

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

A Great Week for Crack

By Des O'Hagan

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The tone was set by an internee's friend from Co. Tyrone: his wife, who seems to have as sharp a sense of humour as himself, was recounting local grass-roots Unionist attitudes which naturally included strong feelings about the party's leaders, particularly Mr. Faulkner.

He was described as "that wee runt who has as many faces as a dying goat." The village wiseman said bitterly: "Sure he ate his words, a hundred times."

I suppose this is an apposite analysis, fitting more than the slippery ex-Prime Minister for it was clear that disillusionment with politics is not absolute. Big Ian is still a frontrunner in his district at least. "He is the only man among them worth a damn."

This, not surprisingly (if one knows Tyrone, which is almost as autonomous as Kerry) is attributed to the fact that he spent his formative years near Sixmilecross. "The while as a wee 'un round the 'Cross cutened him up." There should be widespread agreement, even in Westminster, on that statement.

Mr. Craig, I am afraid, can take no consolation from Tyrone opinions in his attempt to go one up on the Civil Rights Association. Vanguard is very far back in the estimation of the farmers. No wonder, as the two-day strike caused the deaths of thousands of chickens and a massive loss of milk. Mr. Craig might find, if he moved outside of his fairly narrow circle of advisers, that his disruption campaign was as fruitless as that initiated by others in a violent manner.

A second major talking point was another campaign, this time propaganda. A local paper carried a story of an illegal radio claiming a radius of 25 miles, calling itself "The Workers' Radio," and organised by the Official Republican Movement.

I think the whole camp was trying to beam in on their broadcast. We were lucky. Very faintly at first could be heard the harsh Belfast voice announcing record requests from wives, girlfriends, mothers. It did not really matter that we had heard the song on a hundred different occasions, the men strained, angrily hushing any late comers to the group. "That so and so, in Cage Five ... whist ... was that Billy from the Markets' girlfriend?" The reception could be improved, we discovered, by pressing down on top of the radio, so we perched it as high as possible on a locker, earthed by the weight of an internee.

It was local radio; many would say it was blatant illegal propaganda. One can understand and even sympathise with this point of view. The young nervous voices, stumbling, hesitant, were quietly sincere, stating their faith in ordinary people, in the hope of Roman Catholic and Protestant working-class unity; I see in the intent listening eyes, agreement. (The Gaeltacht radio should consider employing local people in similar capacity. They have a natural style which professionals seem to lack.)

Naturally, Friday was the day. A close friend was one of the first to be released. He had been offered a conditional discharge months previously, but had refused to give the undertaking which was demanded at the time – one of four men who courageously turned their backs on those open gates.

I was hauled out of bed to shout hoarse farewells across the wire, it may have been simply that I was not fully awake, but there was not much to say. He looked as dazed as I felt, whitefaced, eyes shining, his suitcase bulging with eight months of books, hopes and ideas.

The excitement was passed on by look, touch, voice, the air: men who liked to meditate late in bed crowded near the gates exchanging shouted names with other cages. Even the officers were affected by the holiday atmosphere. As the morning passed rumours hastily revised the numbers to an unlikely total of releases: the fact that we thought any figure unlikely possibly reflects the extent to which we have been institutionalised. One almost begins to accept internment. It stopped at 43, a trickle poured on the arid, bloody soil of the North.

Although we, like most others, had been waiting on this step, and are mentally adjusted, tonight the camp has the same empty quality as on the Sunday of the Derry massacre. Men went to bed early, withdrawing to their own haven. There is a stillness in the hut and emotional exhaustion; one small group remains whispering loudly, others toss, restless, cough. It will, I feel, be a long night for many.

Old hands who have passed this way before know that now is the most awful time. Expectations raised bring thoughts of home, each call to the Governor's office could be that call. Nerves stretched, taut, whip back lashing others into ready anger. In some ways, though, it must be easier for us than those who wait on the outside. For women, harassed in so many different ways, each release into their neighbourhood, the joy of others, the jubilation to see someone else reclaimed, there must be agony.

The long trek back to Long Kesh, the waiting, the brief visit, the crying children, this surely must be heartbreak.

Our worries have been routinised, we know the irritants, and most times can laugh, at any rate ultimately, at the pettiness of bureaucracy. We have the company of men whose insights keep us interested, talking: in fact, not only last week, but indeed often, the crack is great.

[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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