

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

Worldly affairs that intrude upon contemplative life

By Des O'Hagan

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Reading the autobiography of Malcolm X, one of the many books sent to the camp by Proinnsias Mac Aonghusa, Malcolm is quoted as once saying, "In the hectic pace of the world today, there is no time for meditation or deep thought. A prisoner has time that he can put to good use ... if he's motivated ... " The catch is in the "motivated", also in the extent to which one's imprisonment is monastic. This is true for Long Kesh in one very real sense as academics say, but mundane affairs manage to intrude often enough to militate against contemplation.

For example Belfast Corporation rates' department recently requested me to attend a magistrates court to explain why I, like thousands of other Belfast citizens, had not paid my rates. Although we arrived at a fairly amicable arrangement, based largely on the fact that I had no money, this sort of sortie by the city fathers is somewhat upsetting. This was my second visit to the outside world, the first was likewise to a court, to explain why I had "illegal" documents in my possession, pamphlets published by Sinn Féin (Gardiner Place). The magistrate, a very discerning man, having imposed a fine of £25, allowed me ten weeks to pay. The problem is that he failed to mention how I was to manage that as the military were waiting impatiently to escort me back to Long Kesh. I am seriously thinking of drawing Mr. Whitelaw's attention to this peculiar use of the courts.

PETITION TIME

It is not only the Northern Irish courts which interest us, or at least which are drawn to our attention; two young Belfast men are presently engaged in collecting signatures in support of a petition to secure the dropping of charges against Angela Davies. Both these lads are in contact with the London Release Committee, who sent them colourful badges calling for the freedom of all political prisoners. About 90% of the men have promised their support: there are some who refuse to sign because Angela is a committed Communist, arguing that she is part of a conspiracy to overthrow the democratically-elected government of the United States. Ronald Regan and the other crackers can draw little comfort from this as I feel their refusal is mainly an emotional reaction to the word Communist and not based on the facts of the racialism which corrodes America.

The other petition currently circulating arises directly from the camp council. On a proposal by Gerry McKerr (Lurgan) and seconded by myself the council has authorised the different cage representatives to collect the names of all men who are opposed to the decision of the Leinster House Government to apply for membership of the E.E.C. It is a simply-worded statement – "We, the internees in Long Kesh, say 'no' to the E.E.C; we ask you to vote 'no' on our behalf in the coming referendum". Over 500 of us have signed, not, let me emphasise, simply at the request of the council; we are too heterogeneous a group to respond almost as one man to directives. There have been furious debates as to this proposed step as we all realise the enormous implications of joining the 'Community', but in the long run all our discussions stop at the Republican charter, the 1916 Proclamation, 'We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible'. It may be naive on our part but we feel certain that membership of the E.E.C. would be contrary to this fundamental principle.

STUFF OF DREAMS

It must have been a combination of petitions, rumours and releases (these continue. I think last week eight were released) but I had a nightmare. I mean no disrespect to Dr. Martin Luther King when I write that it seemed to be similar to his words "I had a vision" [FIX THIS TO I HAVE A DREAM?]. The New Jerusalem visible from the top of the hill was shrouded in mist, but I managed as I sleep-flew across to pick out some interesting details.

I could see beneath a trembling pure silk flag emblazoned Éire Nua a bar arranged to look like the map of Ireland; dark corners hidden in smoky haze apparently threatened to erupt inwards. Intuitively I suddenly understood, with the certainty of absolute knowledge, that the whole space was Dublin and that the corners were simply pulsing rhythmically to a central juke-box designed to represent the G.P.O.

The music was triumphant, a Wagnerian "Róisín Dubh"; the older customers froze between verses striking aggressive, teeth-clenched poses. A group of what appeared to be cattle dealers or successful businessmen circulated back-slapping, flushed with food, wine, joviality, snapping figures at sweating waiters. Obviously, a party was in progress.

I drifted closer. A number of men, uneasy, clutching glasses nervously, strained, fixed smiles, were being fêted: "Jasus, but you're great lads up there in the North," jerking his big head, but I could see nothing in that direction. "Fair play to ye, no better men, drink up." He stopped, looked fierce, "It's the Republic." Some young girls joined him tittering, frowning anxiously as he thumbed over his shoulder at the fading group he had just left.

The rest of the dream was even more confused: it seemed as if the baked interior of one building was entirely draped in flags hanging in rows linked to a maze. The impression I now have was of a vast mausoleum leading to a dimly lit courtyard; this in turn changed into a series of small backyards occasionally lit by the glow from bedroom windows. In the distance a dog was barking fiercely, the sound echoed round the yard, so that it seemed to come from an overflowing waste bin. The streets in this part of town were deserted, as, for some reason, I frantically rushed, twisting and dodging, back to the bar. (It seems that I awoke the internee in the bunk above me at this point.)

Now I recognised a few faces. Squashed in the corner, they were trapped by the press of the crowd; reluctantly, I was drawn to them. Clearly afraid of attracting attention we were pushed to and fro, further and further away. The movement was no longer accidental, the faces were threatening, bulging eyes, shouting, as we backed off. The dream changed abruptly as dreams do, yet preserved continuity. We wandered aimlessly, with many others on a cold, windswept plain. The man walking beside me was about to tell me why we were there when one of our early risers awoke me.

Normally my sleep is untroubled and my friends to whom I have told the story feel that I have composed this dream, except the man in the top bunk. He demands that I put my name down for the doctor or else move to a new bed.

[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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