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Developing and Contact –
***Days of Surrender* by Jaki Irvine**



‘... the truly philosophical element in every work, be it called literature, art or science (or whatever) is its capacity to be developed. This capacity in a work arises precisely when a reader steps in and, as it were, picks something up to take it further.’

Copy Press invites you to join
Cherry Smyth
Yvette Gresle
and Gavin Everall
developing *Days of Surrender*

Friday, 9 October
6.30 – 8.00pm
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Days of Surrender by Jaki Irvine: isbn 978-0-9553792-8-4
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Days of Surrender

Gavin Overall

9-9-2015

‘No colony in their empire gave the British more trouble than the island of Ireland. No subject people proved more rebellious than the Irish.’

When I worked at the publishers Verso, a writer I admired a lot, a major historian and activist, told me that he had no library, that once he’d finished a book all the research was filed and the books removed to new homes, given away or sold. I was quite shocked. I still hold onto books, hoping that I’ll get to read them again, or find some spark in the present that ignites something from the past, previously read. Or seen.

When re-reading the article I wrote that reviewed Jackie’s book *Days of Surrender* as part of a discussion on Copy Press publishers, I was struck by how limiting the review space was, how what had been written both was not enough and also seemed to close down an on going reading of the book. I was left wondering both what to more to say and how I’d clearly not said enough at the time.

I’ve been dwelling on how to make an approach ... about history, about the poetry of the language and about the particularities of the women volunteers – and I wondered if the best thing was just to allow the account of this spark, which *Days of Surrender* recounts, fictionalises, reports, and to do exactly that: spark something, just to see what came to mind.

So what follows are three fragments, a sort of drift that this book sparked.

I start with a quote from *Britain's Empire*, a book by Richard Gott, which takes as its structuring premise the fact that one each and everyday of the British empire one or other of its subjected and colonized subjects rose up against it.

And so to repeat: 'No colony in their empire gave the British more trouble than the island of Ireland. No subject people proved more rebellious than the Irish.

'From misty start to unending finish, Irish revolt against colonial rule has been the leitmotif that runs through the entire history of empire, causing problems in Ireland, in England itself, and in the most distant parts of the British globe.

'The British affected to ignore or forget the Irish dimension to their empire, yet the Irish were always present within it, and wherever they landed and established themselves, they never forgot where they had come from.

'The British often perceived the Irish as "savages", and they used Ireland as an experimental laboratory for the other parts of their overseas empire, as a place to ship out settlers from, as well as a territory to practise techniques of repression and control. Entire armies were recruited in Ireland, and officers learned their trade in its peat bogs and among its burning cottages. Some of the great names of British military history – from Wellington and Wolseley to Kitchener and Montgomery – were indelibly associated with Ireland. The particular tradition of armed policing, first patented in Ireland in the 1820s, became the established pattern until the empire's final collapse.'

What drew me to *Days of Surrender* were not just the moving and poetic readings that I heard Jackie give, it was partly personal. I grew up in a family in which one part, my father, hated the Irish.

Irrationally, and often quite viscerally.

His mother was Welsh. His father English, and my Dad and Grandfather both served in the Royal Navy. My mother would have identified herself as both British and English, though her mother was actually Irish, from Belfast or just outside, and she rarely spoke about politics, and only of Ireland in the fondest terms. However, whilst entirely distancing herself from all but her closest family, and rarely speaking of Belfast, she was an Irish Unionist.

Anecdotally, part of my family records were destroyed in the Dublin Post Office, in 1916, along with thousands of other birth and marriage certificates. My mother discovered this, when she retired, by researching family history in her vain attempt to disguise the effects of dementia. When she told me, there was a sense of shame. Not shame about what the British had done, but some sort of shame that our family history was some how caught up in this event.

People say that they are born into certain politics – I certainly wasn't. I learnt it. Read it, identified with it against the grain.

Days of Surrender starts and finishes with an image ... it starts with an image of surrender, an doctored image, which then leads the narrative. It finishes with another image, that of the re-union of the Irish Women's Volunteers in 1921. There is a defiant mood in the image. I think that I misread it when I wrote, 'the civilian clothes and nurses uniforms give little indication of the subterfuge, clandestine smuggling and flirting utilised to navigate the machine-gun- strafed streets of Dublin, nor the revolutionary vigour of the many hands in this photograph that had taken up arms and fixed others in their sights.'

For a start there are uniforms. And the gaze out is clearly, un-ignorably defiant. There is another moment of defiance like this in popular culture. It's a scene

that's both shocking and haunting. It comes at the end of the film, *Battle of the Algiers*, and acts as a sort of Coda. The film is famous for its neo-realist technique, for its combination of documentary footage, and non-professional actors.

The main body of the film starts like a good film noir with the end. The opening credits run over an almost still image, of the broken and tortured body of an Algerian insurgent. Slowly his torturers, the French army – most battle and torture hardened by the war in IndoChina – move, circle and bring his post-confession body back to its new life, as informant, traitor, zombie. And his confession leads them to the hole in the d where Ali le Point, politicised criminal, leader of the guerrilla insurgency, hero, is walled up.

Refusing to surrender, and without spoiling this film, the French enact their brutal revenge. But this is not the end of the film, or the end of history. The credits start to roll, over a mist-covered Kasbah four years later. Out of the midst, slowly appear ranks of women, accompanied by this long low wail, a traditional a defiant Maghreb cry. The French shoot into the crowd. A voice tells us that here a new nation is born. The Algerians win.

In the course of the film, and as in the Easter rising, bombs, munitions, acts of violence and revolt are played out, determined and acted on, by Algerian women, hidden in traditional attire, or dressed as the enemy in Western clothes – the only way to access the French bars and clubs that were the sites chosen to be bombed.

Algeria was, for some time, France's Ireland.

As empire retract, it seems that settlements don't. Anger and revolt continue.

A group in Gaza launched itself on the world in 2012, in the midst of Operation Cast Lead with a manifesto. It starts: Fuck Israel. Fuck Hamas. Fuck Fatah. Fuck UN. Fuck UNWRA. Fuck USA! We, the youth in Gaza, are so fed up with Israel, Hamas, the occupation, the violations of human rights and the indifference of the international community! We want to scream and break this wall of silence, injustice and indifference.

Gaza Youth Breaks Out, faced hostility and support, and two years later, wrote of the focus on this part of the statement. *Manifesto 2* is worth reading, for the impassioned anger.

This week they posted a short video on Facebook from the West Bank ... young women on the barricades with catapults and slingshots.

Another image of defiance.

Proximity/Distance

Yvette Greslé

9-9-2015

I read: 'Photograph taken of the moment of surrender of 1916 Rising. The feet visible beneath Pdraig Pearse's in this image belong to Elizabeth O'Farrell.'

I look: A black and white photograph. It is banal. Ordinary. No great heroic scene. No obvious staging. No special pose or gesture. No attention to an individual upon whom I might project a character. Just a plain old street with a building, a pavement and some people. I can't really see what's going on. On the page the photograph is small, innocuous, and its surface is marked by time. Three figures are visible. All men. Two on one side, one on the other. The figures of the two who stand side by side are obscured by a ghostly, nebulous whiteness, which hovers over the building behind them. At the left hand side of the photograph the amorphous whiteness is denser. I imagine a presence. I imagine what I cannot see. The pavement appears white. It must be snow. I imagine that the sky is white too. It must be cold. The man who stands alone with his arms behind his back wears a hat and a greatcoat. But he is not alone because if you look really closely you can see another pair of feet, and the edge of a skirt.

I encounter this text and this image as a stranger. There are words I struggle to pronounce. My particular English comes from a post-colonial education. I have neither personal nor historical proximity to this story. I am not used to this detachment. The histories I work on ordinarily are intimately known. It is the idea of history, and its stakes, including the personal stakes, that motivates the work I do. I see the internal worlds of photographs and

artworks as sites for critical reflection, obscuring, disrupting, making visible, shifting established modes of thought, and questioning modes of evidence.

I begin reading. But my historical imagination was forged elsewhere. A jolt. Something familiar in *Days of Surrender*: 'Remember the Boers! Women and children starving in the camps!' Sentences open up a space, and another and another. Other places. Other histories. My own history: Look at what the English 'did to us.' 'In the concentration camps. They put glass in our food.' 'They made her wear donkey's ears because she couldn't speak English.' 'Yes but then look at what you did. Giving as good as you got. Worse.' Dangerous histories. Histories that hurt. Passed down. Time collapses, goes all blurry around the edges. The poetic, it is often said, speaks to what ordinary language fails to express. Michel-Rolph Trouillot narrating another place and time writes: 'This is a story within a story – so slippery at the edges that one wonders when and where it started and whether it will ever end'.¹ Friday, 28 April 1916, Moore Street, No.9, Mrs Mulvany, Victuallers, **page 28**: 'Nobody's innocent here. There are no innocent bystanders in this house nor on this street. It doesn't matter anymore who you say you are, not now. They're not listening.'

Some facts (with thanks to Sean J. Murphy): The Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, constituting the 'Army of the Irish Republic', had seized the General Post Office (GPO) and other buildings in Dublin on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, and proclaimed an independent republic. The British Army counter-attacked and a week of fighting ensued, which left the city scarred and resulted in the deaths of some 450 people, most of them civilians. On 3 May, 1916, Padraig Pearse was executed, with 14 others, by firing squad, without trial.²

In *Days of Surrender* the documentary strategy of date and place name introduces each narrative fragment. Each fragment is its own internal world simultaneously linking to the others: isolated words, textured descriptions, lightness, heaviness, the free-flow of everyday thought. I focus in on Elizabeth's internal world as she, working with the rebels as a nurse, risks her life to carry messages between Pearse and Brigadier-General Lowe, in the run-up to the surrender. Elizabeth is a member of *Cumann na mBan*, the Irish republican women's paramilitary organisation, formed in Dublin on 2 April 1914. I am familiar with the videos that Jaki Irvine, born in Dublin, makes as an artist, and their intimate relationships to sonic and visual worlds, there in everyday life, they pass us by, unless we slow ourselves down, and stop to reflect. **Page 60:** Sunday, 30 April 1916, Westland Row: 'Outside Boland's Mill. Two loaves of bread and a woman's hat lying on the ground in a drying puddle of blood. Calling. Shouting. Growing hoarse with it. Nothing. Except the banging and whizzing of bullets. Crossing Grand Canal Street Bridge and you wouldn't hear anything above the din.'

Days of Surrender opens with the words of Julia Grenan who fears that Elizabeth will be lost. **Page 9:** Saturday, 29 April 1916, 15 Moore Street. 'Saint Anthony. I'm talking to you. Now. Right now. Please don't let her be lost don't let her be lost ...' I discover that Julia is buried alongside Elizabeth at the Republican Plot at Glasnevin Cemetery. **Page 70:** Sunday, 30 April 1916, Dublin Castle, 7 pm.

A guest I am, not a prisoner. On the orders of General Lowe. A guest, who cannot leave, in the charge of a Matron, who is to make me comfortable if you please.

Julia. Julia. Where are you, love?

THE PHOTOGRAPH

Page 41: Saturday, 29 April 1916, Moore Street, 2.55 pm. [read page and note] ‘That others in such a moment, would have looked posterity more directly in the eye. But not Elizabeth O’ Farrell. Unwilling to claim this wretched limelight. Stepped in behind Padraig H. Pearse and forgot about my feet that were left sticking out behind his. My apron, my overcoat. Stepped in behind Pearse and halfway out of history. Stepped in. Stepped out. I would undo it if I could. I will regret it forever.’

This moment in *Days of Surrender*, the taking of the photograph at a moment of surrender, prompts me to think more about a particular point of tension in my work. It has to do with the photograph and how Jaki’s text motivates me to think more self-reflexively about how I encounter images prior to historical knowledge. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote of paranoid as opposed to reparative reading practices in histories of oppression.³ I read Elizabeth’s feet, and the edge of her skirt, in a particular way, through erasure. I discovered subsequently that three versions of the photograph exist, circulated on-line, and that in one Elizabeth’s feet and the edge of her skirt are excised altogether. I also discovered that this point of erasure is contested in narratives about the photograph.⁴

Historian Sean O’ murphy brings into view the imminent ‘commemoration of the centenary of the Easter Rising in 2016.’⁵ He asserts, in the voice of the historian, that this ‘should be accompanied at all stages by careful and objective historical research.’⁶ He continues: ‘Certainly, the remarkable historical document that is the Pearse 1916 surrender photograph deserves as much close study and analysis as possible.’⁷ O’Murphy argues that

Elizabeth's role in the rising is fully acknowledged even as others assert that she has been airbrushed out of history.⁸ He refers to a play, produced in 2014 titled 'Eirebrushed'.⁹ He notes that in 1956 'shortly before her death, O'Farrell herself provided an explanation for her position in the surrender photograph, being quoted as recalling that 'when she saw a British soldier getting ready to take the photo, she stepped back beside Pearse so as not to give the enemy press any satisfaction', but 'ever after, she regretted her action.'¹⁰

In *Days of Surrender* Elizabeth made a deliberate choice 'to not give him' – whoever this he is – 'the satisfaction of making that photo with me in it' (p.41). In that moment, and through the chance remains of her presence, feet and edge of skirt, Elizabeth animates an otherwise hopeless and silent image of surrender.

NOTES

¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p.1.

² Sean J. Murphy, 'Some Notes on the Patrick Pearse 1916 Surrender Photograph', Published exclusively at Academia.edu, <https://ucd.academia.edu/SeanMurphy> 4 May 2015, revised 18 June 2015.

³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid reading and Reparative Reading', in *Touching, Feeling: affect, Pedagogy and Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁴ For example, see: Sean J. Murphy, 'Some Notes on the Patrick Pearse 1916 Surrender Photograph', Published exclusively at Academia.edu, <https://ucd.academia.edu/SeanMurphy> 4 May 2015, revised 18 June 2015.

⁵ Ibid.p.5

⁶ Ibid.p.5

⁷ Ibid.p.5.

⁸ Ibid.p.3.

⁹ Ibid.pp.2-3.

¹⁰ Ibid.p.3.

Bystander

Cherry Smyth

9-9-2015

At one point in Jaki Irvine's beautifully provocative and compelling text on the Easter Rising of 1916, *Days of Surrender*, the main character, Elizabeth O'Farrell tells a family not to risk going out into the street as the British army are shooting whoever they see. 'Nobody's innocent here. There are no innocent bystanders in this house nor on this street. They're not listening.'¹

It never occurred to me, on a conscious level, that there could have been bystanders in Dublin, at Easter, in 1916. How could there be? There was an occupying army. Young men were about to be conscripted for a war they didn't believe in. People were being shot in the street, in their homes. Barricades were up. Children killed in the cross-fire. Men made to strip in the middle of the street, a girl dressed up to go out, riddled with bullets for pointing a fan, mistaken for a weapon.

When do you become guilty, not innocent, for standing by? If the Irish Volunteers had achieved independence then, would the bystanders have continued to stand by or have left the new republic? How could the War of Independence of 1919-21 that followed be considered won when the 6 counties of the north had to remain British? As many of us stand by watching the idea of Europe being challenged and Fortress UK being defended, how innocent can we be? What borders in ourselves do we fear to cross? When does a bystander become a colluder, a collaborator? It is too often a choice to do nothing and that is doing something. It is an implicated position.

Women are supposed to bystand, remain innocent. Elizabeth O'Farrell refused that assignation. She crossed the line of obedience, of good behaviour. Just as Hannah Arendt would do in Nazi Germany after the burning of the Reichstag and the arrests that followed in 1933. It 'was an immediate shock', Arendt admitted later, 'and from that moment on, I felt responsible. That is, I was no longer of the opinion that one can simply be a bystander.' She had joined others in collating a journal of anti-Semitic remarks made in ordinary circumstances, for which she was arrested and had to flee. 'I thought, at least I had done something. At least I am not "innocent". No one could say that of me!'²

If Elizabeth O'Farrell had lived in 1970, she would have been called a suspected terrorist. If she'd lived in 2001, she would have been called a terror suspect. If she'd lived in 2015, she could have been arrested for sending an email saying she was planning to go to the General Post Office to take part in an Easter Parade.

Arendt chose to move from being a philosopher to a political theorist and activist. To understand was not enough, she had to act, to begin something new. 'The *raison d'être* of politics,' she wrote, 'is freedom and this freedom is primarily experienced in action.'³ She goes on to write that action springs from principle and that the validity of principle is universal: the principles of honour, love of equality, virtue or excellence. But how ethically unclear everything becomes when the equally universal principles of hatred, fear and distrust motivate one's actions. Actions are then condemned as extreme, foolish, unjust, barbaric - unless they are the actions of the armies of the dominant nations, who currently justify the subjugation of international law in the name of the war on terror. The preemptive strike is now carried out by remote-controlled drones. These assassinations are deemed proportionate and legitimate.

Action, Arendt argues, must be guided by freedom as well as principle and she calls this act to change reality a moment of 'infinite improbabilities', a kind of 'miracle'. Our task now, it seems again, is to imagine ways to act beyond anticipation, to share the onus of evil committed by others, to act for a common humanity.⁴ This has evolved in this century into what Genevieve Lloyd calls 'a collaborative morality'⁵ and Rosi Braidotti describes as 'affirmative ethics', that is the 'need to look for ways in which otherness prompts, mobilizes and allows for flows of affirmation of values and forces which are not yet sustained by the current conditions.'⁶

The following poem (extracted here) concerns another Irish woman who refused to do nothing, who believed in the same principles of freedom and autonomy for the whole of Ireland as Elizabeth O'Farrell. Mairéad Farrell was born in Belfast fifty years after the Easter Rising. When she was murdered in 1988, aged 31, a book of condolences was opened at the GPO. What levels of subjugation did she have to endure before the decision to act, outside innocence, happened to her? What determined her guiding morality, her sense of ethics? What continues to make ideas of collaboration and affirmation not work for Palestinian women in Gaza and on the Left Bank who can no longer stand by? I cannot own Mairéad Farrell but I cannot disown her. In some ways I feel a strange debt towards her, a complicated debt. I can only speak of her, write of her. Is writing a form of 'owning'? As Brigid McLeer said of the Easter Rising, 'That project is unfinished and I use the word "project" to neutralize it.'⁷

As the feminist writer and artist from Lebanon, Etel Adnan, wrote when she noted the greater confidence and expressiveness of the women of Barcelona compared with those of Beirut and Marrakesh: 'We are

terrorists, not terrorists in the political and ordinary sense of the word, but because we all carry inside our bodies - like explosives - all the deep troubles that befall our countries ... and travelling doesn't change anything in any way.'⁸

Foreign Body (extract)

In 1988, a girl went to Spain.
An Irish girl. It was March.
Some would say woman.
But she was a girl, a good girl
to those who knew her. Clear-eyed, pale.
The mimosa was out. She rented
a white Ford Fiesta. A friend gave her a gift.
Carefully wrapped. She put it in the boot.
The friend's name was Libya.

(i.m. Mairéad Farrell, 1957-1988)

Postscript: In 2008, Sinn Féin wanted to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Farrell's death at Stormont, but the Northern Irish Assembly refused to allow it.

1 Jaki Irvine, *Days of Surrender*, Copy Press, UK, 2013, p.28

2 Hannah Arendt, 'What Remains? The Language Remains', an interview with Günter Gaus, in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, edited by Peter Baehr, Penguin, USA, 2000, p.6

3 Arendt, p.444

4 *ibid.* p.459

5 Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics*, Routledge, London, 1996, p.74

6 Rosi Braidotti, in 'The New Activism: A Plea for Affirmative Ethics', in *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalisation*, Nai Publishers, Rotterdam, 2011

7 Brigid McLeer in conversation with the author and others, 9 October, 2015

8 Etel Adnan, *Of Cities & Women*, Post-Apollo Press, USA, 1993, p.54