Prison stories can help us to escape our past

Recently I went to see a film featured as part of Belfast Film Festival. While it was a special interest film, the fact that it was part of the festival and shown in one of our big movie houses lent it authenticity and certainly exposure to more people than if it had been shown in a less public venue. The film We Were There was recorded in 2007 by the Prisons Memory Archive. It featured the voices of a number of women who had experience of the Maze/Long Kesh from a range of very different perspectives; loyalist and republican prisoners' wives, daughters and granddaughters; open university tutors; artists; probation officers; and a prison officer's wife. The directors, Aguilar and McLaughlin, had the sense and skill to let the women tell their own stories, pointing out familiar landmarks of emotional significance to themselves as they wandered round the arid landscape that is currently the Maze site.

While in some ways the stories were simple reminiscences of the patterns of life for those working in or with relatives in a prison, in other ways there were so many layers of history and emotion underlying the whole film that it was impossible to immediately digest - and certainly impossible to dismiss - this one-hour powerful film. There were so many impressions.

Striking was the photography of the background prison itself, abandoned, desolate, ugly but jumping with indelible memories, many painful, of times past. Those women who worked there identified the contrast between the humiliation of the security requirements and the humanity, often warmth, of the captured men. The prisoner's wives talked about years of their lives visiting, bringing in - smuggling sometimes - comforts for their men. They all talked of the lost time waiting and some recalled the antagonism that they felt was directed by some staff towards themselves and their children. In the middle of this was the prison officer's wife, outside the walls always, who poignantly spoke of her and her children's silent sentence, of their lost time, as her husband worked all hours in what was also for prison staff a stress ridden, hostile environment.

Although the backgrounds of the women's stories were so diverse, the motivation and reasons for visiting the Maze/Long Kesh so different, the impact of the prison audience had the benefit of hearing further from those featured in the film but time did not permit us asking these young people what they made of it at all. I'd love to have known.

I'm sure there were others there like myself vividly reminded of the horror of the troubles, and how multilayered and complex our entwined and violent history has been. And the absurdity really, of those who seek to blame a single cause or group.

I was again struck by the overwhelming feeling that, given the length and intensity of the conflict here, ably illustrated with these women's images, more time and skill is needed for healing and remembering. As for the women's current views, except for the prison officer's wife all were represented in the discussion. (And if there is one wholly ignored section of society in our peace process it is prison staff and their families.)

Even though these women told very different stories of very different experiences they were unanimous in their views that we had to find a way to move forward in peace together. I came away utterly convinced that these stories and more have a fundamental role in future peace resolution and that the proper place for this continued dialogue is in the currently blocked peace centre proposed for the Maze Long Kesh site.

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This short film and the discussion afterwards showed clear as daylight that it is not all about a shrine to republican heroes. It is not particularly about them at all.

The women in the film illustrated the power and depth of every story told with honesty. In fact those who oppose the Maze development have the most to gain in supporting a centre where the voices of history, including their own, could be heard.