

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

Efforts To Combat Deprivation On The National Day

By Des O'Hagan

March 13, 1972

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St. Patrick's Day is looming threateningly arid on the horizon. Alcoholics Anonymous and the Pioneers of Total Abstinence, probably secret advocates of internment, can be imagined over the prolonged decline in the sales of the diet of Northern drinking men, a bottle and a half 'un. (Some of us have friends who drink obscene imperialist beverages with an international reputation. It is interesting that they remain free: virtue indeed must have its own reward.) Strenuous efforts are now being made to combat this deprivation which is assuming a truly poignant form as the national day approaches. My father, who could not sing to keep himself warm, used to chant monotonously:

"The rain poured down as we flocked into town with our flags and our green banners waving. The hand it did play God Save Ireland on St. Patrick's Day."

We will have a parade but it will lack the sort of colour, promise, thirsty impatience to break the ranks which I am sure the Hibernians always displayed.

Our drink engineers, brew chemists, have had a fair degree of success in the past, although the after effects, as far as I am concerned, were sufficiently devastating not to encourage me to try again. It felt more like food poisoning than a hangover. On the night in question following lock-up at ten o'clock, we supped steadily, yarning, singing the favourites – the chorus of "Rann na Feirsde" is very popular on occasions like that – it was only when the time for solo renderings arrived that it was clear that some of us were definitely well on. It is reasonably fair to assume that if the "Birth of the Blues" is belted out half a dozen times in succession the singer is not sober; in my own case, being normally aware that I am father's son singingwise, our hut was shattered, silenced, sobered by the weird howling of "Faith of Our Fathers"

ATTRACTIONS

Our first feis, or rather feiseanna, as each cage is unfortunately autonomous, will include the normal range of activities with special attention devoted to the internment skills: plaques, crosses, musical boxes, dolls' houses, decorated handkerchiefs, both commemorative and predictive will be judged. For the physically active, footraces around the cage perimeters are being arranged, the winner of the Long Kesh mile should receive, in my opinion, a special reward [f]or his ability to speed round a circumference which would normally leave one prostrate with dizziness. As we are plagued with mice clattering across the corrugated iron hut roofs we are also trying to organise a hunt led by the cage cat "Freedom" and the few poachers in our midst. Mr. Craig, who is something of a Pied Piper, would be very welcome at the moment. [insert new paragraph here?] Fifth Avenue's jaunt will undoubtedly be watched by thousands more puzzled onlookers as the Irish-Americans stride for freedom and justice, but it will be easier explaining our shenanigans to a handful of English warders than trying to tell New York's minorities why the day's festivities are dulled by black armbands. Harlem's Negroes would be better hearing about Ireland and Derry from Angela Davis than Judge Comerford.

Like many other people who are gradually losing interest in the subtle non-answers of politicians – in fact I believe that some of the occupants of another cage have been consulting the occult via an ouija board in the hope of learning the content of Mr. Heath's cliff-hanging initiatives. The spirits consulted had not even pure speculation to offer. What genuinely amazes us is [NOT?] the sickening speed with which new legislation can be passed at Westminster when Britannia's robes seem about to trip her up, but that all sorts of circumlocutions, pauses, shady deals, seem to be necessary, even in the eyes of one's friends, when the internment issue is discussed. Anyhow, both Connolly and Pearse – who else would they consult – kept their other-wordly information and were equally redundant to give partisan support to any of the present political parties.

HORROR STORIES

There are many shades of opinion contained here in spite of Mr. Faulkner's clever portrayal of internees as identical in character and outlook. All, however, were nauseated as the horror stories of the Abercorn restaurant were related; condemnation of what was a gross terrorist act was total and unequivocal. Men whose stories of personal suffering are in themselves shocking could hardly find words to express their abhorrence of the maniacs who had so callously and murdered and maimed innocent people. Now there is depression, a lethargy has gripped us. How extensive it is would be impossible to say, although it appears to have affected not only those who are politically aware but the many who found themselves galvanised into active resistance against sectarian mobs who seemed about to swamp their homes in August 1969, and on that account, as a threat to the community, have been interned. I do not want to convey any sense of superior or inferior, for surely it is an excellent thing to wish to defend one's family, one's friends, from the ravages of organised swarms of bigots. The difference is that a genuine human emotion has evolved into the counterpart of what it sought to oppose; this distinguishing it from the ongoing secular, socialist tradition of Republicanism. It is as if one had suddenly become aware of fear, fear not only for oneself but for the entire community.

Last July, off the Shankill Road, an area of slum housing so much like the Falls, I remember talking to people about the ridiculous Belfast Corporation plans for urban renewal, tower blocks of flats which would kill the local communities. I was there in the company of members of the "Seven Days" team who were preparing a background programme on the Twelfth. (Ironically the researcher is now in trouble with the R.T.É. establishment.) We were received courteously, the only complaint heard was the indifference of the Northern mass media to human living conditions. All that seems so far away, separated by a contrived chasm of blood and violence.

To have been in Long Kesh will now mean for many of the working class to be blood tainted as it is hard for people to distinguish shades of opinion, faced with Weatherman-type violence. When reasonable men like Mr. Robb, surgeon at Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital, find it hard to look at the future then it is slightly ridiculous to pose the question as to what reception Oliver Donohue and myself would have on the Shankill Road now.

[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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