
Original Article

'Dead faces laugh': Medievalist hungers and Irish republican time, 1917-1981

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Abstract The article analyses the temporal entanglements of personal and historical time through hunger-striking protests in Ireland and their commemoration in medieval imagery, reflecting on the role of medievalism and temporality in nation-building by insurgent agents. Between 1917 and 1981, twenty-two Irish republican paramilitary prisoners undertook hunger strikes to the death for recognition of political status and protest against their prison regimes. While some of these deaths went unremarked by the wider public because of state censorship and lack of support, others catalysed worldwide attention, and succeeded in pitching a compelling national and political narrative for their supporters. The article focuses on how the use of medievalism in examining and commemorating these deaths highlights the vivid temporal collapse between the present of the individual and the past of the nation, and the way this can appeal to the protest's audience, while making a powerful political bid for the legitimacy of the insurgents' national narrative. The article examines temporal entanglement both as practiced by the audience of the hunger strikes, from poets such as W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney to journalists and scholars, and by the republican community itself, whether by hunger strike survivors, their comrades, or their families, bringing together literary, material, and art historical evidence to show its relevance and pervasiveness. By doing so, the article achieves a study of the ways medievalist temporalities interact with political and personal history, in a bid for the ownership and definition of the nation.

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- 1 Irish republicanism envisions a united Irish republic, and is a current of the larger Irish nationalist political movement. British loyalists are in favour of the permanence of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom, as a current of the wider British unionist movement.
- 2 The Provisional IRA was the largest republican paramilitary formation. The INLA (Irish National Liberation Army) was a very small but very active farther left group, more closely aligned with contemporary European revolutionary socialist formations. Both had split from the main Irish Republican Army (Official IRA), in 1969 and 1975 respectively.

Throughout the Northern Ireland Troubles (circa 1969 – circa 2005), the imprisonment and prison protests of Irish republican and British loyalist paramilitaries were a fundamental and highly visible part of the political and military struggle (McEvoy 2001, 72–107).¹ These protests were most intense during the taxing and traumatic 1976–1981 period, which saw republican prisoners spend up to four and a half years naked, dressed only in blankets in rejection of prison uniforms, and smearing their cells in their own excrement in escalation for two and a half years (see Coogan 1980; Clarke 1997, 110–30), eventually going on hunger strikes in 1980 and 1981. Thirteen years later, Irish republican activist Bernadette Devlin McAliskey wrote the foreword for an oral history of these prison protests (McAliskey 1994) but while the book treated the whole of the protest history, McAliskey focused specifically on 1981, and the lengthy hunger strike which saw ten of the prisoners die: Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kieran Doherty, and Tom McElwee of the Provisional IRA; and Patsy O’Hara, Kevin Lynch, and Mickey Devine of the INLA.² The activist remembered this as an indelible event, characterised by a nearly unspeakable accounting of time:

I wonder sometimes how many people stop to count how many seconds make up the minutes that made up the hours of the 66 days of Bobby Sands’ dying, or the 73 of Kieran Doherty’s, or the 46 of Martin Hurson’s. How many seconds did it take all 10 to die? [...] as the clock ticked out the ebbing life of each in turn [...]. (McAliskey 1994, xiv)

For McAliskey, it was the time of hunger strike that most pressed on her memory, a time which lingered on in seemingly endless dilation, even as it rushed to the close of the prisoners’ lives.

But the time of hunger strike was not the only time that confronted readers of the volume. The book, edited by three former prisoners (Laurence McKeown, himself a hunger strike survivor, Brian Campbell, and Felim O’Hagan) was titled *Nor Meekly Serve My Time* after the ‘H-Block Song’ by Francie Brolly, written in 1976 in support of the prisoners’ protest against criminal status. The song lyrics were reproduced at the volume’s beginning (Brolly 1994). Criminal status for paramilitary prisoners had been introduced by Britain in replacement of *de facto* political status (English 2012, 3855–3932): to members of Irish republican formations, who saw themselves as Irish nationals fighting against illegitimate British rule, political status was a fundamental acknowledgment that they were not common criminals, but bearers of an ongoing tradition of rebellion. In the mid-1970s, seeking to isolate the conflict to Northern Ireland itself and to delegitimise the paramilitaries, the British



government had introduced a policy of 'criminalisation,' denying the political and historical claims of the republican campaign in favour of treating it as one of common crime, sparking immediate protests from the republican prisoners (McEvoy 2001, 227–49). In this context of reclamation of the legitimacy of the republican struggle, the narrator of Brolly's song, a boy, tells of the renewal of 'Ireland's fight' in the span of his own 'young life', where he 'learned of centuries of strife' and joined the fight against them. The song refuses to 'brand Ireland's fight/Eight hundred years of crime,' because the current trouble is 'No new design[...]/Black Cromwell lives while Mason stalks,' wondering whether 'Britain need a thousand years/Of protest, riots, death and tears' to leave.³ The tension and the identity between past and present animate Brolly's lyrics: the current fight, he says, is a continuation of one that sinks its roots firmly into the Middle Ages, its invocation of eight centuries reaching back to the first Anglo-Norman arrival in Ireland in the 1100s. At the same time, it may project itself, if needed, into the future.

The oral history of the protest, then, prefaced itself with two strong chronological claims: a claim on the immediate, visceral, carefully measured time of the hunger strike of the previous decade, and a claim on the perceived continuous chain of time from the Middle Ages to the present day which could underpin and legitimise its authors' cause. At the focal knot of hunger strike and ongoing struggle, two streams of time came together: one precisely and nearly unbearably pinpointed in immediate events, and one sinking into the deep past and reaching into the far future, two streams mutually compatible and equally necessary to the self-representation and external reception of the armed wing of the Irish republican movement, and its role in Irish history. The two were joined by a third fundamental stream of time, that of the deep, highly personal emotional resonance and grief of the strikers' families and comrades, whose interaction with the medievalism of the movement and its political needs would further shape, as we'll see below, remembrance and memorialisation in private and public. As Niall Ó Dochartaigh has observed, the hunger strike pitted asymmetrically 'biological time against the institutional time of modernity' in a context in which temporality was crucial, but whose decision-making process was 'not easily assimilated' to the clock (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 185). The appeal to medieval time through the practice of medievalism, that is the use and appropriation of medieval imagery, references, and themes, presented an alternative to such a precision, and an evasion from the harrowing boundaries of the fasting body and the community which grieved for it.⁴ Medievalism, as will be discussed in detail below, was closely entwined with the Irish republican movement: it was a fundamental part of the Irish nationalist revival in the nineteenth century, and it made a consistent appearance in the

3 Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), English statesman, a figure of loathing in Irish history because of his brutal campaign of reconquest in Ireland in 1649, marked by religiously-motivated massacres and repression. Roy Mason (1924–2015), Labour politician, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in 1976.

4 For an introduction to medievalism, see Matthews (2015), D'Arcens (2016), Kjærulff (2018).

revolutionary practice and the memorialisation of Irish republicans in the twentieth. Irish medievalism evoked both an independent national past that could be ‘recovered’ and claimed by the republican movement to justify its campaign and frame its members’ protest and death, and a disruptive modern construction through literary, artistic, and material production, often untethered from precise chronological and historical references, but because of this the more able to transcend and redefine time.

Louise D’Arcens and Andrew Lynch have underlined medievalism’s ability to function as ‘a challenge to the assumptions of both historical periodization and linear models of temporality,’ a fundamentally disruptive and creative tool to both reframe the past and to an extent ‘make’ it, whose very complexity means that ‘looking more closely, the distinction between “found” and “made” medievalism does not hold’ (D’Arcens and Lynch 2014, xi–xii; D’Arcens 2016, 2–3). Building on these premises, by engaging the ways in which medievalism was deployed to explain, commemorate, and cope with hunger strike, and the foundations it rested on in Irish republican history, the article reflects on this complex temporality: the relationship between present time as embodied in hunger strike, and medieval time as evoked in compellingly undefined, suggestive traits, in a practice of medievalism which we can trace across the twentieth century, both within and without the republican movement. I propose that, in recollecting a wearying protest whose temporal dimension proves both especially memorable and especially traumatic, medievalism and its ability to grasp and reshape time becomes a versatile means of ordering the past, claiming the present, and envisioning the future, and speaks powerfully to Irish republican conceptions of history, personal engagement in the armed struggle, and understanding by an outside audience.

In its practice by Irish republicans, in turn, the medievalism of hunger strike provides a powerful case study which deepens and queries related medievalisms both within and without Europe. Ireland occupies a unique status within the history of colonialism (among many others, see Lloyd 2001; Howe 2002 and 2008; Cavanagh 2013; Laird 2015). Irish nationalism has consistently allied itself with, and been considered an ally by, Indigenous anticolonial movements, for instance among the North American First Nations (de Groot 2020; Rennard 2021) and by the anti-apartheid African National Congress of Nelson Mandela in South Africa (Guelke 2000; The *Derry Journal* Newsroom 2017).⁵ The British government itself applied to Northern Ireland during the Troubles the same counter-insurgency strategy and personnel it had deployed against the Kenyan anticolonial Mau Mau rebellion (Newsinger 2002, 60–83, 151–94; Dixon 2009), even if substantially lightening the approach in recognition of the heightened visibility of Ireland on the international

5 It is of course necessary to keep in mind Irish contributions to the settlement of colonial North America, and the internalisation of colonial constructions of North American Indigenous peoples in Irish culture (see for instance Porter 2003; Mullen 2016).



stage as a European nation. The Provisional IRA, in turn, claimed the politics of Frantz Fanon's discourse on anticolonial insurgency (Fanon 2002; Hanley and Millar 2009, 220–1; White 2017, 1091–3). Irish nationalism is also prominently and enduringly connected to non-European movements such as the Palestinian cause, both through the left-wing republican Sinn Féin party (see for instance, relevantly, the commemorative volume by Hashim and Aljamal (2021) for the connection between Palestinian and Irish hunger strikes, endorsed by republican leader Gerry Adams (4)) and through the currently-governing centre-right parties of the Republic of Ireland, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil (Ryan, Omorodion and Raleigh 2023; Mullally 2023). The movement for civil rights for Northern Irish Catholics in the 1960s, in which many republicans themselves took part, explicitly connected itself to the Black civil rights movement in the US (Dooley 1998), while Sinn Féin has openly supported the Black Lives Matter movement.⁶ However, despite its sustained involvement in anticolonial politics, the republican movement still sought the support of Nazi Germany against Britain during WWII (O'Donoghue 2010), even after many of its adherents had taken part in the Spanish republican struggle against Francoism (Bowyer Bell 1969; for a discussion of the political journey of one republican leader, Frank Ryan, from antifascist struggle to possible Nazi collaboration, Cronin 1980; McGarry 2010). It can in fact be shown that Irish nationalist politics have both a longstanding far left tradition and connection to revolutionary Marxism (Hanley and Millar 2009; McDonald and Holland 2016; Finn 2019; Leddin 2019; Mulqueen 2019), and prominent far right adherents (Cronin 1995; Newsinger 2001).

Relevant to our argument, Irish hunger striking is a catalyst for complex postcolonial politics in the UK: Grant puts the tradition in dialogue with that of anti-imperial Indian hunger striking (Grant 2019, 330–5); Black British director Steve McQueen, who has recently completed a documentary series on the Brixton uprising against police discrimination by protesting British people of colour (Ramachandran 2022) further reflecting on the significance of the year 1981 in British history, dedicated his first feature film, *Hunger* (2008) to Sands' life and death, recollecting the impact it had had on him as a child even before he understood its political significance (Lim 2009). The positionality of Irish protests within the postcolonial politics of the former British empire operates within a wider, complex theatre where the whiteness of the Irish is liminal and contextual within the larger history of racialisation of subject peoples by the British (Ignatiev 2008; Garner 2015), while still benefiting from white privilege and its supporters outside its boundaries (Walsh 2021; Brundage 2022). Indeed, for example, despite the extensive alliances historically forged by Irish republicans with different peoples of colour outside Europe, and their

6 @sinnfeinireland, 4th June 2020. <https://twitter.com/sinnfeinireland/status/1268520260396896260?lang=en-GB>.

pointedly seeking allies and being sought after among the Italian left (*An Phoblacht* 2009; Sartori 2017), the 1981 hunger strikers in particular have been claimed by the Italian far right as examples of white European Catholic nationalism (Rinaldi 2021; Berizzi 2023), again attesting to the potential of Irish nationalist politics to embody and rally diametrically opposite political aspirations.

This extremely brief excursus into the specificity of the positionality of Irish nationalism as both part of the wider European nationalist landscape and an insurgent, resistant subject to Britain claimed by and aligned with non-European groups immediately connects to the separateness and significance of Irish medievalism within the larger tradition of European medievalism. For colonial Britain in particular, nationalist medievalism could be a tool of empire, with the Victorian historiographical and iconographical tradition shaping and crystallising an image of the triumphing, ‘Anglo-Saxon’ conqueror across the Atlantic (Modarelli 2018; Rodrigues da Silva 2021).⁷ British imperialist medievalism affirmed the primacy of England (Ellard 2019, chs. 2–4), seized on the crusades as a standard of behaviour and justification of conquest (Horswell 2018), and connected the ruling class of the colonies back to the metropole (D’Arcens 2010), a fundamental usage of medievalism for Spanish-ruled South America as well (Altschul 2020); these medievalisms also became deeply entrenched in the studies of the past of England itself (Rambaran-Olm 2021). Medievalism both defined the creation and identity of the French nation (Glencross 1995; Stahuljak 2013), and underpinned its colonial enterprises (Warren 2011). Germany’s medievalism both underpinned its transition from imperial fragmentation to unified nation state (Gentry 2020) and lent strength to Nazism (Link and Hornburg 2016). These Western European medievalisms of conquest were used to validate both the coming together of the nation as a united, homogenous, native community, and its right to expand the territory it ruled at the expense of other nations.

There were certainly numerous resonances between these medievalisms and that of Ireland in the nineteenth century: many Irish practitioners of medievalism were influenced by the British Romantics (Connolly 2006), as the two medievalist traditions developed alongside as well as in opposition to each other (Orr 1989; Pryce 2020). But Irish medievalism, as we will see below, primarily designated itself as a medievalism of resistance and reclamation, which sank the roots of nationalism pointedly beyond British domination, and reaffirmed the unbroken continuity of the nation in the face of occupation. Within the Irish republican movement, as we will see, medievalism was a powerful legitimising call, which allowed armed republicans to cast themselves in a tradition that claimed mythological roots as well as historical ones, and shaded itself into the smudged but

7 Medievalism, of course, remains a flexible tool within the English-speaking world and beyond: Victorian Britain also saw its deployment by marginalised groups (Matthews and Sanders 2021); scholars have analysed its usages by people of colour across different eras (see for instance Vernon (2018) and Hsy (2021)).



powerful time of the medievalist collapse that this essay focuses on. While Ireland, like other Western European nations, saw in medievalism the origin story for its continuity, legitimacy, and existence as a recognisable national community on a unified territory across an extensive timespan, unlike many of them Ireland used medievalism to cast itself as a nation enduring in opposition and centuries-long rebellion against the claims of another. Rather than a justification for expansion, Irish medievalism could be a justification for insurgency, as seen on the hardest edge of Irish nationalism with the armed republican movement here examined. While nineteenth- (and, by and large, twentieth) century practitioners of Irish medievalism could sit on the variety of political positions encompassed by Irish nationalism, they were usually united by a wish to reaffirm the claim of their common nation against British domination, and harnessed medievalism as a tool in its service.

As they were positioned (or, in some cases, they positioned themselves, as we shall see) at the intersection of usefully indefinite medievalist time and harrowingly precise fasting time, republican hunger strikers embodied this tradition: the rupture with European conquering medievalism in the service of the unruptured time of the enduring, insurgent Irish nation. This article analyses their medievalist practice by first engaging with the ways in which time became entangled and collapsed in the hunger strike, and the way this phenomenon intersects with the temporal implications of the practice of medievalism in Ireland, examining the history of Irish nationalist medievalism and the history of the Irish hunger strikes across the nineteenth and twentieth century. The essay then pursues these intersections through an exploration of the enduring but transforming relevance of W.B. Yeats' play *The King's Threshold* (1904), and closely related examples of literary medievalism, in recollecting and coping with hunger strike for both a scholarly and an eyewitness audience. Specifically, I examine how Yeats' medievalist play was directly connected and responsive to the 1920 hunger strike of Terence MacSwiney, and how it was then rediscovered and redeployed by journalists, scholars and poets in recollecting the 1981 hunger strike despite republicans' apparent disinterest in it. The medievalism of republican witnesses and participants in the 1981 hunger strike is then examined, jointly with a reflection on the temporality of the private grief of the hunger strikers' families and comrades, and the way acknowledgment of this grief interacted with the strikers' commemorations. Building on the exploration of these more direct agents of medievalism, the confluence of time and practice is then explored in its explicitly public-facing, communitarian aspect through funerary sculpture and mural painting, engaging with the intersection of collective and personal history in a claim on the national narrative, by observing examples of funerary monuments and murals across the



twentieth century. Drawing conclusions about the significance and versatility of these modes of communication and commemoration, the article concludes by setting out the way medievalist representations of Irish hunger strikes illuminate vividly republican experiments in nation-building, as collective and individual chronological streams collide in one moment of emotionally loaded, time-altering protest and its after-effects.

Accounting struggle: time streams

Time was an essential component of what made the prison protest hard to bear, be it time spent in prison, time dreading punishment, or measuring the days and weeks leading up to death on hunger strike. Recollecting in verse the terrifying moments leading to his first police interrogation, Bobby Sands described how time had passed unbearably slowly, yet fled in the cells: ‘Like ticking clock,/ I stopped in shock/ As time ran out on me./ And God forbid, but flew it did,/ Like screeching blackbird flew [...]’ (Sands 1982, 45). Recounting their experiences to anthropologist Allen Feldman in the mid-1980s, former republican prisoners recalled the unsettling, achronic period of the dirty protest, in which time had lost all anchors except for beatings (Feldman 1991, 179–86, 225), and which followed on the ‘disordering of time’ fundamental to interrogations (136–42). Only the shock of the hunger strike protests, first in October–December 1980, and then in March–October 1981, had been able to reactivate time, giving the prisoners back to a precisely accounted-for chronological dimension (Feldman 1991, 228–9, 248).

Time and its reckoning were essential to the impact of hunger strike: tallies of the days of the fasting were kept on public boards in Belfast’s nationalist quarters, and they were daily updated on protest placards.⁸ But fasting time could not be relied upon: when Martin Hurson suddenly died, unusually early, after forty-six days, the reaction among his supporters and family was shock (Beresford 1994, 315–8). The same shock accompanied Tom McElwee’s death while still in relative health: both deaths were felt to be unannounced, and their loved ones were unprepared for them (Campbell, McKeown and O’Hagan 1994, 240–2). Mickey Devine, the last of the strikers to die, agreed with fellow striker Pat McGeown they should hold out until the by-election to fill Sands’ parliamentary seat, and died on the morning of it.⁹ The death of Joe McDonnell took place amidst a contested timeline of intensive negotiation between republican leadership and the British government which has been claimed to have been mismanaged, costing McDonnell’s life and the life of the five strikers to die after him (O’Rawe 2005; Hennessy 2014, 378–420; Twomey 2021; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 180–5). The hunger strikers’ time

8 See for instance (<https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-bobby-sands-1981-h-block-protest-silent-march-victory-to-the-hunger-113016523.html>) and (<https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2018/02/23/hunger-strikes-and-desperate-desire-justice>)

9 Bobby Sands’ political career, and its relevance to the hunger strike, will be described in detail below. McGeown lapsed into a coma and was saved by his wife (O’Malley 1990, 84).



was fragile: Kevin Lynch consoled his mother by telling her that his grandmother's ninety years of life were not so different from three months (Beresford 1994, 363). Time on hunger strike became dilated and threatening, and weaponised, traumatic timekeeping had been a constant of the prominent republican hunger strikes of the twentieth century: in 1920, Sinn Féin Cork mayor Terence MacSwiney endured for seventy-three days under the world's riveted, horrified eyes (Costello 1995, 157–225); in 1973–4, the Price sisters, Dolours and Marian, Provisional IRA bombers of the Old Bailey, London (1972), survived a 208 days strike with daily force-feeding, which destroyed their mental and physical health and prompted international condemnation and their eventual release on humanitarian grounds (Keefe 2018, 165–181; Miller 2014, 195–202).

If the protests however were measured by a present, painfully felt time, the hunger strikers themselves were not constrained by it: they looked, consistently, both forward and back. Terence MacSwiney looked back to the brutally quashed Easter Rising of 1916: he wished he had been able to stand and fall with his comrades then, and hoped his current, slow death would be counted with theirs.¹⁰ He also looked forward, to the good he perceived his hunger was doing the nation at the time of its decisive struggle (Costello 1995, 182). At the other end of our timeframe of the twentieth century hunger strikes, Bobby Sands looked back to Terence MacSwiney, and before him, to Thomas Ashe, who in 1917 had been the first republican hunger striker to die (Sands 1982, 154, 158–9). But Sands also looked forward: to the nation he wanted to bequeath to his son and nephew, and to the future in which 'what is lost here is lost for the Republic' (Sands 1982, 158–9). Before his hunger strike, Sands had propagated one of the most enduring republican slogans, a firm expectation of final if future victory: 'Tíocfaidh ár lá,' 'our day will come' (Sands 1982, 108, 172; Sands 1983, 59–60, 118; for a discussion of its origins Mac Giolla Chríost 2012, 51–2). Such confidence of one's place in the progression towards a united Ireland was fundamental for republicans facing death: as John Brannigan has put it, when Easter Rising leader Pádraic Pearse ignited the rebellion he knew to be doomed, he had 'mailed the Proclamation [of the Republic] to the future at a non-existent address,' confiding to it the result he hoped for, but knew he would not see (Brannigan 1996, 61). Such confidence is more easily understandable once we focus on what underpinned it: a conception of the nation reaching far into the medieval past (elastically defined) and closely tailored to the cause advocated for in the present.

The medievalist aspects of the early twentieth-century Irish nationalist movement, of which republicans were part, have been extensively studied (for instance see Kiberd 2015; Crookes 2021). From the mid-1850s onward, a cultural movement was fostered which sought to rid Ireland of

10 Cork did not rise in rebellion against British rule in 1916 when Dublin did, heeding the order of Eoin MacNeill, the leader of the Irish Volunteers, the main rebel formation involved, who thought the rebellion had no chance of succeeding and should be called off (Costello 1995, 62–70, 181).

‘English’ influence by rediscovering ‘true’ Irish culture (crucially, Hyde 1894; Kiberd 1996, 133–66, 25–305; O’Connor 2006, ch. 1). As ‘English’ influence had come to Ireland in the twelfth century, some sought the solution in a ‘de-Anglicised’ Ireland, which could only be looked for in the even more remote medieval time before it.¹¹ The return to the medieval, it is important to stress, was by no means an unchallenged view: some advocated instead for a return to the culture of the seventeenth century, the time of the systemic opposition to Irish culture, and there were also calls for inspiration to be taken from the contemporary folk culture of the Gaeltacht, the still Irish-speaking part of the island (for a discussion see O’Leary 2006, and also Corkery 1924).

11 ‘De-Anglicisation’ in particular was the term used by Douglas Hyde (1984), one of the main proponents of this approach.

But while not unchallenged, the medievalist approach had wide appeal, resting on an ample raft of activities which found legitimacy in it. The Irish language, which had endured much marginalisation and erasure in the modern period, had been a key feature of the vivacious medieval Irish literary scene (Mac Giolla Chríost 2012, chs. 3–4); Irish sports such as hurling, and Irish ‘traditional’ music forms, were somewhat imprecisely dated back to this period (O’Shea 2008, chs. 1–2; with caveats, Ó Séaghdha 2011, 122–125; Rouse 2017, 11–30; Cronin 1999). The complexity of written sources outlining the historical timeline of the medieval era in Ireland (see Evans 2010; McCarthy 2008) contributed to the smudged and pliable dimension of this perception of the nation’s lost independence. Ideas of the medieval past blended seamlessly with the mythological ‘heroic age’ preserved by the abundant poetic production of the period.¹² The idea of Ireland wholly free of Britain was not only profoundly remote in time: it was so imprecisely defined it could, to an extent, be carefully constructed through a collective cultural program.

12 The term ‘heroic age’ is used contextually, as it would have been at the time of the Celtic revival, in works such as de Vere (1882), and by one of the authors examined (Yeats 1903). See below for Seamus Heaney’s usage, and for a widely-used anthology, Koch with Carey (2003).

Armed republicans of the time were closely engaged with such a program. Pádraic Pearse had been highly active in the Irish language revival, and his medievalist poetry cast republicans as the mythological hero Cúchulainn (O’Leary 1983).¹³ Eoin MacNeill (1867–1945), both a professor of medieval history and leader of the Irish Volunteers, shaped the medievalist dimension of the Free State which the 1916–1923 revolutionary period yielded, heading a cultural and education program, which also inspired decorative and commemorative motifs in the state’s pageantry (Johnston 2019; Mulvagh and Purcell 2022). Several hunger strikers were also practitioners of medievalism: Thomas Ashe had been active in the music and hurling revival (Ó Lúing 2017, 33–6), and Terence MacSwiney had written medievalist plays (Costello 1995, 28–30; Kiely 2005, li). And while Bobby Sands’ own medievalist production was minimal, his favourite poet, whose book he asked for on his deathbed, was Ethna Carbery (1864–1902), whose medievalist, mythological compositions envisioned the nation at the beginning of the twentieth century

13 Though it is important to stress Pearse’s embrace of medievalism was not absolute: as he stated, ‘we want no Gothic revival’ (de Brún 2012), revealing a nuanced relationship with it.



through poetry which cast Ireland in a Romantic and heroic light, making a case for the inherent poetic and national value of its history (O'Hearn 2016, 345, 355; Carbery 1902, 1904). At the point of death Sands, a revolutionary socialist precisely contextualised in his historical era, sought the comfort of medievalist poetic escape; significantly, he had not been aware that Carbery had died in 1902, and clearly considered her deeply relevant to his present practice (O'Hearn 2016, 585–6). Indeed, McKeown recollected Sands' propaganda strategy as one which 'exploited emotive symbolic images of Catholic, Gaelic Ireland through which to garner support' (McKeown 2001, 231), attesting to the awareness of the relevance of this kind of cultural, artistic, and intellectual background. The armed wing of the Irish republican movement was thus associated with an environment steeped in medievalism, to which its adherents were often enthusiastic contributors, at ease with its potential for temporal entanglement.

As Oliver MacDonagh has stressed, 'in the scholarly warfare over the resuscitated body of the Celtic past' the 'elision of time' was fundamental in presenting the period as 'validating or invalidating,' in a perspective in which 'time was foreshortened,' and Irish nationalists claimed the independent past of the nation, while their adversaries depicted it as an era of 'barbarism' from which Ireland had slowly emerged thanks to British domination (MacDonagh 1983, 1–3). The stakes of medievalism for Irish nationalists were extremely high, going to the heart of their nation-building project, requiring both a wilful act of recovery of this 'lost' history, and a creative and flexible grasp on its temporality to reinvent it. Influentially, Benedict Anderson defines nations as 'imagined political communities,' where the act of imagination is both fundamental and self-conscious, but eventually absorbed and accepted unconsciously (Anderson 2016, 5–7, 204–6). Conversely, describing his practice as a historian writing narrative history, Eric Jager places 'an act of the imagination' at the basis of any attempt for recovering the past, no matter how historically founded, in order to bridge an otherwise impassable gap (Jager 2016). These two acts of imagination had collapsed into one in the radical medievalist nation-building of Ashe and MacSwiney, and they would collapse again, with the added dimension of the briskly interrupted time of their fast and life, in the recollections that would follow them. Carolyn Dinshaw frames the encounter of 'late medieval English texts and their postmedieval readers' through '*asynchrony*: different time frames or temporal systems colliding in a single moment of *now*' (Dinshaw 2012, 5). The manifestations examined here hinge on such collisions: the coming together of the brief time of individual lost lives and the centuries-long perspective to which they were vowed, in the medievalist representations meant to make sense of the sharply limited time of hunger strike.



The King's Threshold: illumination, curtailed

In 1904, Irish revivalist W.B. Yeats completed *The King's Threshold* (Yeats 2005), a medievalist play about the fasting protest of a medieval poet, Seanchan, who had also appeared as a character in the medieval saga *Tromdámh Guaire* (Connellan 1860). Feeling slighted by the king, who denied him a poet's rights, Seanchan begins fasting at the king's door, upholding the righteousness of his claim according to medieval Brehon law (see Kelly 1988, 181–2). The king sends powerful men from Seanchan's hometown, his father, and his lover to persuade him to desist; eventually, as Seanchan holds out, the king concedes, granting his request and enabling him to end his fast. The play was written in antiquarian medievalist mode: it displayed the author's knowledge of the society of medieval Ireland and period details such as characters taking notes in *ogam* code (see Swift 1997; McManus 1991). Yeats had concerns about the work: he considered it hard to cast and unsatisfactory to stage, and it did not enjoy the success of his other productions (Kiely 2005, l–li).

This changed during Terence MacSwiney's 1920 hunger strike. Yeats followed it closely, and would later commemorate MacSwiney by restaging the striker's 1914 play *The Revolutionist* (Hannigan 2012, 1834–48, 3271). Because of MacSwiney's strike, Yeats wrote of *The King's Threshold* that he would now 'give it the tragic ending it always needed' (Kiely 2005, li–lii), and revised the work accordingly, changing the final scene: in this version, Seanchan dies, accompanied by his disciples, calling upon the king:

When I and these are dead
We should be carried to some windy hill
To lie there with uncovered faces awhile
That mankind and that leper there may know
Dead faces laugh.
King! King! Dead faces laugh. (Yeats 2005, 517)

Seanchan's death humbled the king in a posthumous victory, breaking his authority. Yeats was far happier with this version, which he accepted as definitive: MacSwiney's approaching death had illuminated his own play for the writer, shedding light from the present into the remote past, whose demands for tragedy he had first eschewed to please his friends, who demanded a happier ending (Kiely 2005, lii–liv; Bradley 2009). MacSwiney's practice of fasting and dying had powerfully played out the playwright's plot, and shown Yeats the potential for victory in defeat: MacSwiney was slowly dying, but his death could rally the nation. Likewise, Seanchan's death did not preclude his victory: in fact, it sealed his legacy.



At the same time as MacSwiney's strike illuminated the past, the medieval past in turn explained MacSwiney's strike, absorbing it into the medievalist legacy of independent Ireland. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his poetic revelation had not come to Yeats at the time of Ashe's 1917 death, so uniquely influential on the mood of the nation (Griffith and O'Grady 1998, 111): his fast had taken place in the vein of the brief, violent strikes of British suffragettes (Geddes 2008, Murphy 2007; Miller 2014, 67–70).¹⁴ A week into his fast, Ashe died of force-feeding (Ó Lúing 2017, 171–83), making his fast short and violent, rather than the long test of endurance of Seanchan, punctuated by intellectual debate. Ashe's death was perceived as heroic sacrifice and celebrated in a medievalist manner, with his poetry reprinted in uncial characters within Celtic knotwork.¹⁵ But it was not the enduring fast of MacSwiney, who consulted the fifteenth-century ascetic text *Imitatio Christi* on his deathbed, and who perceived the role of the poet-hero within the nation's heritage through the 'faith' and 'ecstasy' he had learnt from his mother (Fallon 1986, 46, 51; MacSwiney 1914, Dedication): MacSwiney's death, rather than Ashe's, was a closer counterpart to that of the visionary poet of Yeats' play. Just as the Easter Rising had compelled Yeats to write his poem on the 'terrible beauty' of dying for Ireland (Yeats 1920), so MacSwiney's death acted as a catalyst into a more vivid understanding of the Irish Middle Ages which he had sought to evoke, framing the mutual understanding and interaction of present and past at the brief, intense conflagration of republican hunger strike in service of the future republic.¹⁶

Reinhart Koselleck has analysed how the French Revolution engineered a deeply intersubjective relationship between past and future, in which 'the prospect of the future continually altered accordingly changed the view of the past,' transforming the Revolution into 'a historicophilosophical concept, based on a perspective which displayed a constant and steady direction' (Koselleck 2004, 50). Yeats' play encapsulated this powerful temporal interaction at the transition from preparatory nation-building to its actualisation in the Irish revolution, connecting the medievalist nationalist project and its outcome at the junction of significant and traumatic present protest. Koselleck, indeed, also stressed the power of art to reify and represent historical temporal entanglements through both the practice of the artist who sets out to represent the past, and also future viewers of their work, who find themselves at the intersection of different temporal planes (Koselleck 2004, 9–11). But while Yeats' medievalist revelation would re-emerge as a fundamental mediating text in the analysis of hunger strike in the later twentieth century, attesting to the significance of his vision, it did not exercise a powerful influence on the fasts that followed, as the protest form itself lost much of its power, even

14 Though Yeats thought Ashe's death might give the play 'actuality,' and considered restaging it then (Kiely, 'Introduction,' l).

15 University College Dublin Collections. <https://digital.ucd.ie/view-media/ivrla:30991/canvas/ivrla:30992>.

16 The poem itself was published during MacSwiney's strike (Hannigan 2012, 2445).

as it continued being practiced as a consistent method of rebellion by adherents of the movement.

MacSwiney's death remained the most influential for fifty years: the lessening impact on the wider public of the hunger strikes which followed his meant that influential commemorations such as this are not to be found again until the 1980s. Several hunger strikes were initiated during the 1920s and '30s, but none enjoyed the mass support of MacSwiney's, which had commanded worldwide attention and provided an example of anticolonial struggle to the Catalan independentists and Ho Chi Min (Hannigan 2012, 2620, 3173–3205). Michael Fitzgerald and Joseph Murphy, on hunger strike at the same time as MacSwiney, were mostly ignored by press and public, despite Murphy dying on the same day (Hannigan 2012, 2226–51, 2611, 3040–75). Joseph Whitty, Denis Barry and Andy O'Sullivan died in 1923; Tony D'Arcy and Seán McNeela in 1940; these hunger strikes, censored in print by the governments of Britain and the Free State, were not known about outside their immediate political and personal community (English 2003, 1082; Bowyer Bell 1998, 40–4; Grant 2019, 94–7).¹⁷ The 1946 death in Portlaoise Prison (Free State) of Seán McCaughey, Adjutant General of the Northern IRA, briefly catalysed attention in Britain and Ireland given his brutal treatment during five years of isolation, nakedness in rejection of prison uniform, and a desperate twenty-three days hunger and thirst strike (Grant 2019, 97–8, 150–1; English 2003, 1445–63; Coogan 1995, 199–201; MacEoin 1997, 533–41), but again, this attention was brief: McCaughey's strike did not spark larger protests, or provoke wide international responses, as MacSwiney's had. As the IRA entered a period of decreasing activity and very low popular support, the protests of its adherents did not attract widespread interest or achieve substantial rewards. Given the Irish republican focus on the prison as a locus of protest and resistance, it is not surprising that the hunger strike, which is so often one of the few weapons available to protesting prisoners (Shah 2022), should be kept in mind within the movement itself as a weapon of last resort. But while republican hunger strikers rested on a continuous tradition of practice within their own movement, they seemingly did so without receiving consistent public interest from without it.

It was in the 1970s that hunger striking again commanded the attention of the general public, first with the 1972 mass hunger strike which contributed to the granting of 'special category status' (*de facto* political status) to paramilitary prisoners, and then the 1973–4 hunger strike of the Price sisters, who still elicited more attention than Michael Gaughan, who died in 1974 after force-feeding (English 2003, 3965; Keefe 2018, 177–8; Miller 2014, 214–6). Hunger striking had briefly been reaffirmed as a potentially useful political tool beyond its consistent practice within the

17 The explicitly celebratory *Ireland's Hunger for Justice*, by the Tomás Ághas Centenary Memorial Committee (2017, 53–112) brings together numerous primary sources and references. For valuable oral history, if explicitly close to the republican viewpoint, MacEoin (1997, 81, 88, 612–24, 886–888).



movement, especially when carried out by prisoners the press was particularly interested in, such as the Price sisters, young and among the first female members of the Provisional IRA, who received widespread coverage. But when Provisional IRA member Frank Stagg, whose grave will be discussed below, died in Wakefield Prison (England) in 1976, hunger striking had again fallen out of public attention outside of Ireland (Clarke 1997, 85–6; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 161–3). Hunger striking's power lay both on the striker holding to ransom their own body and life against their jailing government's rules, and on external agents holding that government accountable. Hunger strikes needed the external pressure to succeed in achieving their means or at least wide coverage, and it could not always be mustered. As Seán MacStiofáin, founding Chief-of-Staff of the Provisional IRA, acknowledged, a hunger strike without external, mass support was doomed to fail and end in nothing gained (MacStiofáin 1975, 361–2), and in fact he was ordered off his own, protracted hunger strike by Provisional IRA leadership, who believed his death would have achieved nothing.

This broad lack of engagement heavily influenced the way these deaths were perceived and commemorated, curtailing the possibility for both inquiry and celebration, until the far different reception of the 1981 strike. While the strike of October–December 1980 had commanded widespread but still comparably local attention (with 17,000 turning out to march in support in Northern Ireland) its ending in nothing achieved had left republican leadership very unwilling to back another, and international audiences were unmoved (Ross 2016, 92–4, 103–14). As Officer Commanding of the Provisionals in prison, Bobby Sands had to forcefully persuade leadership into backing the prisoners' project of embarking on another hunger strike (O'Hearn 2016, 728–63). While the prisoners themselves were clearly keen to reprise the protest, leadership was unwilling, as they feared a lack of engagement by the public. Five days into the 1981 protest, however, circumstances changed: Frank Maguire, nationalist MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, died suddenly of natural causes (Ross 2016, 116–28). Seizing on the possibility, republican leadership put Sands forward for election: the electoral campaign, and Sands' victory with 30,000 votes, commanded international headlines, and turned the world's eyes on Great Britain, one of whose parliamentary representatives was being allowed to starve to death (O'Hearn 2016, 373–8; Beresford 1994, 131–3). The government let Sands die; the sequence of deaths which followed his saw rapidly diminishing public engagement (Ross 2016, 131–46). Concessions were made to the prisoners only in early October, after the strike had been called off (Campbell, McKeown and O'Hagan 1994, 255–64; Clarke 1997, 201–4). Despite this, however, the strike had been a success in both drawing the world's

attention, and holding it. It dominated international headlines, stirred support from New York to Tehran, and ensured the failure of the criminalisation program (Beresford 1994, 131–2): as politician Joe Austin remarked, while Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had claimed the hunger strike was the IRA’s last card, in allowing the strikers to die she had ‘handed them a whole new deck’ (Clarke 1997, 166). The 1981 hunger strike would prove a watershed event, the catalyst for continuous, powerful recollection, in which medievalism would play an important part. The re-emergence of medievalism after a sixty-year interval, despite the relative continuity of hunger striking protests, shows that it was a conscious choice, not an unthinking way of framing the protest, and that it had lost none of its power as a framework for republican practices of dying for the nation, and the intense temporal dislocations they could evoke.

Observing hunger strike: medievalism as framework

It is after 1981 that we find Yeats again in these contexts, but not, at first, among republicans themselves. The prisoners engaged in a systemic education program, and even under the severe conditions of the prison protest they had organised regular oral lessons in Irish and history (English 2003, 4649; Coogan 1980, 7–8; Mac Ionnrachtaigh 2013, 398–3227). Bobby Sands, who as Press Relations Officer for the Provisionals in prison had prolifically written both poetry and prose for the protests, had a self-taught, wide-ranging education in Irish, history, and poetry (O’Hearn 2016, 58–80; 176–8; O’Malley 1990, 45–7). He referenced Irish poets like Carbery and Oscar Wilde, and produced sophisticated intertextual pieces, such as his opening hunger strike diary entry, woven with references to the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic.¹⁸ His complete lack of reference to Yeats, therefore, suggests that he was either unaware of (which I consider unlikely) or uninterested in his production. This lack of interest continues, tellingly, in Tom Collins’ *The Irish Hunger Strike* (1986), the first account of the events to be published, written after interviews with both the family and colleagues of the strikers (Collins 1986, 14–5). Collins wove his text with medievalist overtones, discussed below, and cited poetry in opening his chapters, but Yeats is only present with the poem ‘The Curse of Cromwell’: clearly, neither did Collins consider the play relevant nor had it been suggested to him by any of his subjects (Collins 1986, 91, 239, 401, 461, 497, 520). This is perhaps less surprising when we consider that both the Provisional IRA and the INLA as a whole skewed hard left politically (Hanley and Millar 2009; McDonald and Holland 2016; Finn 2019), which made Yeats, a nationalist but not a

18 Sands took the metre for his poem on interrogation, sentencing and imprisonment (1982, 38–81) from Wilde’s 1898 *Ballad of Reading Gaol* (Wilde 1898); for the diary entry, Sands (1982, 153), compare with (<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/pir24416.htm>). On the editorial history of Sands’ complex prison manuscripts, Whalen (2008, 76–86).



republican, whose politics had gone right (even far right, see O'Brien 1965; Bradley 2011), a less than ideal fit for them, especially for someone as concerned with poetic genealogies as Sands. The variety of positions within the Irish nationalist movement could seemingly influence both poetic production and poetic reception.

Yeats returned to the fore in 1987, with the appearance of South African journalist David Beresford's *Ten Men Dead: The Story of the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike*. Still one of the most significant accounts of the strike, Beresford's book called on medievalism in general, and Yeats' in particular, to explain what he had witnessed, the 'sublime quality' of 'hunger-striking, when taken to the death' (Beresford 1994, 38). Beresford opened and closed his narrative with quotes from *The King's Threshold*, ending with the call by Seanchan on the king: 'Dead faces laugh' (Beresford 1994, 9, 432). The writer had meant this to be the title of the book, but the publisher rushed the manuscript to production under its working title (Beresford 2019, 281). While the title was not medievalist, the first few pages argued forcefully that the protest itself was: Beresford drew a direct line between medieval legal fasting, its adoption in hagiographical legend of Irish saints 'fasting against God,' and what MacSwiney first, and the Northern Irish paramilitaries later, had done (Beresford 1994, 14–24). The Yeats of 1904, Beresford claimed, had been 'something of a mystic,' who had prophetically written of what would later happen (Beresford 1994, 16). 1981 took place because, seemingly continuously, Irish people had been 'fasting against' divine and lay authority since the Middle Ages. Beresford's medievalism leap-frogged thousands of years, folding time on itself: early medieval Irish people had fasted, Yeats the mystic-poet had foreseen them fasting again, and then, they had done so. In this perspective, medievalism needed no link of transmission: it manifested itself across time, thanks to the continuity of space occupied by its practitioners. Even as an outside observer, Beresford had seemingly re-enacted the 'elision of time' noted by MacDonagh in the nineteenth century.

Of course, Beresford's thorough work of journalism might have been simply framed by a cursory engagement with medieval history, a literary flair meant more as a stylistic device than an argument in itself. Indeed, Beresford argued for the universal value of the event he was investigating on literary grounds: 'It is the stuff of tragedy, of Shakespearean proportions' (Beresford 1994, 431). Yeats, as a poet of the strikers' own nation, fitted with this: Beresford investigated 'the story of how those ten very ordinary men died' and poetry provided clarity (Beresford 1994, 431). Intervening time disappeared: the 'incongruity' of the time of hunger strike made sense once it was framed within the undefined, powerful time of hagiography and myth, illuminated by poetry (Beresford 2019, 283).



Yeats' time was not precisely tethered to a point in history: to explain a confusing present, it need not be. Tellingly, medieval historian Fergus Kelly, working in Belfast at the time, approached these associations carefully. In his *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (1988), he pointedly notes that 'the use of fasting for political purposes – the "hunger striking" – is distinct from legal fasting' (Kelly 1988, 182, n.29), querying the immediate continuity implied by Yeats.¹⁹ Kelly attempts to take medieval time away from medievalist time: he objects to the unbroken connection in which Yeats and Beresford thrive. There could be no disappearing the wall of poetry between Seanchan and Sands: medieval Irish time did not touch hunger-striking time. But among chroniclers of the hunger strike, this time collapse proved popular.

19 As well, as Mac Giolla Chríost points out (2012, 159–63), the medievalist origins of the Irish terms used by the strikers are complex, querying a direct link between the two practices.

Padraig O'Malley took up Yeats' text in his 1990 *Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strike and the Politics of Despair*. The volume took its title from a line in *The King's Threshold*: 'I thought that hunger and weakness had been enough,/[...]To hold his mouth from biting at the grave' (Yeats 2005, 89–91). To O'Malley, the use of Yeats was not a stylistic device but an admonition. His driving thesis is that there was 'no inventiveness' in the 1981 hunger strike, but that the hunger strikers had 'turned to the mythic past to alleviate their sense of oppression' in a place where 'history collapses itself; analogy is a substitute for analysis' (O'Malley 1990, 5, 116, 287). O'Malley emphasised the surviving families of the hunger strikers, whose endless pain he confronted in lengthy and carefully reported interviews; his view of the strikers was that their deaths had been senseless 'insanity,' prompted by a 'self-perpetuating cycle of death' (O'Malley 1990, 261). This echoes Richard Kearney, who has argued for the 'cyclical' nature of republican 'blood sacrifice,' arguing that the republican movement perpetuates itself, and substantiates its claim on Irish history, through the voluntary and repeated death of its adherents, countering its inability to win in a manifestation of the 'triumph of failure' (Kearney 1997, 111; 2006, 30–47, 48–59; see also O'Neil 1984, Sweeney 2004). O'Malley's use of Yeats' text, then, evokes a history in which the hunger strikers are hopelessly enmeshed: they can no more escape death than Seanchan could escape his written ending. In this usage, the play exemplifies the performative mythmaking of hunger strike: the strikers, and with them the nation, are 'entrapped in an action-response pattern that endlessly repeats itself,' whose already charted conclusion they are bound to act out with no deviation, as 'victims of our myths' (O'Malley 1990, 117, 287); the past and the present become each other, and medievalism is a life sentence.

Begoña Aretxaga has forcefully demonstrated the problem with such views of hunger-striking, as they 'conveniently permit commentators to ignore the field of sociological and political power relations at play,' and



'reinforce the stereotype of the Irish as irrational myth followers and hopelessly prone to violent character' (Aretxaga 1997, 94–5). Yeats' commemoration of MacSwiney's death was a creative call and response: through his revision, MacSwiney's death both illuminated and was illuminated by the medieval Irish past, but this neither directly explained his hunger strike nor diminished his agency. In both Beresford and O'Malley, instead, medievalism becomes the poetic edge of the past as chain: because of what used to be, the present becomes inevitable. Beresford still preserves the strikers' agency, presenting them as heirs to a quickly-summarised history in which there are constant threads, but their personal choice is not impaired. For O'Malley, instead, the time of hunger striking is out of joint: it twists on itself, suffocating those who inhabit it, and Yeats' poetry is the elegant gloss to an oppressive practice. Still, both call on medievalism to explain the present; both present the 1981 hunger strike as the seemingly inevitable evolution of what had already been done, and for O'Malley the families, too, could only find consolation 'in the mythic past' (O'Malley 1990, 283). But the two writers' pressing into service Yeats' heroic, pliable time in a link of cause and effect is not consistent with poetic practice and its own, characteristic temporality, as another poet would show.

As an Irish poet from a nationalist background from Northern Ireland working during the Troubles, Seamus Heaney carefully framed his artistic depiction of the armed republican movement, whose methods he did not share, but who belonged to his same political and geographical community; and indeed, Francis Hughes and Tom McElwee were both from Bellaghy, Heaney's home village, and he knew well Hughes' family (Heaney 1997; 2004).²⁰ Like Yeats, Heaney was a practitioner of literary medievalism of exceptional pedigree: both a writer of medievalist poems in his own original poetic production, and a translator of medieval poetry from Italian, Irish and Old English (Heaney 1979, 61–4; 1983; 1999). Given his positionality and his literary interests, Heaney's relationship to the medievalism of hunger striking is significant and arresting, in the way it both echoes and denies Yeats'. In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney tells of his reluctance to speak in favour of the Long Kesh prisoners and their dirty protest in 1979 (O'Driscoll 2009, 4605–4623). The poet reports that he had briefly considered dedicating to the prisoners his translation of the Dante passages about the imprisoned Count Ugolino (O'Driscoll 1979, 4623). But he did not do so, after being lobbied by republican spokesman Danny Morrison (something he also recalled in the 1996 poem *The Flight Path*, significantly comparing prison protester Ciaran Nugent's eyes to 'something out of Dante's scurfy hell,' see Heaney 2014, 78–9; Morrison 2009).²¹ Explaining how he had chosen silence during the hunger strikes as well, Heaney told Dennis O'Driscoll, his interviewer:

20 Hughes and McElwee are also memorialised in the composite ghost of the hunger striker who appears in the poem 'IX,' in *Station Island* (1984, 84–6).

21 Nugent, the first republican to be sentenced under the criminalisation policy, refused the uniform and wore a blanket instead, beginning the protest.



I was wary of ennobling their sacrifice beyond its specific history and political context. Uneasy, for example, about seeing it in the light of Yeats's *The King's Threshold*, his play about a hunger strike in the heroic age, in the other country of the legendary past. (O'Driscoll 2009, 4658)

Heaney's approach here needs careful analysis. He had immediately thought of medievalism, albeit through Dante rather than the Irish past, as a medium through which to view the prisoners: temporal entanglement accompanies, inexorably, the weariness of prison protest. But Heaney was also acutely aware of the power of medievalism: it is not only a time, but also a place shift, a very real 'other country' through which the protest can ascend to a different plane. Like Yeats, Heaney was witnessing republican time unfolding; like Yeats, he was aware of how that time can be transfigured by being lifted into medievalist asynchrony. Unlike Yeats, he refused to act on this awareness: Heaney declined to engage in time collapse, and echoed Kelly in a more philological approach, where medieval time and medievalist time remain separate. But his rejection of action was still built on his self-acknowledged sense of the potential for it: he saw how medievalism could be a key of access to a deeper understanding, but would not turn it. Hunger striking time breaches the temporal boundaries with the past, and the poet cannot ignore it, but only refuse to chronicle it, concerned that to frame it with medievalism would be to endow it with the gravity and authoritative legitimacy of the past. For Feldman, 'by manipulating biological imagery, the Hunger Strike would inject historical time as a radical and critical force into the static spatialized power configurations of the prison and of Northern Ireland society as a whole' (Feldman 1990, 225): medievalism injected a further 'radical force,' a different level of understanding that could prove as unsettling as it was revelatory for those who saw its urgent relevancy.

In Beresford, O'Malley, Kelly and Heaney, Yeats and his medievalism of hunger strike are a crucial knot between republican present, and Irish past: a knot which can tie together a present that could not otherwise be understood with the temporal displacement produced by such an intense living in time. While their approaches are different, these writers have in common an awareness of the way the time of hunger strike demands a reflection on the past that it can be taken to echo, if only to deny it: for those who were looking at it from without, hunger strike was a question and medievalism an answer, of a kind. But while the grief of the eyewitnesses had touched both Beresford and O'Malley, who openly acknowledged in their works the searing effects of engaging with hunger strike (Beresford 1994, 423–32; 2019, 283–4; O'Malley 1990, x, 284), their engagement with medievalism remained intellectual, placed on an



external viewpoint. What happened then when the time of hunger strike was instead painfully, personally felt? If time displacement was a consistent result of the unbearable present of the fast, how did those who had lived the hunger strike, or closely felt its effects through their loved one, engage with the possibilities, and forewarnings, of its temporality?

Surviving hunger strike: medievalism as perspective

While the time of hunger strike was short, its consequences for those closest to the strikers were long, indeed inescapable. O'Malley's account of his interviews with the families of seven of the 1981 hunger strikers stressed the enduring quality of their grief, their lingering in a space 'fixed in time,' endowed with 'total recall' of the events (O'Malley 1990, 262). While some had been able to move on and rebuild a life by the time he wrote in the mid- to late 1980s, others had not: Maura, Joe McDonnell's sister, spoke of her incapability of even talking about what had happened; Patsy O'Hara's mother Peggy still addressed the picture of her son in her living room; Kevin Lynch's father spent every day, 5 to 7pm, on his grave; Mickey Devine's widow Margaret was only then beginning to recover; Tom McElwee's family were persecuted because they bore his name (O'Malley 1990, 261–82). O'Malley gathered their testimony several years after Beresford had sketched a very similar picture two to four years after the end of the strike, and the overall constancy of the mourning both witnessed is significant (Beresford 1994, 424–6). The members of the hunger strikers' families were left with the years-long, potentially life-long consequences of what they had lived through, in an extremely circumscribed but enduringly recollected time.

This grief was viscerally personal, and none of the subjects interviewed was communicating it directly: as a journalist and a scholar, Beresford and O'Malley held their sources at one remove, compiling their accounts of the hunger strike with acknowledgment of this pain, but their application of medievalism was seemingly wholly untethered from the families themselves, or their own perception of the strikes. Not so with Tom Collins' account. In his review of the book at the time it came out, Desmond Fennell of the *Irish Times* characterised it as a 'shocking love story,' intensely focused on the background of the strikers, and the ties that bound them to the community they sought to represent (Fennell 1986). Deaglán de Bréadún reported that the launch of the book in Dublin was attended by the families of several of the strikers, and that Collins had agreed to donate 50% of the royalties of the volume to a fund, to be administered by the families, to pay for a monument to the memory of



their sons (de Bréadún 1986). Collins' narrative, self-evidently, cleaved very close to the families' point of view, and his work was welcome to many of them. This makes his specific use of medievalism the more suggestive.

In a scathing review of the work, Bill Rolston argued that Collins had written a 'Lives of the Irish Saints,' reading the entire history of the hunger strike through the lens, on the one hand of the understandably gentle point of view of the families ('the sort of thing that doting parents say about their sons, especially their dead sons') and on the other of religion, depicting his subjects as unusually pious men, whose every action was guided by faith (Rolston 1986). And indeed, *The Irish Hunger Strike* relies heavily on religious tropes, and they are specific and long-standing ones. It is in certain ways a work of hagiography, codified according to very medievalist modes of communication. Medievalism begins with the cover: medievalist uncial font, evocative of early medieval Irish manuscripts (O'Neill 2014), declares the very simple title of the work, which did not seek to define itself more clearly or precisely, as Beresford and O'Malley's volumes had done. The background image is of a sky at sunset, with the dying sun peeking out of backlit clouds. Immediately, a celestial dimension is imposed: this is the story of a hunger strike that needs no further identification or presentation. It is *the* hunger strike, lifted out of temporal and earthly planes. Collins is keen to stress how prayer accompanies the practice of war for his subjects: Francis Hughes, whose paramilitary career made him at one point the most wanted man in Ireland, is described regularly praying before undertaking military missions, in a personal devotion which reflects the imagery of pious medieval knighthood, and suggests an interest in medievalism which goes beyond the confines of nationalist Ireland into the reaches of widespread medievalist models (Collins 1986, 160–1; MacGregor 2004). Piety can apparently translate, moreover, to borderline personal miracles: having lingered on the devotion of Martin Hurson for St Martin de Porres, Collins describes him successfully praying over a sick calf and a broken engine (Collins 1986, 431–2), in a clear iteration of medievalist hagiography. Like MacSwiney, Raymond McCreesh, accounts of whose intense piety are regularly reported (Beresford 1994, 198, 203), had Kempis' *Imitatio Christi* with him to the last: Collins lingers on the philologically medievalist devotion of his subject (Collins 1986, 213).

The issue is not whether Collins is reporting truthfully, despite his religious set pieces: much of what he says deepens other accounts, and he is consistently keen to reveal who he got his information from. While some of it, as Rolston pointed out, cleaves uncritically to the understandably fond viewpoint of the families of the dead, and the already near-legendary status of his subjects, Collins does not seek to write fiction, and his volume



reveals in fact a varied engagement with the community of the strikers. In the chapters dedicated to Bobby Sands and Joe McDonnell, with whose families he apparently did not speak, Collins makes no precise claims, relying on publicly available documents for Sands, and focusing on activist protests during McDonnell's strike instead (Collins 1986, 91–137, 357–400). Careful reading tells us much about the familial and political networks underpinning the strikes, and the willingness, or unwillingness, of their members to speak, and what to reveal. Indeed, Rolston was not disagreeing with the information Collins was presenting, despite acknowledging its uncritical aspects: rather, with the way it was pitched, a pitch, I would argue, characterised by the elevation into asynchronous medievalist time, which speaks to the concerns, and coping mechanisms, of the strikers' community.

Collins stressed the grief of the survivors, illustrating his pages with unusually private pictures of the strikers, shown at family functions and in their childhood (Collins 1986, 137, 183, 519). His point of view started from the personal and familial; it also engaged with the political, and indeed Rolston praised his close and critical analysis of the framework of the strikes (Rolston 1986, 20). But his religious overtones, framed by medievalist conventions, added an atemporal, amortal dimension to the story he told. Collins was recounting the specifically pinpointed protest of individuals, members of the families he so supportively featured; but he did so while making a pitch for their enduring qualities in a much broader, even religiously eternal, perspective. The canonisation of the hunger strikers, and of the Blanketmen before them, could be a trial to republicans themselves: Brendan Hughes, leader of the 1980 hunger strike, had passionately reclaimed their earthy humanity, saying 'they weren't saints [...] they missed ordinary things, they used to talk about sex.'²² The normality he advocated for, however, was not what Collins sought to feature, showing his subjects in a crystallised perspective, in which their sacrifice, thanks to the divine perspective he shone upon it and the medievalist overtones that encoded it, took on an enduring, nearly immortal quality, a gateway to the 'other country' Heaney described. Collins' closeness to the families strongly suggests that his presentation was both acceptable and welcome to them, as his medievalism transfigured the subject it glossed. His depiction lifted the clinging pain he discussed to another plane, detached from everyday life and more manageable for it.

In 2005 we find again medievalism as coping mechanism, as means of enshrining the present and making it more bearable. With his memoir *Blanketmen*, erstwhile Provisional IRA Press Relations Officer Richard O'Rawe completely changed the narrative of the hunger strike, claiming that republican leadership had rejected an offer for settlement in early July

22 Blanketmen are those who wore prison blankets in refusal of wearing prison uniform, as discussed above. Brendan Hughes in 'IRA – Behind the Mask', by Frank Martin (1991), (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAa17smUAw&ab_channel=WBTZ, 00:56:52–00:54:03).

1981 which would have saved Joe McDonnell and those who followed him (O’Rawe 2005, 2209–2396). O’Rawe had been a friend of Sands and a close collaborator of him and Bik McFarlane, who became Officer Commanding during the strike: his testimony was compelling and not easily ignored. It ignited a dispute which has created a rift in the republican movement (O’Rawe 2010; Hopkins 2016). O’Rawe acknowledged the potentially devastating effects of his denunciation, which touched on one of the most intense experiences of his life (O’Rawe 2005, 3069–3209). He wove his account with detailed recollections of his friends the strikers, with whom he had played Gaelic football, whose mannerisms he remembered fondly (O’Rawe 2005, 1807, 1566, 2464). His recollection is detailed and concrete, vivid and un-hagiographical, unlike Collins’. But, significantly, it is also capped by medievalism. In his final chapter, O’Rawe recounts a dream he had before his 1983 release (O’Rawe 2005, 3028–3058). He dreamt he was on a moonlit beach, behind him ‘the dark-blue silhouette of an old castle, probably the scene of great and important battles in time gone by,’ when he sighted a white cloud at sea. It released ‘ten gigantic horsemen,’ with ‘skeletal faces and long, white, monk-like hoods and habits.’ Their leader, calling him by his Irish name ‘Risteard’ in Sands’ familiar voice, caressed his face, before the horsemen returned to the clouds ‘like spirits from another world,’ as singing could be heard: ‘Provos march on...’. O’Rawe’s medievalist dream straddles the historical and mythological time of Ireland: it brings together a castle with suggestive images of the dead as riders of the apocalypse, clothed in ecclesiastical garments evocative of the medieval, tightly-knit monastic community. The clouds that opened Collins’ account return here: medievalism is the gateway to the celestial dimension of remembrance, and the shades of these visions speak Irish to him. This does not deny O’Rawe’s recollection of very real men he knew; but it stands, significantly, closing a memoir he knew would prove irredeemably divisive. Medievalism is here both a blessing of his friends’ deaths, and an acknowledgment of the value of his perspective of them, a claim and a coping mechanism.

Both Collins and O’Rawe thus deploy medievalism to filter and express a personal and enduring grief; both use it as the key to unlock a different perspective on a visceral loss. For both, it illuminates and frames, even soothes an emotionally traumatic event, but it does not do so to the point of obliteration or the erasure of the context. Both writers, in different manners, remain aware of the reality of the men they discuss. This is not medievalism as edulcorated consolation, but medievalism as declaration of intent and as claiming of the ground, where the suffering endured is held to belong to a higher plane and a longer perspective. The strikers, it claims, did not die for nothing: they sit in a long, unbreakable history, in which



they remain accessible to those who knew them, while their legacy is sealed and upheld by active, creative, resilient recollection. This recollection can ideally mediate between the emotional and the intellectual, as shown by Laurence McKeown's work.

As discussed above, McKeown edited the oral history of the prison protests from which this article began, occasioning a sophisticated engagement with the temporal dimension of the strike. In 1998, he earned a PhD from Queen's University Belfast (McKeown 1998). While his thesis took its title (*Unrepentant Fenian Bastards*) from a song of defiant political statement (Seanchai & The Unity Squad 1997), its book form engaged once more with temporality: *Out of Time: Irish Republican Prisoners, Long Kesh 1972–2000* (McKeown 2001).²³ Time streams collided in the title: the precisely laid-out time of imprisonment ended by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the suspended life in prison it had entailed, the disorienting experience Feldman's interviewees had also spoken about. McKeown acknowledges the complex temporality of the reality he lived, even as he analyses its effects through the lens of sociology in a scholarly manner.²⁴ Personal engagement comes through at the very end of the work, when the author, having concluded his analysis of republican paramilitary imprisonment, acknowledges the melancholy of the many and deeply felt deaths which characterised it. Reclaiming the results gained by the protests, McKeown turns to both poetry and medievalism:

I am not a believer and yet, if somewhere out there in the millions of galaxies that exist, electrical impulses could once again form the features of friends and comrades who died on hunger strike so that we might live our (imprisoned) lives with dignity, then they must surely have a mischievous smile on their lips. The dying words of the poet Seanchan (Beresford 1987, p. 432) sum up my sentiments and the conclusion to this book: [...] Dead faces laugh. (McKeown 2001, 239)

McKeown quoted Yeats through Beresford: the poet continued to sit out of favour with republicans themselves. But the time collision enshrined in the play appealed to McKeown, who here brought to bear an even wider perspective on the present: eternity itself, cast in a distinctly atheistic light which speaks of 'electrical impulses' rather than the afterlife implied by Collins' and O'Rawe's imagery, but no less poetic or resonant of medievalism for it, showing its versatility as an artistic, religious, and historical lens. McKeown invokes medievalism to evoke mischief, tragedy turned amusement through victory. A survivor of hunger strike only because his family had him fed once he became unconscious (McKeown, Campbell and O'Hagan 1994, 244–53), McKeown was functionally one

- 23 Historically, 'Fenian' referred to members of the nineteenth-century insurgent group the Irish Republican Brotherhood, but it is often used in Northern Ireland and Scotland as an insult for Irish nationalists or simply Catholics. It is usually reclaimed by republicans in its political meaning, as in this instance.
- 24 Significantly, McKeown would return to temporality in his much-later prison memoir, *Time Shadows* (2021).

of the disciples who followed Seanchan in death, and the man who survived to tell the tale. He recalled the fading time of his final days on hunger strike, when he was slipping into achronic death; he had known the strikers, been one of them, and engaged in sustained chronicle and scholarship to document and commemorate them. His choice of Yeats' poetic text is profoundly significant: it restates the value of medievalism to illuminate intellectually, cope emotionally, and claim politically. In McKeown's work, they come together: he is claiming a political triumph, acknowledging a lingering personal bond, and collapsing present time, hunger-striking time, medieval time and eternity in one brief, all-encompassing statement. Medievalism, so claimed, not only explains the strikers: it belongs to them. For Feldman, the hunger strikers possessed 'emblematic status [...] as a concentrate of historicized collectivity' (Feldman 1990, 241): McKeown seemingly embedded a comparable vision in his own reflections.

This belonging presents itself, even more concretely, in the tangible manifestations of the protest: the funerary monuments and murals which celebrate it, making public this intimate history for the world to see. Having served as explanation, device for remembrance, and political claim, republican medievalism can also return to its origins: a radical nation-building and a militant staking of the field. The final time collapse of this essay pursues the proprietary approaches of the hunger strikers and their community to medievalism on literal consecrated ground, exploring the imagery which it can rest upon to call the whole of Irish history together, at the still point of the hunger striker's body.

'Our Fenian dead': reifying time in stone

The fundamental importance of the memory of the republican dead was summed up by Pearse in his 1915 graveside oration for Irish Republican Brotherhood member Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa: 'the fools, the fools! they have left us our Fenian dead, and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace' (Pearse 1922, 136–6).²⁵ The cycle of republican death and burial features prominently in armed Irish republicanism: in the words of historian J. Bowyer Bell, 'the one great gift possessed by the movement, the moment when the transcendental Republic becomes visible at a patriot grave' (Bowyer Bell 1998, 590). When the patriot grave belongs to a hunger striker and it is marked by medievalism, I would argue, it is not the Republic alone that is made visible: but an urgent and powerful call on the past of the nation itself.

The searingly precise time of hunger strike, with the brief years of the strikers' lives consumed in the few (but, in perception, unending) days of

25 It is worth underlining that in itself, significantly, 'Fenian' is a medievalist word, derived from the Fianna, a group of mythological Irish warriors. The youth group of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and later the IRA was named Na Fianna Éireann.



Fig. 1: Grave of Francis Hughes and Tom McElwee, St Mary's Cemetery, Bellaghy. (Wikipedia User Vintagekits, [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0](#)).

the fast, is joined to the medievalist time of Ireland in immediacy on the grave shared by Francis Hughes and Tom McElwee, who were cousins (fig. 1).

Different streams of time collapse on their common headstone: the years of their lives are listed together with the days of their fast, and the uncountable years of Ireland's history evoked by the image of weeping Éirinn and a Celtic knotwork cross. The epitaph in Irish, in medieval insular lettering, claims Hughes and McElwee rest here 'among the warriors of the Gael,' folding together their present militancy with the mythological past also by using the archaic, poetic word 'laochra' for 'warriors.'²⁶ Nor is this explicit medievalism unique. Patsy O'Hara and Mickey Devine are named in Altnagevin Cemetery (Derry) on the monument to the INLA dead, which brings together with confident fluency past and present: next to the harp, Celtic knotwork, and Irish in insular script, the INLA marshal the symbols of their very modern campaign, the Tricolour, the Starry Plough, and their emblem of a raised fist, a red star, and a Kalashnikov.²⁷ Peremptory superimposition of remote past and immediate present are habitual to INLA iconography: the formation's monument in Belfast superimposes an Easter lily, symbol of 1916, and the raised fist over the imitation of a medieval high cross, bringing together the present, the immediate past, and Ireland's medievalising history together in a firm statement about the group's claim to it (fig. 2).

A similar statement is made by Martin Hurson's grave: an imposing high cross, covered in knotwork, envelopes a portrait of the dead man;

26 The font (*seanchló*) is itself an interesting example of medievalising Irish usage: it was used as the standard font for writing modern Irish until the mid-twentieth century, and was being phased out just as Irish republicans became invested in the cultural program again (Mac Giolla Chríost 2012, 46–7).

27 Emma McCann (https://www.wikitree.com/photo/jpg/O_Hara-622-2).



Fig. 2: INLA monument, Milltown Cemetery, Belfast. (Author, March 2020).

28 Wikipedia user Vintagekits (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Martin_hurson_grave.jpg).

29 Wikipedia user Vintagekits (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ray_mccreesh_grave.jpg).

crossed rifles at its base reflect his militancy, but also recall the time of the war of independence rather than the Troubles, which were fought with different weapons, once more bringing together medieval time, the revolutionary early twentieth century, and the present.²⁸ Medievalism can be even more precise: Raymond McCreesh's grave concedes iconographical modernity only to the symbol of the Sacred Heart at the centre of an otherwise very medieval cross.²⁹ High crosses, of course, cannot be unthinkingly taken to imply medievalist intent. The Celtic cross, a versatile and widespread symbol, which has been appropriated by the far right in continental Europe and the US (Lomuto 2016; Williams 2012 and 2019), is a regular feature of cemeteries in Ireland and, to a lesser extent, Britain:



Fig. 3: Grave of Kieran Doherty, Milltown Cemetery, Belfast. (Author, March 2020).

its outline belongs to place beyond its first historical iteration. Indeed, the first funerary monument to Martin Hurson was abstract in its decoration; Kevin Lynch is buried under a severe, undecorated high cross; Frank Stagg's Celtic cross is embedded in a plain headstone.³⁰ The burial plot of the Provisional IRA in Milltown Cemetery, Belfast, eschews crosses, and indeed, Irish: Volunteers, as members of the IRA are referred to by the organisation, are buried three to a grave, under modern headstones (fig. 3).

The widespread possibility of eschewing medievalism confirms the precise choice of its presence: this is not an unthinking default, but a statement, made in cognisance of its meaning. Kieran Doherty is buried under a plain grave marker, but the mural which celebrates him in his native Andersonstown is different (fig. 4). Most of it is a photographic rendition (Doherty in the 1970s, his parents, his funeral) but it also depicts on a stone the Irish name of the Republican Army in medievalist font, framed by Celtic knotwork (fig. 5). It tells us in English and Irish of Doherty's service, and states his belonging to place, Andersonstown itself. The medievalism of the inscription does not bely the contemporaneity of the memorial (a detailed representation of a local man, his family and funeral) but it anchors and widens it: it makes a larger and more stable claim, seeking to root him into the Irish past, as part of whose centuries-long struggle, it implies, Doherty died.

The time of the nation, growing from the individual perspective of the patriot dead to the vast foundations of the past, permits a fundamental widening of the horizon, allowing nationalist commitment to critically reframe personal loss, in a shift which crucially affects temporality itself. Speaking from the viewpoint of religious rather than political ideology,

30 TG4, *Mná an IRA* (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/tg4/6553404551/>); Wikipedia user Vintagekits (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kevin_lynch_grave.jpg); for Stagg's grave (<https://www.anphoblacht.com/contents/24064>).



Fig. 4: Mural to Kieran Doherty, Andersontown Road, Belfast. (Author, March 2020).

François Hartog has shown the fundamental intervention of the Christian perspective on historical temporality, demonstrating how in Augustine of Hippo history wholly changes its coordinates thanks to the added, timeless perspective of Heaven to come (Hartog 2015, 59–63). ‘All in all, the Christian order of time retained a certain malleability, which allowed present, past and future to be articulated against a backdrop of eternity’ (Hartog 2015, 62). Seen in the perspective of the republic to come,

31 For the picture (<https://www.anphoblacht.com/contents/27810>).



Fig. 5: Mural to Kieran Doherty, Andersontown Road, Belfast. (Author, March 2020).

through the ‘transcendence’ Bowyer Bell saw in republican funerals and their material and artistic rituals, the perspective of the nation functions in the same way: radically reframing, and thus reclaiming, an immense measure of past time against the harrowing suffering of the present, enabling a vision of the future that seamlessly justifies the present and follows the past.

The timeline of the hunger striker dead, then, can dilate and shrink: dilate into the uncountable time of Ireland’s past, and narrow to the cutting point of a closely measured protest, and of a sharply truncated life and the highly personal trauma it can engender. The medievalism explored throughout this essay is shown in immediate clarity in the material

manifestations of the hunger strikers' memory, meeting points of the commemorations of their families and their paramilitary formations. This collapse of the personal and the political, the present and the past, the coming together of the familial nucleus and the political community, and the claim they can make on history, make for a flexible, sophisticated nation-building; one demonstrated by a final example.

'Mise Éire': circular and linear time

In 2000 the Ulster Museum commissioned a republican and a loyalist artist to each produce a mural depicting the mythological hero Cúchulainn in light of their respective traditions. Danny Devenny, a former member of the Provisional IRA and friend of Bobby Sands (Cole 2009), produced a mural of Francis Hughes in collaboration with fellow artist Marty Lyons (fig. 6).

The work is layered with references, bringing together the historical and mythological sides of republican struggle, the memory of 1916, and the Troubles, in a precise and contextual claim which completely transfigures the myth. In legend, Cúchulainn dies tied to a rock, fighting to the last breath (Hull 1898). The mural's design is based on the picture taken by the SAS on capturing Hughes in 1979: the image is faithfully reproduced, but Hughes was not then dying.³¹ The mural merges together Hughes' later death with his earlier militancy, echoing Hughes himself, who, in his final speech in prison, claimed that 'he had been given a weapon again' (Beresford 1994, 163). War and hunger are blended into one in the sacrificial figure of Cúchulainn.

The figure is accompanied by other precise photographic renditions: those of the mothers protesting by wearing the blanket for their sons during the 1970s, recalling the familial dimension of armed republican struggle.³² The placard held by the painted mothers bears a poem by Pearse (Pearse 1917, 323), which personifies Ireland as a mother whose children are going to die, reworking the theme of the suffering mothers of republican men. Celtic knotwork and Irish in uncial lettering frame the scene, while the IRA black beret and gloves restate Hughes' paramilitary allegiance. The raven which landed near Cúchulainn, attesting to his death, becomes the lark, which through Sands' poetry was the symbol of the republican prisoners (Sands 1982, 15–6).³³ The mural firmly claims Cúchulainn and what he represents: produced shortly after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, it brings together two of the best known elements of the republican struggle during the Troubles, civilian support for the protesting prisoners and the hunger strike, and anchors them both to 1916, and the medieval and mythological past, making the history of

31 For the picture (<https://www.anphoblacht.com/contents/27810>).

32 See the images by Gilles Peress, 'Mothers of Republican prisoners "on the blanket" in a protest march against jail conditions,' 1981. <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/objects/mothers-of-republican-prisoners-on-the-blanket-in-a-protest-march-against>. See also: NLA/reportdigital.co.uk, 'Coalisland Blanket Protest,' 1978. https://www.reportdigital.co.uk/reportage-photo/coalisland-blanket-protest-northern-ireland-in-support-of-ira-hunger-gallery-1900-1905-1033-0/detail-0_00119051.html.

33 The cover of the Sands collection shows a lark caught in barbed wire (no credit given). In 1998, Danny Devenny painted the same image on the Sevastopol St, Belfast, mural of Sands (Wikipedia user Kwekubo, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bobby_sands_mural_in_belfast320.jpg).



Fig. 6: Danny Devenny with Marty Lyons, *Cúchulainn* (2000), Ulster Museum Collection, Belfast. (Author, March 2020, courtesy of the artist and the Ulster Museum).



Ireland as seen through the lens of armed republicanism both linear and circular: there is a straight line of continuity and a circle of identity at once posited here, from the legendary medieval past to the present in which Hughes becomes Cúchulainn, and Cúchulainn has always been Hughes.

Medievalism, then, becomes a manner of grasping time: firmly lifting the dying present into the immortal past at time's narrowest point, on the traumatic edge of hunger strike to the death. The medievalist commemoration of Irish republican hunger strikers highlights the potential of this specific form of protest, so closely bound in measured time, to transcend it, reshape it, while still remaining painfully tethered to the concrete reality of lived, consumed, lost and mourned life. The encounter and reciprocal alteration of the limited time of hunger strike and the vast time of medievalism makes visible, as it attempts to solve, the enduring knot of the armed republican vision of the Irish nation: at once claimed as burningly existing in the past, urgently present in the bodies of the republican dead, and transcendently at hand in a future yet to come. By occupying the short, painful, immediate time of hunger strike, republicans succeed in reaching for and claiming the 'eight hundred years' of 'Ireland's strife,' embodying it, and projecting themselves into a future yet to come.

It is significant, as explored through the first part of this essay, that this claim is visible to outsiders, even if they do not wish to substantiate it: both O'Malley and Heaney recognised the compelling medievalism of republican practice, even if they did not endorse it. Republicans themselves, as shown by their disregard for Yeats, could choose which medievalism to embrace, and, given the abundant nature of non-medievalist republican commemorations, which to eschew. But where medievalism is embraced, this essay has shown, it becomes both complex and enmeshing: fruit of the painful intersection of personal and familial life, political and historical struggle. Through it, and the self-evidently successful appeal to the medievalist imagination, republicanism can succeed in a moment of blinding, illuminating asynchrony: the collapse of present, past, and transcendental time, in one proprietary and compelling stake on the history, and the identity, of the nation. As Pádraic Pearse had written, and Devenny and Lyons included in their mural vision: 'mise Éire.' 'I am Ireland.'

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