

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

A Day in the Life of Long Kesh Monstrous Rhythm Interrupted Only by Sleep By Des O'Hagan

May 27, 1972

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I had a stimulating letter last week from an old lady in Donegal who, apparently sensing that I was somewhat depressed, sat down and wrote 17 exuberant pages of scandal, gossip and yarns about people whom I do not even know. It was indeed a great tonic. She asked me to write in detail about a day in Long Kesh, what we do, as she said, morning, noon and night.

As the days have become routinised or, as old prison hands have it, "the penny has dropped, you're doing time now." It is very hard to perceive change, to note differences. We seem to be living to a monotonous rhythm interrupted, if one can call it that, only by sleep. Internees are like duppies, the living dead of West Indian mythology; in fact in my hut there are one or two who are almost a near living confirmation of the fable. Names I dare not mention for security reasons. My security.

At any rate I have had to shake myself and as I am not accustomed to keeping a diary I hope that the following notes are a reasonable account, not too crude for devotees of Samuel Pepys.

2.30am: My feet are beginning to feel cold sitting here at the top of the hut with three others. Hut rules demand that lights are extinguished by one o'clock: anyone wanting to read or talk *sotto voce* must gather under one light. Occasionally someone will roar for quiet, but tonight the only sounds are from the sleepers. Last light out, bed, time to think, though not really, too disjointed, must be the infamous stream of consciousness, helicopter taking off, wake the bloody dead, still did have one trip swooping up from Crumlin across the Falls' redevelopment gaps, redevelopment nothing, must be ready to build more tower blocks now, wonder how the housing action is going, no Falls left by the time we get out, cigarettes there, lighter ...

FINE MORNING

7.30am: I always snap awake but never at this time, the hut door has jammed so the officers are pushing, twisting at the lock. A very bright morning. Two warders counting up one side, down the other as I watch from one eye. Definitely should get up, a surge of childhood guilt, a sin to lie in bed on a fine day like this. Doze off again.

10.45am: The voice of authority, democratically elected, now rouses the men still in bed; most of us. There are a few early birds, usually countrymen long accustomed to regular hours, but we generally like to greet the day slowly, warily. A cup of tea is a great help so little syndicates have sprung up sharing food parcels, taking turns to make the tea. This morning I also manage to get *The Irish Times*. Even though we know that there is the rest of the day to peruse the papers every day there is a demand to be among the first to read the news. Scarcity certainly creates competitiveness; combined with the present circumstances it has turned many men here into avid students of the press.

11.00am – Strip bed, fold blankets and sheets, which is necessary for hygienic reasons in our opinion; wash, study face, comb beard, ignoring sarcasm from the younger crew. Back in the hut I make the tea this time, more sarcasm, there has been a request (an insult to my integrity) for a list to be signed by each member of the syndicate to ensure that they all take their turn: the search for equality continues unabated. Conversation now revolves around the treatment of various news stories in different papers. At times one could almost believe the old story of the headline which supposedly featured in Belfast years ago, "Catholic dog wins greyhound derby".

12.00 or thereabouts – Dinner arrives. We study the menu carefully, reject steak, curry, pork chops, and settle for stew with mashed potatoes. The chef acknowledges our satisfaction with a gracious

symbolic gesture from the security of the cookhouse door. A tedious part of the day, we read or talk until news time.

1.30pm – Radio Éireann is genuinely admired for its extensive coverage of Six County affairs. (Is it not about time, by the way, that Telefís Éireann was equally accessibly to Northern viewers?) I doubt if a day has passed when the entire camp has not tuned into this news service: it [I?] may be prejudiced but I am of the opinion that it is as close to being objective in its reporting as is humanly possible.

2.00 or slightly later – I think that I have said enough previously about this time, it is much too painful to dwell on it, rather like being let down on a date, so most men with romantic souls will know what it is like.

This afternoon there is a talk, followed by a discussion on religious sectarianism; this is a continuation of a debate begun some weeks ago. Now in the light of exploding sectarian blackness what was formerly a somewhat academic subject for some is a matter for urgent analysis. All we can do here is analyse. Today accusations are flung back and forth; charges of hypocrisy on many lips; overall I have the impression of just not knowing where to begin. It may be that the whole topic of religion in Ireland is so enclosed in myth, superstition and authoritarianism, or that it lends itself so readily to sloganising, that we find it difficult to talk rationally about sectarianism. In the prevailing climate of opinion in the North – we are part of it – to reject Roman Catholic or Protestant bigotry is simply to invite the charge of being Communist, but I have a vague memory of a bishop in South Africa saying that the only possible position for a Christian in his country was to identify with the Communists. God help him if he had lived in Ireland, Senator McCarthy was only a boy scout compared with some of our responsible citizens.

4.30pm: There are a few who gather expectantly around the television waiting on the daily appearance of their number one pin-up Miss Helen of UTV's "Romper Room". It would be too much to say that she has displaced Róisín Dubh in the eyes of her admirers, but she certainly would draw a queue to the stage door if people still do that sort of thing.

Our television committee is constantly confronted with competing claims which in the last resort can never really be satisfactorily resolved but it is clear that there are priorities: current political programmes have the largest audiences, closely followed by all forms of sport, while viewing distasteful to Malcolm Muggeridge has an excellent following. As we argue the merits of different channels, interruptions by the disgruntled are greeted with shouts of "Who rattled your cage?" Linguists should be interested in the fact that we have generated our own rhetorical questions, for example, "What are you wirelessly about?", directed at anyone complaining unnecessarily. This has a crushing effect, particularly when it is enunciated in a broad Belfast accent. No-one has yet produced a suitable reply.

4.45pm: Following the Six County news bulletin, a lull in the conversation is broken by the one sentence litany, "Big Murphy was arrested today": response, "Aye, but he was arrested at the gate." As Big Murphy has never been in Long Kesh the ironic historic awareness of the comment is worthy of specific origin: alas, we have failed to chart Murphy's career here precisely; we know of him as owning a chair in which one dare not sit but now that he has gone no one knows from where he came, how long he was here or in which prison his spirit now frets.

(To be continued)

[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/]

Monotonous rhythm interrupted only by sleep

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