

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

Memories are made of this ...

By Des O'Hagan

July 1, 1972

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There obviously had to be a last letter from Long Kesh although I hurry to add that, along with 370 others, I am still enjoying bed and board as a guest of the incredible Mr. Whitelaw. If it is still the practice of the Tory Party to take soundings to discover the grassroots' views on potential leaders, and if the new leader is still thought of as emerging in response to the pressing needs of the party, then Mr. Heath must be wriggling uneasily in his chair as he applauds his Northern Ireland manager.

At the very least Mr. Whitelaw's performance must be provoking discussion in the elegant club rooms, distraught with fears of a sinking pound, militant workers and depressed election agents: how about "Whitelaw restores peace to a troubled Whitehall?"

Naively I had hoped that I could have the story of taking a wry, farewell look at the rows of empty Nissen huts, the corrugated iron gates slamming shut, then hurrying to a waiting car and the final ride to freedom. It would have made a beautiful ending. We are still here and I should be grateful for the opportunity of preparing, in a very real sense, a final letter. It is not that there is any hard evidence to suggest that release will be any day now but, as the times that are in it are full of endings and beginnings; I feel constrained to contribute in the same spirit. Hence the "Last Letter from Long Kesh."

It is too soon to start counting the gains and losses sustained, to try to balance account[s?]. At the same time it would be agreed by most that internment, the camp, has been the bitter heart of this past 11 months made fury [months' mad fury?]. Long Kesh has been cursed, praised, questioned, analysed, visited, photographed (internally and externally) and finally renamed (disguised). Many who were here will look back, remembering nostalgically the comradeship, the laughs, the fears, others unfortunately but understandably will be bitter, nurturing hate, dwelling over-long on the vicious wrong done to them.

Bitterness, hate in themselves need not be destructive and there are men who could be described as leaving here full of bitterness, but who in fact have found the will to hate the evils done to people and are bitter only in their rejection of the now publically-admitted sectarian brinkmanship of former republicans and their Orange counterparts. They are a promise of a better future.

At the moment, however, we are more preoccupied with memories, already recounting half-forgotten events, the humorous and the tragic. I suppose the following story is not really funny but it can still raise a laugh at each telling. One old Belfast lady, childishly innocent of the nature of internment, was paying her first visit to the camp. The warder escorted her to the tiny box where her son was already seated at the table. She gazed at him astonished, then slowly queried: "My God, son dear, do you just sit there all day like this?"

Even Holywood has produced its crop of stories, like the young man confronted by a Special Branch officer promising all sorts of lurid ill-treatment if he did not receive the sort of answers he required. Proceeding then more calmly he demanded to know how many were in the local defence unit. The answer is still reverberating round Long Kesh: "What's it got to do with you? You just mind your own business." In the circumstances, to my mind, it rates as high as any scintillating witticism from Oscar Wilde.

Subsequently, during the interrogation the detainee was frog-marched another room to confront a close relative, the detective's objective being to elicit what alleged position the relative held in the defence group. Angrily: "Do you know who that is?" "Aye that's our Tommy." "And what's he?" Pause, indignantly, "He's a Catholic."

But there are those who still bear the scars of Girdood, Ballykinlar, Holywood and the secret cells in which the science of psychology was so abused in a vicious effort to dehumanise. This cannot be forgotten and as it reminds us that absolute power corrupts absolutely, it also should surely be a guarantee that special powers have no future in Ireland. Government functions, if not better, certainly less dangerously when their every action is subject to the fullest publicity.

It is hard actually to grasp that, while we have been entombed for nearly 11 months, over 300 people died violently and that many thousands were injured grievously, but we are in sufficient contact with reality to know that recent overtures to the Unionist working class from leading Provisional spokesmen who are abysmal in their political ignorance and apparently blind to their own history have absolutely no chance of being accepted. At the same time protestations from Unionist leaders of their concern for the establishment of a democratic society ring equally hollow as they continue to rant in terms of a Protestant majority and a Roman Catholic minority. If there is to be a new Ireland it can only be by way of a frontal assault on all sectarian forces combined with an end to repression.

Alternatively, we could all adopt the principle as did one internee, if you cannot beat them, join them. Certainly we were sceptical about his sanity but this is what he did. Having seen the many advertisements for the prison service he decided to apply, the application forms were delivered to his home address and were later followed by an invitation to an interview. In the meantime he was released and as far as we can learn has been accepted as a trainee prison officer. For a time there was great speculation that he would return ultimately to Long Kesh so that we gave a new twist to the old joke, "Nut returns as screw and internees bolt for cover."

Memories

The Camp Riot: The sad young soldier with the guard dog after the riot in October, 1971, who sneaked up to the cages to whisper that, "One of your blokes have been murdered". It was not true but I shall always remember his anxiety and sorrow with gratitude.

Christmas: The little girl singer standing shyly, lost, in the bitter cold dusk waiting on the cage gates being opened.

Bloody Sunday: The stillness, the shock, the sickness.

St. Patrick's Day: An angry exchange about Irish-Americans bleeding publicly for the old sod but blind to the white racist character of their adopted country.

Easter: The sharp bright notes of the Last Post.

Above All: The people at home, in England, and throughout the world, who wrote and continue to write. They indeed are, as I think Connolly said, incorruptible.

[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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