

From the condemned cells of Kilmainham

Signatories

edited by Lucy Collins
(UCD Press, € 20.00)

Joe Carroll

Eight well-known Irish writers were asked to give their "artistic responses" to the seven executed leaders of the 1916 Rising and to Nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell who delivered the surrender which ended the rebellion 100 years ago. The result is eight monologues written originally to be delivered in a theatre, but here brought together in book form.

The idea of a "collaborative literary response" to the Rising came out of a discussion in the UCD Common room between two of the college teachers, Eilis O'Brien and playwright Frank McGuinness. They were influenced by UCD's strong connections to the early 20th Century independence movement.

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One of the executed leaders, Thomas McDonagh, was a lecturer in English, for example. Kevin Barry, of course, was a medical student in UCD when executed in November 1921.

The publisher of *Signatories* describes the result as "a unique theatrical and literary commemoration of a pivotal moment in Ireland's turbulent past." The eight monologues "give contemporary interpretations of the story of the eight protagonists' final hours, encapsulating the emotional turmoil of their self-sacrifice."

The writers have used

their talents to imagine themselves inside the heads of the seven signatories to the 1916 Proclamation in their last hours in a darkened cell in Kilmainham. In the theatre the result would have been more striking with sound effects including the volleys from the firing squads.

Moving

On the written page the efforts to re-create these final moments are still moving. The reader is brought right into these gloomy cells lit by guttering candles as the doomed men question their decisive role in what now can seem like a suicidal folly.

But none of them disowns their actions. Rachel Fehily has Thomas Clarke as a totally unrepentant Fenian, triumphant even as he sings *A Nation Once Again* interspersed with whoops like: "We've done it. I knew the lads would do it. They came out and fought the fight. And oh, what a glorious fight it was!"

Thomas Kilroy has Pearse wrestling with an inner demon - "my pathetic otherness, my weakling half". But now "cleansed myself of all weakness. Just like that. Passed through the flame of purification. I'm ready now."

Eilis Ni Dhuibhne evokes an elated Sean MacDiarmuida flirting and bantering with the Ryan sisters, Min and Phyllis, as the minutes count down to the summons to the Stonebreaker's Yard. It is beautifully written.

Marina Carr walks us beside Thomas McDonagh right up to the sandbags: "I hear the sounds of the soldiers lining up and the muffled commands of the



The Stonebreakers' Yard where the 1916 leader were executed.

officer and I think they'll probably make some awful myth out of me."

He has a last vision of his father sitting in the parlour with his glass and waving his big hand in dismissal. "Keep away from them Fenians. Just steer clear of them. Great cry, little wool, like the goats of Connacht."

Joseph Mary Plunkett had the unnerving experience of being the last of four executed that

morning. Joseph O'Connor puts the words in his mouth. "You can imagine that, I

expect. Hearing the others. Not pleasant." "It's been written that I wasn't afraid. I was very afraid."

But an even worse experience was being married shortly before in handcuffs. "Everything else I could tolerate. Even understand. Predict! But

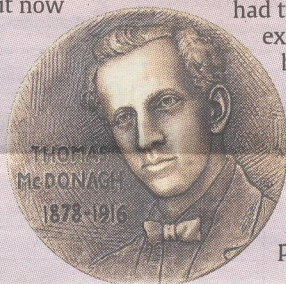
that detail was cruel. My Grace deserved better."

Each of the writers provides a striking picture of these last hours. For Nurse O'Farrell, Emma Donoghue has her in old age, near death, recalling dodging bullets to deliver Pearse's surrender messages, first to the British and then to the commandants scattered in their garrisons around the city. You feel you are beside her.

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The other writers are: Hugo Hamilton on Connolly and Frank McGuinness on Ceannt.

Signatories was a gamble. Letting modern writers do voyeur in Kilmainham's condemned cells could have been an embarrassment. But these are good writers and it worked.



A Thomas McDonagh medal.