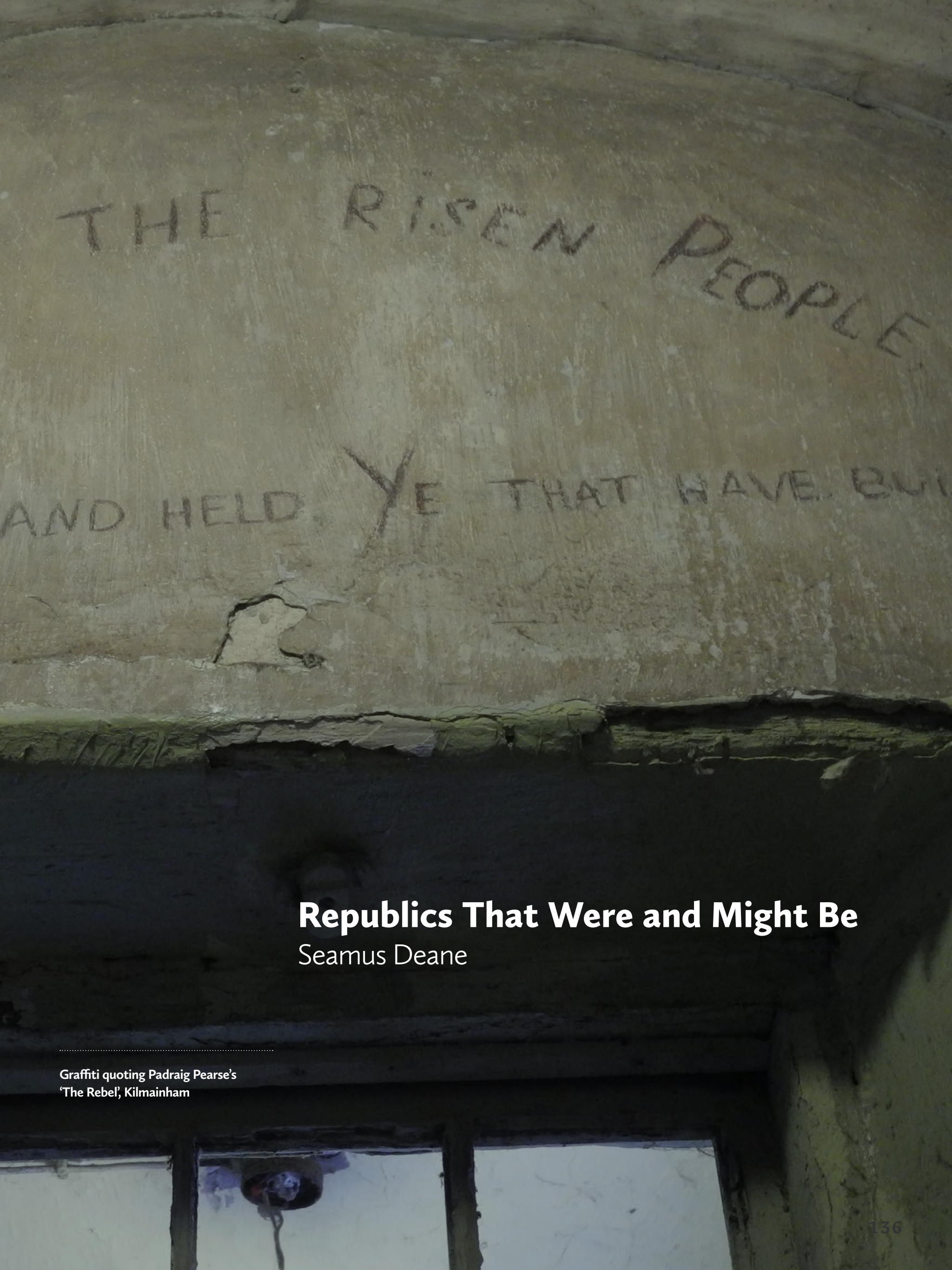
Republics That Were and Might Be

Seamus Deane



Graffiti quoting Padraig Pearse's 'The Rebel', Kilmainham

This essay is an edited and abridged version of the inaugural Field Day Seamus Deane Honorary Lecture, delivered at the Playhouse in Derry, 13 September 2015.

Sam McCaughey, died on hunger strike at Portlaoise prison, 1941

I want to begin with five moments, that might seem arbitrary but which will, I hope, come together for you in a coherent shape—eventually.

The first is in Ireland in the year 1941. It involves two IRA men on hunger strike. One of them, David Fleming, has been on strike for 55 days and was nearing death. The other, Sean McCaughey, decides to make his death coincident with Fleming's, to achieve the greater public and political effect. To speed up the process of his own death, he goes on a thirst strike as well. The effect is catastrophic. After five days he goes blind. Another prisoner who visited him, gave a description of McCaughey's appearance. The skin of his hands had wrinkled back, so that they seemed almost entirely skeletal. His body was already emaciated, the eyes were black holes drilled in his head. His tongue had shrivelled and was rolled back; a prison warder sat beside him holding a spoon on the tongue to prevent it curling back and choking him. He died within ten days. Fleming survived.

A signal difference between the two strikes was that Fleming's took place in Crumlin prison in Belfast, and McCaughey's in Portlaoise prison in the Irish Free State under the government of Éamon de Valera. McCaughey was one of five men who had been on hunger strike and 'on the blanket'—refusing to wear prison clothes and therefore naked save for the blanket from their bunks. When McCaughey died, according to one of them, they all stood naked at attention in their cells and saluted as the body was rolled in a gurney down the jail corridor. The government attempted to have the inquest *in camera* within the prison, but the counsel for his family, Seán MacBride contrived to question the prison doctor whom he called to give evidence on McCaughey's death. He elicited the information that McCaughey had been badly fed even before he went on hunger strike and that he had not tasted fresh air in almost four years. This evidence, with other plain indications of the terrible conditions under which the prisoners were held caused such uproar that it brought down De Valera's government at the forthcoming election and launched MacBride's political career.[1]

Cesare Borgia in the Palazzo Venezia in Rome. Possibly a copy of an original contemporary portrait painting of Bartolomeo Veneto (active 1502–46)

The second moment is taken from Niccolò Machiavelli's famous tract *The Prince* of 1513. This is one of his examples of the difficulties of becoming a prince or governor; in this instance, the man concerned is Cesare Borgia, son of Pope Alexander VI, who intrigued to make his son master of the Romagna. Cesare, popularly known as Duke Valentino, succeeded in wiping out the ruling families, the Colonna and the Orsini, but found that the territory, because of the incompetence of his murdered predecessors, was in a lawless condition. So he hired a condottiere, gave him absolute power, and had the whole area 'pacified' in a campaign of frightening cruelty. His next move, says Machiavelli, 'is worthy of special note, and of imitation by others'. He decided to make it plain to the pacified people that the cruelty had come from the condottiere he had employed, not from himself. Therefore, the morning after Christmas Day in 1502, 'he had him [the condottiere] placed on the public square of Cesena … in two pieces, with a piece of wood beside him and a bloody knife. The ferocity of this scene left the people at once stunned and

1 *Irish Republican News*, May 16, 2015.

James Harrington *ca*. 1635.
Artist unknown.
National Portrait Gallery, London

satisfied.' Only the bad luck of his father's death and his own illness, prevented Borgia from dominating all Italy. Otherwise, he was a perfect example of 'virtù' and of the unpredictability of 'fortuna', a mix that can be fatal to even the most brilliantly designed careers. [2]

The third example is from the greatest of English republican utopias, James Harrington's *Oceana* of 1656. In the preface to that deservedly famous and influential work, in sketching out the best policy for the various parts of the British Isles, his (or Oceana's [England's]) policy for Ireland is simple and brutal; the policy of genocide begun in the 1590s should have been completed and the island planted, not with Britons, but with Jews. Thus at one stroke, a burden on the English treasury would be removed, the country would become prosperous and the 'Jewish problem' solved. This, remember, is a utopian work, a republic modelled upon Venice and Rome. [3]

The fourth example is from Paris in 1848 and is taken from Victor Hugo's *Things Seen*. Hugo had a bad conscience about the 1848 revolution. He had supported the earlier outbreak of 1830 which had placed Louis-Philippe the king of the bourgeois and of Big Business on the throne,; but 1848 was different. No-one of any prominence supported it; it was the bloodiest outbreak in that Year of Revolutions; when Hugo later wrote in *History of A Crime* about the coup d'état of Louis Napoleon and in *Les Misérables* (not published until 1862), he seemed to be intent on expiating the fact that he had been involved in attacks on the barricades, on the side of the National Guard. In one famous scene, as the Guard advanced

> *a woman appeared on top of the barricade—young, pretty, wild-haired and terrible. This woman, who was a prostitute, lifted her dress up to her belt and shouted to the National Guards, in the horrible brothel language that one always has to translate: 'Cowards, fire on the belly of a woman if you dare!' Events now took a terrifying course. The National Guard did not hesitate. A platoon- fire toppled the wretched woman; she fell with a loud scream. There was a horrible silence, both on the barricade and from the attackers. Suddenly, a second woman appeared. This one was still younger and prettier: almost a child, scarcely seventeen years old. What a wretched situation! She too was a prostitute. She lifted her dress, showed her belly, and cried: 'shoot, you brigands!' They shot. She fell in a hail of bullets on the first. It was thus that the war began.'*

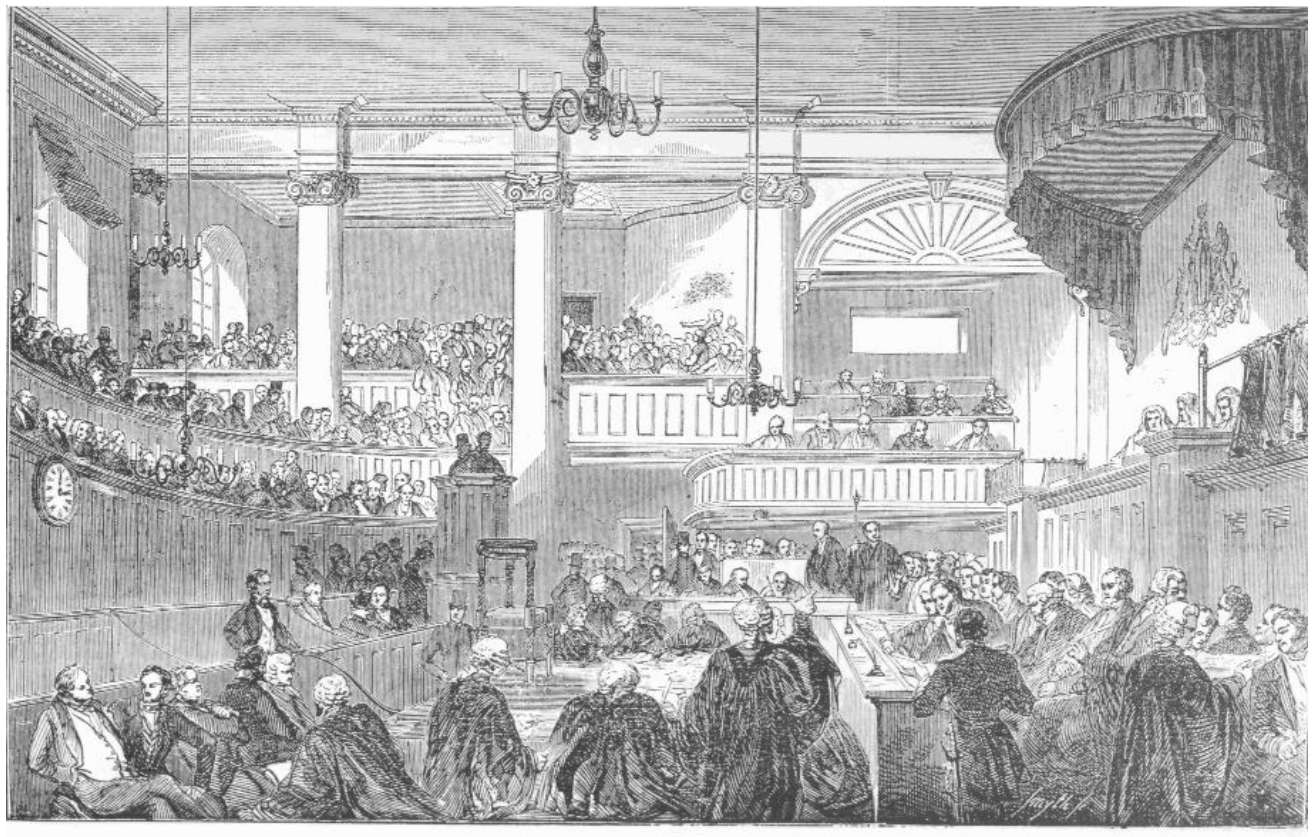
One report had it that 15 bullets pierced her head. [4]

In the first chapter of Mitchel's *Jail Journal*, he tells how, after he was sentenced to fourteen years transportation, in May 1848, the jailer came into his cell in

2 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. and ed. Robert M. Adams (2nd. ed., New York, 1992), Chapter VII, 21.

3 James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana* and *A System of Politics* , ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1992; repr. 2003), 6.

4 Cited in Eric Hazan, *The Invention of Paris: A History in Footsteps*, trans. David Fernbach (London, 2010), 277.



Trial of Mitchel

Trial of John Mitchel in Green Street Courthouse. *Jail Journal* was first serialized in New York newspaper, *The Citizen*, from 14 January 1854 to 19 August 1854.

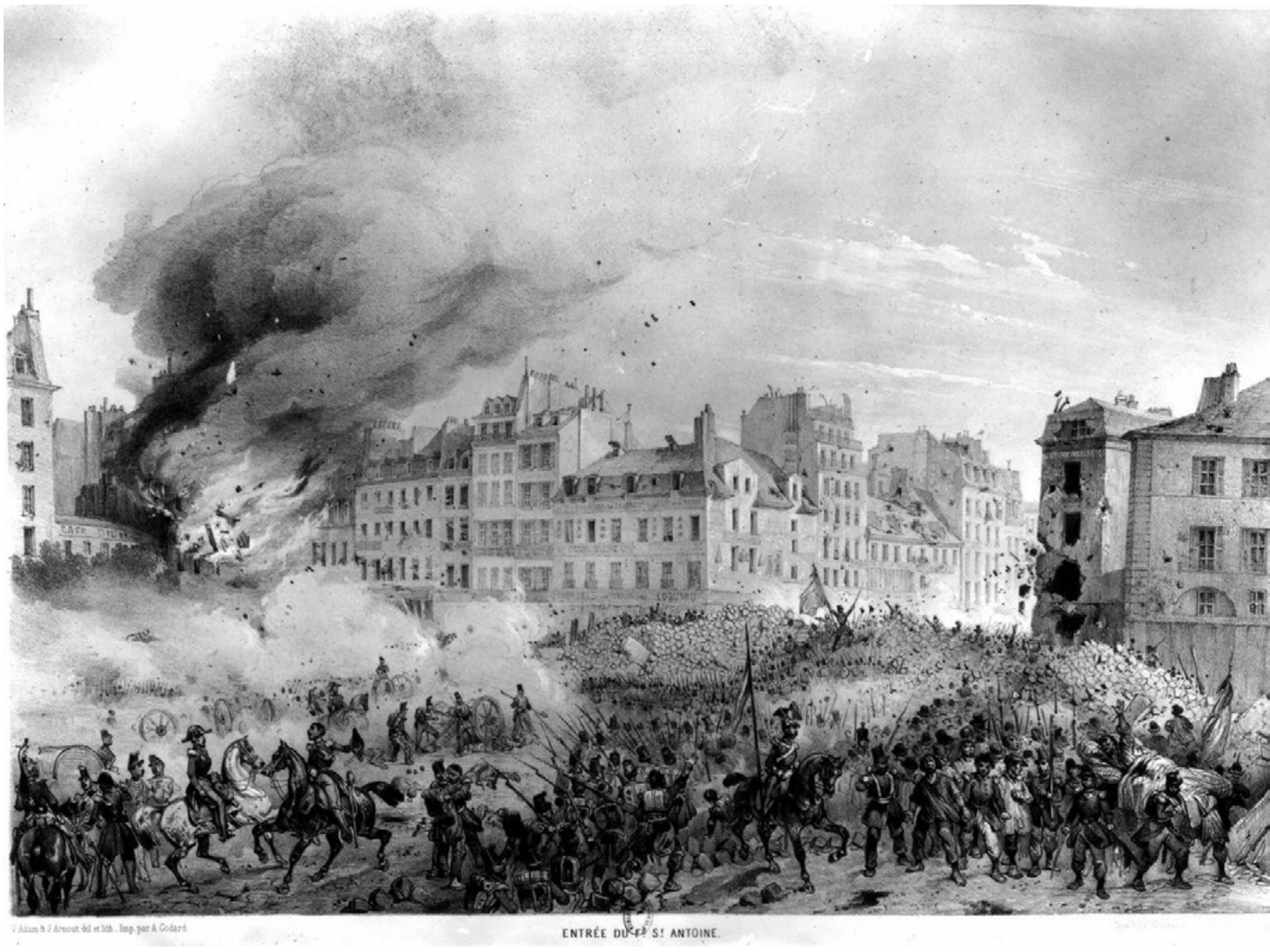
Newgate Prison in Dublin, carrying a suit of 'coarse gray clothes in his hand and said he was to put them on 'directly'. He did. Then someone shouted from the foot of the stairs in the lower deck, 'Let him be removed in his own clothes.' He was ordered to change again and did so. Two days later, in Spike Island, Cork, waiting to board ship, the Governor of the jail came into the cell , asked him to put on 'a suit of brown convict clothes' so that the governor of Smithfield prison in Dublin could report that he had seen Mitchel in convict clothes. Later he was told by the Cork governor that, on direction from Dublin Castle, he could wear his own clothes. '[E]ither I am or am not a felon' writes Mitchel. So began this long dispute over the clothes of the prisoner, his status as a criminal or political prisoner and the condition of Ireland as country, naked, without laws, only the appearance of them—which itself could be at any time dispelled.[5]

Mitchel was the first victim of the Treason Felony Act of 1848: he and his Young Ireland friends were its intended targets. It is a lengthy piece of legislation that still stands, despite an effort by *The Guardian* newspaper in 2001 to have it, or at least a section of it, repealed. This is Section Three which makes it a felony to advocate republican views. Between them, the courts and the House of Lords, decided not to repeal the Act, although it was erroneously reported at first that they had in fact repealed Section Three. After much red-top tabloid screeching about the danger this posed to the Queen, it was affirmed that the legislation stood. It had been used, inevitably, in Ireland more than a dozen times before 1900 and, with equal inevitability, was used in Northern Ireland into the 1950s. (The hunger-striker David Fleming, whom I mentioned earlier, was serving a twelve-year sentence under this act in 1946.) Perhaps the initial indecision about what clothes Mitchel should wear during his transportation to Van Diemen's land arose from the novelty of his status. Was he indeed a felon? Although clearly a political prisoner, for whom a parliamentary act had been framed and a jury notoriously

5 John Mitchel, *Jail Journal, with an introductory narrative of transactions in Ireland* (Dublin (1854), 1913), 1–15.

packed (although this was common enough in Ireland, Mitchel and his defence counsel effectively publicized the 'packed jury as the palladium of English Justice'),[6] could this be officially acknowledged?

In this period when Mitchel was composing at least part of *Jail Journal* on his way to Van Diemens's land and was also reading Lalor's contributions to *The Nation* newspaper that, I suggest to you, modern Irish republicanism was born. This is not at all to deny Tone was the first leader of Irish republicans, but to say that a new element had been added, one that gives to the modern version of republicanism a specific and identifying difference, one that differentiates it from other kinds then current in Europe.



Lithograph by V. Adam and J. Arnout. Entrance to faubourg Saint-Antoine during the riots, 26 June 1848, Paris. Bibliothèque Nationale.
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This difference arises out of Fintan Lalor's distinction between land and soil, which itself arises from the conditions of the Famine. It is one in which the word 'soil' begins to have a terrible resonance as in the horrific conditions of the cells of the hunger strikers in the 1980s, foul with shit, excrement, urine; in which, for instance, we hear again that dimension in Yeats's poetry in which the word soil, with its cognates and pararhymes in 'sole' and 'soul' and the connections with the body ('For Love has pitched its mansion/ In the place of excrement/ And nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent)—even the word 'rent' there means both torn and 'rented out'—all of that adaptation by Yeats of an originally republican vocabulary.[7] The revulsion at and the intimacy of and with the body in the sexual sphere explored in the poetry of his old age also lives in the republican experience in jail of the naked body, stripped of clothes, beaten, probed; stripped

6 John Mitchel, *Letter to Lord Clarendon on Jury-Packing (1848)*, Wikisource.

7 W. B. Yeats, 'Crazy Jane talks to the Bishop'.