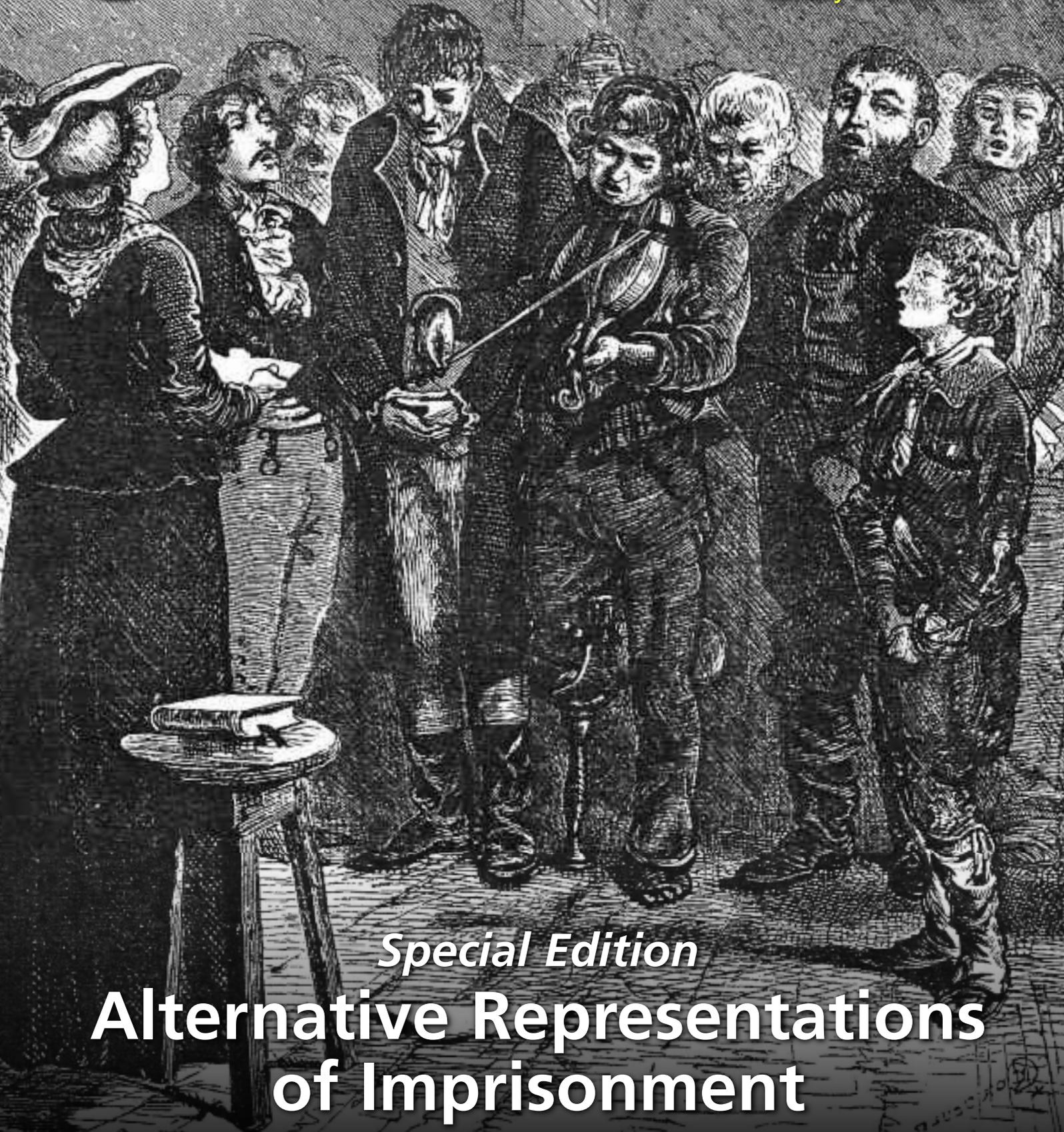


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**Alternative Representations
of Imprisonment**

'When the prison no longer stands there':

Donovan Wylie's photographic project 'The Maze'

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"Here come the women," she said, without excitement; and we stood and listened as the sound grew loud, then louder, then louder still. It seemed, at last, impossibly loud — for we of course had turned three angles of the floor and, though the women were near, we could not see them. I said 'They might be ghosts!' — I remembered how there are said to be legions of Roman soldiers that can be heard passing sometimes, through the cellars of the houses of the City. I think the grounds at Millbank might echo like that, in the centuries when the prison no longer stands there.'

In 2002 the photographer Donovan Wylie² began visually documenting the decommissioning of HMP Maze, more colloquially known as 'The Maze'. His images map the tearing down of walls and the coiling up of wire fencing: the slow entropy of a now disused site. They share with architectural photographic convention a stark quality. There is a coldness to them. There are no people in these photos. Wylie returned in 2007-8 and the cumulative project resembles a sort of time-lapse photography. This might remind us of Barthes's³ notion that the earliest cameras were 'clocks for seeing'. In a mechanical fashion they froze in time a visual representation of an object or scene. They fixed that particular instant. This series of images, recorded across six years, depict — in an almost 'flick-book'-like fashion — an accumulation of decay. As the project progresses, the buildings come to have less and less physical integrity. Once intact cells are now exposed to the elements. The early images show buildings that had comparatively recently been emptied. More recent photos show increasing stretches of waste ground. Wild grasses and weeds now grow through cracked asphalt.

To use Marion Shoard's term, by way of Farley and Roberts⁴, Wylie's images reveal The Maze as an

'edgeland'. An 'edgeland' is the sort of abandoned or ignored place that can be found — although often not consciously seen — on society's edges or between other more 'meaningful' sites. They are where 'overspill housing estates break into scrubland'⁵. They are the 'blur from a car window' or the 'backdrop to our most mundane and routine activities'⁶. For them, '[t]o walk in edgelands ruins is to feel absence and presence at the same time'⁷. These photos allow us to virtually walk through this particular space and experience that particular uncanny sensation. They allow us to map the extent to which 'spatial forms [are] ...concretized...through time.'⁸ To put this differently, they reveal the ghostly after-effects of the spatial patterns enacted by the site's past occupants: bright patches on sun-bleached cell walls where posters were once tacked up; a pillow just off-centre on an immaculately made bed. My intention here is to discuss both this making (and unmaking) of prison as a place and how the history of a site can be said to persist even 'when the prison no longer stands there'. This also raises the question of how these images of The Maze more broadly feed into the collective understanding of imprisonment. It is useful first though to briefly discuss the history of The Maze itself and its place in the collective social imaginary.

Purbrick⁹ provides valuable background on the site in her commentary on Wylie's 2004 collection. Formerly an RAF base, in 1971 Long Kesh had been set up as 'a makeshift internment centre'¹⁰. Later, with the expansion of the site, it would take the name The Maze. The earlier name is derived from the 'Irish word for the long ditch,' the latter meaning 'the plain'¹¹. Purbrick suggests that some 10,000 inmates were imprisoned in Long Kesh and latterly The Maze through to 2000 when the site was finally closed, Republican

1. Waters, S. (1999) *Affinity* London: Virago Press p.20 (emphasis added).
2. Wylie, D. (2004) *The Maze* London: Granta Books.
3. Barthes, R. (1981) *Camera Lucida* London: Vintage Books p.15.
4. Farley, P. and Roberts, M.S. (2011) *Edgelands: Journeys into England's true wilderness* London: Jonathan Cape.
5. *Ibid.* p.5.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.* p.154.
8. Augé, M. (1995) *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of super-modernity* London: Verso p.58.
9. Purbrick, L. (2004) 'The architecture of containment' In D. Wylie (2004) *The Maze* London: Granta Books.
10. *Ibid.* p.91.
11. *Ibid.*

and loyalist prisoners having been released under the terms of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement¹².

The buildings themselves were notable for both their scale and repetition. Eight H-blocks were surrounded by steriles and inertias. The latter was a 'fifteen-foot wide void' that ran within the two and a half mile long, seventeen foot tall perimeter wall¹³. Between the fences and gates, the steriles and inertias, ran roads allowing passage across the site. Wylie talks of the disorientation that comes with walking a site of this size with such repetitive features. This is mirrored in the 26 images tracking his passage within the perimeter wall through the numbered and demarcated zones of the inertia. This calls to mind Vidler's¹⁴ description of Piranesi's Carceri series: engravings depicting a terrifying carceral world. The uneasiness we feel, especially in the earlier pictures, comes from the sense of absence. As Wylie¹⁵ stated in an interview, 'the images suggest that you don't know whether [the prison] is closing or opening.' There is an uneasy sense of anticipation for a population that will never arrive or never return. Taking the project as a whole, we are confronted with the scale and repetition of the buildings. Yet, it becomes increasingly difficult to orientate oneself as the buildings themselves disappear. The rubble and weeds in the steriles of the 2002 images have inexorably spread by 2008. The 'plain' has reclaimed itself.

Prison 'edgelands'

There are several points of interest in exploring this decay through Wylie's images. Firstly, there is a strangely perverse quality to seeing the interior of buildings, usually so hidden from view, stripped bare.

There *should* be an invisibility to their deepest levels. Now they are open to our gaze and, increasingly, the elements. Secondly, they draw our attention *as images*. Or rather, we are drawn to them as photographic representations of a particular vision at a particular time. They are records taken from Barthes' clocks for seeing. We will return to this in due course. It is useful through to dwell a little longer on the site's slippage into the edgelands. Returning to Farley and Roberts¹⁶, they propose that

Edgelands ruins contain a collage of time built-up in layers of mould and pigeon shit, in the way a groundsel rises through a crack in a concrete floor open to the elements. They turn space inside out, in the way nature makes itself at home indoors...

That which made the prison what it is — the solidity of a wall, the rigorous sterility of an inertia — slowly dissolves in perhaps a more foundational and fundamental way than any other building in decline.

There is a particular resonance here with former prison sites. That which made the prison what it is — the solidity of a wall, the rigorous sterility of an inertia — slowly dissolves in perhaps a more foundational and fundamental way than any other building in decline. Farley and Roberts¹⁷ cite Philip Larkin's (1955) poem Church Going to describe this process:

*A shape less recognisable each week
A purpose more obscure.*

Yet, in looking at some of the later images, I am also reminded of Andrei Tarkovsky's (1979) film *Stalker*. A bleak, futuristic film that pre-figures a post-Chernobyl landscape, there is a similarity to the eerily empty, crumbling buildings of 'The Maze' series. In the end, do all ruins come to resemble one another? Or, do they still remain tied to the building's original function? In

12. Ibid. HMP Maze holds a particular place in the collective imagination precisely because of its politically charged past. Brevity precludes an extended discussion of this key dimension. However, Wylie offered an interesting comment on responding to this through his photography in an interview with the British Journal of Photography: "It was a very complicated thing, and whatever I did I felt I was taking a position [eg on one side of the conflict or another]. In the end I realised that the prison was a machine, a piece of architecture designed to do a job. Literally and conceptually it was designed to capture men, so I started to shoot it like that." Smyth, D. (2010) *Donovan Wylie on architecture, art and life* Available at: <http://www.bjp-online.com/british-journal-of-photography/q-and-a/1724937/donovan-wylie-architecture-art-life> (accessed September 2011).
13. Wylie (2004) p.5.
14. Vidler, A. (1992) *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the modern unhomely* London: MIT Press.
15. Cited by Beyfus, D. (2010) *Donovan Wylie: Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2010* Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/photography/6988852/Donovan-Wylie-Deutsche-Borse-Photography-Prize-2010.html> (Accessed September 2011).
16. Farley and Roberts (2011) p.157.
17. Ibid. p.152.

looking at ruins do we see the core of what a building was and what it represented or do we have that understanding fatally undermined? Do these images change, damage or enhance our notion of 'prisonness': that sense of what a prison is? For example, image 1, taken from the series 'The deconstruction of the Maze prison, 2009', is laden with irony. In an echo of the edgelands description of space being turned inside-out, cell doors now open to the elements. A barred window is set in a wall that can simply be walked around. A guard tower finds itself stranded. The perimeter wall anchoring it in relation to the rest of the prison has been knocked away. With a porous perimeter at every level, that which made the prison a prison — its boundaries and barriers — is simply no longer present. The impotence of the tower is echoed in image 2. Similarly taken from the 2009 series, stanchions that once supported wire fencing now stand bare and unconnected. In the foreground, a wall has been half demolished. Reinforcing rods claw out into the air. The whiteness of the exposed concrete contrasts with the stained exterior. The 'collage of time', the accumulated layering of dirt and decay, is laid bare.

Images of prison 'edgelands'

In reading these descriptions and looking at the images, we might well be reminded of a quote from a seventeenth century text entitled 'A Journey into Greece' that prefaces Christopher Woodward's¹⁸ elegant 'In Ruins':

[W]hy does he treat us to descriptions of weeds, and make us hobble after him over broken bones, decayed buildings, and old rubbish?

Why examine these images that mark a past whose relevance and importance is ever-receding? Woodward's¹⁹ simple reply is that '[w]hen we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our own future.' Whereas that sentiment might be a little self-serving, I would extend it to say that, in regarding such decaying buildings, the past's relationship to the present is brought into sharp focus. There is then an inherent value to looking at these images. As Augé²⁰ (1995:79) put it, the meaning of a given place 'is never completely erased'. Whilst we do not see people, their marks remain. Vestiges of past practices are visible, as are those being inscribed in the present. The photos reveal not only the evidence/absence of past occupants, but also the industry/presence of those carrying out the decommissioning²¹. The interchange between past and present, absence and presence, plays out in each image.



Image 1
Taken from The deconstruction of the Maze prison, 2009 (Copyright Donovan Wylie/Magnum Photos).



Image 2
Taken from The deconstruction of the Maze prison, 2009 (Copyright Donovan Wylie/Magnum Photos).

18. Woodward, C. (2002) *In Ruins* London: Vintage p.i.

19. *Ibid.* p.2.

20. Augé (1995) p.79.

21. Wylie described the process of demolition as "a very hard job for the crew: crunching reinforced concrete is as monotonous an experience as being a prisoner". Cited by Pulver, A. (2010) *Photographer Donovan Wylie's best shot* Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/mar/10/photography-donovan-wylie-best-shot/print> (Accessed September 2011).

We can draw upon this idea still further by examining a particularly arresting series of photos from the 2009 collection. They show wire fencing in various states of disrepair. In some instances, it has been roughly coiled. In others, the centre point between stanchions has been pulled down. Alongside the bulldozed walls, this stands as another layer of security that has been compromised. There is something intangibly intriguing to these mounds of wire. The authors of Edgelands consider perhaps whether

*[f]or those who believe that walls of old buildings can hold 'recordings' of sounds from the past, a metal fence could be equally plausible...[W]hat memories are stored in them?*²²

Sifting through the ruins gives us glimpses of past practice. This does not, perhaps, quite stretch to capturing a 'spirit recording' from the piles of discarded fencing. However, the metaphor of 'haunting' used here and in the opening quote from 'Affinity' is a useful one. It allows us to unpack the means by which either prison ruins or photos of such ruins inform representations of imprisonment. For Barthes²³, the photo is a 'bizarre medium'. It allows a particular vision of a frozen point in time: 'false on the level of perception, true on the level of time.' Allen²⁴ (2003: 130) draws out the analogy to mediumship by highlighting 'the paradox of photography.' Whereas the photographic image 'capture(s) life' its 'true essence is to attest to the reality of death'²⁵. It allows us to commune with the past and what 'is therefore lost'²⁶. The photo is a record of what-has-been. Wylie's image of a time-lapse state of decay — of *ruins* — both compound and confuse this. There is a doubling. Both the ruins *and* the images of these ruins suggest a haunting. They depict a past event, whilst also continuing to inform the present. Perhaps this most accurately describes what happens when 'the prison no longer stands there'. When buildings crumble or the photographs yellow and fade (and their digital copies become corrupt) their influence can still be felt in the collective imagination relating to imprisonment. They 'haunt' the present mythology of prisons and imprisonment.

I have described elsewhere the way in which this sort of social imaginary of the prison could be said to build up and 'haunt' the present²⁷. Shields²⁸ is particularly effective in describing the process by which place-images accumulate to create a central place-myth that defines a particular type of place, area or building. These place-images can be derived from numerous sources: from popular culture and museums, through to ruins and art projects. The place-myth itself comes to frame our overall understanding of a site. It is both referential and anticipatory in that it provides a framework for our understanding of the past and shapes perception of the future. Wylie offers specific 'place-images' of a particular point in The Maze's history. As such, they feed into the broader place-myths of The Maze and mid- to late-twentieth century imprisonment. They speak to the persistent, on-going collective mythologies of imprisonment even while the physical buildings themselves decay.

'When the prison no longer stands there'

Walls have been knocked through and wire fencing pulled down, rolled up and taken away. That which was The Maze 'no longer stands there'. Wylie²⁹ has stated that he 'was against The Maze being demolished...because...people should be able to experience it.' We now have his images to 'experience' it. They form part of the 'elaborate play of remembering and forgetting' around its identity as a prison site³⁰. Whilst it may be that the site itself provides a 'shape less recognisable each week' and might not echo with the sounds of prisoners as the character in Sarah Waters's 'Affinity' suggested of Millbank, its influence persists. In this regard, it is perhaps best to end with these words from Wylie³¹ —

...flawed as the concept is, I feel that photography does have the capacity to record history. In 20 years' time, I'd like this photograph, and the others, to be seen as a historical record, as well as a metaphor for the peace process.

22. Farley and Roberts (2011) p.96.

23. Barthes (1981) p.115.

24. Allen, G (2003) *Roland Barthes* London: Routledge p.130.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Fiddler, M. (2011) A 'system of light before being a figure of stone': The phantasmagoric prison in *Crime, Media, Culture* 7:1 p.83-97.

28. Shields, R. (1991) *Places on the Margin: Alternative geographies of modernity* London: Routledge.

29. Cited in Smyth (2010).

30. Pile, S. (2005) *Real cities: Modernity, space and the phantasmagorias of city life* London: Sage p.57.

31. Cited by Pulver, A. (2010).