

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

Strike at Long Kesh – of prisoners and warders – a dream of solidarity By Des O'Hagan, who is interned at the camp.

January 15, 1972

Originally published in The Irish Times, page 7
[no 'Letter from Long Kesh' title on the printed article]

Somebody, a Dubliner for sure, calculated once that if everyone who claimed to have been in the G.P.O. in 1916 had been there then the G.P.O. would have had the dimensions of Croke Park. It is not that one wants to claim a similar history-making role for Long Kesh but I would not be surprised if the present population of 427 has not undergone the same process of multiplication in another thirty or forty years' time, unless the British Army makes exaggeration unnecessary.

Anyhow, there is no doubt about it. Long Kesh is gradually acquiring symbolic significance in the national consciousness.

No blasphemy is intended when I suggest that ex-residents will be held in the same awe as the annoyingly regular penitent at Lough Derg. Signs of the sacred, Mecca-like character of the spot have already manifested themselves. There has been a Christmas Day pilgrimage or almost one at any rate; senior secular holy men including the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition at Westminster have come in search of self-knowledge and possibly public absolution. Big Ian did also and no doubt was genuinely hurt when he was denied the opportunity for heated discussion with Mad Mitch. (One has to admire Mitchell's bloody cheek.) A pity, as Ian knows what being inside is like and a chat with internees would have helped his image with Whitehall's Northern Ireland experts who must be desperately studying Mr. Faulkner's horoscope at the moment or whatever they do when change is imminent.

HISTORIAN NEEDED

What the camp really lacks is a dedicated historian; maybe the Ford Foundation or Taca could help here. Somebody who would be able to state authoritatively at future meetings of the Irish Folklore Society what actually did happen.

In fact, the more I reflect on this idea and its national significance it becomes clearer and more urgent that a team of scholars should come here immediately. The historian should have the services of a sociologist, social psychologist, obviously a social anthropologist, ritual being the "in" concept, a political scientist and if there is money to spare a theologian, what American academic institutions love to call a "multi-disciplinary team."

I did say immediately, as what now is fact could in six weeks' time appear to be fantasy.

For example, as is well known to criminologists, prisoners and their guards tend to form an in-group against threatening out-groups. The fairly quiet arrival of English prison officers has clearly set the scene for a unique industrial dispute along similar lines. I mean just about everyone here is threatened.

MERCENARIES

The local officers, who in the majority genuinely detest the sight of Long Kesh and are uneasy about their relationship with the British Army[,] are now working with what I suppose is best described as well-heeled scab labour.

Mr. Faulkner, unable, in spite of 10 per cent unemployment, to recruit warders locally has imported what one senior member of the prison staff has openly and colourfully described as a "shower of effin English mercenaries." Not only colourful but fairly accurate – there are two Gaelic-speaking

Galwaymen and one Pakistani among the new arrivals – for they receive £12.50 tax free on top of the weekly flat rate.

In any other industrial situation, the reaction would probably be fairly prompt but the problem for the Irish prison officers is that they belong to the same union, association actually, which makes a difference, as the English warders. There are also some funny clauses relating to transfers, hardship, allowances, official secrecy, shut-your-mouth-and-if-you-don't-like-it-you-know-what-to-do-Mac type clauses. All in all a fairly trying situation.

From the other side of the fence (sorry) there were bound to be reactions. There are serious Socialists here who believe in what are often just slogans. You know, solidarity with other workers, joint action, one out all out. Others naturally enough could not care less, a screw is just a screw.

NATIONALISM

There is also a national ingredient in the situation which should not surprise anyone who has worked alongside an Orangeman in Birmingham. We are, after all, Irishmen in the face of the master race and if you find that hard to believe then your knowledge of Englishmen is derived solely from B.B.C. television. Still the issue is mainly industrial as there are Englishmen employed under local conditions: one distinguishes the foreigners by little polished buttons on the side of their caps.

It would be wrong to give the impression that the prison officers and the detainees are holding discussions with a view to a wage claim, work to rule or strike action. This could possibly happen with a Lenin in our midst but there is what I am sure Billy Craig would once have described as hard evidence of revolutionary activity. Tacit agreement has been reached between a number of internees and the local officers that the Isle of Wight visitors are to be told firmly that that their presence in what is undoubtedly Ireland and *our* concentration camp is just not wanted. Even more forcefully, certain internees persist in reminding them that in the days of recruitment to the Palestine Police £50 all found was the sum mentioned in public advertising. The advertisement being amended to read, if I remember right, "if you are found."

The regular presence of a common enemy. One hopes that this is not some devilishly clever English plot to unite the Northern Irish at the most significant point of disagreement, is leading to a gradual erosion of the more obviously authoritarian aspects of the camp and it is reliably reported that three warders were seen in the pouring rain kicking a ball about the central cage area when they are supposed to be on guard duty.

What I think future historians will judge to be dubious even though witnessed to here and now by this observer, is the fairly widespread feeling that there ought to be significant support from the internees in the event of industrial action by the prison officers. I fear that there will be no such action due to the nature of the warders' contracts. That this is tragic in the present distraught state of Northern Ireland will be clear to anyone who has been carefully following this piece of contemporary history. For a solution satisfactory to everyone from Miss Devlin to Mr. Heath seems to be contained in the following hypothetical headline, "Long Kesh Warders Strike – Internees Come Out In Sympathy."

[This letter is part of a series of 21 which appeared in The Irish Times between 15 January 1972 and 1 July 1972. Permission for the text from the letters to be archived by CAIN was provided by the current copyright holder Dónal O'Hagan. The full set of letters, plus background information can be found at: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/des_ohagan/]

Strike at Long Kesh—of prisoners and warders—a dream of solidarity

SOMEBOODY, a Dubliner for certain, calculated once that if everyone who claimed to have been in the G.P.O. in 1916 had been there then the G.P.O. would have had the dimensions of Crac des Chevaliers.

It is not the same when to claim a similar history-making role for Long Kesh but I would not be surprised if the present population of 10,000 or so has gone through the process of multiplication in another thirty or forty years' time, unless the British Army makes exaggerated claims.

Anyhow, there is no doubt about it, Long Kesh is gradually acquiring symbolic significance in the national consciousness.

No atmosphere is intended when I suggest that ex-residents will be held in the same awe as the anonymous revolutionaries of Long Derg. Signs of the sacred Mecca-like character of the spot have already manifested themselves. There has been a steady flow of pilgrims on almost one at any rate; senior secular holy men including the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition at Westminster have come in search of self-knowledge and possibly public absolution. Big fan did also and no doubt was genuinely hurt when he was denied the opportunity for

nestled discussion afforded Mad Mitch. "One has to admire Mr. Faulkner's ready chisel and pithy, as Ian knows well, being insatiable like and a chat with internees would have helped his image with Whitehall. Northern Ireland experts may be more sceptical than Mr. Faulkner's horoscope when the moment or whatever they do when change is imminent.

HISTORIAN NEEDED

What the camp lacks really is a dedicated historian; maybe the Ford Foundation or Tacis could help here. Somebody, I suppose, able to state authoritatively at future meetings of the Irish Folklore Society what actually did happen.

In fact, the more I reflect on this idea and its national significance it becomes clearer and more urgent that a learned scholar should come here immediately. The historian should have the services of a sociologist, social psychologist, anthropologist and even the spiritual realm the "in" concept, a political scientist and if there is money to spare a theologian, what American academic institu-

tions love to call "a multi-disciplinary team."

Now is and immediately, as what now is fair could in six weeks' time appear to be fantasy.

For example, as is well known to criminologists, warders and their guards tend to form an in-group, against threatening out-groups. The fairly quiet arrival of English prison officers has already set off a few unusual industrial dispute along similar lines. I mean just about everyone here is threatened.

MERCENARIES

The local officers, who in the majority genuinely detest the sight of Long Kesh and are uneasy about the implications of the situation, are now working with what I suppose is best described as well-heeled scab labour.

Mr. Faulkner's gamble, in spite of 10 per cent unemployment, to recruit warders locally has imported what one senior member of the prison staff has openly said and I must describe as a "shower of effin English mercenaries." Not only colourful but fairly accurate — there are two Gaelic-speaking

Galwaymen and one Pakistani among the new arrivals—for they are not far from top of the weekly flat rates.

In any other industrial situation the reaction would be fairly prompt to the problem that Irish prison officers in that they belong to the same union association actually, which makes a difference, as the English warders. There are also some funny clauses relating to transfers, hardship allowances, official secrecy, shut-your-mouth-and-if-you-don't-like-it-you-know-what-happens.

All in all a fairly trying situation.

From the other side of the fence (sorry) there were bound to be revolutionaries here and revolutionists here who believe in what are often just slogans. You know, solidarity with other workers, joint struggle on and all out. Others naturally enough could not care less, a screw is a screw is a screw.

NATIONALISM

There is also a national ingredient in the situation which should not surprise anyone who has worked alongside an Ossiegraman in

Birmingham. We are, after all, Irishmen in the face of the master race and, if you find that hard to believe, you may like to remember that it is the English who have sold us out to unite the Northern Irish at the most significant point of disagreement, is leading to a gradual erosion of the most important authoritarian aspect of the camp and it is reliably reported that three warders were seen in the pouring rain kicking a butler in the central hall because when they were supposed to be on guard duty.

What I think future historians will judge to be dubious even though witnessed to here and now by this reporter is the fact that I have a personal feeling that there ought to be significant support from the internees in the event of industrial action by the prison officers. I feel that there will be no such action due to the nature of the warders' contracts. That this is tragic in the present difficult circumstances is, I am sure, readily apparent to anyone who has been carefully following this piece of contemporary history. For a solution to the emergency from Downing Street to Mr. Heath seems to be contained in the following hypothetical headline, "Long Kesh Warders Strike — Internees Come Out In Sympathy."