

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

Image-builders 'sensationalist' in their portrayal of Joe McCann (Sub-title) Hollywood Character Emerges By Des O'Hagan

April 25, 1972

Originally published in The Irish Times, page 8

Illustrated with a photograph of a handkerchief drawn on by Des O'Hagan

Joseph McCann is dead. I intended to write something else at this point but what immediately comes into my mind are lines from a song of the Wobblies, "It's there you'll find Joe Hill ... but Joe, says I, you're ten years dead, I never died, says he."

Possibly the words are in the wrong order, in fact may not even be the proper words, but the sentiment is what we who knew Joe McCann feel. The press tried to create what I feel is an obscene myth where there was a man, possibly more correct it was a section of the press which felt the need to peddle sensationalism to a public to whom violent death is no longer shocking; their crude efforts to make a flashy Damon Runyon character of Joe were sickening. They derived from what seemed to be conscious attempts to portray the struggle of people (any people) as a Hollywood gangster film; human tragedies do not conform to Bogart-style scenarios, and it is truly sad when journalists, automatically it seems, write as if the world were but an extension of a shabby film lot.

SHODDY SHALLOWNESS

It may be a gratuitous insult to Americans but in spite of their many wonderful contributions on film the responsibility for such shoddy shallowness is largely theirs, although indeed there must be many in the U.S.A. who are more frightened of this dimension of their power than by the awfulness of their weaponry.

They would be right, for the image builders, whatever their reasons, although wrong in their portrayal of Joe McCann, unfortunately would have created a caricature which many will accept because they have seen it so often on television and, alas, probably identified with it.

Many times here in Long Kesh we have been stunned by news, Derry's Bloody Sunday, the Abercorn Restaurant, McGurk's bar; on this occasion I noticed that the men kept hoping, even when the story was no longer unconfirmed rumour, that somehow or other, it was just not true. Yet once accepted the mood changed abruptly. I am told that cloistered religious celebrate a death, I think it is true to say in the same way that we may have felt something approaching gaiety, as if we understood that Joe's death was a releasing of the pent-up, crushed, battered spirit of the people.

MANNER OF DEATH

It may have been the manner of his death. A brief wild chase, the dash for the security of the Market slums, the billowing overcoat, the quick orders to halt, the crackling of gunfire, the twist and fall, the closing crescendo to kill, this was ritual execution acted out by many throughout the history of the Irish people.

It is caught on the wind, it reaches into our memories stirring dread and wonders, half-recollected stories heard from brooding proud men at street corners on dark winter evenings or in the glow of turf fires throwing sudden giants on the wall, daubing the mind. Somehow there is satisfaction, one can picture knowing old men, anger thin in their blood, nodding with little tender secret smiles. How else could it be, how else would it be, for those who were and are our heroes?

From Cuchalain to Mellowes, in mythology and reality, those whom we acknowledge to be great have faced overwhelming thoughts, never despairingly, but because it could not be any other way. But they have always reassured us by being human, we have no Mount Olympus even Slemish is only a hump

on the ground, they have been fiercely linked to the people and although they have died in the canon's mouth, we remember them not as soldiers but as men.

We cherish their imperfections, the proofs of their humanity because as people we have suffered much at the Nitzschean figures from Cromwell to Churchill. If we are to be criticised, it is because we have been too generous with the lives of those who wish only to provide for the people, Connolly bleeding in a chair for the exploited working class, Mellows shot for giving the land to the peasants, now Joe McCann for believing that only the people should have power, to be sure it is usually the English who provide the martyrdom but we are too eager to welcome it.

Many have died in this past 12 months, there have been ugly, bloody, murderous deeds perpetrated through sectarian hatred; distrust, fear, violence divide the working class. I like to think that Joe's death, as his life, being in the only tradition which offers hope to the people will in some way be a cleansing influence. The men here who are in the same tradition know the explosive combination of unemployment, poor housing, inferior education, many have actually fought against sectarianism through Republican Clubs in company with Joe, but it came as a surprise even to learn that Gusto Spence in Crumlin [Road] Prison this past seven years, had written to Mrs McCann offering his sympathy and telling how he had not forgotten a kindness done to him by Joe. We do not know what this was but it surely must offer hope for that section of the people who have suffered most when a Shankill Road Loyalist identifies with a dead Republican leader from Turf Lodge.

LISTLESS STIRRING

In Divis Flats, the Markets, Ballymurphy, some day also in Sandy Row, Dee Street, the Shankill where over-worked women and workless men, powerless, manipulated, now begin to stir listlessly, there will be recognition that Joe McCann stood out against mindless sectarian hatred, that his life was lived building not destroying but, in working for and with the people, he was making them aware of what the future could hold if they only could see to shape it.

Now it seems Utopian to talk of the day when the mass of the people have put aside contrived differences, rejected demonic leadership and begun to build a truly human society in which men will be valued by what they can give and receive according to their needs. That vision has been with us a long time, it did not perish with Tone, Lawlor [sp], or Connolly, it did not die in Joy Street with Joe McCann, if anything it has become brighter, warmer, nearer and in its coming we can hear a growing, swelling, rising song of the people " ... I never died said he."

[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/]

Image-builders 'sensationalist' in their portrayal of Joe McCann

HOLLYWOOD CHARACTER

EMERGES

JOSEPH McCANN IS DEAD. I intended to write something else at this point but what immediately comes into my mind are lines from a song of the Wobblies, "It's there you'll find Joe Hill . . . but Joe, says I you're ten years dead, I never died says he."

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A handkerchief painted by Des O'Hagan in Long Kesh.—(Photograph: Pat Langan.)

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