# LETTER FROM LONG KESH

## Bleak Wake for the Derry Slaughtered
**By Des O'Hagan**

February 10, 1972
Originally published in The Irish Times, page 11

It is bitterly cold here tonight. Sunday. We have been walking round the cage. Our breath puffs out and hangs momentarily in the sharp piercing air, the tarmac glitters darkly through a light down of snow, one can feel the hard mud ridges break underfoot and in between the cages frozen pools dully reflect the perimeter lights. Tonight is so clean, so pure that the distant sound of cars on the motorway seems like the rumble of the sea falling gently on the sand. The guard dogs bark quickly, then silence; one could be walking up through Gleann Finn enjoying the brilliant moonlight intent upon an evening's drinking and talking with good companions.

Sunday is newspapers, a surfeit of stories, columns of trivia, momentous accounts of world problems, dolly birds with ever briefer swimming trunks and swinging advertisements for swinging people. All the grossness of Western civilisation is complied for our entertainment. I am not consumed by the puritan ethic but tonight this is my mood and I am sure the predominant emotion in Long Kesh.

Casually today we talked about Derry, in fact there had only been the occasional question about the march, forecasts of attendance were tossed out, someone may have raised the possible tactics of the Army. This was merely hours ago, now I forget. It is not that we were disinterested, we knew, quietly rejoiced that the people would assemble in their thousands on the heights of the Creggan, the women clutching at the weeuns' hands, the men muffled up against the winds blowing down the Foyle, looking stern as they stamped their feet, watching out for the famous. Many here have walked in the proud demonstrations, Coalisland, Enniskillen, Newry, Derry and Armagh. But now we are part of the marchers in a strange uneasy fashion. We should be there feeling the strength of the singing throng, hurrahing the slogans, jostling one another into louder voices and instead we are the objective. In this symbiotic relationship, separation is the consuming desire.

### THE EXPECTED

The first news of the monstrous actions came as some trouble in Derry. It was only to be expected, we said, Faulkner is intent upon demonstrating that he is as tough as old Brookeborough or any of the hardliners who bluster into Glengall Street and out of it advocating fire and brimstone solutions. Our interest waned slightly, to stop and talk means to feel one's feet freeze.

Then the first killings, two men had been shot – my mind jumped to Cusack and Beattie and last summer, which is now so many deaths away. Derry is the Bogside and Creggan: the square blocked Free Derry slogan beckons one gaily from the old city announcing the vigour of a hardened people. I have never been to Paris but I imagine that I would find an arrondissement, having the same harshness where the communards furiously erected barricades, madly innocent of the deluge which would overwhelm them. There is a quality, drawn from the Foyle and sheltering Donegal, a colour in the people that must be what the English mean when they boast about war-time London. One feels romantically that it could happen here, liberty, equality, fraternity might not be goddesses, but works of human art.

The sombre nuance in the newsreader's voice quells the angry shouts; we listen intently hearing incredulously the increasing numbers of slain and wounded. Now a numbness invades the mind so that even the foulest condemnations fall flat, lifeless on the hut floor. Bleak, bleak is the night as we sit huddled ejaculating nonsense to fill the void: we wake the slaughtered it seems, automatically reverting to hushed tones as men conscious of bereaved wives and coffins in the next room. One's mind is dead but the senses quicken, other men's eyes tighten, strain, surround the tears of pain, of sorrow and stare harshly at their own souls.

We then stand behind the cameras watching the swollen streets, the Civil Rights banner raises a feeble chair speedily quietened as the dragon water-cannon arcs across the screen. Often the sound of rubber bullets, the billowing gas, the slap of Army boots have sent our hearts thudding madly. Now we flinch at the squealing brakes, twist with the dodging youths: then the welling sickness. A sickness that will remain for days feeding on the horrors, the bitter vicious words, the images of crumpled bodies and a blood-soaked standard. The oaths sound hollow, feeble, useless, the men are dazed, groping for understanding as the twisted bodies disappear from view. The embittered face and repulsing flailing arm of one bearer epitomises all our emotions.

Tonight we do not sit late arguing the demerits of the E.E.C. or recalling the antics of old friends. I watch the quietness. In this crowded hut the isolation, the sudden fresh loneliness, is unbridgeable, bed is a sanctuary, sleep is coveted.

**IN HONOUR**

Tomorrow or Tuesday our gesture. It is our custom to honour the dead publicly, we stand facing inward, rows of silent men, hair catching the breezes, frozen faces, young and old. The roll of a drum leads the piper into the wailing keening “Memory of the Dead,” then the two minutes, hollowed-out peace. We scatter running for the huts, cursing the rain, the cold, the time, the camp, anything. To speak words always seems necessary as if the chatter here and now can erase the last few minutes. The Irish are, I am glad to think, embarrassed by displays of military glitter, our parades are more enthusiastic than disciplined, we do not goose-step or boast in hard satisfied tones of crack regiments and hard-hitting front-line troops. Our revolutionaries have been part-timers immersed more in living than in war. And this is right.

On this occasion we dip a Tricolour. It is camp made, nailed to a broom handle. Some will not even see it for the cages lie at angles cowering from each other. Close by every shoulder are the ghosts of the Bogside, but for our Derry comrades there is a special heartache, a grief we cannot share. One yearns for an eloquent Pearse at Rossa’s grave or better still the passionate angry worker Connolly, a Northern voice, harsh, direct, demanding. From the cells of the Crumlin jail, one could see bulky Cave Hill, birthplace of the Republic; we have travelled about ten miles from there and the green and orange will remind some of us that no matter what distance others may have fled from the common name of Irishman that is what it is all about, why we are here is because at some time, somehow we believe that the men of no property will inherit this small part of the earth.

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