

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

The second half of A Day in the Life of Long Kesh Mice Threaten to Take Over from Internees By Des O'Hagan

June 9, 1972

Originally published in The Irish Times, page 9

6.00pm – Marshall McLuhan was half right in picturing the world as a global village. The tragedy of Vietnam flickers nightly, disasters such as the Battersea fun fair momentarily evoke sympathy yet it is true that we wait for the Northern Ireland news impatient with the visual horrors of An Loc or the complexities of the British Rail dispute. Apart from the natural parochial and political interest in our own affairs, I think that we assess all news items as impinging adversely or otherwise on our own position. Such selfishness is understandable particularly as we study the stamping rows of the Ulster Defence Association and their efficient patrolling of weekend barricaded East Belfast.

Some of us drift away to discuss the news, others debate the merits of the evening's programmes. Undoubtedly television keeps us informed, educates us and entertains, but we seem to be dominated by its presence. It beams down from a shelf above one door: we gather underneath it like some preliterate tribe fascinated by the magical gyrations of the witch doctor. It is not really as bad as that but gradually we begin to empathise with the luddites.

7.00pm – Tonight our Republican Club meeting is lively. Now all discussions seem eventually to turn to sectarianism, civil war, and the growing bitterness of which we occasionally learn on visits. Encapsulated as we have been for many months in Long Kesh our analysis of the present situation is highly academic, although we all have detailed stories of Unionist 'moderates' who have become extremists during the past ten months. At times, though, we cannot help but wonder if there are now so many ex-moderates how it was that Unionism was for so long a thriving, unhealthy, sectarian, near-Fascist force in Northern Ireland. It may be that we are naive in musing thus and that the bombing has been so gross as to have rent the fabric of our community beyond patching, but as human beings we cannot accept such pessimistic futurology. Our meeting, at any rate, concluded hopefully as someone pointed out that it was still possible for ex-extremist Unionists to join with democrats in rejecting the unjust repressive system to which we are heirs.

9.00pm – No point in watching the news after we hear the headlines, a repeat of six o'clock. A walk round the cages is pleasant now as the evenings are brighter, warmer. The red roof of a barn on a nearby hill momentarily glows dully as car headlights move swiftly down the encircling M.1. Tonight a soldier lonely in the watchtower immediately above and behind Cage 2 shouts something incomprehensible but vaguely mocking. We stop[,] also welcoming the opportunity to engage in an exchange of insults, glad of the 'diversion'. It took us some time to realise that this sort of heckling which the occasional guard will initiate was really stemming from a desire to establish human contact. Concerned obviously with not losing face in case the response from an internee would be too brutal the soldier is forced to open a conversation across the wire in the only way possible for him, a shouted insult. We have learned in the main from these conversations something of the dimensions of British Army internal propaganda and the uneasy distaste which higher ranks have for these transient associations.

In the course of one discussion with a young soldier he told us that he had been lectured as to how we were all mad gunmen intent on murdering Protestants. I doubt if he really believed this as he was quick to relate the points we made about the nature of repression in Northern Ireland to the Heath anti-trade union policy in Britain. Our growing mutual interest was interrupted by the telephone in his box, a brief exchange and he shouted down that he had been warned to tell us to sod off. It must indeed be a poor sort of army that is afraid of its men being indoctrinated by the prisoners over whom they watch.

9.45pm – We have a miniature billiard table donated by a sympathiser which circulated between the three huts, this week it is our turn. A knockout competition left me completely shattered. Having

started favourite in the betting, evidence of me youthful wild oats, I was knocked out in the first round. One does not mind being beaten but the score was such as to leave me totally incapable of ever boasting in the future of my early prowess with a billiard cue.

12.15am – Set the trap. We are plagued, as I mentioned once, with mice, but from wild accounts of size from those who wake in the night disturbed with revels, we are going to need this jumbo-size mark II Long Kesh guillotine-type mouse disposer. Like a part of Belfast which is renowned as the only area in which the tinkers organised a petition to have the residents removed, there are those among us who firmly believe that the mice are organising in secret and increasingly in public to force through demands to have the internees restricted to a section of the hut. The rest of the area is already almost no-go, so it would only be a matter of recognising their creeping possession of the territory. Anyway a unique trap has been ingeniously constructed. It consists of the wooden dome cover taken from a sewing machine, one end has been removed and replaced with a transparent shutter. A hole pierced through the centre is wedged with a match which itself is held in place by a length of cord running along the roof of the dome then through another hole into the trap. A hunk of cheese asks as a weight and a bait. The trap really is an architectural masterpiece. The inventor, James Lawlor, of Turf Lodge, has decided not to apply for patents, an altruistic gesture which I hope the authorities will recognise as a part of the initiatives in this post-Faulkner era. Success in the first twenty-four hours, we feel, has been good, although this judgment may be biased, for we can only guess at the total mouse population. So far, two have been detained. One managed to escape, gross negligence, which is being thoroughly investigated by the SMIB5 (Special Mouse Investigation Branch).

1am. No enthusiasm tonight for late polemics, reading or the ongoing post mortem since Mr. Whitelaw arrived some ten weeks ago. Clearly, the men were adversely affected by the sudden cessation of release last week. Time for a final cup of tea and what else can one write, but so to bed.

Historical Footnote: The recent arrival of fifty or so unfortunate short-term prisoners into one of the cages must have presented a major headache for whoever is legally responsible for their general well-being in the Ministry of Home Affairs. Apart from visits, employment, welfare, there was also the problem that Long Kesh is, after all, an internment camp. One could hardly have prisoners transferred here to serve sentences. The solution is on a notice board outside Cage 6, which, I am told, reads: "H.M. Prison. The Maze." I suppose it is as good a name as any in the circumstances, but someone soon is certain to draw comparisons with another notorious racecourse, which could possibly prove embarrassing at Strasbourg.

[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/]

Mice threaten to take over from internees

THE following is the second and final part of Des O'Hagan's description of the daily routine in Long Kesh.

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