

Time to Think

Open University Journeys in British and Irish prisons during the years of conflict, 1972-2000

Oral History interview clip transcript

Name of Interviewee: **Geraldine Ward**
Interviewed by: **Jenny Meegan**
Date of interview: **09/09/2011**

Important

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Clip title: 1998 was a very different year

Duration: 00:03:13

Clip start point in full interview: 00:14:11

Clip end point in full interview: 00:18:05

Interview identifier: 012_S_01

Description: Geraldine Ward studied Social Sciences with The Open University in Maghaberry Prison and was the Officer in Charge (OC) of the Republican women in 1998. She describes being given temporary release to speak at the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis (annual conference) on their behalf that year, how 1998, the year of the Good Friday Agreement, was so busy politically and full of change with prisoners being released or going out on parole on a daily basis, how amidst all the changes her OU studies provided a constant and an opportunity to immerse herself and focus and her own unexpected release.

Transcript:

1998 seems to have been quite a significant year for you and your studies, do you want to tell me a little bit about 1998?

Well, 1998 was a big year in political terms in the North. I was released from Maghaberry in December 1998, so 1998 was an unsettling year. I was actually the OC [Officer Commanding] of the jail.

That means you are in charge.

That's right. In charge of the Republican women in the jail, and so there were a lot of things going on in 1998.

Tell me about some of them.

There was the Good Friday Agreement. And then, there was another Ard Fheis [Sinn Féin Annual Conference]. So myself and Padraic Wilson from the Kesh [the Maze and Long Kesh Prison] were released to go out to the Ard Fheis, to speak at the Ard Fheis on behalf of the women Republican prisoners. So 1998 was a very different year for me personally in Maghaberry, and I found that the OU course and the education, it kept you focused; so that you didn't get too carried away with thinking about things - because it was an unsettling time - and you wanted to do well. And near the end of 1998, the letters had started coming in about ones getting released. So it was very unsettling because one day somebody would be getting a letter, the next day they would be going home. That was the way that it was working. Or they would be going out on parole, they would be starting their parole literally the next morning. And so it was a different time, it was probably a nice time to be in jail when people were being released and things were maybe better on the outside.

But the course, it kept you focused and the OU definitely to me was something that you had to do and something that you would have to get your head settled and go in and sit down and read. It kept you down to earth.

And you were the very last person to be released?

Yes, I was the last woman to be released, yes.

And were you expecting to be released in December, or did that come as a surprise?

It came as a surprise in the end. I had been waiting to get a date for release, and then had got a date, and then it was appealed and I went to the appeal on the Monday. And on Monday evening, the Governor came over and told me then that I would be going home on Tuesday, Tuesday morning.

And sometime in the middle of all that, you got your OU result?

Yes. It was such an exciting time, and I had passed. Because so much was going on in 1998, that you were very wary that you mightn't pass your OU. And I did, it was like one of those things, you really wanted to get your exams. So to have my OU result and to be going home, was really just the best thing that could be happening. So, I was delighted. I definitely was.