

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

How The Shamrock Was Well Drowned

By Des O'Hagan

March 25, 1972

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The road to hell is paved with good intentions, which seems to mean an awful lot of navvys are employed on that particular building site. On Saturday, March 18th, I collapsed out of bed conscious of very little except that I had made my labourers contribution to the broad downward highway.

I suppose on reflection that it was worth it although I would not enthuse over the previous evening[s] *Scoraiocht* so keenly as a friend who doubted whether he would rather have spent St. Patrick's Day any place else. Truthfully, there was an arm-linking comradeship in our cage, we sang songs sad and gay, laughed uproariously, cheered to the echo the winners of the day's competitions. We denied as loudly as possible everything except our pleasure in each other, the enjoyment of the for-once cheerful canteen-Nissen hut. It was a sentimental evening where we became very self-conscious, as if to provide one good memory when reminiscences of Long Kesh are swapped, for our cage has had more than its share of grief.

This letter, then, is something of a roll call not of all the men in Cage 4 but of some as they appeared in the course of the evening. This is so possibly because I feel that our festivities helped to preserve our individuality and shattered the anonymity of what is a grey world. It may also be that we were whistling loudly in the dark, if that was the case then the blackness was grim.

LIKE A SHEBEEN

Unconsciously I think the canteen had taken on the appearance of one of the many shebeens which sprouted in working class Belfast after August 1969. We even had a doorman meticulously handing out two chits for the bar. I wonder now did Eddie Keenan – later he whooped out "Follow Me Up To Carlow" – actually expect to discover gatecrashers among us, his scrutiny gave me the same uneasy feeling one has squeezing among regulars through the unwelcoming near closed door of a strange club, ready to plead an explanation as to why one should not be excused entrance. At the far end of the hut our makeshift bar, carefully guarded by Freddie Scappaticci and Angelo Morelli, provoked immediate demands for a purge of the Mafia, an end of prohibition in the camp to prevent another St. Valentine's Day Massacre. We also later began to appreciate the significance of the marriage-feast of Cana, for as the night wore on, their diminutive containers continued to flow, all were satisfied.

Johnny Collins, bespectacled eyes gleaming, marshalled the performers. He joined the first group – "straight from a successful whirlwind tour of Girdwood, the Maidstone, Crumlin, now resident in Long Kesh, for your entertainment exclusively, the fabulous Cat Melodeons": and the feeling was what better place could they be. The Cat, Brendan McNulty, leader of the group, was catweazle with ambitions to be a jockey, harmonising with Tony McKay and Tommy Sinclair: their fans found it hard to howl down the strong vocal support for an all Ardoyne Dylan-Donovan quintet, Kill's Cubs, the Cowboy Singers led on guitar by Thunder McAuley supported by the Brothers Kane, Brian Mullan and Mickey Moan.

SILENT FINISH

Sean Murphy sang "The Foggy Dew," starting a flood of bubbling thoughts: Father Charles O'Neill, who wrote the verses, worked in St. Peter's, twin spires black over the Falls, my mother telling me how Countess Markievicz and Father Flanagan were stoned in the shadow of the same church by irate Hibernians, Connolly, who lived next door, fighting slavery on a seldom-received pound a week so that she said, "We borrowed cups of sugar in '13." Then Sean McKnight, whose voice conjured up Connemara, Spideal, Fiesti Conlon, shy on the tin whistle, which brought me rushing back to the Old House Bar, the Falls Fleadh, but it is "in Grafton Street in November we tripped lightly along the way." We were silent as he finished.

Our table, Rodgers, Sullivan, Browning, Larkin, Campbell, cheered as loudly as any, for we are all in Hut 33, which collected, it seemed, the bulk of the prizes. We even featured in the Old Crocks' forty-yard dash, which is not to deny Willie John McCu[?]rry's victory by a stomach over Olympian Gerry Adams. Special applause was reserved for the presentation by Billy O'Neill, of the Fainne Glás, beaming teachers and proud pupils. So proud that Gerry Campbell claimed that he would not take a £100 for the camp-made green-wrapped ring. I do not think modern economic theory is threatened on that account in any way, but there might be something for advertisers, the promoters of enthusiasm for the language revival.

We have had many firsts here to remember and it may well be that we will all celebrate at least one birthday. But Paddy Tolan, one of the many from Ballymurphy, scored a unique hat trick on St. Patrick's Day. Not only was this his birthday, but also his wedding anniversary. I seem to recall that St. George was removed from the Vatican's official list of the canonised: our own representative seems to have fallen asleep on the job if this is how he permits his namesake to be treated. All we could do was give Paddy an extra-special roar, which just possibly may have been heard in the 'Murphy.

POPULAR SONGS

Everyone has a song to which they can listen again and again. "Larkin", to my mind, has a quality which demands attention, Martin Henderson interprets it as a challenge that no longer concerns only Ireland. In Madrid, they would understand when they recall 1936 or in the States if they talk about the I.W.W. "In the month of August the bossman told us: now that is a line which I will find it hard to forget, there comes later through the good news of "The Voice of Freedom, the Voice of Justice." [where should the quotation mark at in the month of August end?] If I had thought of it at the time, "Fair play to you Martin" would have been the right encouragement.

There were other songs, singers, the night finished at different times. It was not for propaganda purposes that I noted an ex B Special fervently declaiming "Who dares [delete s?] to say forget the past," as some of us drifted out to the huts. We wandered back and forth reluctantly.

I am reminded now of closing time. The men always last to leave. The shouted goodnights without the slamming car doors or high laughter. Our cage area is a desolate place even in the sun, when the huts were barred the patrolling soldiers must have felt a little lonelier.

[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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