

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

Early Morning Visit from an Army By Des O'Hagan

January 29, 1972

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Secretly I used to count myself among those Irish who suffer neither from ethnocentrism nor Anglophobia, but, in spite of such sociological virtue, I have succumbed to the certainty that the English middle class are, in fact, an inferior breed. That effortless English superiority which Rebecca West revealed when recounting an observation on William Joyce on horseback, "but he does not ride like a gentleman," has gone with the dignity, grace and charm of the empire.

Evidently there are still those who remain calm and retain the proper values, as would be clear to anyone reading the recent heated exchanges on the problems of shipping polo ponies from Malta.

Stretched out on my bunk, in my inner eye I can see the new English middle-class male stereotype. He is identical with a Peter Sellers caricature of an Indian applicant for a responsible Government clerkship: in Cheam they smile indulgently at the nearly impeccable Oxbridge accent and the naive reliance on inferior qualifications (B.A. Bombay Academy (Failed)). What I am coming to – belatedly I admit – is the recent extravagant production – the great Long Kesh search. We have it on the most reliable authority (inside the War Office) that the Army's gin-and-tonic public relations officers – the accent is correct, the qualification nearly the same, M.A. Madison Avenue (Failed) – are now anxiously studying basic propaganda texts, the reading list having been strengthened to include the Compton Report on the advice of the more experienced MI5.

AT BEDSIDES

The black comedy began spontaneously at 4.30 a.m. Unencumbered by lack of planning 1500 eager baying troops – we never saw a policeman – and selected breathless television crews, hurried through hostile countryside to bleak, dank Long Kesh. Thoroughly briefed on arriving about the possible dangers, 20 soldiers sneaked into each hut, positioned themselves at the bedsides and waited.

Reveille is not normally the most urgent business of the day. There is little to attract one culinarywise at any time but the truly icy cold interior of our living quarters makes surfacing a genuine act of will. Most of us are not easily startled, having arrived at Long Kesh via Girdwood or Holywood, but it is unusual to awaken at 6.20 to the gentle touch of the military, not dressed apparently for a riot.

"Good morning gentlemen" (sic) and we were then informed that we must wait in bed until ordered to leave for the canteen: the great search had begun. Individually marched through a double rank of soldiers, supported by two attendants as the tarmac was slippery, one was poked by the gelly sniffer stuttering ominously in the corner of the canteen. This dalek-like probe is unfortunately prone to vomit out condemnation at the most inoffensive of objects, nylon jackets literally causing it to gibber idiotically like a Stormont Minister confronted with the civil rights reform programme. The British Army's general lack of trust in advanced scientific procedures was neatly expressed by disillusioned private that it would be easier to shoot the lot of 'em. Quite.

While the hunt continued one had glimpses of military-looking civilians sporting cameras and apparently enjoying what amounted to an inexpensive day at the races. One ebullient sergeant roughly modelled on John Wayne – the British Army increasingly appears like a branch of the Green Berets – suggested that music might help to dispel the gloom. Later it was regretted that no-one thought to call out "Achtung, achtung, you will now listen to the music." The Army is apparently aware of the need to counteract such a false image for one notices the flash of a gay scarf worn by an officer, encouraged possibly by the idiosyncratic styles and the ethos of the Battle of Britain. It would be more honest to accept Wayne.

One could sense that the 50 or so soldiers were bored, irritated, disenchanted with their role of threatening overseers in the packed Nissen hut. Some listened interestedly to a discussion on the Pearce Commission, significantly though as comparisons were made between themselves and the Todds, one intervened to state that they were there to do a job and do it they would. A potential political commissar. Dinner having been refused the hut suddenly rocked to “Óró 'Se Do Bheatha 'Bhaile”, followed by a spirited chanting of “The Boys of the Old Brigade”. Our songs betrayed varying understandings of the situation: what, I wonder, did these sons of Newcastle coalminers and Dorset farmers make of “Joe Hill”, “Connolly Was There”, “General Munro”, “Free the People”, “Rebel Heart”, “Larkin”, the “Belfast Brigade”, and the “Internationale” in Gaelic? They tapped the rhythms, probably yearned for the familiar warmth of the noisy local. May they enjoy it soon.

Eight hours later they departed, according to reports elatedly displaying an esoteric range of diabolical instruments ranging from Stanley wood knives, dagger type darts – Jim Pike should watch out – drills and a caveman’s spoon. It may sound petulant, but had Army H.Q. requested these tools through the usual channels, then our visitors could have arrived as normally, we would not have been subject to maximum boredom, and valuable television time would have been saved. As a P.R. exercise it has appalled professional journalists who will now find it increasingly difficult to translate Army handouts. Life is becoming impossible.

SELLING POINTS

In an effort to help publicise Long Kesh and its struggling offspring, Magilligan, surely without wishing to sound didactic, one should emphasise the selling points of what is undoubtedly our only growing influence. Literally overnight Cage Six fully populated, functioning albeit imperfectly, has blossomed into life. Criticisms from ecologists, demographers and other doomsday theorists can be quickly dismissed as subversive, stemming from their covert sympathy for the reactionary Civil Rights movement. On the other hand, adroitly handled, such criticisms could be invaluable, being readily demolished by pointing out the successful nature of the experiment in terms of population relocation and new high densities: utilisation of formerly useless resources: reduction in unemployed: and a significant cutback in pollution. Having once made these points opposition from anti-internment organisations would collapse, all sensible, practical, informed and progressive opinion would swing to the Army.

Regular entertaining bulletins on the diverse qualities of the camp plus the occasional academic paper on its functional relationship to the economy would help project a balanced image. One could also employ redundant tourist officials conducting grand tours from H.M.S. Maidstone to Armagh, north to Magilligan, then to Crumlin Road, culminating at Long Kesh.

Our climate does not compare with Greece but we can offer superior facilities to natives and visitors alike.

[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/]

Early morning visit from an army

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