

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

Release by Russian Roulette or R.R.C.?

By Des O'Hagan

May 15, 1972

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On a wet windy day there are drearier places in Ireland than the black flooded runways of Long Kesh, but from where I sit in the new small "quiet-hut" the view is decidedly depressing. Looking left between two grey Nissen huts my eyes picked up discarded orange skins, pieces of sodden wrapping paper, then the boundary fences festooned with coiled barbed wire (we have thought of training roses to grow along these thorns, sorry) and come to rest on the square red iron gate supports which lead into other complexes.

This physical slice of the site is today cupped by a bleak dark northern sky. It is also Monday, the beginning of another week in which we will commiserate nine months of captivity, a fair foul time as the man said. Overall it is the sort of day when it is ruefully aware of what we half affectionately refer to as the Big D, described by the Red Cross as a falling in morale, a general air of depression.

SHRILL VOICES

Paradoxically this mood, I think, has increased of late, one hears more complaints of headaches, some voices seem shriller, more quickly raised in annoyance, while others withdraw into protective silence. This is a response, not just to the releases of the past few weeks but equally to the manner of the releases. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday have displaced visits from home as tension high points of the week, for it is on these days shortly after two o'clock when the entire camp is agitated by the appearance of a deputy governor, accompanied by the senior prison officers responsible for each cage. Cages 2, 3, 4, 5 are a half circle with the administration block in the centre so that the men living in this area are aware almost immediately if anyone is to go free.

The procedure has become finalised. The deputy governor, holding a thin sheet of startingly white paper, enters the cage: he remains poised, indifferent at the gate as the senior prison officer directs a warder to fetch an internee. At the door of each hut a small crowd has gathered, watching self-consciously. Each man feels his stomach lurch sickeningly as the guard approaches; never did any actor play his role so dramatically: the called name unlocks a sad hub-bub of applauding shouts. It may be two or even three who pack away their bedding on a wooden truck surrounded by friends, their joy edged with pain.

SADISTIC SYSTEM

Faced with this sadistic system of release by Russian roulette, we have responded by endeavouring to overcome the massive alienation it engenders by pretending either to be in control or at least able explain the basis on which releases occur. In our cage, from which quite a number of men have been freed, we have fabricated a few reasonable myths and an all-powerful body which decides who is to go next. Let me state categorically now that if any of our friends on the outside have heard rumours that this group is in any way connected with or influenced by the Southern establishment they can accept my assurance that these are absolutely untrue. Naturally enough, I cannot speak for whatever other agencies exist within the camp.

One bed in one hut was coveted for a time, as successive occupants were called to better things: at the moment it lies fallow as current long odds suggest that its fruitfulness is exhausted, having delivered so many winners. We have also turned to other worldly affairs in our search of explanations: for a time participation in the rosary was considered to be a gilt-edged security but the recent success of men who bore our Lady of Fatima, in statue form, round the cages has caused considerable anxiety as this was a once-off procession. There is also thriving speculation with regard to the men who were fortunate to shake the hand of the Cardinal, in the flesh, on his recent pastoral visit to the

camp. Odds here are very short indeed, though usually well-informed sources discount any possible connection between his call here and his later meeting with Mr. Whitelaw.

WULLY WHITEWASH

Wully Whitewash, as they have endearingly baptised him on the Shankill Road, might be interested in a little bit of grassroots Unionist gossip from Co. Tyrone which came my way last week on the whole subject of internment. (My informant from that region has now rejoined his family, more power to him). "Faulkner was the greatest devil that we ever had, he ruined the country by bringing in internment. We are free of him now and we can do as we like, we were tied to people like him but we are not tied now." It is not that I can see droves of loyalist farmers flocking into the Civil Rights Association, heralding a new age of emancipation and enlightenment, but when one compares the basic good sense of that statement with the urbane idiocy of Enoch Powell's recent aside that the cause of violence is the belief that it will succeed, I, like many more, would rather look west of the Bann for guidance than to Oxbridge chauvinists within the Tory Party, not that we are likely to influence them, or they us.

REVOLUTIONARY

Our all-powerful body which I mentioned earlier makes the decisions as to whom is to be released and when. Known as the Revolutionary Release Committee it has a revolutionary chairman and secretary, issues daily bulletins and spends a considerable amount of its time warding off the counter-revolutionary alliance, which is headed by a disgruntled trade unionist who claims that the original committee was never elected. Acceptance, however, is not based in this case on democratic origins but on successful forecasting. So far the R.R.C. has not only maintained its position but staggered the opposition by having the revolutionary secretary released.

It is still raining, rumours abound, one third of the camp is expected to close before the end of the month but this week the major talking point has been the E.E.C. and the destruction of the Belfast Co-operative Stores. As yet I have met no-one who has expressed approval of such an act, although I dare say there are some who can be found to defend it, just as there are those who can be found to defend internment.

[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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