

# LETTER FROM LONG KESH

## Revealed Depths of Incarceration

By Des O'Hagan

March 4, 1972

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I was pleased to read last weekend that the British Army fire advisory service were expressing concern about the fire hazards to which internees were exposed in Long Kesh. There is touching kindness for you. But General Tuzo's consultants can rest easily as the possibility of a blaze here are remote. If one could picture a fire scudding across the frozen wastes of Alaska incinerating every last piece of ice then one has a fairly objective picture of the sort of raging inferno we might experience.

A one-line passage in the alleged report claimed that the Army's responsibility ended at the wire. This is also very gratifying though it should cause serious concern to the security section about the identities of the 50 or so soldiers who appeared in our cage on Saturday evening last. As a prelude to the arrival of men from Magilligan and the Maidstone some shuffling in personnel between cages was undertaken. We were marshalled, backs to the fences, facing a tight half-circle of baton-tapping troops. The horrifying appearance of a modern soldier is to my mind one of functional concentrated menace. They have learned the importance of projecting the correct image: the slow rise and fall of a baton into a caressing palm which emphasises the blunt sickening thickness of its skull smashing end can loosen the springs of fear in the toughest hearts. It is equally terrifying to know that these are young working class men eager for their first bloodletting. Yet occasionally, and more so of late, privates whisper their distaste for their concentration camp duties, their desire to get away from our enraged women and children whose frenzied defence of their homes they can appreciate and understand. Members of the famous Gloucesters Regiments have complained bitterly about their brutal role in Belfast.

### OUTSIDE WORLD

Our knowledge of the outside world, the real world of Ballymurphy, the Falls, Turf Lodge, Divis Flats, comes to us through returned parolees, in the main temporarily freed to attend funerals. Personal anguish has not touched me in Long Kesh, the consuming grief that is unknowable to others, but death has visited here often so that now there are men here who stare into the dark with only morning to come.

Who can say that the imminent death of a spouse whispered by a warder, suddenly in the night, is not a tragedy so great as to be indescribable. (She was buried on the morning of the explosion at the Parachute H.Q. in Aldershot). We know the helpless, huddled streets dipping off the Falls which fill with the threatening bulk of armoured cars: doors crash in as shouted orders send hearts thumping madly: women who daily must face the soldiers' taunts, the jeers, boldly stare down young eyes, wake startled, wild in the night. Such acts threaten the not so young: death then stalks Long Kesh. Our condolences must sound stereotypes for we have had much practice. We cannot diminish the grief of friends who lose wives, sons, brothers, their sorrow attracts no messages from those in secular or sacred office. Yet that man's emptiness is poured into this void so that we brush soldiers with infinite pain and hastily avoid eyes which hold loved images laced with barbed wire ribbons.

When one catches brief glimpses of children's faces twisted, not with tears, clutching desperately at their fathers' shoulders, the nightmare corridor between the visiting boxes becomes a spur to unreasoning anger. It is then, also, that one realises the awful dimensions of each man's incarceration.

### SHARPENING SENSES

In some senses there are unique personal insights to be gained from imprisonment. To have read Wilde's "De Profundis" or "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" in the cold womb of a prison cell can be to be confronted with, as Seosamh Mac Grianna, once said, the dark side of one's own soul. I do not think I

really understood that until now, understanding that in one's own mortality is brutality born. This realisation does not bring with it the end of dread, a quietening of nerves full stretched but rather it sharpens the points of senses so that this instant can be held almost pleasurably. On first seeing the revelation that "the most terrible thing about prison life is not that it breaks one's heart, for hearts were made to be broken, but that it turns one's heart to stone" ("De Profundis), I thought, that is true. Now it feels wrong and I hope that this is not self-deception, for although we are deprived of many things one is still aware of dismay, love, fear, anger, distrust, hate. But possibly Wilde was consumed with such a fierce emotion that he felt no heat.

There is to my mind a warmth of spirit which is a necessary part of being human; it can lead to appalling acts and those who commit them know and regret it. Their instant terrifying nature feeds the appetite of a public weaned on headlines that dull the senses to the more lasting horrors. Instant judgments, public announcements follow, aimed at a desired end irrespective of events; demons and demi-gods are created, dangerous myths which should not be permitted to surface from our pre-history: meaning is eroded, language is debased by embodied Deplhic voices who for too long have been deaf to the screams of the suffering.

### **PUBLIC CONCERN**

Naturally I am writing of the tragedies of Aldershot and the attempted assassination of John Taylor, Minister of State for Home Affairs at Stormont. To be honest, they have not provoked the same concern or reaction expressed in various parliamentary announcements and questions. Our vision is probably distorted, our judgment warped, so that we cannot appreciate what we are told by our Westminster overlords who display such concern for law and justice. We have heard Sir Alec Douglas-Home's lofty defence of the Smith Regime's imposition of law and order on Rhodesian Africans and listened in silence to Heath's condemnation of the picketing techniques of unruly miners: we have not even been moved by either of their humane speeches. In our long discussions it is unlikely that anyone understood or agreed with the political concepts employed by these non-violent men.

To be sure there may be some here who rejoice in violence in the same way as I believe that Pearse or Fanon did. This is their burden. For the vast majority violence has meant sectarianism, the degradation of the dole queue, slum houses, poverty, educational rejection and of recent years the [repression of?] the ghettos by the British Army. Yet all are saddened by the death of any civilian: we do not send to see for whom the bell tolls.

Each day, each night we live in this violent deprivation of our freedom which I am afraid will take its mental and physical toll. (One man has been quietly released through a mental hospital recently). I am not attempting in writing this or in my earlier comments to provoke arguments around Old Testament criteria for justice: such would be sterile. But in as much as the men of Long Kesh are for so many the heart of the present agonising destructive situation it is surely worth saying that for us, as far as we can learn, the awful guilt for every death must be borne by those who seem to balance parliamentary votes against a search for justice.

[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/](https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/des_ohagan/) ]

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