

## **Irish Hunger Strikers Monument in Havana, Cuba: Public and Private Commemorations**

Giselle González García<sup>1</sup>

It is generally believed that the 1981 Hunger Strike held a considerable weight in the internationalization of the Northern Irish conflict and the creation of a favorable scenario for the beginning of the peace process.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the memory of the 1981 hunger strikers is today imbricated, and some say monopolized, within the self-narrative of the republican movement in the North of Ireland.<sup>3</sup> Regardless, as Brian Conway has influentially suggested, Sinn Féin has become an active choreographer of the hunger strikers' memory, if not the only one.<sup>4</sup> The monument dedicated to their memory in 2001 in Havana, Cuba has been the location chosen for several instances of official commemorations and has been curated with specific political purposes by different choreographers of memory (Figs. 1, 2). Furthermore, it has been a part of important acts of private commemoration carried out by ordinary and anonymous individuals.



*Figure 1: The Irish Hunger Strikers Monument, Havana, Cuba.*

The monument is located at Victor Hugo Park in downtown Havana. It is one of the four monuments that exist in total on the premises. Together, these monuments seem to build on each other's meanings, with the common theme being the fight for independence from colonial powers, republicanism, and international solidarity with Cuba. The center piece is the Victor Hugo monument, erected in 1937, which includes inscriptions of the French writer's anti-colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Giselle González García obtained her BA in History at the University of Havana and is currently an MA student at Concordia University's School of Irish Studies. Her primary areas of interest are Irish migration to Colonial Cuba, material culture, memory studies, and global Irish diaspora studies.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Graff-McRae, *Remembering and Forgetting 1916: Commemoration and Conflict in Post-Peace Process Ireland* (Dublin; Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2010): 175.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid: 174.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Conway, "Conclusion: Trajectories of Memory" in *Commemoration and Bloody Sunday: Pathways of Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 142-160, 188-91.

sentiments: “Not a single nation has the right to set its claws upon another. In this conflict between Spain and Cuba, insurgent is Spain. To discover an island gives no rights to martyrize it...”<sup>5</sup> Another of the monuments is dedicated to Freemason Francisco Pi y Margall, with a plaque that reads, “What colony did not rise against its colonizer....?”<sup>6</sup> Both of these works serve to legitimate the Cuban anti-colonial wars and call to mind the similarities with Irish republican and nationalist narratives.

Thus, a monument whose inscription reads, “to all men and women that have fought for Irish independence”,<sup>7</sup> and that is dedicated to the 1981 hunger strikers, is a fitting addition to this park’s evocation of anti-colonialism. The upper part of the first plaque on the monument has an image that represents the mythical figure of Cú Chulainn,<sup>8</sup> allegedly modeled after the one at the General Post Office (GPO) in Dublin. Certainly, the similarities between them are striking (Fig. 3), connecting in a semiotic way the cause of the hunger strikers with the 1916 Rising and Irish independence, but also with the idea of self-sacrificing acts for the homeland. Moreover, the strikers’ monument’s setting in a public space in Havana dedicated to the anti-colonial struggle connects the memory of the hunger strikers to Cuba’s own history. Interestingly, the most famous Cuban to have effectively used a hunger strike for political purposes, Julio Antonio Mella McPartland (1903-1929), was the son of an Irish immigrant woman, Cecelia McPartland (born c.1881 in Lisnadarragh, Co. Cavan). Mella was a leader of the working class, a founder of the first Cuban Communist Party, and a vocal critic of the imperial colonization of Latin America. Sadly, he was killed while in exile in Mexico.



*Figure 2:* On the left Cú Chulainn’s representation at the hunger strikers’ monument in Havana, and on the right at the General Post Office in Dublin.

<sup>5</sup> Text extracted from pictures of the monument taken by the author. Translated from the original in Spanish.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> This is the most common interpretation of this figure by Irish sources. Cuban oppositionist groups tend to see in it a chained Prometheus.

The Hunger Strikers Monument has a second plaque, which reads, in part, “In memory of the Irish martyrs and of the International solidarity between Cuba and Ireland, 1981-2001”. Following this, there is a list of the Irish hunger strikers’ names, preceded by the word VOL (Volunteer) and the dates of their death in English. At the bottom, additionally, there are the following words in English, “They sacrificed their lives for Irish freedom”. This phrase appears also in Spanish and Irish.

These ideas of self-sacrifice and solidarity resonate with the Irish republican political rhetoric of the 1980s. Their self-presentation as successors of the 1916 republican generation and the direct allusion to a connection with the Easter uprising serve to present them as inheritors of its legacy and responsible for achieving all of Ireland’s freedom. Rebecca Graff-McRae puts forward the idea that the 1981 hunger strikers were aware of their position within the history of the republican movement, and that they embodied previously established traditions of self-sacrifice and martyrdom that were already well established in the deep memory<sup>9</sup> of the Irish republican movement.<sup>10</sup>

The monument in Havana was unveiled by Sinn Féin (SF) leader Gerry Adams in an official ceremony that took place in December of 2001 within the context of the twentieth anniversary of the loss of the lives of these Irish men (Fig. 3). The performance around this very first act of official commemoration resembled protocol usually afforded in Cuba to heads of state. There was a large crowd gathered, many of whom were children in their primary school uniforms. A minute of silence was observed in memory of the hunger strikers, and a wreath was laid in front of the monument.



Figure 3: Gerry Adams unveiling the monument in December 2001.

<sup>9</sup> About the conceptualization of deep memory, see for example Guy Beiner, “Between Trauma and Triumphalism: The Easter Rising, the Somme, and the Crux of Deep Memory in Modern Ireland” in *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 46, No.2 (2007): 366-389.

<sup>10</sup> Graff-McRae: 163. See also Stephen Hopkins: “‘Our Whole History has been Ruined!’ The 1981 Hunger Strike and the Politics of Republican Commemoration and Memory” in *Irish Political Studies*, Vol. 31, No.1 (2016): 44.

The monument is made out of what looks like Cuban grey marble from the Isle of Pines, and it originally had two bronze blocks, one with a quote from a Fidel Castro speech, the other with the names of the 1981 hunger strikers.<sup>11</sup>

Often referred to by SF members, the first part of the speech given by Fidel Castro in 1981 is as follows:

On speaking of international politics, it is *impossible to be silent* about what is happening in Northern Ireland. *I feel dutybound* to refer to it. I feel that the Irish *patriots* are these days writing *one of the most heroic pages of human history*. They have won the admiration and respect of the world. They also deserve its support. There are ten who have died in the most emotional gesture of *sacrifice*, of *personal selflessness* and *courage* imaginable. Humanity should be ashamed that before its very eyes such *crimes* are committed. These *young* fighters are not asking for independence to end their strike; they are not making unattainable demands. They are only demanding something as simple as recognition of what they are: *political prisoners*.<sup>12</sup>

However, it is the second part of this speech that is immortalized in bronze on the hunger strikers' monument. Originally in Spanish, the words might be translated as follows:

The stubbornness, intransigence, cruelty and insensibility of the United Kingdom's Government before the international community regarding the problem of the Irish patriots, who are on a hunger strike until death, remind us of Torquemada and the inhumanity of the inquisition during the Middle Ages... Tyrants [must] tremble when they are faced with men who are willing to die for their ideas after sixty days on a hunger strike[!] Following this example, what were Christ's three days on Calvary which for centuries has been a symbol of human sacrifice[!] It is time to put an end to this disgusting atrocity through denunciations and pressure by the world community[!]<sup>13</sup>

The next commemorative event that took place at the Havana monument is less documented, but not less interesting. Within the context of the twenty-fifth anniversary campaign, SF sent a delegation to Havana. This included a visit to the monument by former hunger strikers Raymond McCartney and Mary Doyle, accompanied by SF press officer Dominic Doherty. They had been invited by the Cuban government with the specific purpose of marking the twenty-fifth anniversary.

Between 2005 and 2015 there seems not to have been any further official commemorations. During this ten-year period, which coincided with the stepping down of Fidel Castro in 2008, the monument fell into a state of disrepair. Then, in 2015, Gerry Adams visited the island again. This was a very low-profile visit. Cuban media kept a tight silence around it. The Irish media was the

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<sup>11</sup> Additions to the monument are addressed, below.

<sup>12</sup> Fidel Castro, "Speech at the 68<sup>th</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union Meeting in Havana". Official Council of State Version. University of Texas Database, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1981/19810915.html>. Retrieved 13 April 2019. Italics are mine.

<sup>13</sup> Fidel Castro. Ibid. While I have provided the translation of this speech for the University of Texas' database, I have added some punctuation marks and words within brackets, which might give a slightly different intonation and meaning to the excerpt.

only one to report on the four-day visit, which again included a commemoration ceremony held at the monument. This time, all the rhetorical focus was on the Obama-period change of policy towards Cuba.<sup>14</sup> Although Adams first and second visits to Cuba seem to have been similar, their media coverage was very different. His next one, in November of 2016, was for Fidel Castro's funeral.

During 2016 a series of events brought new life to the monument and the activities around it. Cuba and Norway had been designated as international co-guarantors of the peace process between Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government, and Havana was the seat for the peace talks. SF sent representatives to advise the Colombian guerrilla members in issues of disarmament, reintegration of combatants to society, and the organization of post-conflict life.

On 3 May 2016 a large group composed of FARC delegates went to the monument. This was not exactly a commemorative moment, but the preparation for one. The members of FARC cleaned the monument, helped with the gardening, and planted some vegetation themselves, all of this in anticipation of the 5 May commemoration, on the thirty-fifth anniversary of the day Bobby Sands died (Fig. 4).



Figure 4: *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) Commemoration, 5 May 2016.

One last moment of official commemoration took place as recently as 2 March 2018. On this day, Gladys Ayllon, a representative of the European division of the *Instituto de Amistad con los Pueblos*<sup>15</sup> (ICAP), and Danny Morrison, a high profile SF member and current Secretary of the Bobby Sands Trust, carried out an official commemoration at the monument (Fig. 5). Also present were officials from the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MINREX), and from the Foreign Affairs Department of the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee (CCP), as well as some unidentified Irish friends.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/cubans-vindicated-by-us-policy-change-says-gerry-adams-1.2378657> . Retrieved 19 January 2019; Ruadhán Mac Cormaic's article in the *Irish Times*, Monday, 5 October 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Institute of Friendship with the Peoples; my translation.



Figure 5: Sinn Féin's Danny Morrison and ICAP's Galdys Ayllon, Commemoration March 2018.

### **Instances of unofficial commemoration**

On a personal note, the original idea for this essay came when, while running a Google search on the Irish Hunger Strikers Monument in Havana, I stumbled onto many social media posts about it. These posts ranged from a single picture of the Irish tricolor flag laid in front of the monument to more serious and permanent ones, such as the plaque that was added to the monument (discussed below).

Different sources reveal that, apparently, there is a vigil that takes place at the monument every 5 May.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, my efforts to find out who originally commissioned the monument came to no fruition. The aesthetics of it suggests that it was a Cuban who designed it; however, the inclusion of the Cú Chulainn image modeled after the one at the GPO and the Irish translation suggest that it was a collaborative project.

Another interrogative arises around the additional plaque positioned strategically at the monument between the first and the second original ones. The message engraved in it, in English, reads:

“In memory of my cousin Robert (Bobby) Sands who died 5<sup>th</sup> May 1981 at HM Prison Maze, and my brother Vol. James (Grissle) McGrillen, Ballymurphy, who died 15<sup>th</sup> February 1976. Your sister Sheila Allister, Newcastle, Co. Down.”

This plaque seems to have been added between 5 May 2016, when in pictures of the FARC commemorations there appears no indication of the plaque, and 15 November 2016, when I visited the monument myself and it was already in place (Fig. 6).

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<sup>16</sup> [www.bobbysandstrust.com/archives/2755](http://www.bobbysandstrust.com/archives/2755). Retrieved January 15, 2019.



Figure 6: Plaque privately added to the Monument in 2016.

The discourse of the additional plaque is *sui generis*. First, with its references to “my cousin”, “my brother”, and “your sister”, it is clear that it is the result of an act of private, familial, and intimate commemoration. I could find no social media posts about this. Second, it links Bobby Sands with his cousin James McGrillen, who was an IRA<sup>17</sup> member killed by the British Army in Belfast. McGrillen was a Catholic, and like Sands, he died at a very young age when he was twenty-five.<sup>18</sup> He was not a political prisoner, and neither was he a hunger striker, therefore, this plaque makes the memories that this monument embraces more complex. It also broadens up the spectrum of these memories, from the symbolic ones connecting 1916 to the 1981 hunger strike, to other episodes of the Northern Irish conflict.

A final point that should be made here is that the Irish hunger strikers’ monument has been incorporated into the Irish Tour of Havana since the early 2000s. Irish tourists enquire on social media as to the monument’s location and how can they visit it. It has also been included in lists of symbolic sites that commemorate an Irish diasporic presence in Cuba, and has been linked to other republican militant figures of Irish ancestry who played a key role in Cuban history, specifically Julio Antonio Mella McPartland and Che Guevara.

The Irish Hunger Strikers Monument has had for many years a semiotic function in the evocation of the events of 1981, but also in the connections it establishes with other historical events. Its solidarity networks’ dimension can be gleaned by simply looking at the monument, however, the acts of commemoration associated with it suggest a more complex relationship between its referents and commemorators.

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<sup>17</sup> Irish Republican Army, IRA

<sup>18</sup> <https://belfastchildis.com/tag/james-mcgrillen/>. Retrieved, April 13, 2019.

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