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Monday, September 29, 2008

Documentary on Maze escape foiled by levity of tone

A BBC programme on the IRA prison break causes unease with its recounting of violence as a cheery caper, writes **Ann Marie Hourihane**

WHAT WITH the economic meltdown - or whatever we are calling it this week - and Iraq and Afghanistan and the health service and climate change, one gets the feeling we've gone off Northern Ireland just a tad. One gets the feeling even people in Northern Ireland have gone off Northern Ireland, and are bored of their politicians and their squabbles. So it was interesting to see a television programme on BBC2 last Thursday, which brought us back to the glory days of the escape from the Maze Prison in 1983.

"The most daring escape since Colditz," said the voice-over on the programme. Given the tone of the production you would have been forgiven for thinking it was called Colditz II. But instead it was called, rather disappointingly, Breakout.

There were four narrators of this story of how 38 IRA men escaped from the Maze Prison: Bobby Storey, Gerry Kelly, Brendan "Bik" McFarlane and Campbell Courtney. The first three were IRA prisoners in 1983, when Courtney was a prison officer at the Maze. The three IRA men looked the very picture of cheerful and self-satisfied middle age. Courtney didn't look the best. He looked sad. On television, these things matter.

We are pretty well-inured at this stage to middle-aged men entertaining us with tales from their distant and extraordinarily vigorous youth. Our cultural tolerance for this type of anecdote is high. And surely the story of the Maze escape should be recorded while the participants are still living: that's what archives are for. But Breakout told the story of the Maze escape so blithely that watching it brought deep unease, not least because you saw how IRA men have mutated into golf club bores. Time does strange things.

Not that the former prisoners seemed at all uneasy. Au contraire. Kelly has never seemed more relaxed in a candy-striped shirt - perhaps Stormont, where he is most regularly filmed, depresses him. Storey was filmed in front of a large framed poster or painting which consisted, literally, of the digits 1916. McFarlane was filmed - this is really true - beside the Tricolour. We saw how these men want to be seen.

It was thus that they told the story of how they had made friends with prison staff, creating a more relaxed atmosphere prior to the escape. It was thus that Kelly told us how he had shot the warden in charge of the control room twice (we didn't hear what happened to this man, who we were told had survived).

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back - with a gun stuck in the stomach of the driver, Davey McLaughlin. Kelly was talking to McLaughlin to keep him calm and, Kelly acknowledged, McLaughlin was talking to him to keep him calm. (You can bet he was.)

Kelly, according to himself, was asking McLaughlin if he was married, if he had children and so on.

Then he asked the driver how much he earned. To which he replied "Not f--king enough". Gerry Kelly thought this witty in the circumstances, which it was. He obviously found it a very funny memory. But one could not help wondering how funny McLaughlin thought it was.

During the escape, Courtney was shot and five other warders were stabbed. One of these was Courtney's friend, James Ferris, who subsequently died. There was a shot of Ferris's gravestone.

There were postscripts on what the three IRA men are doing now: Storey is giving slide-show presentations about the Maze escape. There was no information on how Courtney spends his time.

On the one hand, it was interesting to see the IRA voluntarily become Dad's Army, with its benevolent telling of its tales of derring-do. On the other hand, one could not help wondering if the republican public relations machine, always its most efficient weapon, has begun to eat itself. The last time I saw McFarlane, he was in the dock at Green Street courthouse in Dublin, accused of participating, in December 1983, in the kidnap of Don Tidey, and in the murders of Private Patrick Kelly and Garda recruit Gary Sheehan, charges that he very much denied. The case collapsed. But I wondered how Patrick Kelly's widow and sons, and Gary Sheehan's family, would react to seeing McFarlane filmed beside the Tricolour.

The IRA are politicians now and we all know that it's the job of all politicians to convince their supporters that they have won when they have done no such thing. But viewers of Breakout were left asking if there is no spectacle the Protestant people of Northern Ireland will not have to endure to make republicans feel better about themselves. Is there no victory dance, be it ever so puerile, that they are not going to be forced to witness?

There's a real danger that the IRA is going to bore the rest of us to death. But even Free Staters know the name of one person murdered by the IRA.

Watching Breakout, that name kept on reverberating through the twinkling orgy of machismo: Jean McConville. Jean McConville. Jean McConville.

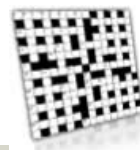
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