

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

Probing the Sources of Communal Hatred

By Des O'Hagan

June 17, 1972

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That this is the weekend of the annual Wolfe Tone commemoration and also, I believe, the 21st letter from Long Kesh (19 in the Second Official Language) makes me feel that I should try to contribute something memorable. Unfortunately the traditional presentation of the key of the house has been deferred indefinitely so the many who would have joined enthusiastically in post-Bodenstown conviviality are unhappily contemplating another dry weekend.

Still we can reminisce about other Bodenstowns, conjuring up the parched throng in Sallins struggling for paper cups and black bottles. Children darting between parked cars, buses hooting, bands piping, flat Northern voices, quick Cork accents, crowds trudging over the railway bridge, small groups fervently exchanging views, the little village for a few hours, indeed, becomes the heart of Ireland.

In a country justly renowned throughout the world for its devotion to religion it must be something of a shock for the student of Irish affairs to learn that our secular processions outweigh religious pilgrimages in our national consciousness. Bodenstown or the Field at Finaghy have a greater hold on our lives than Saul or Knock, and at this time it is absolutely clear that Tone's programmatic call for the unity of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter under the common name of Irishman still remains the only hope for the future. It is equally a harsh reminder to Christians of how tragically they have failed in a country in which they have wielded so much power. I suppose it is a case of the corruption of their institutions rather than their ethics.

1969 REMEMBERED

If my visitors are correct there was an enormous sense of relief in Belfast when the para-military Ulster Defence Association declared their intention not to erect their barricades at the weekend, to withdraw, at least temporarily, from the brink. For many it must seem as if a turning point has been reached, that the mass of the people have decided not to be dragged any further from towards a sectarian massacre. The U.D.A. move, following, as it does, on the Six County Executive of the Republican Clubs' initiative, has started a ferment of discussion within the camp, although unfortunately we tend to revert to the tragedy of August 1969, a corrosive episode in Northern history.

All the memories, though, are not bitter. Apparently at one local barricade in September 1969, as a police wave length was being monitored, a patrol radioed that an ugly crowd had gathered and seemed to be heading in the direction of the nearby Roman Catholic ghetto. One of a very diligent band of vigilantes dashed down the narrow street warning exertedly that a crowd of ugly Protestants was about to attack. Had the mob proceeded they would have found the defenders overcome by laughter rather than fear.

We have been comparing notes, probing our childhood for the sources of the now overt communal fear and hatred. I hope that I will be believed when I write that during 20 years or so living on the Falls Road I was never aware of hate of Protestants. The heart of the Lower Falls, that sprawl of sweat boxes erected to satisfy the needs of 19th century capitalism, now being ripped out to satisfy the needs of an urban motorway contained three churches, two Presbyterian and one Roman Catholic. Looking from the Shankill Road across towards the Lagan, St. Peter's Pro-Cathedral dominated the district: at the close of a sunny day the shadow from the spires could have fallen on either of the others, they sat so close together.

TROUBLES OF 20s

On a Sunday all proceeded peacefully to their house of worship. I remembered one of the sextons who had a standing joke with my father about giving the Sunday service on the basis of 50 % of the

collection. St. Peter's still stands. Albert Street Presbyterian Church, I understand, closed and Bertha Place has gone with the surrounding slum houses. The flour mill which overshadowed the latter has disappeared, along with the impatient Clydesdal cart-horses striking sparks fretfully off the round road stones, kidney pavers or Belfast confetti of the sectarian troubles of the 1920s. The memory of those days was recalled when someone was behind with some household task which could draw the wry comment, "they're in on us and we haven't got a stone gathered." But seldom did I hear any talk of Protestant, [-] Catholic conflict.

In the mill's place is a tower block of flats and a motorway planned to act as a moving boundary between the people of the Shankill and the Falls: urban planning is seemingly based on the perpetuation of sectarian conflict.

Undoubtedly, one could romanticise one's childhood, but what is certain one did not meet or play with Protestants, in spite of the fact they lived fifty yards away. Separate educational facilities ensured separate development and while it is impossible to measure the contribution that this may have made to the present situation, it must surely demonstrate the need for a revision of local theology.

August '69 was traumatic, but the wounds were healing, or rather being healed on the shop floor and the building sites, where ecumenism is a real struggle and not a topic to be enjoyed in polite conversation with tea and biscuits. One Republican internee, an ex-shop steward, pointed out as we discussed our formative years that some time before his arrest he was accepted unreservedly by the workers as mediator and spokesman, so that occasional sectarian disturbance was resolved without too much disruption. Prior to his arrest his position had been almost totally undermined by the bombing campaign, his politics, to which his loyalist workmates has been relatively indifferent, were becoming increasingly unacceptable. It is interesting that he believes the lost ground can be regained, when it is again possible for him to work as a Republican trade unionist.

Another participant in our discussion was particularly angry, not, as is our wont, about the past, but for the future. In the very large working-class Catholic estate of Andersonstown he has calculated that 60 men have lost their jobs as a direct result of explosions. When one considers the families of these men, their friends, their acquaintances and the thousands of other workers who have suffered also, the problem for Republicans intent on propagating their political philosophy seems to him well-nigh insurmountable. His conclusion: they have made Republicanism a dirty word.

FAULKNER'S PAST

All of this is not to say that we are less aware of the role of Orangeism and the Unionist Party as the primary womb of sectarianism. Mr. Faulkner, who extended repression in such a tragic fashion, can claim to be one of the midwives of communal hatred. His present concern for the welfare of the North sounds uniquely hollow as he snaps petulantly at Mr. Whitelaw's heels, for there are many who remember him heroically striding down the Longstone Road some 13 years ago, his manner no less arrogant, his purpose no less criminal, than that of the most backwoods bigot. There is, I believe, good reason to hope that the bulk of loyalist workers finally have appreciated the extent to which their traditional leaders were willing to exploit their emotions in the interest of their political and economic power. The conflicts which rage beneath the surface of traditional Unionist unity promise that future defections will not be in twos to the Alliance Party but in greater numbers in more radical directions.

Our analysis concluded with some thoughts for Mr. Whitelaw, and although he is in the political tradition of Burke it may be that he is astute enough to harken to the lessons of the French Revolution as understood by Tone. His sojourn in Ireland will be brief, either by virtue of an election in England or because he has contributed to the emergence of democracy: on the other hand, should he fail to confront and reject the twin evils of sectarianism and repression it is unlikely that he will be remembered other than as an Englishman who spent some time in Ireland.

[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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All the memories, though, are not bitter. Apparently at one local barricade sometime in September, 1969, as a police wave length was being monitored, a patrol car radioed that an ugly crowd had gathered and seemed to be heading in the direction of the nearby Roman Catholic ghetto. One of a very diligent band of vigilantes dashed down the narrow street warning excitedly that a crowd of ugly Protestants was about to attack. Had the mob proceeded they would have found the defenders overcome by laughter rather than fear.

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