

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

Latest Camp Shuffle Leads to Rural-Urban Confrontation

By Des O'Hagan

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Last week was indeed bizarre; there are times when one has the faintest of hints that the world is, in fact, constructed along Kafkaesque lines. These clues to the irrational underworld that every so often threatens to erupt are never so compelling as to force one immediately to seek the shelter of an asylum, but they are very disturbing.

Sunday was a particularly glorious day. The sun shone, birds actually twittered, in the distance the Lisburn hills wore a gentle haze: Monday, hailstones fairly lashed the camp, bitter cold winds sneaked round the huts, cutting through umpteen layers of clothing. Very disturbing, particularly as there are four peculiar civilians wandering around questioning the warders. They arrived accompanied by a plush caravan which is irritating the senior officers who must transact their duties in the rain and gales. It was the caravan which first attracted attention. Any new development requires immediate investigation; getting sceil is a vital part of the day's activities. Rumours naturally abounded. Some suggested that it was a response to a demand for more private visits by wives, others hoped that a bar was to be opened as part of the initiatives. The truth, well is the truth.

END PRODUCT

The four gentlemen are members of the organisation and methods branch of the Home Office. The prison officers have been instructed to answer truthfully any and all questions. These I understand, really are extremely difficult: "What are you doing now" or "what did you do during the past five minutes". The Prison Officers' Association, by the way, was not informed of what is a clear breach of even contractual employment. It probably is not too fanciful to suggest that the end product will be a significant contribution by Mr. Heath to the new order in Europe, a pamphlet entitled "efficiency and inefficiency in the management of Concentration Camps".

In the meantime, a member of the camp council had been probing about the reasons behind the latest internal camp shuffle. The wall of silence surrounding such moves was breached officially: the purposes [delete 's?'] is to ensure that each cage will have an adequate number of young men to enable inter-cage matches to be played. The scheme from Sunday last actually provides for rural [-] urban confrontations as a number of countrymen have been confined exclusively to one area. Those who scorned this revelation have been dispersed in confusion for on Wednesday the first ball was kicked, we violated the virgin pitch. Again very disturbing.

Then one afternoon my siesta was cut short when I was asked to join a representative group of internees to meet some visiting social workers who had cajoled their way past the serried ranks of security to assist our very active, hard-pressed resident, Miss Kennedy. We met actually inside the camp, four members of the Legion of Mary and ourselves, myself somewhat disbelieving as my capacity for scepticism has been enhanced of late. Our conversation was normal, I suppose, as we warmed to the task of enlightening our relatively naive guests as to the problems we face. The dreamlike quality was restored to the situation when our companions confessed that they had never heard of Harry Taylor. I returned to the cage beginning to doubt the existence of the gentleman myself.

Everyone's world tends to be fairly circumscribed, horizons are fairly near at hand, although I do remember standing in Picadilly Circus and reading above a shop door "The Hub of the Universe". Devastating, or as we say here, there's a thing now. We are probably as guilty, in as much as it comes as a severe shock to learn that there are people in Europe (Switzerland) who understood Long Kesh to be a village with no unwilling residents. I learned this also last week as the censors seemed to conspire to promote my generalised unease by an increased flow of uncensored mail.

From France and [the] Comité pour la Liberation du Peuple Irlandais came a three-page report on a mass demonstration held in Place de la République on February 10th. Apparently 8000 demonstrators condemned the Derry massacre and called for an end to both internment and the Special Powers Act. Their petition was signed by such notables as Satre, de Beauvoir, supported by numerous lawyers, writers and academics. Their slogans avoided the usual clichés, were brutally direct so that the reader was left in no doubt about their opinions, “Heath salud, la peuple aura ta peau” which I have laboriously discovered is a fairly decent popular sentiment. It would not have missed the gouging blue pencil had it been in Gaelic.

A letter from Rome arrived the following day, not from the Pope, thank heavens, but from the Group for Civil Rights in Ireland, who have been active in fundraising for relief committees in Belfast and Derry. They have also held an all-night vigil in front of St. Peter's, which kind of puts sitting outside Downing Street in the shade. Is there a one-upmanship in picketing locations or possibly a league table, the Pentagon, Red Square, St. Peter's, Downing Street (now threatened with relegation)? In the light of the Unionist Party's major propaganda plans, it is cheering to know that this Italian group is disseminating information, not just locally, but also throughout Europe. It is also a pity that our home movie had not been shot by Fellini as there is considerable interest in the product, the last word in the theatre of the absurd.

RETAIN SANITY

To complete my unhinged feeling, I had the following letter from Essex, though paradoxically it should help to retain sanity. “My wife and I wish to convey our sense of outrage at your imprisonment without trial. I find quite a few of my countrymen object to the injustice of your present position and are trying to impress this opinion on our Government. Speaking also as an old soldier, with two years of lousy service in France and Belgium, 1916-1918, I can assure you that time will pass when you will have long since been liberated and your present loss of freedom and ‘ill-treatment’ will be something most Englishmen will want to forget.” On second thoughts my queasy imitations of a world near mad look pretty silly in the warm light of this man's refusal to let the past or the present to be shaped in anything other than human terms.

Historical Footnote: Those who are interested in the dynamic intervention of social structure and political values (Long Kesh) might care to analyse the following poster which appeared in one cage prior to St. Patrick's Day. I reproduce it here without comment: “All alcoholic beverages will be pooled and distributed equally.

[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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