

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

Beginning at the beginning

By Des O'Hagan

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Some of my friends have been insinuating that I am not really writing about Long Kesh, that these occasional jottings fail to convey the claustrophobic, deadening, frustrating, hopeless, vicious, inhuman nature of the camp. (Is this better?) Fair enough, one good photograph or preferably a filmed documentary would be far more accurate in its portrayal of our daily existence. Indeed it is a pleasure to disclose that a brief 8mm. survey of Long Kesh produced by the camp council will soon be available; the film is in the can as far as I know and although not directed by Roman Polanski, it should make compulsive televiewing.

Anyway I have decided to accept the advice and accordingly begin at the beginning. Kesh as explained by Dineen's Irish-English dictionary has a variety of interesting meanings. I imagine that in the chthonian fastness of the Home Office when the problem of accommodating the growing number of political dissidents was being discussed and suitable housing debated, that a quiet unassuming expert – Problems, Ireland, North – pronounced in favour of the present site, his decision made not for security reasons, but from his deep passion for and long appreciation of Celtic themes and languages. Never having really been called on to advise on the plethora of difficulties besetting the province his career is at last justified: in one historic moment his years of careful study bore fruit and are crystallised in the apposite selection of the site – Long Kesh.

Personally speaking I stand in awe of "Ceas Uladh." "The periodic novena of languor to which Macha's curse subjected the Ulaidh." Consider this in conjunction with a previous reference to the "the pangs of labour": the absolutely Euclidean precision of the word plus these political, historical and social derivations alone must undoubtedly qualify it for the most startling, imaginative four-letter word ever. The emancipated mass media will soon be echoing to the sibilance of kesh this, that and the other. By then Mrs. Mary Whitehouse will be the leading activist of Women Against Internment and the final phase of the civil disobedience campaign begun with the devastating Clean Up Stormont, to which Mr. Faulkner will calmly reply "Kesh off."

Cis, ceis, ceis, ceas and ceas concentrate very satisfactorily every possible poetic nuance one would desire in a centre such as ours. The Language Freedom Movement might care to note this point as they hunt for initiatives: it could be that our failure, at this time, to understand Mr. Faulkner and his brand of Unionism is simply due to the compulsory use of Gaelic place names in the North: we might be more sympathetic to his public distaste for internment if we knew precisely where we were, in English that is.

APPROVED USAGE

I believe the generally accepted translation of kesh is a wattle fence and that there are a considerable number of places in the Down region bearing this title, which does not say much for the early Irish if they bore the slightest resemblance to this windswept plain. But I would rather strain a point to emphasise the other senses contained in Dineen. This, by the way, has the approval at least of our hut: linguists may be horrified but we arrive at most of our decisions in a thoroughly democratic way. There is general, ferocious agreement that a 'wicker basket' is an unexpected bonus which certainly could be applied to a prominent Keshian figure who alas in this instance must remain nameless. Truly.

Dineen also is the accepted arbiter for the more serious activity of learning Gaelic; there are, in spite of the difficulties, space, din, no privacy, a large number of keen students. Culture, naturally, is a topic which provokes extreme attitudes, we still have advocates of the kilt as the definitive symbol of Gaeldom, while dismay at the downward plummeting of Man Utd would sadden Croke Park enthusiasts. Though I am inclined to think the ultimate statement on the question of the components

of culture came from an Irish-Italian internee: on being harassed into taking up step dancing as a contribution to the preservation of the national heritage he snorted: "And if I plant potatoes I suppose I am supporting Gaelic agriculture."

BLESSED THEORY

Being an Irishman still presents problems of definition, even in here; also the situation is not helped by the widespread canvassing of a two nations theory, which now not surprisingly appears to be official Conservative policy. There are one or two who accept it because it comes from the I.C. and B.O. Others maybe because it seems to have the canonical blessing of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy (bigots). Dr. Cruise O'Brien's contribution is ignored as he is deemed an agent of Wilsonism: opponents range from simple souls who accept Tone and abhor sectarianism to an outraged sociologist who holds the floor occasionally at 2a.m. swearing bitterly at what he describes as the sinister conspiratorial resurrection of medieval political concepts in neo-Weberian terms. As most of us are in bed reading, sleeping or because we have learned his jargon (it sounds good) no-one bothers to question him. That is, until recently.

He had taken to prowling around alone the perimeter of our cage, which is definitely not his usual gregarious manner, muttering angrily about racism, sectarianism, socialist republics and religion. The storm broke a few days ago and we have been wallowing helplessly in the face of the profundity of his anti-bolistic [IS THIS THE RIGHT WORD?] (but) functional theory of the new Ireland (his words). Under pressure he admits frankly that the analysis may have been floated elsewhere but that his primary purpose in presenting it now is due to status anxiety combined with the academic desire to be quoted as the source of the most-revolutionary theory since flower-power. We have excused him this last ambition as he assures us that the two nations exponents are themselves less worried about what they say, and more worried about who said it first, if you follow me.

His claims are absolutely outrageous. He proposes that Ireland become a loose federation of 32 autonomous county republics and in this fashion every possible problem will be solved. Unemployment, which like the poor we have always had with us, would be eradicated by the need for standing armies, smuggling, prime ministers, cardinals, moderators and secret agents. There could be secular societies, theocratic societies, communist societies, and there would of course be room for experimentation. Our tame sociologist further argued that provision would have to be made in the future for the different Protestant (and increasingly) Catholics brands of Christianity, as he says that no matter what one is born there is no guarantee what one will finish up. The citizens of the famous two nations theory will at that time be easily accommodated, he thinks, in places like Rathlin or Tory as real national criteria will have relocated them in the various republics.

He has also decided on the title of this exhaustive work (and awaits offers from interested publishers), which has a faint ecclesiastical tone, in order to preserve continuity with the original thesis, "Parochialism Rules".

[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/]

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