

**Jail! - An insight into  
prison life in Ireland,  
namely Castlerea Prison.**

*Niall Harnett, a Shell to Sea campaigner*



Art by Mick Connors, prisoner

**A fundraiser for Shell to Sea victims of Gardai prosecution in Co. Mayo**

***Your letters have sparked riots in the maximum security wing of my heart— Sideshow Bob, the Simpsons!***

When 'The Rosspport Five' defied Shell and the courts and went to jail in the summer of 2005, rallies were organised in the major towns and cities by their families and supporters. "We'll fill the jails with men, women and children if necessary ... and we'll never lie down" - was the common theme of the speeches addressed to the very large crowds. Hearing these words cemented my commitment to the Shell to Sea campaign. We had already begun work on the Rosspport Solidarity Camp after having met the community and 'the Five' before they went to jail.

I wasn't what you'd call an 'activist' before this, but I had made friends in Co. Clare with people involved with the environmental and social justice group Gluaiseacht (Irish for "Movement"), around the time that Shannon Airport was handed over to the Americans to facilitate their war on Iraq. Gluaiseacht brought me to Co. Mayo and the camp where I was introduced to the principles of collective organising and the politics of direct action. I soaked it up, immersed myself in it and got stuck into the fight against Shell, to win. I was never really interested in disrupting the Corrib Gas Project, we were gonna stop it entirely.

I'm convinced that the processes of law are unable to deal with a critical mass of people engaging in civil disobedience to achieve a goal. It's for that reason that cops have to resort to violence to diminish the protest to a 'manageable size'. It's all about occupying space. To be involved in a protest like Shell to Sea requires that you push and keep pushing even when the backlash comes in the form of state violence and negative media. If you confront both you can remain on a course to success. If you flinch you are in big trouble. Cops must be prosecuted in the courts to stop their violence and restrict them to using the law only. The temptation to adopt a 'media friendly reasonableness' must be resisted. If you're going to adopt a radical stance, then at every turn you must expect to have to make unexpected radical decisions. No compromise. This tests people and it's my honest view that most 'ordinary' people will not 'perform' to this standard and the 'activists' will disagree over tactics.

It was never 'a tactical goal' of mine to go to prison, I was just prepared to push things and not be too worried if I landed up in court or in jail for a short time. But I never did anything unless I thought I had 'lawful authority or reasonable excuse' for my behaviour. Unfortunately the judges didn't see it my way. A jury might have gone with me but the procedures here denied

me that opportunity.

On 21st April 2010 I was convicted of assaulting a number of Gardaí in relation to Shell to Sea protests and sentenced to 6 months imprisonment. Remission for good behaviour means that prisoners will have their sentences reduced by a quarter, once you keep your nose clean. I was given credit for 2 weeks time served previously in 2009, before I was bailed out pending my appeal – which I lost and went back inside..

I went in a 'political prisoner' attached to an effective, high-profile campaign, there's no getting away from that. I've never gone on the offensive against any cop in Mayo, I just react to their cowardly violence and abuse of their power. They are the criminals, not me. They hide behind their uniform, I'm up front about what I do and have no shame or regret for anything I've done in protest situations. I've made mistakes and you learn as you go on. I might do things differently now in similar circumstances, but there is no shame in standing up to those tossers.

So I spent 4 months in jail from April to August in the summer of 2010.

### **Castlerea Prison, co. Roscommon**

When I first arrived in jail, it was a shock to the system. Prison officers wouldn't be the friendliest of individuals, they behave a lot like police officers and don't have much respect for prisoners. When you arrive at reception your clothes and belongings are taken from you and you are issued with prison clothes - cheap jeans, a white t-shirt, a cheap shirt and underwear. You get clean bedclothes, a towel, soap and a toothbrush and you are brought to your cell.

Most prison cells are doubles, with some singles. It's usual for new prisoners to be put in a double cell and it's pot luck who you end up with. Cells are reasonably roomy, with a double bunk bed, a sink with hot and cold water and a toilet in the corner behind a 3 foot wall as a screen. The beds are along one wall and on the other wall is a bench with a television and an electric kettle. On the back wall of the cell is a window, with bars. Cells in the main 'sentenced' block are comfortable and bright. Cells in the newer 'remand' block are modern but dingy, even though they have showers. But they're dark and the taps and showers don't work properly.

A prison block is a bit like a block of flats – noisy. I arrived at night. You can hear televisions and music playing and prisoners calling out to each other. I was nervous, not knowing what lay ahead and wondering what the other

prisoners were like. I felt unsafe and at risk. I slept well though, I liked the smell of the clean sheets I'd been given, although the mattress and duvet weren't the best.

You are woken at 8.15am and called out for breakfast. You walk to the kitchen at the end of the landing and pick up a pint of milk and a small bag of cereal. Tea bags and sugar too if you need them. You see the other prisoners for the first time, who appear to be a lot of hard men, looking hard. No smiles that early in the morning, no interest. You eat breakfast in your cell and turn on the television to watch Ireland AM.

Unlock at 9.30am. Prisoners appear on the landing, brushes and mops are grabbed, bins emptied, chat and talk. You look around, you know no-one, you're out of place, you just want to go back into your cell and bang out the door. But you can't, you must go out, you're sent out, out to the yard. The yard is grim. 30m x 30m of black tarmac surrounded by high concrete walls and steel fences topped with razor wire. The ground is filthy, stained with dirt and spit. Many prisoners spit a lot, hacking and spitting constantly, even inside the prison. There's a toilet in the corner of the yard. It's filthy. There's a water tap there too but it's broken. The morning session in the yard is long. 2½ hours till lock-up for lunch at 12noon. Some prisoners walk, in circles, some play cards or just sit and stand around chatting and smoking. The Travellers play hand-ball against the high wall - they're good players.

You pick someone out to talk to, to walk with, so as you're not on your own. You're nervous, struggling for things to say, wanting to just be normal like the other prisoners. You're careful when you look at people and make sure not to bump into anyone. You're vulnerable and careful not to make any wrong moves.

Some prisoners are called from the yard for school, or the gym, or a visit, or a visit to the governor. These are your options too, and you make a mental note of every bit of information coming your way. In fact, I always carried a small note book and a pen with me and made notes of everything I thought important.

I was called to see the Governor on my first day, Deputy Governor Ethel Gavin, a nice lady, in fact. She set me straight on one or two things I was unclear about and put me at ease. James Kelly the Chief Prison Officer sat with her and smiled pleasantly at me. The 'Governor's Parade' is a daily option that all prisoners have access to any weekday morning. It may be the governor that you meet, or a deputy governor or a senior officer deputising.

I did meet the then Governor Daniel Scannell on my first 2009 visit to the prison. We talked briefly about the circumstances that landed me in prison. "You can't beat city hall" he said to me as I left the room. It may look that way but I disagreed. Martin Reilly is the new governor now and I met him on occasion on my second longer spell inside.

The morning period of 'unlock' ends at 12 noon and you are called back to your cell for lunch, which you collect at about 12.15pm and bring back to your cell. I would watch 'Midday' on TV3; I'd lie on the bed after my lunch, listening to the news at one and inevitably dozing off till unlock again at 2.30pm.

Back out to the yard again till 4pm and locked in for tea till 5.30pm. Unlock at 5.30pm for 2 hours recreation in the 'rec' room till 7.30pm. The 'rec' is a couple of grim smoke-filled rooms with two pool tables and some telephones. You get one six minute phone call a day. The prison officers stand guard outside, well, sit actually and read the same books as most of the prisoners – crime non-fiction! I would normally 'decline' the rec and stay in my cell. In fact, if I could, I preferred to stay in my cell for most of the day unless the weather was very good, especially for the first while, till I 'got me head together'.

I spent the first 10 days out of 4 months in a double cell in the new block for remand prisoners, because the main 'sentenced' block was, as usual, overcrowded. My cell mate was sound and we accommodated each other quite comfortably. He was a heavy smoker though and the taps and shower in the cell didn't work properly. After 10 days I wrote to the governor asking to be moved to the main block and to my

You need to be pro-active about getting what you want in prison. Forms have to be sourced and paperwork filled out to secure your prison visits and your phone calls. If you want something you must ask for it, and keep asking till you get it. You'll need patience,

surprise I found myself in a bright single cell on the 3rd landing only a few hours later. It was probably luck that a cell became empty just at the time I wrote my letter, but even so my sense is that that cell was given to me with the good grace of the prison staff, which I appreciated. There were a few whimpers from other prisoners who were on the list for a single cell, it appears that I jumped the queue, but them's the breaks and I wasn't gonna be shifted once I entered the sanctuary of my single cell.

And that's what the single cell was for me - sanctuary.

## **Support**

Locked up for at least 18 hours a day can be claustrophobic, but when I 'banged out' my door I knew no-one would bother me and I was safe in my own world, with my telly and my kettle, my clean bed and ... the mail that started to flood in.

Being a 'Shell to Sea' prisoner has its advantages. Pat O'Donnell, another Shell to Sea'r and I had a certain novelty value which attracted the goodwill of most of the prisoners and some prison staff. And we were privileged to have the support of a lot of people on the outside. The support which came to my cell in the form of letters, articles, books, drawings and photos was overwhelming. It was a lifeline that lifted me right out of prison.

## **Pat O'Donnell**

'The Chief' Pat O'Donnell is a well known Mayo fisherman who fought hard against Shell and paid the price. He was convicted and sentenced over 2 months before me, initially housed in the main block and moved to 'the Grove' before I arrived in the jail. The Grove is a recent initiative, designed to be progressive and rehabilitative for long term, settled and political prisoners. It's a small housing estate for about 50-60 prisoners, isolated from the main block, with more freedom for inmates who live there. You can garden there and grow and cook your own food, do your house up a bit and walk in the grounds, on grass, inside its own boundaries. Some sex offenders are housed there and that is an issue which bothers other prisoners. In the main block, sex offenders are kept separate from the main population.

Pat and myself were kept separate. I did meet him on the first day I was admitted to the prison. As I was being led past the houses on the way to the block I called over to some lads I could see there and asked for Pat. They called him quick and he came running to the fence. The prison officer was good enough to let us have a minute together. A strange moment, we both put our hands up to the steel fence to touch palm to palm and we stood like that for a moment to greet each other before I was taken away. I was glad of that. I'd gone to see Pat's wife Mary the night before and he phoned her while I was there. I spoke to him, he put me wide on a few things and gave me the names of some lads who'd been his friends in the main block.

Apart from that short meeting, Pat and I never saw each other again in the prison. He was there from February to July and I was there from April to August. We wrote to one another regularly. I asked on a number of

occasions to be transferred to the Grove to be with Pat and I was told that I was on the 'list' for consideration. In mid-June as Pat's release date drew near I went to the governor to make another appeal. Mr Kelly, the senior officer was deputising that morning.

"I'll put it to you this way Niall, you'll have more chance of getting to the houses when Pat's gone". "Why is that?" I asked. "We're keeping ye separate", said Mr Kelly. "Why is that?", I asked again. "Because you're protesters".

A slight shock to hear it so bluntly put, I didn't feel the need to discuss it any further than that. I had the information.

I wrote to the governor to say that I appreciated Mr Kelly's honesty but I couldn't understand why we were being kept separate. Even republican prisoners are housed together. Gang members may need to be isolated from each other but we were neither of the above. I could only assume that the Gardai were giving the governor instructions. I queried him as to why he would be listening to those idiots.

Governor Reilly called me to his office to discuss. He said there was simply no room in the Grove at the moment. I asked him was there any political pressure from any source influencing his decision to keep us separate. He said no.

I knew there were spaces in the Grove. At least Mr Kelly had been straight with me. All the prisoners, and all the prison officers will tell you that Chief Officer Mr James Kelly is straight. I appreciated that.

But Pat and I were denied the opportunity to share our prison experience together and I regret that. It was deep when we hooked up on the out. I was camped out on the small beach in Inver for a few days and we shot the breeze there together for a long while, chatting and laughing and remembering our prison friends. I've a lot of respect for Pat O'Donnell, he has taken the most hits of all.'

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[1] For more on his tale see <http://www.indymedia.ie/article/95795>.

## Settling In

The first month was tough and very unsettling. It took me that long to get comfortable with myself in prison. It took me another month to get comfortable with other prisoners. It took me the next month to make friends. After 3 months of my time, they released Pat. An officer came to my door and told me to pack my bags - I was going to the Grove!

Some of the lads had gathered around my door, there was the whiff of a single cell on offer, nothing is lost on the prisoners. I said to the guard that I wanted to stay. The lads were saying go, go. I said no, I'd prefer to stay here with my friends if it was all the same. I only wanted to be over there to be with the Chief. The guard went away to make a call and came back 10 minutes later and told me I was safe where I was. I knew I'd made the right decision. Yes, I was tempted to go to the Grove to see it and experience it, and Pat said there was a welcome there for me, but I wanted to use the last month of my own sentence to enjoy the company of my new friends. And that's exactly what I did.

Little things mean a lot in jail. When I first I arrived on the landing and I was unlocked for the first time, a lad came straight in saying "You're one of them Shell to Sea boys, you should not be fucking in here. Do you need anything, dvd player, cd's, what? Just ask ok?" Later, another lad came in with a stereo. I had one cd of my own which was a gift sent in later to me after I watched a documentary about the band - The Dixie Chicks Live, a double album. Love it. I used to rock in my cell listening to it and trying to play some of it. I had a mandolin and tin whistle with me, and I practised a lot. I borrowed Amy Winehouse and Bob Dylan.

### Quote of the day!

The lads were playing football another day and a fella got hurt. Lads were always getting injured playing football. *"You'll always get good players in prison"*, one prisoner told me. But it's rough. And ... eh ... *"it's never a foul in prison unless it's a stab"*!

At the peak of jail overcrowding and when I didn't go to the Grove there was talk of them putting an extra prisoner on a mattress on the floor of my cell, which is very uncomfortable for both people. I'd had a man on my floor before for a few days and it made me value my sanctuary even more when he was gone.

I chatted with my immediate neighbour about it, a man who took a long time to get to know, he won't mind me saying. He was distant and just didn't seem to want to engage with me at all from the start, even though we were next

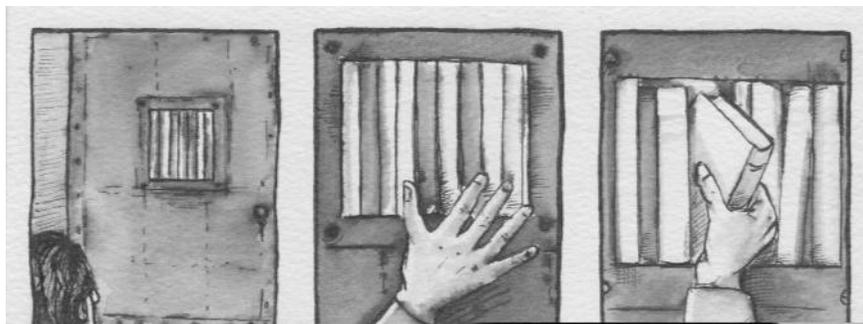
door neighbours. It took a while. The first breakthrough was when I borrowed his sweeping brush off him and he told me to keep it! The next was when he said to me, straight out of the blue, “Niall, if it bothers you that much to have a prisoner on your floor, and it happens, just put him in here with me, I'll take him”. I couldn't believe I was hearing this from a man with whom I was struggling to talk to and befriend. I'd never have done it to him, but that sincere offer blew me away, I have to say. “We've got your back Niall”, he said. When the door banged out for the night that evening at 7.30pm I lay back on the bed, conscious that my neighbour was just 2 feet away from me on the other side of the wall. We were that close, and what he had said had brought us closer. I wanted to talk and chat and be friends, but the cell had us barred and he's doing 3 years.

We were chatting another time and he asked me about my girlfriend, how long we were together, and what age she was. “We're both in our forties”, I said. He's in his twenties. “You're grand so”, he says. “The young ones I hang around with ... they wouldn't wait for a fuckin' bus”!

## Routine

Prison routine is healthy, in my opinion. I took advantage of it. Unlock at 9.30am and into the gym most mornings by 10am. You can shower in the gym and be back in your cell fit, washed and fresh in time for lunch at 12.15pm. Most prisoners have a snooze after lunch till unlock again at 2.30pm. If the weather was fine I'd go to the yard and walk. I decided I'd use the yard time to just walk and get more exercise that way.

Lads would join me intermittently and we'd talk and walk in circles till lock-up for tea at 4pm. If I didn't go to the yard for the afternoon, I'd just practice music in my cell and learn a few tunes. Prisoners are allowed to have instruments and music books in the cells. I'd never go out to the yard or the 'rec' room again at 5.30pm. I'd just stay in the cell as it suited me better.



Lock up for the night is at 7.30pm. Nobody bothers you again till morning. A minimum of 18 hours enforced lock-up per day. It didn't bother me. I'd watch television into the night, write the odd letter and practice a few tunes.

## **Clothes**

You're entitled to wear your own clothes in prison but not till after they've been checked and tagged for the laundry a few days after you arrive. You must pack three of everything to avail of this privilege. 3 pairs of jeans or tracksuit bottoms, 6 t-shirts, 3 sweatshirts etc. One jacket is okay, or just a couple of pairs of shorts for the gym is fine too. Trainers for the gym and flip-flops for the shower are available free at reception if needed. Tracksuits rolled up to below the knee with white trainers is the prison fashion.

Haircuts are done by a small number of other prisoners who have taken on the role. Barbers have the use of an electric hair clippers only. Scissors are not allowed because they may be used as a weapon. Buzz-cuts are the norm in prison and it's quick and easy to stay clean with a short haircut.

## **Food**

Dinner at noon is generally meat, chicken or fish with potatoes and vegetables.<sup>2</sup> You wolf it down. Prisoners volunteer for work in the kitchen and some of them are trained chefs. There's no doubt in my mind that they work hard to produce tasty dinners for their fellow prisoners from fairly basic supplies.

Tea at 4pm is a small affair – a bun-burger, a baked potato or a bowl of tinned spaghetti or some such. Or a steak and kidney pie ... hardly anyone ate them, those pies were rotten. Though some prisoners love them and stack up their plates with the ones left behind by the others who have no other choice but bread and jam.

Dinners are filling, nourishing and tasty. Teas are meagre. You'd be hungry again by 8pm. You've got to be wise how you eat and store food in your cell. You can collect as many bags of cereal you want in the mornings and as much bread as you need at tea time. Likewise there's no shortage of milk,

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[2] As far as I'm aware the prison doesn't cater for vegetarians or vegans. I think the best they can offer is to give you a plate full of vegetables and perhaps some extra fruit for desert. But you would have to push hard for this. However, the tuck shop will order a limited amount of stuff for you (e.g. soya milk), if you are prepared to pay for it, but there are no cooking facilities in the cell except for a kettle.

butter and jams.

Then there's the shop. Once a week you get a supervised visit to the 'tuck shop' to spend your prison allocated allowance of about €2.50 a day. You are entitled to receive money from the outside too and it is all credited to your account. Some lads walk out of the shop with bags of stuff, mostly drinks, sweets, chocolate, biscuits, cigarettes and tobacco. Some lads spend up to a €100 a week ... on pure shite!

But you can also supplement your diet with tuna, processed cheese and pot-noodles! Not great, but it'll get you over the 8pm hunger pangs. The kitchens may have leftovers and overspill too. Fruit and yoghurts that need to be eaten by a certain date are recycled through the prison by the kitchen crew in exchange for cigarettes. It's a good little system and I'm giving nothing away here. Food close to its best-by date is used up rather than being thrown out and the kitchen lads are entitled to the perks for their hard work. No-one begrudges them that and there's no need to be hungry in prison.

## **Drugs**

I had to have a chat with some of the prisoners about writing about drugs in prison. I didn't want to create trouble for anyone. The lads had no problem encouraging me to write what I saw. There are few secrets in prison, in any case.

I've been around drugs and taken drugs when I was younger. But I can honestly say that the first time I ever saw heroin and the first time I was ever offered heroin, was in jail. This is a problem that faces prisoners. I can see and understand how prisoners are tempted and become vulnerable to addiction. No prison is drug free, but Castlereia, in my view, is a quiet, settled prison without what you would call a drug problem.

Lads in Castlereia smoke the odd joint and smoke a bit of heroin to get them through the long nights, the long months and the long years. The jail goes through phases when there are drugs to be had in the prison and phases where things are quiet. I don't think it's possible to maintain a serious drug habit in Castlereia.

## **Work**

You can volunteer for work if you want to – cooking, cleaning, painting etc. You'll get pocket money and the privilege of having your cell door open all day so you can mingle with other 'workers'. I didn't work and I made the mistake of boasting to one of the painters that I wasn't gonna work for my incarcerators and certainly not for pennies. He told me he painted the cells only, for one reason only, so that lads could have clean bright cells. I shut my big mouth and apologised to him for being so crass. His example of real 'prisoner solidarity' made me rethink my 'political attitude' to 'work' and we became good friends.

## **Gym**

The gym in Castlerea is generally well-equipped with weight resistance machines, treadmills, bikes and rowers. There are no free-weights, which could be used as weapons. If you set yourself a nice routine in the gym, the equipment is there to enable you to get fit and strong. Physical fitness is good for the mind and body. I recommend using the gym if you are struggling to find a sense of well-being.

Counselling is available if you are really struggling. Use what is available to you.

Prison is no place to be unstable. You've got to keep it together. As Ali said to Foreman in the ring - "*You picked the wrong place to get tired!*"

## **Being Productive**

If the routine is a help, it's important also to manage and discipline yourself into adopting a productive regime of some sort. Education and training is available to long term prisoners at the prison schools and workshops, open university included. Many prisoners do courses of one sort or another. One of the lads, for example, discovered he was a great story teller after taking up 'creative writing'.

But the reality is that some prisoners suffer hard from the deprivation of liberty. A friend of mine in jail told me how he never left his cell for the first 5 or 6 years of his life sentence for murder. "I spent all those years right behind that door", he said. "They filled me with drugs for my depression and I put on stones in weight. I was too scared to come out. I should have complained to the doctor but I was too fuckin' tired!"

We laughed our heads off together at that.

His sense of humour had obviously returned along with his sanity by the time we met, because he had applied himself over recent years to snapping out of it. But it was a choice he had to make and something he had to work at. I'm proud to call that man my friend.

Another lad came in while on medication for depression. They put him on the floor of another man's cell, took his drugs from him and gave him paracetamol (the cure for all ills in Castlereagh) instead. He cut his own wrists in the middle of the night. He didn't die thankfully.

Lifers talk about the 'prison warehouse'. I'm convinced that most murders are not 'planned'. Circumstances give rise to a fight and someone winds up dead. A conviction for murder is an automatic life sentence. It's possible to be released on parole after 16 years or so. The parole board won't even meet you till you've done at least 8 years. A successful achievement on an anger management course is just one of the requirements set by the board. Lifers talk about simply being warehoused in the meantime with little interest shown in their welfare or early rehabilitation. They are just locked up away from society.

John Lonergan the ex-governor of Mountjoy prison writes in his book - <http://www.johnlonergan.ie> of his efforts to progressively improve the prison system in the interest of the early rehabilitation of the long term prisoners. He was obstructed at nearly every turn by the Irish Prison Service, prison officials and government ministers, and left isolated. The recent 'Report on an Inspection of Limerick prison' - <http://www.iprt.ie/prison-reports> - for example, is damning. I'm surprised more prisoners don't sue the Prison Service and the Minister for Justice for breaches of human rights, rights which remain lawfully attached to prisoners despite the deprivation of their liberty. Legal actions by prisoners would go a long way to improving things for prisoners.

I doubt if a lot of murderers would ever kill again. I'm pretty sure the lads I knew would pose no danger to society if they were pardoned or released early for good reason. They are good lads, settled and mature now they've done a long stretch in jail.

I wound up on the top floor of the main prison block, the third landing - the 'threes'. The first landing on the ground floor, the 'ones' is a thoroughfare of double cells filled with young lads. All prisoners use the 'ones' to get to the other parts of the prison. I spent some time there. It's

busy, noisy and volatile on the 'ones'. You dare not leave your cell with the door open, you will be robbed. The 'twos' and the 'threes' above are quieter. Most of the lifers and long term prisoners are up on the 'threes' and there's a tidy community spirit up there among the mature prisoners where most of the cells are singles. Stealing on the 'threes' is a no-no. Prisoners look out for one another and it's safe to leave your door open. I enjoyed the stability and the friendship of the long-term community on the third landing.

## Fights

Fights are common enough in Castlereia and a lot of them take place in the yard when the prison officers are locked outside. It's normally the younger lads that fight when tensions rise and their mates stir it up. You always know when there's going to be a fight. Things go very quiet in the yard and people start sitting down, watching. There's normally one or two lads winding up some lad to fight some other lad because of what someone said or did. Inevitably two lads stand up and face up.

People assume prisons to be dangerous places filled with dangerous men. If things boiled over that would be true. There are no shrinking violets in prison. Prisoners have to be selfish to protect themselves and they will fight, but I've seen the way lads look out for each other.	Travellers' rules apply, dukes up, a fair fight. A ring forms around the fighters and there's some hard punches thrown. The prison officers radio around the jail for support and the fight is broken up in minutes if not seconds. The lads are usually friends again the following day. Prison officers encourage lads to shake hands. It's rare enough that a serious fight resulting in serious injury will happen, but it does happen. Lads may fight in their cells and things can kick off anywhere.
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Bullying goes on. I heard one story about an overcrowded holding cell in the basement where 4 or 5 lads were being held. A new prisoner, a foreigner, used the term 'knacker' by mistake. A traveller threw a bowl at him hitting him in the face. and then forced him to write out 100 lines of - "I will never call a traveller a knacker again".

It is good to make friends for this reason, to have people who will stand with you in the unlikely event that trouble comes your way. I suggest standing your ground and being prepared to fight if necessary. Showing that you are willing to fight can in itself negate any risks of bullying, I imagine.

But fights don't happen without a reason and there's no reason to feel

threatened unless you provoke someone. Generally, prisoners just want to get along.

At the end of my stint in jail I felt completely safe in prison and in the prison yard, the place where I felt most intimidated at the start. Castlerea is a safe prison, in my view, unless you want it to be otherwise. I used to walk around the yard surrounded by criminals of all ages, backgrounds and type and think to myself - this is a safe place for me - "I'm safe as houses in here".

### **I used only have a Little Bit of Yin and Fuckin' Loads of Yang. Now I'm Totally Bleedin' Zen**

When I left prison my head was clear. I was super-sensitised to all around me when I came in, it must be a survival instinct. It's very healthy. I sucked in anything of positive value and instantly rejected anything of no value.

For example, if a prison officer was rude I never looked at them or spoke to them again. If they were polite, I soaked up their good manners and relied on them if I needed something. I kept it simple. I would only borrow the cream of musical CD's to have in my cell, no mediocrity. I decided that I would eat everything that was handed to me, but I would buy no shite at the shop. I would walk in the yard rather than sit around.

I thought about my life and questioned how my family would view my jailing. Every parent wants their child to be a 'success'. The answer was simple. It's my success in life to have lived and worked with friends of the calibre that live on the Rossport Solidarity Camp. I wouldn't have it any other way. I put my term in jail down to part of the whole experience of a full-on campaign.

Facing court cases and the threat of jail is stressful and debilitating. When I was sent to Castlerea prison I was weak, unsure and under-confident. There's no doubt that all prisoners, including myself, struggle in many ways to come to terms with being incarcerated. In spite of that, jail gave me the chance to think. When I left I was calm and clear.

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***Special thanks to my prison friends.***

***Special thanks also to Eddie Geraghty.***

## **Rosspport Solidarity Campers facing imprisonment?**

The activists at the Rosspport Solidarity Camp have maintained a campaign of direct action against Shell since the summer of 2005. They persist in their efforts, week after week, month after month, year after year, to physically disrupt and block work on the Shell Corrib Gas Project. Many of them have been continually arrested, prosecuted and convicted of criminal charges of obstruction and civil disobedience.

Recent fines imposed on the campers amount to over €8,000 and it's possible that some activists with mounting convictions will end up in Castlerea prison at some stage. If they do, they'll find a warm welcome from the lads in Castlerea, but they'll do their time to the day. Time off for good behaviour is one thing, but unlike 'normal' prisoners, Shell to Sea prisoners do not qualify for early release.

For more information on the campaign to stop Shell in Erris, Co. Mayo please visit [www.shelltosea.com](http://www.shelltosea.com) or [www.rossportsolidaritycamp.org](http://www.rossportsolidaritycamp.org).

### **Final note**

This account has been about Castlerea prison. The various protocols and routines will be pretty much the same in other Irish prisons. Mountjoy Prison is where there will be exceptions, having a much harsher reputation than other Irish prisons.

Cover art, a composite of Vincent van Gogh's *The Exercise Yard* and Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, by Mick Connors, prisoner.

*Prison Books*, by Carrie MacKinnon.

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