groupings involved, which in turn have been mirrored by fissures in their respective political wings. The pervasiveness of such organizational fracturing is noteworthy in that in the majority of instances, it has not been on the basis of the tactics employed; instead, it has primarily stemmed from the perceived “abandonment”—imagined or genuine—of what have come to be regarded as core ideological principles (Currie and Taylor 2011:98–99, 102–3; Sanders 2011:1–17).<sup>4</sup> Despite such metamorphoses, Irish Republicanism has always retained as fundamental the pursuit and establishment of an independent all-island republic free from all external political and military involvement. This objective is to be pursued by all means available,

up to and including the use of physical force. While the “armed struggle” is described by Republicans as “an option of last resort” (B. O’Brien 1995:358), it has through time come to be regarded by some as constituting a *de facto* component of Republican ideology.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for its more essentialist practitioners and advocates, political violence transcends mere tactic and has become an integral ideological principle in itself (Currie and Taylor 2011:103),<sup>6</sup> a phenomenon that has infused the ideology with what Richard English has termed “a militancy proving more a matter of intense commitment than of practical fruitfulness” (2006:122). In tandem with these objectives and tactics, Irish Republicanism also exhibits a deeply rooted, quasi-theological adherence to self-sacrifice as an elementary prerequisite of national liberation, an ideological construct most famously extolled by Patrick Pearse at the graveside of Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa in 1915.<sup>7</sup>

Such essentialism gained popularity from the late nineteenth century onward (Sweeney 2004:338; Zimmerman 1967:66, 69) but became deeply calcified within the Republican belief structure in the aftermath of the Easter 1916 Rising, following the execution of all sixteen of the principal leaders.<sup>8</sup> Easter Week proved a totemic event in the Irish national struggle that for Republicans had “all the sacrificial significance of High Mass” (Coogan 2005:3), thus forever cementing the role of the sacrificial martyr within the physical-force tradition.

The predominance of, and rigid adherence to, such an essentialized ideological construct has regularly obfuscated—and, indeed, often superseded—the politico-military activity actually engaged in by Republicans. Thus, to the most doctrinaire and dogmatically pure Republicans, military failure via ideological adherence will ubiquitously trump political gain via expedient pragmatism (Frampton 2011:28, 83–85; Ó Broin 2009:13; Sanders 2011:9). This paradoxical construct has created what Patrick Bishop and Eamon Mallie have observed to be “the perverse psyche of Republicanism . . . turn[ing] disaster into an emotional triumph” (1987:455), a trope that predominates in the musical works under review.

The concept of national freedom requiring a symbolic cleansing of the nation’s soul is not restricted to the actual death itself but is also evident within the hagiographic treatment of protracted endurance and suffering within Republican popular culture. Tim Pat Coogan describes this ideological binary as “a dual standard of endurance as well as infliction” (1980:14), citing a speech by Irish Republican Army (IRA) hunger striker Terence MacSwiney as typical of the double-edged dynamic that predominates in physical-force Republicanism in Ireland.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Richard Kearney notes that “the violence of the IRA is unusual in that it is as much a violence suffered as a violence inflicted,” arguing that Republican armed activity essentially comprises “a violence to end all violence. . . . [It is] ‘sacrificial,’ in that it promotes suffering and bloodshed as prerequisite to ultimate justice, freedom and peace” (1980–81:62).

Kearney further observes that Republican violence promotes an ideological belief system that "invests their campaign of 'resistance and suffering' with the sanctity of an ancestral rite. The sacrificial victim must undergo his passion and crucifixion before arising to liberate his community from its bondage. By commemorating the violence of their Fenian forebears, the IRA seem to be operating on the prerational and atavistic conviction that they can fulfil the redemptive promise of their martyrdom" (1980–81:62–63).

While there is manifestly a "profoundly religious, Catholic quality" (English 2004:210) to this aspect of Republican ideology, self-immolation does have a well-attested secular tradition in Ireland as far back as the Brehon Laws of the pre-Norman era, during which it had significant legal standing (Coogan 1980:15; Kelly 1988:182–83, 241).<sup>10</sup> Despite such well-established historical origins, the ideological centrality of self-immolation within Republicanism only came to prominence in the early twentieth century. It should be noted that the term "self-immolation" can often be the subject of academic subjectivity and reinterpretation, and the term is used advisedly within the current research.

Michael Biggs describes the phenomenon of self-immolation as "an individual intentionally killing himself or herself (or at least gambling with death) on behalf of a collective cause," noting that "although the word 'immolation' strictly means 'sacrifice,' since the 1960s it has become synonymous with fiery death. My definition of self-immolation encompasses other methods of self-inflicted death" (2005:173, 174). He further broadens the definition by asserting that "martyrdom can resemble self-immolation" (174). He does, however, stop short of describing hunger striking as such, claiming that such death can be averted by the granting of concessions: "With self-immolation, by contrast, death is not conditional on the opponent's (in)action" (174).

Within academic discourse on Irish Republicanism, the term "self-immolation" is used consistently, often in significantly differing contexts. Hunger striking is referenced as self-immolation by George Sweeney in two separate articles, within both their texts and their titles: "Nor were the ten men who died at the Maze prison [in 1981] the first to do so from self-immolation" (1993:10); "Human sacrifice and self-immolation were prevalent both in Celtic culture and in pagan Irish mythology" (2004:337); "Self-immolation through hunger striking is not a phenomenon peculiar to Ireland" (343). Timothy Shanahan likewise comments: "Some of those who embarked on self-immolation [in 1981] were prevented from carrying out their martyrdoms by family interventions" (2009:51). Seán Moran goes beyond the parameters of the Irish hunger strike tradition, conflating self-immolation with the British execution of sixteen Republicans in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising: "[Patrick] Pearse recognized that this theology led to self-immolation, exchanging a wretched existence for everlasting life and eternal victory" (1991:20). D. George Boyce deploys similar usage, referencing "the personal and psychological reasons why, in the end,

self-immolation was [Patrick Pearse's] only choice. Death compensated for failure in life" (1996:168). Thus, the sacrificial deaths narrated in the ballads under review, while not falling into the strict definition of self-immolation traditionally deployed, do have a profoundly self-immolative *context* within the Irish national struggle. That this ideological shift toward the lionizing of martyrdom was also reflected in the attendant ballad tradition has been noted by George Zimmerman (1967:69–72), who remarked that the “doctrine of ‘blood sacrifice’ and of messianic martyrdom does not belong to the nineteenth century street ballads. . . . It became really popular after Easter Week [1916]” (71–72).<sup>11</sup>

Despite the longevity of the Republican song tradition previously referenced, the position of such ballads within Irish folk music has undergone some considerable change in recent decades in terms of performance, style, and popularity. Until the 1970s, such works enjoyed a broad cultural appeal and were popularly taught to children in primary schools. With the emergence of the modern Troubles in the late 1960s, however, the position of Republican ballads (along with many other aspects of Irish cultural life) underwent considerable reevaluation within popular public discourse. Nightly television news reports of bombings and shootings suddenly gave the historical figures in such ballads a modern-day resonance that disconcerted many. May McCann notes that while such ballads “might function in the South [of Ireland] as a nostalgic fireside song . . . in the North [of Ireland] it would be a song of resistance” (2003:927). Framed within the context of an ongoing armed struggle by Republicans, these ballads served as a contemporary (and highly uncomfortable) reminder of the violent origins of the Irish state, with their underlying message of glorious self-sacrifice jarring significantly with the more modern, cosmopolitan, and socially progressive image that the Irish political and economic establishments were keen to project at the time. From the early 1970s onward, Irish government authorities pursued an unstated policy of political and cultural containment of the escalating northern conflict, with the period noted as one of historical revisionism and widespread political censorship (see Corcoran and O’Brien 2005). Republican ballads did not escape such restrictions, with the Irish state public broadcaster RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann) effectively ceasing to play such works on television and radio, albeit via publicly undeclared broadcasting directives.<sup>12</sup> While rigorous academic research on this unofficial ban is scant,<sup>13</sup> an insight into the prevailing censorious atmosphere can be gleaned from the comments of folksinger Christy Moore during a live performance for Republican prisoners at Portlaoise Prison:<sup>14</sup>

This is a song myself and Dónal Lunny wrote a while ago.<sup>15</sup> There’s a music journalist—God be good to him, he’s died since: he was killed in a plane crash—but he hated me altogether. He was always slagging everything I did and everything I ever recorded, but then I recorded this song, and Jaysus [Jesus], he gave it a great

write-up altogether. He said: "It's great to see Christy Moore giving up all that auld political shite and singing a decent love song." Well, he was right, but he didn't really understand what the song was all about, and they played it for about six weeks on RTÉ until some eejit [idiot] in the *Poblacht* [*sic*] wrote what it was about.<sup>16</sup> One of them intellectuals up in Belfast wrote what the song was all about, and it was all over for the song anyway—they banned it straight away.<sup>17</sup>

During this period, censorship of Republican songs was not solely the preserve of state authorities, as there is also widespread evidence of self-censorship by musicians regarding contemporary political violence. Numerous high-profile performers publicly eschewed musical works that were overtly militant, most notably, the internationally acclaimed ballad group The Dubliners. Diarmaid Ferriter notes how the group "stopped singing 'rebel songs' in the 1970s, the climate deeming their Irish ballads politically incorrect" (2012:270).<sup>18</sup> Leading member Ronnie Drew articulated this position in a 2008 interview broadcast by RTÉ: "There were certain IRA songs that we did sing which were funny. Like, at the time, 'The Old Alarm Clock' was funny. . . . I remember in 1969, I said I wouldn't sing another rebel song because of the trouble that was in the North of Ireland, because that would be my contribution. . . . I would be a Republican at heart, [but] when little children start getting killed and . . . stuff like that—I just didn't want to know" (RTÉ 2009). Interestingly, "The Old Alarm Clock" narrates the capture and imprisonment of an IRA man in London during the organization's bombing campaign that lasted from January 1939 to March 1940 and caused the deaths of seven civilians and the execution by hanging of two IRA volunteers. That such a ballad could be regarded as "funny" points to some of the more complex and nuanced aspects (if not, in fact, sheer cognitive dissonance) that pertain to the historical view of physical-force Republicanism in Ireland. Despite these sentiments, The Dubliners did continue to play a number of ballads with overtly physical-force narratives. Examples include "Kelly, the Boy from Killane" and "The Merry Ploughboy," but perhaps as 1798 and 1916 narratives, respectively, the mists of time had clearly blunted the songs' violent edges sufficiently so as to not discomfort the sensibilities of a 1970s audience—or, indeed, a folk group, as the case may be.

As Republican ballads form part of a living folksong tradition, musical arrangements have understandably varied through time, similar to the social, cultural, and political contexts outlined above. The correct method of musical performance is, as ever, within the remit of the individual performer, with varying deliveries possible depending on time, place, and audience. Of the ballads currently under review, all with the exception of "Joe McDonnell" are in major keys and performed as standard I–IV–V arrangements resolving to a tonic.<sup>19</sup> This produces a notably mild musical ambience, along with a considerable degree of lyrical dissonance, given the dark subject matter narrated. Regarding time

signatures, all except one are set to lilting  $\frac{4}{4}$  arrangements, with “Brave Billy Reid” sung in traditional waltz time. Similar to the major key melodies and standard musical progressions used, the deployment of such gentle tempos is again somewhat incongruous, given the songs’ emotionally bleak and thematically violent narratives. Clearly, one can never be fully sure whether this deployment is by accident or by design, so appropriate caution should be exercised before attributing specific motives.

This musical innovation does nonetheless pose an intriguing musicological question: Did ballad writers consciously embrace overtly “softer” musical arrangements so as to subtly reflect the elevation of the self-sacrificing martyr within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Irish Republicanism? Were such keys and time signatures deemed necessary for what are clearly commemorative and quite often hagiographic works?<sup>20</sup> The simplicity of the musical arrangements, while being somewhat typical of traditional Irish folksongs, does provide an indication as to where the importance of these works lies. Such compositions are primarily narrative and secondly musical, a reflection of their commemorative (i.e., past) and inspirational (i.e., contemporary/future) propaganda functions. While it is obviously preferable for the music to complement such lyrics, this is not necessarily regarded as being one of the essential roles of the Republican ballad. Furthermore, an examination of Republican songbooks—particularly those from the mid-twentieth century onward—reveals a significantly large number of ballads that contain no musical notation whatsoever to accompany the texts, again pointing toward the primacy of lyrical content. *Songs of '98: The Year of the French* (1997), for example, provides music for only thirteen of the forty-five ballads included, and one major fiftieth-anniversary commemorative songbook, *The Tricoloured Ribbon* (1966), contains fifty-six ballads without any accompanying music. Similarly, *Songs of Resistance* (2001), the definitive collection of over 120 modern Republican ballads from 1969 onward, again contains no musical notation whatsoever. This is not to suggest, of course, the complete absence of music from all songbooks; however, it does point to the preeminence of the lyrical aspect of the tradition and to the broader propaganda function served by these songs, which, as suggested above, tends to supersede the importance of melody.

Within the broad parameters of folk music, the narrative ballad will always reflect the sociocultural mores of the community to which it finds itself related (Casey, Rosenberg, and Wareham 1972:397–403; Ferris 1970:439–49; Ó Cadhla 2012:69–70). Thus, we may reasonably expect the Republican ballad to provide us with a significant ideological insight into the Irish physical-force tradition itself and, by extension, the community that sustains it to the present day (McGimpsey 1982:7; Zimmerman 1967:9–10). The current research has examined a diverse cross section of death ballads from within the broad repertoire of Republican

song so as to establish how protracted endurance and sacrificial martyrdom—both key ideological tenets of essentialist Irish Republicanism—are promoted within the tradition.

Three distinct subgenres of Republican death narrative have been identified: (1) death via hunger strike; (2) death via state execution; and (3) death via armed confrontation.<sup>21</sup> Being thematically reflective of the underlying political ideology, such works are regularly constructed on the correlated tropes of self-sacrifice and national liberation. This holds true with a notable consistency, despite the markedly different death scenarios narrated (i.e., the dignified hunger striker in his cell versus the unrepentant Fenian on the hangman's scaffold versus the classic depiction of the armed liberation fighter).

While the tropes of self-sacrifice and rebirth are more readily associated with the self-immolative context of the hunger strike, they are also evident—albeit in considerably more nuanced form—in Republican execution ballads. As will be demonstrated, this is due primarily to the protagonists' ability and willingness to absorb British (or, indeed, Irish) state violence and punishment. Such thematic representation is not so readily achieved, however, in ballads narrating Republican deaths in the context of violence that has been perpetrated by Republicans themselves. Here, in clear juxtaposition to the classic MacSwiney maxim, the Republican is not, in fact, enduring but is actually inflicting violence, a narrative feature that has resulted in the development of some interesting literary conventions by ballad writers. While analyzing output from the latter category, I will show that the sacrificial endurance trope of the physical-force tradition is represented by the evasion and blatant obfuscation of any references to acts of Republican violence. In such instances, ballad writers are not simply claiming that Republicans have no responsibility for the violence they inflict; rather, they are stating quite baldly that Republican violence does not, in fact, exist in the first instance, such is the centrality of peaceful self-sacrifice within popular Republican tradition.<sup>22</sup> While the central characters in all three contexts are clearly sacrificing their lives in manifestly different ways, they all share a notable commonality in the eagerness with which they approach, and indeed embrace, their certain death. The narrative impact of such fatalism is that deaths resulting from both execution and armed conflict are elevated into a form of self-immolation within Republican ballad tradition, as will be observed in the following selections.

### **“I Bow My Head to Their Rage and Hate”: Self-Immolation in Republican Song**

As observed, the mythological tropes of self-sacrifice and rebirth became embedded within the Republican psyche post-Easter 1916. One of the prominent

participants in the Rising, Thomas Ashe, penned the autobiographical (and ultimately prophetic) ballad, “Let Me Carry Your Cross for Ireland, Lord!” while imprisoned in England (O’Mahony 2001:13–15).<sup>23</sup> The ballad promotes the motifs of sacrificial endurance preceding a national regeneration, with the narrative conveying a hybridity of religious and political imagery in which Ashe entreats Jesus directly to facilitate Ashe’s own martyrdom. He likens his role within the Irish struggle to that of the Crucifixion, the opening line of each verse repeating the titular invocation. In an echo of a popular Catholic recitation, Ireland is “weak with tears” and portrayed as a long-suffering, lamenting mother, *Róisín Dubh*, who, despite witnessing her own son’s martyrdom, gains solace from the knowledge that his death will alleviate the suffering of others.<sup>24</sup>

The “cause of *Róisín Dubh*” is a cross that Ashe must personally carry so as to enable national resurrection, the elevation of the Irish struggle to that of Jesus’s Crucifixion being a popular dramatic ploy evident throughout Republican ballad tradition. In the opening verse, while acknowledging the unfinished task of 1916, Ashe predicts further unavoidable conflict, stating that for Ireland, “The hour of her trial draws near.” The trope of national rebirth is developed by describing this “trial” in language evocative of a woman in childbirth (“And the *pangs* and the *pain* of the sacrifice / May be *borne* by comrades dear” [emphasis added]). The narrative quickly descends into abject fatalism. While many appear willing to assist Ireland in her hour of need (“Though anxious and all as they are to die / That Ireland may be spared”), Ashe pleads to be singled out for martyrdom (“But, Lord, take me from the offering throng, / There are many far less prepared”).<sup>25</sup>

Verse 2 shows Ashe as having rationalized his decision (“My cares in this world are few”) and actively preparing for a death that will guarantee him glorious immortality (“And few are the tears will fall for me / When I go on my way to You”). His suffering—like that of Christ—will alleviate a similar fate for others, but, perhaps more importantly, it will provide inspirational force to his own generation of Republicans and beyond:

Spare! Oh spare, to their loved ones dear,  
The brother and son and sire,  
That the cause we love may never die  
In the land of our heart’s desire.

The language employed in verse 3 is explicitly sacrificial, with Ashe now actively inviting martyrdom:

Let me suffer the pain and shame,  
I bow my head to their rage and hate  
And I take on myself the blame.  
Let them do with my body whate’er they will.

Again, he offers his life in order to spare others who may rededicate themselves to the completion of the national struggle: "My spirit I offer to You, / That the faithful few who heard her call / May be spared to Róisín Dubh."

A subsequent commemorative ballad, entitled "In Memory of Thomas Ashe," reaffirms the ideological exposition evident in the original work (the ballad was written under the pseudonym "Benmore"; O'Mahony 2001:28). Again, the suffering of Ashe and Ireland is at one with that of Christ, who is addressed directly in the narrative in a notably confrontational tone, an implication, perhaps, that he does not fully appreciate the gravitas of what Ashe has actually endured on both Ireland's and Christ's behalf:

And he bore Your cross for Ireland, Lord,  
And for glorious Mary's name.  
He struggled with a daring soul  
To enrich his country's fame.

Thus, the self-immolation of Ashe has facilitated a welcome martyrdom (and an ensuing immortality) that should not be mourned, as now, "the glory of that cross was his."

Similar to the post-1916 period, the predominance of self-sacrifice and related ideological constructs came very much to prominence during the H-Block hunger strike of 1981.<sup>26</sup> Many ballads were written during the period of the strike itself and in its immediate aftermath, with all following a similar trajectory. One such work, "Ten Deathless Heroes Die and Ireland Lives," provides several illustrative examples of the pervasiveness of the tropes of sacrificial endurance and rebirth within the Irish physical-force tradition (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:17).

This ballad is an almost completely revised version of a previously released work, "Forever on My Mind" (Moore 1984:94); however, there are marked contrasts between the two.<sup>27</sup> The latter is a quasi-sentimental recollection of the hunger strike narrated by a participant in the widespread street protests of the time. Only in verse 1 are we presented with imagery evocative of rebirth and national reawakening ("Darkened years of winter have passed, / Summer waits for spring before it lives"). The imagery of winter is used to describe the years of protest preceding the hunger strike ("Blanket clad and wasted the winter has been long"); however, the arrival of spring—a thinly veiled analogy for national regeneration and liberation—is uncertain, as "no gleam of hope a thoughtless nation gives." Verse 2 follows an essentially commemorative trajectory, stating that the memory of the hunger strikers will remain undiminished in the mind of the narrator, who also describes a sense of collective helplessness at the futility of supportive street protests ("In silence we walked through the streets / As one by one our hunger strikers died"). Here, we are presented with imagery of a

dejected people who are intellectually detached from both the hunger strike and the ongoing conflict and thus in need of regeneration, which will be achieved via the sacrificial endurance of the hunger strikers.

This theme is developed within the reworked narrative, “Ten Deathless Heroes Die and Ireland Lives,” which brings us back onto more familiar territory. The paradoxical wording evident in title is indicative of the previously highlighted ideological juxtapositions that underpin militant Irish Republicanism, with the entire narrative centering on the self-immolation of the hunger strikers as a functional conduit for national rebirth. The ballad opens with the same verse as the original but inserts a qualifying second verse that extrapolates on the winter/spring analogy used previously. In an obvious echo of Pearse’s 1915 polemic, the audience is presented with “anguished men, by sacrifice, again enkindle flames, / The dawn of Spring emerges from their graves.” The Irish people are shown to be no longer oblivious to unfolding events. Instead, they are now a revived mass, united behind the hunger strikers and, by extension, refocused on the national question (“Sacrifice, in tempest, has raised us once again, / No more the cold indifference which depraves”).

The ineffectiveness of street protests in the context of the cycle of deaths in the original ballad has been replaced with imagery of unified mobilizations across Ireland (“Towns and cities echo back the tramp of marching feet, / The names of ‘Ten’ our banners now enshrine”). There follows a further three verses that describe a post-hunger strike Ireland in which “the nation’s soul” has been revived by the deaths in the H-Blocks, having been “cleansed again by vapours from their blood. / . . . Again we’ve found the manhood which forever kindles hope.” The attendant phraseology is rich in sacrificial language (i.e., martyred, revives, cleansed, risen, rising, lives again, purging, redeeming), and while the narrative does not contain the explicitly religious motifs found in comparable ballads, the writer cannot resist the familiar trope of fusing the suffering of Republican martyrs, the Irish people, and the crucified Christ into one (“Eight hundred years of darkness is our loss. / . . . Ten martyred men, our glory and our cross”).<sup>28</sup>

### **“High upon the Gallows Tree”: Execution in Republican Song**

While the above works portray Republican self-sacrifice and resultant immortality within the very specific context of the hunger strike, the trope is not restricted to thematically self-immolative output. Similar representations of death are also evident in the extensive number of execution ballads within the genre. Both Ellen O’Brien (2003:159) and George Zimmerman (1967:93) note that it is common for execution narratives to contain highly moralistic sentiments on behalf of the condemned (i.e., regret, repentance, fear of death, etc.).

In the context of Republican ballads, however, execution narratives perform quite the opposite emotion in that they serve primarily as platforms for the display of patriotic bravery and justification for the Irish struggle. One of the more famous of these works, "Kevin Barry" (Cronin 1965:51–52), provides a markedly sentimental account of events prior to the eighteen-year-old's death by hanging on November 1, 1920.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the narrative, the execution itself is deliberately downplayed so as to be of almost secondary dramatic importance to Barry's own willingness to sacrifice his life, a key trait of Republican execution ballads.<sup>30</sup> Verse 1 describes the morning of the execution and portrays Barry as offering no resistance to his captors, thus facing death with characteristic stoicism ("High upon the gallows tree, / Kevin Barry *gave* his young life for the cause of liberty" [emphasis added]) and resolute in the face of his impending fate ("As he walked to death that morning he proudly held his head on high").<sup>31</sup>

Barry's Republican credentials are accentuated in verse 2, where he requests to be shot "like a soldier" (i.e., a political prisoner) and not hanged "as a dog" (i.e., a criminal). Verse 3 returns to the familiar themes of endurance and suffering, highlighting Barry's opportunity to extricate himself from his predicament. He can easily escape the scaffold by simply imparting information, but, predictably, he refuses, thus hastening the inevitable fate that he gladly embraces:

British soldiers tortured Barry just because he would not tell  
The names of his brave companions and other things they wished to know.  
"Turn informer or we'll kill you!"  
Kevin Barry answered "No!"

Similar to the hunger strikers who can simply wear a convict's uniform, Barry can extricate himself from his impending death by informing, but he chooses not to, thus carrying the cross by explicit choice. There is a pervasive sense of fatalism throughout the ballad coupled with a predetermined set of dramatic roles, which, when fulfilled, will facilitate Barry's entry into Republican mythology and immortality. Such inevitability becomes more apparent in later verses ("This sad parting *had to be* . . . Kevin Barry, you *must* leave us . . . On the scaffold you *must die*" [emphasis added]). The opening line of verse 5 ("Another martyr for old Ireland, another murder for the crown") neatly distills the intrinsically symbiotic nature of the endurance/infliction binary that forms the cornerstone of modern Irish Republicanism. Within such a quasi-mythological construct, the volunteer may safely embrace death, comforted in the knowledge that he or she is soon to meet a predestined fate as a martyr within the Republican pantheon. Thus, in verse 5 we are presented with the narrative's climactic moment when we are told that Barry "to death walked, softly smiling." National redemption will be achieved through his self-sacrifice, and Barry will consequently become immortalized in Republican collective memory—and, of course, in song—with immediate effect.

A comparative narrative is to be found in “Brave Tom Williams” (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:13), a work detailing the final moments of a nineteen-year-old Belfast IRA man hanged in Crumlin Road Prison in 1942.<sup>32</sup> Prison communications from Williams prior to his execution display the now familiar traits of stoicism and endurance, coupled with a fatalistic willingness to self-sacrifice. The Irish struggle is again compared to the suffering of Christ (“our dear, beloved, tortured, crucified Erin” [McVeigh 1999:49]), and MacSwiney’s maxim of victory via endurance is duly echoed.<sup>33</sup> Following the reprieve of his five coaccused, Williams wholeheartedly embraces his imminent martyrdom, stating: “Don’t grieve for me, remember, from day one *this is how I wanted it. I wanted to die* and I’m happy that you five are going to live” (McVeigh 1999:70, emphasis added). Again, a Christ-like willingness to suffer so as to alleviate the fate of others is unmistakable, a theme returned to in the attendant ballad.

The narrative is related several years after the execution and contains a certain gravitas due to the narrator—also a prisoner—witnessing the execution. The scene is set with depictions of grieving prisoners (“Of a night in Belfast Prison / Unashamedly, I saw men weep”), and, similar to the portrayal of Barry as “just a lad of eighteen Summers,” Williams’s youth is also pointedly accentuated; he is described as “a lad . . . [going] to meet his God on high . . . in the flower of manhood.” Similarly, he proceeds to the gallows with unthinking bravery (“marching / . . . With head erect he shows no fear”). As evidenced in other death ballads under review, Williams’s plight is representative of the broader colonial context in which a weakened captive (Ireland/Williams) seeks to invert the predominant power dynamic with a more dominant, oppressive adversary (Britain / the executioner). The obvious Christ-like symbolism of Williams assuming full responsibility for the shooting in order to facilitate the commutation of the death sentences of his coaccused is further developed within the narrative. Ireland’s plight is again portrayed as a crucifixion and is representative of a suffering that Williams can himself alleviate via his own sacrificial act: “And proudly standing on that scaffold / Ireland’s cross he holds so dear,” the audience being later instructed to “keep memory of the morn / When Ireland’s cross was proudly born.”

A lesser-known composition, “The Ballad of Tom Williams” (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:96), follows a similar narrative but stops short of describing the execution in such overtly sacrificial language. It does, nonetheless, make due reference to the standard Republican trope of portraying outright defeat as a victory that is to be achieved through the endurance, rather than by the infliction, of violence: “They have slaughtered our bravest, they have slandered their name, / But the end of the tyrant is hatred and shame.” Thus, the execution of Williams may provide a short-term victory for the British authorities, but it is ultimately self-defeating, as his death, having redeemed Irish nationhood, will

simply inspire others to continue. In line with essentialist Republican dogma, the infliction of violence by the strong on the weak is effectively overturned and shown to be in itself an intrinsic weakness.

Similar attempts at realigning the colonial power dynamic can be observed in other works previously discussed. As noted in "In Memory of Thomas Ashe," for example, although now physically dead, the hunger striker has comprehensively defeated his tormentors by embracing their aggression, thus neutralizing their superior strength. He has exposed them not as an all-powerful empire but as a vindictive oppressor who targets the weak. In accordance with the more dogmatic tenets of the Republican tradition, victory has been achieved through suffering what Britain has inflicted, as Ashe is now "triumphant, [as] dead he lay" (O'Mahony 2001:28). Similarly, in Ashe's own work "Let Me Carry Your Cross for Ireland, Lord!" (O'Mahony 2001:13–15), his sacrifice has a unifying force that inspires and reinvigorates his fellow Republicans and thus is an act that has rendered the enemy impotent: "With the men of Ireland around his bier / And the stranger's strength at bay." In "Ten Deathless Heroes Die and Ireland Lives" the final verse again seeks to shift the balance of power in the colonial relationship by portraying defeat as victory, claiming that the hunger strikers, *à la* Ashe, "triumph in death" and that now (somewhat fancifully, perhaps) "Britain rules no more" (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:17). Similarly, in the narrative of "Kevin Barry" (Cronin 1965:51), by embracing death, an obvious attempt is made at removing power from the English executioner so as to ultimately invert power as a weapon against him, a motif also in evidence in the death ballads of Williams, Ashe, and the 1981 hunger strikers. Thus, by enduring the violence that has been inflicted, the previously highlighted "perverse psyche of Republicanism," whereby abject defeat is essentially reconstructed as a victory, is very much evident throughout this selection of ballads and, indeed, predominates across the entire genre, despite significantly divergent narrative representations.

### **"I Shook Bold Freedom's Hand": The Obfuscation of Violence in Republican Song**

Regardless of such attempts at power realignment, the jaundiced representations of political violence throughout the canon are worthy of further analysis. Among the most consistent conventions employed by ballad writers to convey the centrality of the self-sacrifice/endurance dialectic of Republican ideology is the marked absence of references to the actual violence perpetrated by the subjects of the ballads themselves. Acts of Republican violence (or even threats of same) are notable by virtue of their absence, although the need for such violence as an intrinsically justified reaction to British aggression is clearly implied. Consequently, Republican militants are never portrayed as aggressors who initiate

violence but are ubiquitously revered as hero-martyrs who—as per the Mac-Swiney maxim—endure, suffer, and ultimately die for Ireland and her people. Thus, to explicitly connect them with violent activities would be to sully the ideological purity associated with their sacrificial deaths. Republican violence—if mentioned at all—is described in markedly opaque language and shown to be of negligible narrative consequence when juxtaposed against graphic descriptions of British aggression, which, as observed, must be “endured” (Zimmerman 1967:66).<sup>34</sup> It will be noted that none of the ballads under review (with the exception of “Kevin Barry”) give any indication as to the actual reason—violent or otherwise—for the subject’s imprisonment. Even in this instance, the specific offense for which Barry was charged and convicted (i.e., murder) is deliberately obfuscated and portrayed in an almost genteel manner (“All around that little bakery / Where we fought them hand to hand”), again studiously avoiding any implication that it is the Republican who was the initial aggressor.

A further example of such obfuscation is evident in “Joe McDonnell,” a work recounting the final days of the fifth of the 1981 hunger strikers to die.<sup>35</sup> McDonnell himself narrates and mentions his imprisonment on four separate occasions; however, in each instance, he pointedly neglects to state the offense for which he was jailed.<sup>36</sup> As shown in similar songs, the ballad writer deliberately disassociates McDonnell from any explicit acts of violence, the actual reasons for his imprisonment being described in deliberately opaque language: “Then one fateful morning I shook bold freedom’s hand, / For right or wrong, I tried to free my land” (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:107). The narrative remains focused on the peaceful endurance of McDonnell and, by extension, that of the rest of the hunger strikers, whose collective dignity is constantly juxtaposed against the aggression and intransigence of Britain. The latter is personified and addressed directly by McDonnell, who asks how “you dare to call me a terrorist / While you look down your gun?” He proceeds to invoke Britain’s colonial history, telling how “you have plundered . . . divided . . . terrorised . . . ruled with an iron hand.” Again, he justifies his (implied) involvement in political violence by placing the blame for the root cause of the conflict firmly on Britain, which has “brought this reign of terror to my land.” As always, the latter is portrayed as the sole initiator of aggression, inflicting a violence that the Republican must endure for the collective good.

Such deliberate evasion is relatively easily achieved in the context of hunger strike ballads in which, as discussed, the narrative focus remains on peaceful, stoic endurance. This is not the case, however, in works that narrate the deaths of armed and active Republicans. Thus, for an ideology that in its most doctrinaire incarnations lays such emphasis on the justification for, and indeed necessity of, political violence, this obfuscative treatment has provided ballad writers with some interesting literary challenges. Evidence of this thematic binary, coupled

with a wholly subjective portrayal of British state violence, is narrated in "The Ballad of Billy Reid" (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:69), a work that relates the killing of a Belfast IRA member by British soldiers in May 1971.<sup>37</sup> While not as explicitly self-sacrificial as other ballads under review here, the narrative does nonetheless construct Reid as the familiar martyr figure who endures, rather than inflicts, violence and who suffers in order to alleviate a communal grievance.

The significantly uneven portrayal of violence is initiated in the opening verse when the narrator informs us of "a terrible wrong" and describes Reid's death quite graphically: "A man he lay dead, he'd been riddled with lead / And he died on the streets of Belfast" (i.e., Britain is the sole aggressor, having "riddled" a man with bullets while he was defending his community). By commencing the narrative with the actual killing of Reid himself (i.e., with no preceding explanation given as to why the armed IRA man was where he was when he was shot), the narrative firmly establishes Britain in the familiar role of aggressor. Not until verse 2 are we given the introductory account—postmortem—of Reid engaging militarily with British troops "when the bold IRA went out to fight for their land, / With an old Thompson gun" ("old" and "bold" being somewhat affectionate descriptors for armed violence) to simply "put the troops on the run" (i.e., to neither injure nor kill) and then "to return to their home" (i.e., the family man and reluctant revolutionary). The subjective portrayal of British state violence is developed further in verse 4, where the aggression is shown to be not solely restricted to the killing itself: "Although he lay dead, he was kicked in the head, / By the hair they dragged him around. / But they still fear him yet," an indicator that Reid's transition from active Republican to inspirational martyr has begun with immediate effect. The ballad finishes with the employment of Reid's death as an exemplar that the Irish people should follow, a standard propagandistic trope evident throughout Republican death ballads:

So if you think he was right, come and join in the fight  
And help to free Belfast.  
For the blood Billy shed, and although he lies dead,  
In our hearts his memory will last.

Such reconstruction of Republican violence into a form of self-immolation can also be observed in "The Loughgall Ambush," a similar narrative that relates the shooting dead of eight IRA members by an undercover British Army unit in 1987. The deliberate obfuscation of Republican violence is evident throughout, but particularly so in the title, where the use of the word "ambush" presents the audience with an interesting dichotomy. Despite the obvious fact that the members of the IRA unit were heavily armed and preparing to attack a Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) base at the time of their deaths, they are pointedly not depicted as launching the "ambush." Thus, from the vantage point of the

Republican audience, the “ambush” is not the abortive IRA operation but rather the counterattack by the Special Air Service (SAS)—or, at the very least, there is deliberate ambiguity as to who was actually ambushing whom. The familiar contrast in language between British “inflictors” and Republican “endurers” is evident throughout.

Verse 2 depicts picturesque country scenes of a “village street” where “the scent of apple blossom filled the air” “on a warm and misty Friday evening.”<sup>38</sup> The idyllic narrative is not interrupted by the planned IRA gun and bomb attack but rather by the mere presence of the SAS unit, whose “hidden eyes were watching everywhere.” There is no mention of the intended IRA violence, except for an oblique reference to the fact that “the digger bomb had only reached its target.” Thus, despite having a fully primed bomb and being heavily armed, the IRA men are deliberately shown to have until this point committed no actual aggression. As ever, it is the British alone who inflict violence: “The SAS did not want any prisoners / ‘Shoot to kill!’—the orders were quite clear.” Of course, we may safely assume that the IRA unit “did not want any prisoners” either and that it, too, was also prepared and willing to shoot (and, indeed, bomb) to kill. However, such narrative would obviously not sit easily as a musical representation of an ideology that endures rather than inflicts violence. At this point, the ballad effectively becomes a carbon copy of the Billy Reid narrative. Similar to Reid, who was “riddled” with bullets, the IRA unit has been “butchered” at Loughgall. Again, as with Reid, British aggression does not end with the killings themselves, and such violence is portrayed as being at best vengeful, at worst psychotic, as the IRA men’s bodies are similarly abused and desecrated postmortem:

They butchered eight brave volunteers that evening,  
They were kicked and punched in case they were not dead.  
They dragged them up and down that Armagh village  
And filled their bodies full of British lead.

The collective national grief portrayed in verse 1 (“When the Irish nation bowed its head in sorrow, / Such sadness as the country’s seldom known”) is magnified in verse 3 to now include (somewhat implausibly) “the whole world,” which is suitably “appalled” at this latest act of British “savagery.” In the final verse, the narrator lists the names of the eight IRA men in succession, a popular literary device in Republican ballads described by Zimmerman as “strings of names . . . repeated in a litany like names of saints” (1967:66).<sup>39</sup> Republican martyrs from previous generations are cited in such narratives in order to confer past political legitimacy on the actions of the present. In an interesting convention, “The Loughgall Ambush” develops this motif not just by citing the dead but also by addressing them directly (using “you” three times and “your” twice), thus implying their status as living volunteers who have physically transcended the

grave. Such references to immortality are ubiquitous throughout the genre and constitute a central trope of twentieth-century Irish Republican ballads, despite their almost complete disappearance elsewhere from modern folksong (Ó Cadhla 2017).

### Concluding Remarks

This article has examined the various representational features of death and martyrdom evident within the modern song tradition of Irish physical-force Republicanism. An overview of some of the more dominant tenets of the ideology has been presented so as to provide an academic framework within which such musical representations may be satisfactorily analyzed. An examination of Irish Republicanism has shown that the trope of exemplary self-sacrifice as a prerequisite for national regeneration and liberation predominates, along with a hagiographic elevation of protracted suffering and physical endurance. Self-sacrifice has proven to be a totem of enduring longevity and one of singular importance to physical-force Republicanism, which became particularly pervasive within the tradition from the end of the nineteenth century onward. Republican death ballads duly changed in tandem with this ideological shift by also embracing a cult of martyrdom and promoting the elevation of self-sacrifice as an iconic and exemplary act of patriotism within Republican popular culture. Various musicological aspects of the Republican song tradition have been examined, including cultural context, style, and arrangements, as well as the widespread censorship of such works by the Irish media from the early 1970s onward. An overview of a selection of works from the twentieth century has shown that these narrative representations of sacrificial death have enjoyed both a popularity and a consistency within the musical canon, particularly so in the 1916 revolutionary period, reemerging strongly at the time of the 1981 H-Block hunger strike.

Ballads detailing sacrificial death form a particular subgenre within the Republican song tradition and continually act as conduits through which the martyrdom trope is promoted within militant Republicanism's broader ideological framework. The research has identified key dramatic devices used by ballad writers in order to convey the ideological centrality of self-sacrifice to Irish Republicanism. This is primarily achieved by the portrayal of self-sacrifice in significantly differing scenarios (i.e., not only in the more obviously self-immolative context of hunger strikes but also via state executions and armed confrontations). Such narrative representations have resulted in deaths from the latter two categories becoming more thematically sacrificial and being duly elevated into a form of self-immolation. Within such musical output, there is a pervasive sense of fatalism on behalf of the individual Republican who embraces

a fate he or she chooses to endure for the sake of collective redemption and national liberation.

The ballad writers consistently emphasize a calm, unflinching bravery as the Republican approaches death and, in doing so, attempts to realign the prevailing power dynamic within the British/Irish colonial relationship. In death, the Republican martyr triumphs by morally overpowering a markedly stronger opponent, thereby neutralizing its vastly superior military strength, which is in turn shown to be an intrinsic weakness. All of the works under review seek to draw upon the “perverse psyche of Republicanism,” whereby resounding defeat is essentially reconstructed as victory. Death is the ultimate vehicle for such triumph and provides the Republican militant with a manifest sense of liberation that is clearly not attainable via outright military victory.

The motif of interminable suffering is consistently promoted by ballad writers who deliberately obfuscate the issue of Republican violence. As demonstrated, it is the Republican who endures rather than inflicts, an ideological construct that has resulted in ballad narratives that provide heavily jaundiced depictions of Republican violent activity. It has been demonstrated that even in instances in which Republicans are armed and engaging their opponents militarily, the narrative is deliberately manipulated in order to portray Republican militants as suffering, rather than inflicting, the violence that they have themselves committed. Such deliberate obfuscation points to the centrality of the self-sacrifice and martyrdom tropes within militant Republicanism and, coupled with the representational differences previously discussed, conveys the extent to which ballad writers have sought to thematically represent this core ideological construct of physical-force Irish Republicanism within the attendant song tradition.

## Notes

1. Within the Irish political context, the term “Republican” is frequently encountered as a generic descriptor for those seeking political separation from Britain. Through time, it has been applied to such disparate sociopolitical groupings as communists, antiquarians, cultural nationalists, and language revivalists, among others. Thus, the descriptor has more diverse connotations than functioning solely as a reference for those who adhere to the doctrine of classic Republicanism, as it will also popularly describe a supporter of (if not an active participant in) armed activity in pursuit of an Irish Republic (McGarry 2003:10). English defines an Irish Republican as having “either specific attachment to a Republican form of government and/or an aggressive pursuit of such an arrangement” (2006:509). Connolly distinguishes twentieth- and twenty-first-century Irish Republicanism from the late eighteenth-century manifestation, highlighting “a narrowing of the term to denote the more intransigent or potentially violent forms of nationalism . . . evident in the contemporary Northern Ireland use of ‘republican’ to describe Sinn Féin and the IRA, as distinct from the ‘Nationalist’ SDLP” (1998:508). Consequently, the term is not one that has always been readily embraced by the mainstream political establishment in Ireland, despite oft-proclaimed adherence to the principles of *res publica*. For an interesting treatise on some of these complexities, see Jones (2005).

2. Connolly describes how "an enduring link was forged between the English Crown and Ireland" subsequent to this date (1998:19). Thus, for doctrinaire Republicans this twelfth-century landing marks the effective "Year Zero" of the oft-quoted "800 years of occupation" by Britain. Such rhetoric can also be found in more mainstream discourse, with similar sentiments expressed—albeit couched in considerably more diplomatic language—in the Irish government publication *Facts about Ireland*: "Thus began the political involvement of England in Ireland which was to dominate the country's history in the succeeding centuries" (Government of Ireland 1995:22). Like so many other aspects of Irish history, the precise nature of this relationship is widely contested. For example, English (2006:24) disputes the notion of conquest per se and questions whether the Irish-British relationship was or is, in fact, colonial. Ó Broin, however, describes it as "a relationship undeniably colonial" (2009:19).

3. For further reading on the sociopolitical structure of early Irish society, see Ó Corráin (1972).

4. For an account on the markedly fractious nature of certain armed Republican organizations, see Holland and McDonald (1994).

5. "Armed struggle" is described in the IRA's training manual as follows: "[Republicans] do not employ revolutionary violence as our means without being able to illustrate that we have recourse to no other means" (reproduced in O'Brien 1995:353). See also, Sinn Féin policy document *Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland* (1992): "Armed struggle is recognised by Republicans to be an option of last resort when all other avenues to pursue freedom have been attempted and suppressed" (reproduced in B. O'Brien 1995:358).

6. McKearney has described this ideological position thus: "Armed struggle is . . . fetishised and given prominence over wider political, social and economic struggles" (2011:x). For further insight into Republicans' view of "armed struggle" as a principle in itself, see "The Keeper of the Flame: Timeless Republicanism" in Frampton (2011:43–49). See also Liam O'Dowd: "Critics of Irish Republicanism emphasize its history of political failure, its tendency to split, its elitist and militarist aspects, and its quasi-theological preoccupation with the abstraction of 'the Republic'" (in Lalor 2003:927).

7. Patrick Pearse (1879–1916) was a Dublin-born barrister, poet, playwright, educationalist, Irish-language revivalist, and Republican militant. On May 3, 1916, he was executed by firing squad in Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin, for his role in the Easter Rising of that year. The themes of self-sacrifice and martyrdom are pervasive in much of Pearse's literary works and speeches, particularly in the years immediately preceding the Rising. For further reading, see Higgins and Uí Chollatáin (2009). Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa (1831–1915) was convicted in 1865 on conspiracy and treason charges and sentenced to penal servitude for life. He was released and exiled under a general amnesty in 1870 and died in New York in 1915. Pearse's famous 1915 polemic at Rossa's graveside reads as follows: "Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations. The defenders of this Realm have worked well in secret and in the open. They think that they have pacified Ireland. They think that they have purchased half of us and intimidated the other half. They think that they have foreseen everything, think that they have provided against everything, but the fools, the fools, the fools! They have left us with our Fenian dead, and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace" (Pearse 1916:133–37). It should be noted that the "blood-sacrifice" thesis within Irish Republicanism has not gone unchallenged and is by no means universally accepted within scholarly discourse. For further reading, see Greaves (1991).

8. Similar to previous and subsequent insurrections, the Easter Rising was carried out by its leaders in spite of a marked absence of any realistic prospects of military victory, again pointing to the primacy of self-sacrifice and political rebirth within physical-force Irish Republicanism. Connolly refers to "the sketchy nature of their planning suggest[ing] that most were driven less by a real hope of victory than by the idea of reviving nationalist militancy through a bold gesture" (1998:514).

9. Terence MacSwiney (1879–1920) was Lord Mayor of Cork at the time of his arrest for “possession of seditious materials” in August 1920 (Flynn 2011:43). He died after a hunger strike in Brixton Prison, London, on October 25, 1920. MacSwiney’s fast was to last a total of seventy-four days, the longest recorded hunger strike to death by an Irish Republican prisoner. The relevant quotation reads: “The contest on our side is not one of rivalry or vengeance, but of endurance. It is not those who can inflict the most, but those that can suffer the most who will conquer. . . . It is conceivable that the army of occupation could stop us functioning for a time. Then it becomes simply a question of endurance. Those whose faith is strong will endure to the end in triumph” (Coogan 1980:15).

10. Under this system, following a legal transgression, redress could be gained for a plaintiff by hunger striking—to death if necessary—outside the transgressor’s home in order to publicly shame him into restorative action. A number of scholars have urged caution regarding any suggestion of an explicit connection between this legal convention and the modern-day Republican hunger strike (Connolly 1998:204; English 2006:379). Regardless of such contentions, the inversion of an opponent’s superior strength as a moral weapon would continually provide a powerful totem for Irish Republicans over the course of several centuries.

11. It should also be noted that the late nineteenth-century embracing of the sacrificial martyr as an inspirational trope was, in part, an unstated acknowledgment by Republicans of the increasing unlikelihood of an outright military victory over Britain. This development represents a clear attempt at shifting the center of power in the British-Irish colonial dynamic, a feature that is evident throughout all of the ballads under review.

12. See Shields: “It is true that current songs expressing extreme republican or ‘loyalist’ views are censored on radio and television, North and South; a fact suggesting not only that these songs are an effective vehicle of subversion but that the views they express are rampant. Neither conclusion is justified” (1993:176).

13. See Connolly: “The extent to which contemporary political ballads inspired by the Northern Ireland conflict were proscribed by the British and Irish media awaits research” (1998:36).

14. The quotation is taken from an unreleased and unofficial recording of Moore by Republican prisoners at the jail on February 7, 1990, which is in the possession of the author. The recording has been widely copied and circulated within Republican circles ever since.

15. The song in question is the 1981 hunger strike ballad “The Time Has Come,” a heavily nuanced narrative consisting of a monologue by a dying hunger striker who pleads with his mother not to allow medical intervention to save his life should he slip into unconsciousness. The hunger striker is not identified but is thought to be INLA (Irish National Liberation Army) member Patsy O’Hara, who died on May 21, 1981, after sixty-one days without food.

16. Moore is referring here to *An Phoblacht / Republican News*, the weekly political newspaper of Sinn Féin, which carried IRA statements and reports of military activity by the organization (“An Phoblacht” translates as “The Republic”).

17. It should be noted that while the reference to RTÉ banning the song is correct, Moore engages in some considerable artistic license about the identity of the reviewer and is clearly playing to his exclusively Republican audience. In his 2003 autobiographical work, *One Voice: My Life in Song*, Moore identifies the journalist in question as Derry socialist activist Éamon McCann (b. 1943–) (128).

18. This self-censorship was further alluded to by Geraghty, who writes that “by the mid-1970s, The Dubliners were performing less often in Ireland and more and more frequently abroad, especially in continental Europe, where they could convey a clear musical expression of Ireland at a time when the country was more and more torn internally” (1994:135).

19. “Joe McDonnell” alternates between keys but is primarily a major key arrangement in each of the four verses (about the dying hunger striker), shifting to minor in the chorus (about the history of British colonial aggression), giving a discernibly more sinister and darker sense at this point of the narrative.

20. While there are, of course, modern ballads set to "darker" musical arrangements, using minor keys or Mixolydian modes, these tend to be more generic political works that do not narrate a specific Republican martyr's death. Popular examples include "The Foggy Dew" and "Come Out Ye Black and Tans." It should be noted that both of these works are arranged in quick march time.

21. It is perhaps noteworthy that deaths via natural causes are very much absent from the Republican ballad tradition.

22. Similar sentiments were expressed by senior Sinn Féin figure Martin McGuinness in a 1985 BBC interview: "The responsibility for every death in Ireland, whether it be the death of a British soldier, an IRA man, an RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] man, a UDR [Ulster Defence Regiment] man, or innocent civilians . . . at the end of the day, responsibility for all that lies at the feet of the British government. They are the people responsible. . . . They are the people who must pick up the tab for all that, not the people of Ireland" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJeW3pWE7JI>); see also Ó Broin 2009:13).

23. Thomas Ashe (1885–1917) was sentenced to death for his role in the 1916 Rising, the sentence being later commuted to penal servitude for life. Following a general amnesty in June 1917, he was rearrested and charged with sedition and sentenced to two years' hard labor. He embarked on a hunger strike for political status in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, where he died from the effects of force-feeding by prison staff on September 25, 1917 (O'Mahony 2001:19–22).

24. Compare the Marian prayer "Hail, Holy Queen": "To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears." The name *Róisín Dubh* translates as "Dark Róisín." It is an archaic poetic personification of Ireland. For further discussion on ballad imagery portraying Ireland as a grieving mother, see Zimmermann (1967:66).

25. It is perhaps an interesting insight into the militant mindset that these anonymous Republicans appear to be more focused on their own dying than on Ireland actually living.

26. Up to and including the present day, Republicans consistently demand recognition as political prisoners while incarcerated. The hunger strike of 1981, which resulted in the deaths of ten prisoners, took place at the Maze Prison (known to Republicans as "the H-Blocks of Long Kesh") outside Belfast and was preceded by five years of protest actions in which prisoners refused to wear convict uniforms, opting instead to cover themselves in blankets. What became known as "the Blanket Protest" escalated in 1978 when prisoners refused to leave their cells to wash or empty chamber pots. This followed the prison authorities' decision to deny the prisoners permission to wear a blanket or towel to the washroom and toilet facilities. There were consistent allegations of prison staff brutality. Conditions in the prison deteriorated quite rapidly when prisoners began a campaign of smearing excrement on the walls and ceilings of their cells and emptying chamber pots under cell doors and out windows, events that would ultimately lead to the hunger strikes of 1980–81. For further reading, see Beresford (1987); Coogan (1980); Hennessy (2014); O'Malley (1991).

27. Both the original and the reworked versions were written by Dublin songwriter Pearse McLoughlin. "Forever on My Mind" first appeared on Irish folk singer Christy Moore's 1986 LP *Spirit of Freedom*, which was released by Moore (unknown to his recording company, WEA) as a benefit album for the families of Republican prisoners. The album was subsequently withdrawn from circulation by WEA. Moore (2003:55, 102) had a long-standing involvement in the H-Block protest campaign as far back as 1979.

28. The similarity between the imagery employed in the above quotation and that found in "In Memory of Thomas Ashe" is notable (i.e., "the glory of that cross was his").

29. Kevin Barry (1902–20) was born in Fleet Street, Dublin, and joined the IRA at age sixteen. On September 20, 1920, he was captured following an attempt to relieve arms from a British Army patrol in Dublin during which three soldiers were killed. He was subsequently convicted of murder and sentenced to death by hanging. A campaign to secure his reprieve quickly ensued, resulting in Barry becoming something of an international cause célèbre. He was hanged in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, on November 1, 1920. The execution of such a relatively young man, coupled with his widely reported bravery while in custody, provided excellent copy to contemporary ballad writers.

Several works were penned, the most famous being the anonymous composition described here, which was written in Glasgow at the time of the execution (*Irish Press*, August 5, 1951). This version gained worldwide popularity through recordings and performances by such diverse artists as Paul Robeson and Leonard Cohen, among others.

30. The descriptions of Barry's final moments before his execution in contemporary press reports varied between sympathy ("The boy met his death with cheerfulness and courage" [*Guardian*, November 2, 1920]) and hagiography ("He goes to the scaffold praying for his friends and enemies. . . . Young Barry . . . went to the sacrifice calmly and serenely. . . . Another young life has been freely given for Ireland" [*Freeman's Journal*, November 1, 1920]).

31. The line "High upon the gallows tree" also appears in an earlier execution ballad entitled "God Save Ireland."

32. Along with five others, Williams (1923–42) was charged with murder for his role in a diversionary IRA operation to facilitate the passage of a banned Easter 1916 commemorative march in West Belfast, during which a member of the RUC was shot and fatally injured. While all six were initially convicted and sentenced to death, the sentences of the other five were commuted to terms of life imprisonment due to Williams taking personal responsibility for leading the operation (McVeigh 1999:36–38). Following his execution by hanging on September 2, 1942, Williams was interred in the yard of Crumlin Road Prison. A lengthy campaign by his family and Republicans to secure the release of his remains was unsuccessful until 2000, when Williams was exhumed and reburied in the Republican Plot of Milltown Cemetery, Belfast.

33. The relevant quotation reads: "To carry on, no matter what the odds are against you, to carry on no matter what torments are inflicted on you. The road to freedom is paved with suffering, hardships and torture" (McVeigh 1999:49).

34. Conversely, Republican armed activity is regularly portrayed in a markedly lighthearted, semi-ironic manner. See, for example, "Auf Wiedersehen to Crossmaglen," "My Old Man's a Provo," "My Little Armalite," and "Say Hello to the Provos."

35. Joe McDonnell (1951–81), a member of the IRA from Andersonstown, Belfast, was interned without trial during 1972–73. He was rearrested in October 1976 following an arson attack, for which he was sentenced to fourteen years. McDonnell contested the Irish General Election in June 1981—in absentia—on the Anti-H Block / Armagh ticket for the constituency of Sligo/Leitrim and received 5,693 votes. He died on July 8, 1981, on the sixty-first day of his fast.

36. The relevant lines read: "All my young ambitions met with bitterness and hate. / I soon found myself inside a prison gate"; "many months of interment on The Maidstone, in The Maze"; "I found myself in prison once again"; "I was sentenced to the H-Blocks for 14 years or more."

37. Billy Reid (1939–71) was part of an IRA unit that ambushed a British Army patrol in Belfast city center, resulting in the wounding of two British soldiers and in Reid's own death (*Tírghrá* 2002:14).

38. "The Loughgall Ambush" text can be found at <http://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=24991>, accessed May 8, 2015.

39. The final verse reads:

Farewell to Paddy Kelly and Jim Lynagh, no more you'll lead your fighting unit forth.  
Side by side with Pádraig McKearney and Tony Gormley, you died to drive the British from  
the North.  
Declan Arthurs and the youthful Séamus Donnelly, on that night you were the youngest of  
them all.  
Gerry O'Callaghan and the gallant Eugene Kelly, your blood still stains the pavements of  
Loughgall.

This device is also evident in the chorus of the previously discussed "Forever on My Mind," in which the names of the 1981 hunger strikers are similarly cited: "O'Hara, Hughes, McCreesh and Sands; Doherty and Lynch; McDonnell, Hurson, McElwee, Devine."

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