

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

Security as usual during improvements (or the case of the bookless library)

By Des O'Hagan

February 19, 1972

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The celebration of the first six months of internment (one sincerely hopes that this is not going to be a spectacular bi-annual event competing with Easter parades, the Twelfth and other illegal promenades) has prompted me to review the improvements in the amenities of Long Kesh; possibly also readers are interested in the ethos of the camp as I understand it, and this, I can categorically state, has not altered in any way.

Let me say at the outset that I now feel, as one of the reluctant pioneers of what I am afraid must be regarded as not an entirely successful project, a certain attachment – or rather a faint quickening of Behan's "curious quickening" – for my present home.

On that account my judgments may tend to lack objectivity, but I hope that these proffered comments are not construed as simply malicious or vindictive. In a sense then, this is in the nature of a half-term report which could be of some use to future architects of similar schemes (though I would be the first to recommend that any tentative plans be scrapped and a less contentious form of public diversion be substituted). There is probably some demand for another Stormont, a minor royal residence or a new employment exchange.

It is in the nature of things where one day is remarkably like another that small changes should assume major dimensions. For example the decision by someone up there that boots should be provided for the internees is a welcome index that our dialogues with the camp bureaucrats actually do at times go beyond the barbed wire boundaries. Complaints, demands, requests are normally met by an intransigent negative, regularly described in the phrase "for security reasons." But the boots are more important in another, far more serious, sense because of the gigantic international plot revealed by Dr. Paisley some years ago, when he divined in the Civil Rights Association a conspiracy born from the Machiavellian marriage of Moscow and Rome. Dr. Paisley was as usual correct, as I discovered last week.

TRUTH DAWNING

When I was forcing on what were described on the box as "work laced boots, of leather, oil, benzene firm sole, made by "Grunit", I was genuinely amazed to read the country of origin – the German Democratic Republic, here in Long Kesh, a Commie boot. It was almost like learning that Governor Wallace had enlisted in the Black Panthers. My immediate reaction was not really on the conspiracy lines already mentioned, but rather one of righteous indignation that local-made footwear was not being used – Banbridge Chamber of Commerce should immediately raise this issue with Roy Bradford, our globe-trotting Minister of Commerce. But as I waited on the cage gates being opened, the real truth suddenly dawned on my addled brain. The warder's numb fingers were having difficulty with the padlock and he naturally proceeded to blast the civil servant who had ordered inferior foreign locks.

There, stamped across the base in brazen letters, was "Made in Italy." The conclusion is patently obvious. The five hundred or so internees will be smuggled in the Papish keys and, well shod in G.D.R. boots, will appear jovially leading a Civil Rights demonstration. Collapse of Stormont, the end of freedom, religion and laws.

Having mentioned security (which understandably is rather a touchy subject at the moment) I must add that the frustrations engendered by the word enrage most of the local staff as well as ourselves. In these circumstances it would be exceptionally difficult for a philosopher in the Wittgenstein tradition to maintain his belief in the aphorism "the meaning of a word is its use." In fact, I am not entirely

unconvinced that the whole of modern linguistic philosophy may not have to be reworked in the light of our experience.

Security, it seems, is an infinitely elastic concept owning not even contestable boundaries. It is easy to appreciate that there will be a wide range of matters which will naturally fall under this heading, varying only according to the stringency of the criteria employed. A Hippie colony, one would imagine, would represent an extremity on a continuum, and Fort Knox the other. Long Kesh in this respect is definitely unlocateable. This is not, may I say, a recent phenomenon arising from the departure of one Francis McGuigan, an event which, as far as I can gather, is not as yet entirely believed by the authorities. There is a haunted feeling, one detects, among the prison officers that he might suddenly reappear as magically as he departed. Rumour has it that if a certain local newspaper had not telephoned Stormont inquiring into an anonymous tip-off, his absence would, as yet, have remained unnoticed.

NOT CONTEMPLATED

Some may be feeling that I am in the process of destroying my own case; the fact is that physical security was considered to be so satisfactory that none dared to contemplate even a single exception. Equally when the camp authorities are unable, unwilling, find it difficult to answer a question or are being bloody-minded they chorus "security."

There are literally fantastic examples of this non-rational, illegal(?) behaviour. The bookless library (honestly) constitutes a prime example.

Long Kesh geographically embraces a number of separate cages, an administrative area, visiting block and a virgin all-weather playing field. There is doubt about the football field; some claim that it is, in fact, a heliport as 'copters land there regularly, while the goalposts, we are reliably informed, are still being hand-carved elsewhere. At one end some months ago a large caravan was placed; this was to be our library, a prelude to a central education area proper. The prescient Mr. St. John Stevas, had indeed informed a spellbound Westminster that library facilities were being improved. Although not short of reading material, thanks to our many friends, we patiently awaited the arrival of a stock of books: so far there is not even the faintest suggestion that the Ministry of Home Affairs are aware that Caxton ever existed. Requests were then made that the caravan be made available as a study area, in particular for those preparing for examinations. In fairness it must be said that the bearer of ill-tidings blushed when he informed us that security demanded that the hut be surrounded another wire fence before it could be used. Overshadowed by a gun-tower, surrounded by what would be six wire fences, clearly it is the Ministry's intention that when we have the opportunity to study that no-one will disturb us.

I had almost forgotten about my original intention to give an account of advances in conditions due to what I now see is an obsession with security: the disease is contagious. The problem is that as I write I am becoming increasingly conscious of the fact that this latest message may never find its way to Dublin so that if it does appear there can be general rejoicing at another breach in the fences. But there have definitely been improvements; of that I am certain. It is only a question of getting my mind off this other issue, security. It must be even more trying for Mr. Faulkner.

[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/]

SECURITY AS USUAL DURING IMPROVEMENTS (OR THE CASE OF THE BOOKLESS LIBRARY)

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