

<b>Institution:</b> Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU)		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UOA 28		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Presenting the Past: Creating content for historic sites & museums		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2015 - ongoing		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Gillian O'Brien	Reader in Modern Irish History	2012 to present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2015 - ongoing		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>  <p>This research has had wide-ranging impact across a range of platforms. Central to this case study are three award-winning museums and heritage centres in Ireland – Kilmainham Gaol and Courthouse, Dublin; Fortress Spike Island Co. Cork and Nano Nagle Place, Cork. As historical consultant for these sites, author of <i>The Darkness Echoing: Exploring Ireland's Places of Famine, Death and Rebellion</i>, (2020) and two open-access reports on heritage, museums and exhibitions O'Brien has had a considerable impact on debates around heritage and tourism in Ireland. Her research expertise informed all the interpretation and display at these sites and she wrote all the related panel text and guidebook for Spike Island. The sites are visited by c.500,000 people annually. The underpinning research for these sites has been wildly acclaimed and alongside the academic publications there have been five keynotes, numerous public presentations, op-ed articles and radio and newspaper interviews and a book on Prison Museums and Dark Tourism commissioned by Cork University Press.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>  <p>The museums focus on historical periods where O'Brien has extensive expertise. Kilmainham Gaol and Spike Island deal primarily with military and penal history from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, while Nano Nagle Place is primarily concerned with religious, education and urban history. O'Brien has researched and published extensively in these areas. Her PhD (funded by the British and Irish Governments), and her monograph <i>Blood Runs Green (R2)</i> (funded by the Fulbright Commission) focused on Irish military and political history and the history of Irish republicanism. This research was key to framing the narrative for the work at Kilmainham and Spike Island. O'Brien's research (funded by the Irish Research Council) and publications on urban history (including the edited collections <i>Georgian Dublin</i> and <i>Portraits of the City: Dublin and the Wider World</i>) alongside her work on the history of education (<i>Irish Primary Education in the Early-Nineteenth Century</i>) (R3) underpinned the exhibition at Nano Nagle Place.</p> <p>O'Brien's experience working with museum and heritage sectors over the last decade provided a solid foundation for the design and development of the three museum projects. She was a collaborator (with Prof Finola O'Kane of the School of Architecture, University College Dublin) on the 'Framework for the Appraisal of Cultural Significance' which was funded by the Office of Public Works, Ireland which ran from 2009 and 2012. She was also a member of the National Consultation Panel for Cultural Heritage and Global Change (led by the Irish Heritage Council) and of Dublin City Council's Cultural Heritage Working Group. O'Brien was also the Historical Consultant for the development of the Edmund Rice Heritage Centre which opened in Waterford City in 2008.</p>		

O'Brien's expertise in Irish history and experience with tourism and heritage sites – especially prisons – has also led her to develop an innovative new project which has critically assessed how Irish museum and heritage sites interpret and package Irish history for local visitors and foreign tourists. The project also analyses the Irish relationship with their past and considers how this has impact on popular perceptions of national identity. This has particular resonances today when discussions about belonging and identity is a very live political issue. A fundamental part of this research over the past few years was visiting museums and heritage sites across Ireland to critically assess how the stories of Ireland's past are told. The research has resulted in the publication of *The Darkness Echoing: Exploring Ireland's Places of Famine, Death and Rebellion* (Doubleday, 2020) (R1). This research also prompted O'Brien to develop and host two workshops for heritage and museum professionals where they considered issues associated with developing heritage sites and museums in historic buildings and a second workshop which focussed on how Irish history is represented and could be represented in museums and heritage sites. The results of the workshops are now available as open access reports: *Inception, Development, Operation: A Report on Best Practice for Site-Specific Museums and Heritage Centres* and *Beyond Storytelling: Exhibiting the Past* (R5 & 6).

In addition, O'Brien has published many OpEds for RTÉ Brainstorm on aspects of history, heritage, dark tourism and museums and has frequently appeared as a commentator on Irish radio or in the pages of Irish newspapers.

### 3. References to the research

All of the listed outputs have been through a rigorous peer review process.

1. Gillian O'Brien, *The Darkness Echoing: Exploring Ireland's Places of Famine, Death and Rebellion* (Doubleday, 2020). The *Irish Times* has noted that 'O'Brien asks incisive questions about how the past is remembered...A powerful chapter on death considers graveyards, megalithic tombs, and the ethics of exhibiting bog bodies and other human remains, as well as Irish funerary traditions. The book concludes with a timely call to reform the national heritage industry. *The Darkness Echoing* is as thought-provoking as it is informative and entertaining'. *Strong Words* magazine concluded that 'Dr Gillian O'Brien delivers such an effective education into the last 400 years of Irish History that more conventional historians might wish to take note'.
2. Gillian O'Brien, *Blood Runs Green: The Murder that Transfixed Gilded Age Chicago*, (Chicago University Press, 2015). This publication has sold over 8,000 copies and was widely acclaimed. It was the *Financial Times* history book of the year (2015) while Donald MacRaild in *Irish Historical Studies* noted: 'She writes with élan. [*Blood Runs Green*] is a work of rich and scholarly poise. It should make the reading lists of all courses on the Irish Diaspora' and the *Times Higher Education* stated: '*Blood Runs Green* is all that's best in academic writing: detailed research, accessible writing.'
3. Gillian O'Brien *Irish Primary Education in the Early-Nineteenth Century* (with Garret FitzGerald, John FitzGerald, Cormac Ó Gráda, Michael Murphy) (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2013) (pp 1-45)
4. Gillian O'Brien & Jessie Castle, "'I am building a house" Nano Nagle's Georgian Convents' (with Jessie Castle) in *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, vol IX, 2017, 54-75
5. Gillian O'Brien, '*Inception, Development, Operation: A Guide to Best Practice for Site-Specific Museums and Heritage Centres*' (June 2018)
6. Gillian O'Brien, *Beyond Storytelling: Exhibiting the Past* (July 2020)

#### 4. Details of the impact

O'Brien's research expertise underpinned the development of the narrative content at Kilmainham Gaol and Courthouse (Courthouse opened March 2016), Fortress Spike Island (opened Sept 2016) and Nano Nagle Place (opened Dec 2017). Her background in eighteenth and nineteenth century Irish history was crucial to informing interpretation and display at these sites offering new narratives about modern Irish history that challenge visitors' ideas about military, penal, religious and women's history.

All of the content at these sites was researched and written by O'Brien (in the case of Kilmainham Gaol and Courthouse she was responsible for all the Courthouse displays as the Gaol has a pre-existing display). Neither Spike Island nor Nano Nagle Place had any interpretive content prior to O'Brien's involvement and indeed both sites were closed to the public. At Spike Island O'Brien was also responsible for writing the guidebook (32 pages, 47 colour images) to the site. Of the three projects Spike Island had the broadest scope as the interpretive framework focussed on related but very different aspects of Ireland's history and heritage – as a prison, a fort and a home. It's location in the middle of Cork Harbour was also a key part of the interpretation. O'Brien developed the narrative and researched and wrote the text of almost 100 information panels displayed within the historic buildings within the fort and across the island. Her research-led text and visual contributions has resulted in an increased awareness, understanding and appreciation of Irish history for the almost half a million people who visited the sites last year, contributed to the creation of a number of jobs and contributed to the cultural enrichment of the three locations. (Sources 4-10)

#### Awards & Visitors

All three sites have won a number of museum, tourism and heritage awards including Best Attraction 2019 at International Travel and Tourism Awards; Europe's Leading Tourist Attraction – World Tourism Awards, 2017; Heritage Island Premier Attraction Award, 2017; Excellence in Local Government Awards 2016 and 2017. Nano Nagle Place won a Trip Advisor Traveller's Choice Award in 2020

In 2019 there were almost 400,000 visitors to the newly expanded Kilmainham Gaol and Courthouse, 81,000 to Fortress Spike Island and 10,000 to Nano Nagle Place. The sites are all well reviewed by visitors – Nano Nagle Place and Spike Island are the top two sites in Cork recommended by TripAdvisor while Kilmainham Gaol is the number one site recommended in Dublin.

Nano Nagle Place is the first heritage centre of its kind in Ireland. It is located in a convent which was built in the 1770s and until 2017 remained closed to the public. It remains a convent, but now allows public access and the former chapel is a heritage centre. O'Brien's expertise was crucial to developing the interpretative framework of the heritage centre which tells the story of female religious life, the history of education and the history of Cork through engaging and interactive displays.

#### Employment

There has been economic benefit associated with the development of the three sites with all of them taking on additional employees since the opening of the museums and heritage centre. At Nano Nagle Place the site now employs 26 staff and has 30 volunteers (many of whom work as

tour guides in the heritage centre). At Fortress Spike Island the number of staff and volunteers has also increased from 33 in 2016 to 48 in 2020. (Sources 4 & 5)

### **Workshops & Industry Reports & *The Darkness Echoing***

Drawing on O'Brien's involvement with the three museum sites she designed and hosted a series of industry workshops in 2018 and 2019 attended by museum and heritage experts including representative of the National Museum of Ireland, the Irish Museums Association, the Office of Public Works and the Heritage Council. These workshops have resulted in the publication of two free, practical and effective 'best-practice' guides focussed on the development of new museums and on the creation of new exhibitions – *'Inception, Development, Operation: A Report on Best Practice for Site-Specific Museums'* and *'Heritage Centres and Beyond Storytelling: Exhibiting the Past.'* As a result of these reports O'Brien was commissioned by RTE Brainstorm to write a number of impactful articles on aspects of Irish heritage (source 3).

*The Darkness Echoing. Exploring Ireland's places of Famine, Death and Rebellion* (Doubleday, 2020) is the result of five years spent developing museums and heritage sites across Ireland. It is also based on over 200,000 site visits and numerous interviews with museum and heritage professionals. The book examines Ireland relationship with its past and considers how certain tropes including martyrdom and heroic failure have become part of the Irish national(ist) psyche. The book challenges and upends many preconceptions about Ireland's history, heritage and tourism industry. (Sources 1 & 2)

### **'Hidden in Plain Sight'**

O'Brien is spearheading an ambitious collaborative research project, 'Hidden in Plain Sight', which examines convents and the women who ran them in pre-Catholic Emancipation Ireland (1775-1829). This project began in 2016 and grew out of her involvement with the development of the heritage centre at Nano Nagle Place. It is a hugely significant project which is very time-sensitive as convents across Ireland are rapidly closing and being demolished or repurposed. The project delivers a critical evaluation of the ways in which the presence of convents impacted on the built environment, landscape and material culture of Ireland. She is the Principle Investigator and is working alongside Jessie Castle, an architectural historian, who is currently a Research Fellow at LJMU. The project examines the hitherto overlooked role played by female religious orders as they commissioned, designed and re-appropriated buildings, creating sites of architectural and cultural significance. Beyond the buildings, they also assess the material culture of convents and consider the paintings, stained glass, statues and religious artefacts that formed a crucial part of the world of the nuns. Castle and O'Brien have published two journal articles on this work and have given invited papers at six conferences and public events. Further articles and a book will be produced as part of this ongoing project.

### **Education in Schools**

Between 2018 and 2020 O'Brien was actively involved in a campaign to restore History as a compulsory subject for the Irish Junior Cycle (12-15 year olds). This drew on her research on Irish education history and her research for Nano Nagle Place. She made a series of high-profile public interventions including op-ed pieces for RTÉ (the Irish State broadcaster), a keynote lecture for the Irish Association of Professional Historians and contribution to their policy document on the teaching of history, meetings with officials from the Irish Department of Education and Skills and radio interviews. In February 2020 the Department of Education reversed its decision and History was restored as a compulsory subject for the junior cycle.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

### Irish History and Heritage:

- 1) Donal Hassett, Historian, University College Cork on *The Darkness Echoing*: 'An excellent piece of public history that talks to, without talking down to, the public about our collective heritage. Gillian's experience of working in heritage gives her a sensitivity to challenges facing curators. But this understanding does not stop her from making nuanced critiques of the ways parts of our past are presented in museums. I found her calls for a move beyond the binary narratives convincing'
- 2) Ryan Tubridy, RTÉ Radio 1 'Dark, mischievous...enlightening and educating...my history book of the year.'
- 3) Nathan Manion, senior curator at EPIC – Ireland's emigration museum commented on O'Brien's article "What's the government's problem with heritage?" for RTE (<https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0716/1153731-heritage-culture-arts-ireland-government-ministers/>)  
'Take the time to read this timely piece by Gillian O'Brien – thousands of culture, heritage and arts professionals would share her concerns and hopes'.

### Museum Design and Development:

- 4) For corroboration of impact of work see letter from Dr Danielle O'Donovan, Nano Nagle Place Programme Manager.
- 5) For corroboration of impact of work on Spike Island see letter from John Crotty, General Manager, Fortress Spike Island.
- 6) Marese McDonagh, 'Potential of 'dark tourism' underlined at Sligo Gaol Event', *Irish Times*, 10 September 2018 <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/transport-and-tourism/potential-of-dark-tourism-underlined-at-sligo-gaol-event-1.3623417>
- 7) Interview broadcast on primetime news programmes: Hopes 'dark tourism' could bring new life to Sligo Gaol. RTÉ News 8 September 2018  
<https://www.rte.ie/news/connacht/2018/0908/992440-sligo-gaol/>
- 8) Jim Carroll, 'Brainstorm: Where Academics write interesting articles in plain English', *Irish Times*, 26 May 2018 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/brainstorm-where-academics-write-interesting-articles-in-plain-english-1.3504486>
- 9) Philip Watson, 'Ireland's Alcatraz: Spike Island in Cork', *The Guardian*, 19 March 2018  
<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2018/mar/19/ireland-spike-island-cork-harbour-alcatraz-prison-and-fort>
- 10) Building Ireland, RTÉ Television Programme broadcast September, 2017  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kr3ZOFsME8w>