Journal of Prisoners on Prisons

Special Issue
Republican Prisoners of War

Guest Editor:
Micheál Mac Giolla Ghunna
Cultural Struggle and a Drama Project

Bobby Sands once wrote:

The jails are engineered to crush the political identity of the captured republican prisoner; to crush his/her spirit and to transform him/her into a systemised answering machine with a large criminal tag stamped by oppression upon his/her back, to be duly released onto the street, politically cured, politically barren, and permanently broken in spirit.

Republican prisoners have always steadfastly resisted this strategy, through strength of spirit and power of mind. The writings of Sands, the existence of the magazine The Captive Voice/An Glór Gafa (The Voice of Irish Republican Prisoners of War) and the activities of the republican community in jail bear eloquent testimony to this fact. The recent drama project in the H Blocks, leading to the creation of the play, The Crime of Castlereagh, is yet another illustration of the cultural resilience of republican prisoners. But there is far more to it than merely an act of resistance.

It has become almost a defining feature of political prisoners throughout the world that they engage in cultural struggle. They write, compose poetry, sing and play music, paint and carve. They utilise every form of self expression. They do so not merely because they are talented thoughtful individuals (one of the reasons leading to their imprisonment), but because they wish to give voice to the pain of their people and articulate the need for radical change to end this pain. Indeed Edward Said, the Palestinian academic, has termed this the role of the intellectual in society. Similarly the recently executed Ken Saro Wiwa described his role thus:

For a Nigerian writer in my position ... literature has to be combative ... What is of interest to me is that my art should be able to alter the lives of a large number of people, of a whole community, of the entire country. ... It is serious, it is politics, it is economics, it's everything. And art in that instance becomes so meaningful ...

Moreover the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, in his own Prison Notebooks, argues that cultural struggle is central to political change, as it concerns the creation of alternative social meanings and values which challenge the dominant ideology of the ruling class. In other words, cultural struggle is about raising the political awareness of the mass of the population, exposing the apologists for injustice and inequality, and creating an alternative set of values and different perspectives of the world.

Irish republicans have always numbered among their ranks a high proportion of writers, poets, musicians, and artists, many of whom endured imprisonment
and used those years to further their cultural activities. For others, the experience of imprisonment acted as a catalyst for their creative talents. This is particularly true of the present phase of the struggle. The dominant image is of a blanket clad Bobby Sands scribbling his poems, songs, and stories on a piece of toilet paper in a freezing and filthy cell. But others were similarly engaged in this cultural struggle. After the blanket protest, republican prisoners in Long Kesh made a sustained effort to put in place a programme of communal education based on the principles of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This laid the foundation for a wide range of cultural activity from Irish language classes, poetry workshops, art and craftwork, playwriting and acting, music and song, and of course, the magazine, *An Glór Gafa*.

The Irish language activities are a classic example of the success of cultural struggle by prisoners having a wider impact on the struggle for political change. While Irish language groups had worked hard and with some success for many years to maintain and develop the language and Irish culture in general, that is to take and maintain control of our capacity to develop our own social meanings, the influx of released political prisoners into local nationalist communities in the 1980s provided a fresh impetus for this struggle. These were committed activists who had learned both Irish and the importance of cultural struggle in jail; and who now organised language classes and campaigns for cultural rights in their local areas, helped to set up and maintain Irish schools, and got involved in a wide range of other cultural activities. The effect was to increase the community's confidence in their own ability to define and express their own interests and aspirations independently. It added to the vibrancy and dynamism of a community that could sustain a broad political, social, and economic struggle over many years. This interaction of cultural and other aspects of struggle is clearly illustrated in initiatives like the West Belfast Community Festival.

It is in this context of an historical cultural struggle in the jails and its interaction with community struggle outside that the recent drama project in Long Kesh took place. A small group of POWs came together, along with Tom Magill of the Community Arts Forum, to adapt for stage performance a trilogy of poems by Bobby Sands. Such a project offered us individual benefits such as skills development and confidence building. However, while personal development is always encouraged by the republican community in Long Kesh, it was by no means our only or even our main motivation. Rather it was a collective and conscious political act on our part to push forward the cultural struggle. In part, this is a continuation of the long history of jail cultural struggle; and the conditions that made the project possible are a result of the sacrifices and planning of those POWs who went before us. However, it is also part of what we see as the wider role of the artist: to articulate the experiences, hopes, and desires of their people. In this particular case, we wanted to tell the story of political imprisonment.
It is unashamedly a republican prisoners' version of that story, focusing on the physical and psychological torture of Castlereagh, the farcical pseudo-legal imprimatur of a Diplock court, and the brutalisation of prisoners during the blanket protest in the H Blocks. It also tells of the hidden reserves of strength within an ordinary man to resist torture, corrupt courts, and prison brutality; and of the comradeship that ultimately defeated the criminalisation policy of the British government. However, it is not a narrow, localised account of the experiences of a political prisoner. The story could easily be set in any part of the world, for it contains universal themes and experiences of imprisonment: fear, isolation, loss of family, and physical pain as well as resistance, principles, stubbornness, comradeship, and courage. There are, of course, other stories to be told — even the screws' story, and the psychological impact of the situation on them. But that is not our concern here.

The type of theatre we chose for telling the prisoners' story is also significant. Using the poetry of Bobby Sands, we organised the play on a collective basis, creating, producing, and directing as a group. In other words, rather than performing the work of someone else, we retained control and ownership of our own images, actions, and meanings. The style was surreal; thus, we created our own world with its own rules and deeper truth, rather than conforming to naturalistic conventions and the dominant version of superficial reality 'as seen on TV.' For example, which image is the truer one, the Diplock judge as a distinguished man in a red cloak, or as a pig snorting contemptuously at justice? It was also minimalist theatre; that is, we used a minimum of props. This meant that the audience had to use their imaginations and engage actively with us, instead of being the passive receptacles for our images. In fact, we were employing the principles of Augusto Boale and his 'theatre of the oppressed' principles that run parallel to those of Paulo Freire and his 'pedagogy of the oppressed' that was used by republican prisoners in the early 1980s to lay the foundations for the educational and cultural basis of our prison community. Thus, the cultural struggle in the H Blocks had come full circle; the pedagogy of the oppressed had prepared the ground for the theatre of the oppressed. Similarly, the struggle of Bobby Sands and his comrades had now achieved the jail conditions and the cultural framework for a new generation of republican prisoners to take the struggle a stage further poignantly illustrated by translating the poetry of the Blanket protest into the drama of today's H Blocks.

The latest drama project must therefore be seen as a continuation of the long history of cultural struggle in the jails. And it was appropriate that the finished play should be performed in conjunction with the West Belfast Community Festival, yet again illustrating the interaction of jail and community struggle. This struggle will continue, as we attempt to take control of our own social meanings and values, express our experiences and those of our people, and articulate the need for radical change in Irish politics and society. It is up to all of us to participate in this cultural aspect of the wider struggle.
"If Tommorrow Never Comes ..."

Francie McGoldric
H Block 7, Long Kesh

Sunday 26th of February 1995 started out as a lovely day, warmer than it had been for a while, and I was about to go to the yard for a walk. As always, I had written to my girlfriend Brenda and our young son Shéa to thank them for the visit and a few presents they had left the day before. It was also a special day in that it was the sixth anniversary of our relationship.

I never reached the yard. I saw the chaplain coming down the wing, and when I heard him ask for me by name, I knew immediately that something was wrong. He asked if I’d like anyone to come with me, so I asked for Sean Lynch, a friend of mine. I knew then it was going to be bad news. When we went into the cell, he asked me if I had a girlfriend called Brenda Curran. I replied, 'Yes, I have.'

He said, 'I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but she was killed last night in a road accident in County Monaghan.' Of all the things going through my mind, this was the worst imaginable. Since coming to jail, my biggest fear was always that something would happen to Brenda or Shéa.

At the time, I wasn’t sure if I was dreaming or not, it was so hard to take in. It was only when I heard my mother tell me on the phone that Brenda had been killed, I knew it was not just a dream. As I tried to come to terms with the reality of what had happened, my thoughts turned to whether I’d get out for Brenda’s funeral. Because Brenda and I hadn’t been married, I fell outside the stated Northern Ireland Office (NIO) criteria, so I had the added worry of possibly being refused compassionate parole. This thought was too much to bear thinking about. I couldn’t sleep and hardly ate with the worry. I was eventually granted 24 hours parole.

Outside, I was met by my family and a friend from jail, Danny Pettigrew, with whom I had once shared a cell when I was on remand. On the long journey down the motorway, I was thinking of our weekly visits and what Brenda had gone through in the last two years, visiting every week without fail. It was ten a.m. when we entered Lisnaskea, and our youth together came flashing back to me. One particular place focused on my mind as I passed it. Sylvan Hill brought me back to the times when Brenda and I were in the same year at St. Ronan’s primary school in Lisnaskea. I first captured her attention by knocking her over with my bike on the way home! Despite this inauspicious introduction, we became sweethearts, but didn’t really start going out seriously until Brenda was fifteen. In the summer months, we would go cycling together or do a spot of fishing and in the evenings, we would sit in the town chatting with friends. As the car continued up the town, we passed the small sweet shop where Brenda had her first job; a few doors up was the Hughie McBrien’s, where we had our
first kiss. We had both looked forward to the day I’d return to Lisnaskea, yet now the town had nothing but sad memories for me.

As we headed up to the chapel to see Brenda for the last time, I recalled the proud day we both brought Shéa up to the same place to be baptised. Entering the chapel, I didn’t know what to expect. The reality of what had happened was starting to dawn on me, especially when I saw her name engraved on a brass plaque on the lid of the coffin. Brenda looked lovely. She wore a ring of mine around her neck, which had been taken off me when I was arrested, and Brenda had worn it on a chain ever since. In every photo and every visit it was there, reminding me of our feelings and commitment to each other. A photo of the three of us had been placed beside her. Even though it was very difficult to see Brenda lying in the coffin, it nevertheless helped me to come to terms with the reality of her death. It meant a lot that I was able to say goodbye, though I found it very hard to bring myself to leave.

The funeral mass was difficult because, as I entered the chapel, I was thinking of the day I had dreamed of since coming to jail, the day I would walk down the aisle to marry Brenda. Walking down towards the coffin was the saddest moment of my life. I stared at the coffin the whole way through the mass and felt like breaking down, but I thought I should try to remain strong for both families’ sake, for they were as heartbroken as I was. At the burial, I threw in a red rose and stayed there until everybody else had gone.

After the funeral, I spent some time in Brenda’s room looking at her clothes, photos – the little things that reminded me of different events in our life together. I took Brenda’s engagement ring and a Claddagh ring, both of which were important to me because we had planned to get married. We had put it off because of the peace process, but in the end, we decided we had waited long enough and were to be married on February 15th, 1996. On September 1st last, we were overjoyed at the IRA initiative to push forward the political situation. Neither of us had witnessed peace in our young lives and we both continually discussed the political situation, often speaking of how wonderful it would be to live together in a peaceful Ireland, where our children could live without fear for their safety or their future.

I sat on the bed thinking to myself what it was like for Brenda to be a devoted mother and partner. I was so proud of how strong Brenda had been after my arrest. While sitting there, all aspects of her life revealed themselves. On her table were all Brenda’s study materials. She had always wanted to be PE teacher and had returned to full-time study. Our separation was one of the factors in her making this decision, which I fully supported and encouraged, and likewise, Brenda always encouraged me to keep at the studying and better myself as an imprisoned republican. Brenda combined this with full-time work in a local factory, her role as a committed partner, and a perfect mother to a young son. Brenda was also active in her community as a youth club leader working with local children and as a member of the Lisnaskea Emmet’s ladies’
football team. Despite coming from a strong Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) background, I was the first one to bring her to Croke Park for the 1989 All Ireland Hurling Final, and this was something we both treasured. Though grieving, I could only feel pride at her accomplishments.

The week Brenda died, she had planned to leave her job in a local factory. We both looked forward to visits during weekdays as a result. Brenda also wanted more time to get involved in Saoirse (Campaign Group for the release of Irish political prisoners) and Sinn Féin locally. When the local Saoirse committee was launched, Brenda immediately involved herself and was keen to attend all the local events. She also attended the annual Sinn Féin dinner for the first time and told me about Martin McGuinness attending and making a great speech. It had a really positive effect on Brenda and she planned to attend this year’s ArdFheis (Sinn Féin’s annual conference) in Dublin as a result. Given her character, talents, and values, she would have made a very effective political activist.

It was a confusing time for Shéa. He wanted to know if I was home for the wedding and wanted me to take him to heaven to see his mammy. However, one moment that I did treasure with him during those few hours was to bring him up to town and buy him some toys and sweets. These precious moments were marvellous, he felt proud to have his daddy with him for the first time in two years and showed this by telling everyone in the shop that his daddy was home. In this short period, I saw how much he had changed since I was taken away from him. He had been only a small child then, now he was showing me where to go in the shop to find the toys. That night I had my own son sleeping beside me for the first time, and waking up beside him next morning was a brilliant feeling.

I rose at six am and visited Brenda’s grave. It was distressing to think that it will be over seven years before I can visit it again. I visited Brenda’s parents before leaving for the prison. My thoughts were with Shéa that morning. How he would cope without his mother, to whom he was very close? I was worried about his future and whether the bond between the two of us would remain strong. The 24 hours compassionate parole was insufficient time to deal with all these concerns.

It is now several months since Brenda’s death, and at times, it is still hard to believe she is gone. It’s hard to come to terms with the thought that I won’t be able to spend my life with her and fulfil our dreams. The men on the wing, especially Sean Lynch, have been a great help over these past few months and their support has been vital in bringing me through such a difficult period. I have tried to keep busy at some reading and learning Irish; but, it’s very difficult to keep my mind on anything for too long as the thought of Brenda is still uppermost in my mind. The main thing that keeps me going is our son Shéa. I see him every week and we have developed a very close relationship. Both Brenda’s and my own parents have been very good about this, understanding
how important it is to me. Over these months, Brenda, in her own way, has still been with me. I know Brenda wouldn’t have wanted me to fall in jail and I know she would have wanted me to continue to contribute positively to my own needs and the needs of the Republican community in the jail. All I can do is stay strong for both families and especially for Shéa who now is the most important person in my life.

One of Brenda’s favourite songs was by Garth Brooks: *If Tomorrow Never Comes*, the chorus of which goes:

If tomorrow never comes,  
Will she know how much I loved her?  
Did I try in every way, to show her every day  
That she’s my only one?  
And if my time on earth is through,  
And she must face the world without me,  
Is the love I gave her in the past  
Gonna be enough to last,  
If tomorrow never comes?

Brenda always used to say these few words about ‘the love I give her in the past’ which would be enough to keep her alive until I’d be home. But now it’s the other way about, the love Brenda gave me will keep me going for her sake and Shéa’s.
Lessons of a Peace Process

Seán Lynch

H Block 5, Long Kesh

A peace process does not begin by some miraculous stroke of luck or genius. It requires conditions that need to be created and a series of steps are necessary to keep it alive and working towards a negotiated peace settlement. As Gerry Adams has pointed out:

Peace does not come in one great and all encompassing gesture. It requires a process ... it requires lateral moves by the all the principal parties to a conflict. It requires that gestures of goodwill be responded to and built upon; that, above all, they should not be arrogantly dismissed or thrown back.

The resolution of the South African conflict is often cited as an example for the current Irish peace process. Interestingly, the requirements outlined by Adams are illustrated in a recently published book, Tomorrow Is Another Country by Allister Sparks (Heinemann, £7.99), which gives an account of the South African peace process.

The first tentative steps in the South African peace process began when Nelson Mandela and an official from the South African government met in 1985. Throughout the mid 1980s, the world watched in horror as South Africa slipped further into violent conflict between the South African government and the liberation movement, particularly the ANC, struggling to end apartheid. However, throughout this period, before the rest of the world knew anything of it, the future of South Africa was being explored in secret conversations in hospitals, prisons, and a cabinet minister’s home. These conversations were between government officials and the most famous political prisoner in the world, Nelson Mandela.

The struggle by the ANC to demolish the apartheid system had begun over 40 years earlier, initially through mass mobilisation, boycotts, and strikes. However as the state became more repressive, the ANC began the armed struggle in 1961, with Nelson Mandela as the first chief of staff of its army, Unkhonto We Sizwe (Spear of the Nation). A number of years later, he was arrested, put on trial for treason, and sentenced to life imprisonment. He said during his trial that: ‘the armed struggle was imposed upon us by the violence of the apartheid regime.’

By the early 1980s, the anti apartheid struggle as a whole had captured the attention of the world. The South African government was under growing international pressure as nations across the globe began to impose economic sanctions on Pretoria.

Faced with crisis at home and pressure from abroad, P.W. Botha and his government hoped to alleviate its difficulties by means of a dual strategy. On the one hand, they employed greater repressive measures to defeat black
resistance to the regime. On the other, they were trying to use the secret talks with Mandela as a counter-insurgency tactic. Their intention was to isolate Mandela from his imprisoned comrades and the external leadership of the ANC by offering him a conditional release from prison in the hope he could be persuaded to broker a political arrangement with other black leaders prepared to be used as puppets of the apartheid regime. In this way, opposition to apartheid would be divided and thrown into disarray, while the apartheid regime would gain a veneer of legitimacy without any fundamental change.

Mandela was not fooled by the government’s strategy. He held strong, refused the terms of his release, and announced that, as a disciplined member of the ANC, he supported its policies, strategies, and tactics. He sent a message to the government stating his view that negotiation, not war, was the path to a final solution of the conflict. He stressed: ‘Only free men can negotiate, prisoners cannot enter into contracts.’

Mandela’s analysis during the mid 1980s was that the South African struggle for freedom could be best pushed forward through a negotiated settlement, and that, if dialogue between the government and the ANC did not start soon, both sides would be plunged into a darkness of repression. However, whilst Botha was not prepared to begin genuine talks with the ANC towards the dismantling of the apartheid system, there were those within the South African government who recognised that a solution to the conflict could only be found by entering into dialogue with the ANC. Despite the government’s strategy, the secret meetings continued. In 1986, the Minister of Justice, Kobie Coetsee, visited Nelson Mandela in a prison hospital. Mandela outlined to Coetsee that he believed a military stalemate existed and that the time had come to start talks on resolving the conflict.

The meetings between the Minister of Justice and Mandela continued throughout 1987 and 1988. Mandela continued to argue for talks aimed at finding a democratic political solution to begin. However Coetsee, on behalf of the South African government, argued that the ANC should fulfil a number of requirements before the ANC could enter into any talks with the government. Again Mandela held strong and rejected the government’s approach of setting preconditions before talks. Finally, Mandela sought and was granted a visit with the state president, P.W. Botha. This meeting took place whilst the government was publicly stating that they would not talk to a ‘terrorist’ organisation like the ANC. The meeting failed to break the deadlock. It was becoming increasingly evident that no fundamental change would take place while Botha remained in power. Botha mistakenly thought he could defeat the ANC and placate the struggle of the oppressed masses by continuing a strategy of trying to reform apartheid. However, the only result of his intransigence was to strengthen the resistance of the black population and the ANC’s insistence on negotiations between the government and the ANC.

An opportunity to break the impasse and move the peace process forward arose in 1989 when Botha, the major obstacle to progress, resigned as state president. The man who was to become a key figure throughout the subsequent
negotiations, F.W. De Klerk, was elected as the new president of South Africa. De Klerk's conservative leanings dampened expectations of radical change. However, after he was briefed on the on-going secret talks between the still imprisoned Mandela and government officials, he granted Mandela's request to see him. Mandela outlined to him a number of issues the government needed to address if they were to demonstrate their genuine intentions of breaking the log jam and moving the process forward. He stressed that negotiations without preconditions between the government and the ANC should begin immediately. De Klerk reflected on the situation and saw change as not only necessary but inevitable. He decided, therefore, that a fundamental step in a new direction was required to overcome the developing crisis in the country. Unlike Botha, he was not prepared to freeze the process but took a quantum leap to break free of the old apartheid mindset. The giant step forward occurred on February 2, 1992 when, in a major speech, De Klerk legalised a whole spectrum of liberation groups, announced the release of Nelson Mandela and many other political prisoners, and declared his readiness to enter into negotiations with all parties to work out a new democratic South Africa. All previous preconditions sought by the government from the ANC were dropped, thus opening up the opportunity for the process to develop.

De Klerk's imaginative move brought about one of the most important phases of the peace process in South Africa. The government had finally made the decision to engage proactively in the process, with the result that the process had reached the organic stage: taken on an irreversible dynamic and momentum of its own, leaving it difficult for any single force or individual to scupper it. This is the crucial step required from the British government to move forward the Irish peace process. Unless and until John Major, like De Klerk, comes on board and engages in the process, there is always the potential danger that every effort by those genuinely seeking a peace settlement will come to nothing.

Irrespective of an oppressor having taken imaginative steps, it would be a grave mistake to believe they will relinquish power easily through a process of negotiations. Mandela said of negotiations: 'The point which must be clearly understood is that the struggle is not over, negotiations themselves are a theatre of struggle, subject to advance and reverses as any other form of struggle.'

De Klerk's speech had demonstrated that the apartheid thinkers had come a long way but they were still not free from their ideological mindset. Despite De Klerk's seemingly progressive action, he was by no means a man who intended to negotiate himself out of power. His goal was to create a form of power sharing which, if implemented, would preserve a modified form of minority rule. He was completely opposed to the ANC's objective of majority rule, primarily because he saw that it would end white domination in a single stroke. In an effort to veto the ANC's objective, De Klerk's nationalist party hoped to prevent democratic change by building an anti-ANC alliance with the Inkatha party and other movements. In other words, De Klerk wanted to use these groups as a veto over fundamental change. De Klerk's tactic of maintaining power and trying to determine the outcome of negotiations
through these groups was similar to Britain’s use of the Orange card: that is, their attempt at preventing movement towards a democratic resolution to the conflict by making all progress subject to the unionist veto. However, as a response to the limited first steps taken by De Klerk, the ANC suspended its armed struggle in 1990 to show their good faith and commitment to developing the conditions for peace.

Whilst the organic stage of the peace process is a qualitative development, it can also foster a dangerous fragile stage, unleashing negative reactionary forces opposed to change and negotiations towards a democratic society. The emergence of a Third Force in South Africa, consisting of sections of the military establishment, vividly demonstrates this point. The strategy of the reactionary forces in South Africa was to organise and exploit racial differences, particularly Inkatha, in an effort to undermine and weaken ANC negotiating power and derail the peace process. A series of developments, including Third Force activities, evidence of De Klerk’s possible complicity in such activities, his unwillingness to tackle these problems, and his intransigence in relinquishing white rule, called into question De Klerk’s peaceful intentions and forced the negotiation process into crisis. Mandela accused the government of having a double agenda. They were using negotiations not to achieve peace but to secure their own petty political aims. Interestingly, De Klerk tried to use the issue of ANC arms to pursue his own political agenda and question the ANC’s commitment. He accused the ANC of failing to disclose the locations of arms dumps and rebuke them for maintaining a private army. Mandela angrily responded that ‘the ANC had suspended the armed struggle to show their commitment to peace, and weapons would be handed in only when the ANC was part of the government collecting the weapons, and not until then.’

As a consequence of the government’s failure to resolve the crisis in the peace process, the ANC suspended talks and laid out a number of demands upon which they would re-enter them. With negotiations stalled, the ANC and its allies agreed on a policy of rolling mass action. This new tactic played a vital role in the ANC’s overall strategic objectives. These were: (i) to provide a channel for the growing anger and frustration among the population with a lack of positive results from negotiations; and (ii) to maximise pressure on the government to take the necessary steps to break the log jam in the process. As a result of the increasing violence of the Inkatha party and other anti-democratic forces, and the success of the ANC’s mass action campaign, De Klerk and his government were forced to abandon their strategy of pursuing an anti-ANC alliance, and instead had to adopt democratic principles and see agreement with the ANC towards finding a final solution. De Klerk finally agreed to accept the principle of majority rule, and reluctantly agreed to all of the demands laid down by the ANC, one of which was the release of 500 political prisoners. The path to a final agreement was eventually cleared.

The success of the ANC’s mass action strategy underlines the need for all Sinn Féin activists and general nationalist supporters to mobilise and create a genuine sense of participation, responsibility, and ownership in the peace
process. They must help shape and define it, maintain its momentum, and eventually allow nationalist representatives, like those of the ANC, to enter negotiations with strength and clear grass-roots support.

De Klerk's change in direction to find a final agreement with the ANC meant that the peace process in South Africa had reached the most important and final stage. Implacable enemies throughout the conflict had converged and were aligned within the basic framework of abolishing the old apartheid order and reconstructing a new democratic future for the country. Mandela's words at this juncture were: 'To make peace with one's enemy, one must work with that enemy, and that enemy becomes your partner when seeking a final agreement.'

The final stages of negotiations were carried out with considerable good faith from both sides. Issues that had previously caused problems were resolved with a degree of flexibility and compromise, two of the essential requirements for bringing a peace process to a successful conclusion.

Whilst the details of the South African peace process are different from the Irish peace initiative, there are many parallels and general rules that apply to both peace processes. The South African example demonstrates the steps required to ensure the survival and success of the faltering Irish peace process. John Major's government needs to follow the courageous path upon which De Klerk embarked and positively engage in the process with vision and imaginative thinking. Major must take the decisive step and initiate all-party negotiations that tackle the fundamental causes of conflict in the six counties. The South African peace process was protracted, fragile, and dangerous, but it proved that a conflict situation can not be resolved without the major protagonists showing courageous leadership, being prepared to take risks, and eventually getting around the table and tackling the core issues of the problem. Unless John Major does likewise in Ireland, the main difference between the South African and Irish peace processes will be that of success and failure.

The central condition highlighted throughout Allister Sparks' book is that of engaging in political dialogue. Only through dialogue did the South African peace process get off the ground and create the opportunity for the ANC and the South African government to break down barriers and stereotyped images of each other. Dialogue was crucial to building trust and confidence between both parties, enabling them to overcome crises and problems that arose throughout the process. And only through dialogue within multi-party negotiations did all sides reach a final agreement and a peaceful democratic resolution of the conflict that had plagued the county for more than 40 years.

The British government has much to learn from the political realism of F.W. De Klerk. Rather than stall an inevitable process as Britain has done, De Klerk had the strength of his political convictions to stay with the developing process and bring about a resolution of the conflict in South Africa. Perhaps, someone should send John Major a copy of Allister Sparks' book.
During a recent address to a high powered inter-church conference in Dublin, Down and Connor Auxiliary Bishop, Michael Dallat, made the following comments:

In Catholic West Belfast, one cannot miss the professionally printed and strategically planted notices demanding that the RUC be disbanded. ... No indication is given as to who or what will replace the RUC. No society can exist without a police service. This is a very sensitive area. I do not know how many really want the RUC disbanded. Many Catholics, moderates who have had no connection and no sympathy with the violence, would not go for disbandment but they would want radical and genuine reform of the police in Northern Ireland, so that we may have a police service that is acceptable to all sections of the community.

When the IRA called a cessation of its military operations on August 31 1994, it gave a new impetus to the debate regarding the acceptability and efficacy of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) as a police force. Much of the discussion to date has concentrated on whether the RUC, despite its history, is capable of being reformed into an acceptable community police service within a new democratic state. A variation on this debate is whether the RUC are capable of being reformed sufficiently in the interim period prior to the establishment of a new democratic Ireland.

In February 1995, during a Sinn Féin discussion on policing, Jim Gibney, a member of the Ard Comhairle (Sinn Féin executive), expressed a compelling need for Sinn Féin to consider a comprehensive and viable alternative to the RUC especially for nationalist areas across the six counties. The easiest part of this debate he said: ‘is to raise the slogan, correct though it is, “Disband the RUC.” The hard job is to come up with an alternative which is viable.’ In making his assertions, Gibney underlines the importance of action as well as rhetoric.

It is important that we, as republicans, involve ourselves in all debate regarding the future of Ireland. In seeking a viable alternative to the RUC, however, it is equally important, particularly in light of comments similar to those made by Bishop Dallat, that we articulate clearly our analysis that the RUC are an inherently irreformable body and that the complete disbandment of this discredited force is required as a step towards eventual lasting peace in Ireland.
The RUC were formed as a ‘Special Constabulary’ comprising 30,000 men in 1921. Their origins were as an armed militia created to maintain and protect the interests of unionism and conservatism in the six counties. They were funded by a British treasury who felt ‘it was the easiest way to police the state,’ and in effect, they were the northern equivalent of the infamous Black and Tans. They were both one hundred per cent Protestant and one hundred per cent loyalist. In the main, they were members of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) or one of the other loyalist institutions. The make up of this anti-Catholic state militia was summed up by General Ricardo, a former UVF leader from County Tyrone who stated:

Every man ... who has lost a job or who is at a loose end has endeavoured to get into the ‘Specials’ and many have succeeded ... Their NCOs are not good, the pay is excessive, and there is much trouble from drink and consequent indiscipline ... They form a distinctly partisan force and it is impossible to expect the impartiality that is necessary in an efficient police force.

In describing them this way, General Ricardo, essentially one of their own, underlines the innate contradictions within this purposely created sectarian body.

From the outset, the RUC fulfilled a military as opposed to a policing role. In every decade since their formation, they have been responsible, both directly and indirectly, for organising sectarian attacks on nationalist areas, many of which resulted in the slaughter of Catholic men, women, and children. The infamous Arnon Street and the McMahon murders, when whole Catholic families were murdered in their homes and on their streets, are an example of the atrocities which were to become synonymous with RUC behaviour throughout the 1920s.

Over the next fifty years, the RUC were to serve their political masters well. Savage attacks, such as those carried out on workers during the ‘Outdoor Relief Strikes’ of the 1930s, exemplified their behaviour. During this time, some Protestant workers were to experience at first hand the brutality that their Catholic counterparts had been experiencing since the foundation of the state. Protestants who were prepared to defend workers’ rights were portrayed as papist supporters as the Orange card was once again produced to good effect. These attacks by the RUC on Protestant workers were deliberately designed to maintain a sectarian divide, underlining the paranoia of Stormont ministers about the prospect of working-class unity.

During the 1940s and 1950s, as attacks on nationalist communities continued, there was a steady increase in RUC membership that remained exclusively Protestant. A crack paramilitary unit, containing up to five hundred RUC men was established and trained by the British army. At their disposal were...
weapons more common to a conventional army including heavy ‘Bren’ machine guns, mortars, grenades, anti-tank weaponry, and armoured vehicles weapons to be used against beleaguered Catholics in the six counties.

In 1968, during the Civil Rights’ Campaign, the RUC and B Specials played their familiar part in undermining legitimate protests when they batoned, beat, and intimidated protesters off the streets. In 1969, they actively engaged in arson attacks on many nationalist areas, particularly in Belfast, resulting in the destruction of homes and streets. These attacks on peaceful civil rights demonstrators in the late 1960s proved to be a watershed as nationalists, who for decades had borne the brunt of state brutality, began to organise in defence of their communities. Any notion that the RUC could operate impartially when dealing with civil-rights demands died with Samuel Devenney, from Derry, who was beaten to death by RUC men as he sat in his own home in April 1969.

At the height of the sectarian murder campaign of the 1970s, RUC members were directly involved in arming loyalist paramilitary killers. One of the most notable cases of this period concerns the self-confessed loyalist assassin, Albert ‘Ginger’ Baker. Baker’s contact, an RUC sergeant who supplied weapons to kill Catholics, was stationed at Mountpottinger Barracks in Belfast. This activity by the RUC, like the plastic bullet murders of Nora McCabe and Paul Whitters and the interrogation and torture of young nationalists like the Beechmount 5 and Ballymurphy 7, show clearly why the RUC will never be acceptable to the nationalist community, a community whose wounds cannot be healed while the RUC remain in existence.

For years, those who dared to challenge the corrupt sectarian nature of the RUC were dismissed as extremists by those whose interests were in the maintenance of the status quo, including some ‘Castle Catholics’ who conceded only that there were ‘rotten apples in every barrel.’ The Stalker and Stevens inquiries of the 1980s put paid to this notion and showed that the RUC barrel itself was putrid. What these inquiries proved, if proof were needed, was that the RUC are a law unto themselves and that contacts between the RUC and loyalist paramilitary organisations exist at every level. Attempts by Stalker to investigate these contacts were thwarted as the RUC closed ranks to protect their membership. This wall of silence, which had the full support of their Chief Constable, underlined the absolute power and sectarian nature of the force.

Bishop Dallat is correct when he says that no society can exist without a police service, in particular, if that society is to be democratic. The crux of the issue in relation to disbandment is that the RUC were formed to protect and maintain a society which was not democratic and one which, by its very nature, is incapable of being democratic. Bishop Dallat does not appear to accept this reality and his remarks, which are at best naive, at worst disingenuous, reflect this. The RUC, like the state itself, is irreformable. This is not simply a cliché, but a statement of fact. If we are to create a true democracy, then we must also create a police service that is reflective of this, a democratic police service
which will work for and protect the interests of everyone, a police service devoid of sectarianism, and one which will not discriminate against any section of the community.

It is also a statement of fact, however, to say that the RUC will not disappear overnight, and although the case for their disbandment is crystal clear, experience has shown that they will not simply pack up. Instead they will hang on by their fingertips in an attempt to create a false impression of acceptability. Commercial advertisements, such as those sponsored by the NIO to promote the RUC, are part of this. So too are attempts to enter nationalist communities through school programmes and youth work, a cynicism which becomes outrageous given the number of nationalist children maimed, killed, and orphaned by the RUC.

The question remains, however, with what do we replace them? The creation of a new independent police service is not going to be an easy task but it is one which we must accomplish if we are to see a lasting peace established. Those who talk of reform, of changing badges and the colour of uniforms, must not do so out of a sense of frustration because the task at hand appears too great. There may well have to be certain reforms in the short term for reasons of practicality. For example, community representatives could be delegated to look after policing requirements in their particular area. The mechanics of such a scheme would need to be discussed thoroughly with input from all who live in the community so that people's opinions are heard and respected. Within this, there may have to be some link with the present RUC but this should at all times be minimal.

Long-term radical reform of the RUC is impossible. For example, suggestions of a two-tiered approach to policing our communities, whereby the RUC liaise on a daily basis with appointed community wardens, is impracticable. The RUC are the main cause of many of the problems within our communities, so how will community wardens deal with such problems? In a mixed area with a significant Catholic minority dominated by a unionist community police, the relationship between this force and the Catholic minority would be akin to that of the local black people and the racist police forces that operate in the Southern states and other parts of America. A new police service, with a democratic input from elected political representatives and a principled code of conduct for professional standards as well as a national watch dog, is needed. But this is only possible in the context of a democratic state.

There are other forces in society such as the Fire Service and the Society For The Protection Of Cruelty To Animals who, on the whole, are seen to act in an impartial manner and are accepted by the community in general. There is a consensus among the community that the issues with which these organisations are involved reflect the interests of everyone. There is no such consensus with regard to policing in the six counties. The role of the RUC is to maintain the state at all costs. The raison d'être of the RUC is one of sectarianism and
conservatism whose duty it is to protect unionism, in particular the interests of middle/upper class unionism. There is a strong need for a new independent police service whose interests are community based, democratically controlled, and which are representative of the whole population of the island.

The issue of policing must be resolved as part of a negotiated settlement, and republicans must set out the broad framework of principles for the new police service: democratic accountability, community interests, impartiality and non-sectarianism. Sinn Féin must give leadership and direction to the debate. But the details of the new police service cannot be decided by any one group or political party. Instead these must be worked out in negotiation with a broad cross section of the people, ensuring that all interests and fears are addressed, and that for the first time we have a real police service based on consensus. There is an onus on us all to create the conditions whereby the establishment of an independent, community-based police service representative of the needs of the whole community can be realised.
Remembering Women in the Struggle

Mary McArdle
Maghaberry Womens Prison

As women, we are often reminded that our contribution to the struggle has gone largely unnoticed and unrecorded. We were delighted therefore that the theme for Prisoner’s Day 1995 was to be ‘Women in the Struggle’ and we were honoured to be able to make our own contribution to the events. I, along with Mary Ellen Campbell, had the privilege of attending to represent women POWs. The event attracted ex-prisoners from all parts of the country including Bronwyn McGahan from Tyrone, the most recently released woman POW from Maghaberry jail. Also present for the occasion were Donna Maguire and Póilín Ó Íth Chatháin, both of whom were recently released from jails in Germany.

The day began with a volleyball match between Armagh and Maghaberry, an enjoyable event for both the players and the spectators. The winning trophy, in memory of Rosaleen Russell, a tireless worker on behalf of women’s rights who died earlier in the year, was presented to the Maghaberry women who were victorious on the day.

At lunchtime, Tar Anall, the new drop-in centre for ex-POWs and their families, was officially opened. Maura McCrory gave a short speech after which Pam Kane and Briege Norney unveiled the opening plaque. Maura outlined the importance of Tar Anall and invited everyone to avail of its services. Briege then spoke of the plight of prisoners in English jails and the hardships endured by their families.

After the formalities were dispensed with, those who had gathered for the opening mingled informally before moving next door into the Felons’ Club which hosted a variety of prison-related exhibitions. Among these exhibitions was a photographic display representing the various roles women have played throughout the war. Cell-like structures had also been created to show different phases of prison struggle with detailed information provided on each particular chapter. The traditional array of POW handicrafts were also on display. One poignant aspect of the exhibition was the display which included personal letters belonging to Tom Williams as well as newspaper cuttings about his case and trial. Also included in this display was the shirt Tom wore on the day of his arrest.

A quilt made by Irish Women’s groups, which was taken to the UN Women’s Conference in Beijing, was also featured. The theme of this quilt was ‘Women’s Rights are Human Rights’ and the women POWs in Maghaberry had contributed a panel to it. A massive poster expressing solidarity with the
Basque prisoners seemed particularly appropriate with a large Basque delegation in attendance.

A video entitled ‘What Did You Do in the War Mammy?’ which documented the experiences of republican women through several decades, was one of the highlights of the day. Full credit for this excellent production goes to the Falls Women’s Centre for their hard work and persistence which, despite this being their first venture into the world of film making, produced this high-quality documentary. Narrated by Caral Ní Chulainn, the video was a clear testimony to the changing role of women in the republican struggle and had Eileen Brady, a long-time activist, lamenting the fact that she was not nineteen again.

After the showing of the video, several women shared a panel and spoke of their experiences of imprisonment, which included internment, the no-wash protest and hunger strikes in Armagh, the opening of Maghaberry jail, and the present-day conditions faced by women POWs. Pamela Kane talked of her experiences in Mountjoy and Limerick jails, outlining the hardships and isolation associated with being the only female IRA prisoner in the twenty-six counties. There then followed a question and answer session, chaired by Una Gillespie, that raised many pertinent questions in relation to women’s struggle.

The evening function proved to be a moving event. A statement, paying tribute to the sacrifice of the women who had given their lives during the struggle, was read out on behalf of the women rows in Maghaberry. It further acknowledged the roles that women have played over the years and called on this potential to be utilised in all future initiatives.

Presentations were then made to Louise McManus, Anne O’Sullivan, and Lily Fennell for their selfless work on behalf of the republican movement. Other presentations were made to ex-prisoners Bronwyn McGahan, Pamela Kane, Póilín Úi Chatháin, and Donna Maguire. Madge McConville and Greta Nolan, both of whom were arrested with Tom Williams, were presented with framed pictures in recognition of long years of dedication to the republican cause. Madge and Greta then unveiled a cross in memory of the dead volunteers and presented it to Liam Shannon who accepted it on behalf of the Felons’ Club.

A colour party led by a lone piper then entered the hall, their flags lowered as a mark of respect, and a minute’s silence was observed. The sombre mood that had descended upon the proceedings created a fitting atmosphere for the presentation ceremony for the families of our fallen women comrades. The family of each volunteer was presented with a plaque that contained a small photograph of their loved one. I was touched by the dignity and courage of the families whose grief, despite the passing of time, is still so apparent.

Finally the day was at an end. It had been a long day and after months of research, hard work, and effort it was, despite its sadder moments, a day that republican women could be proud of. What we, as POWs, had wanted most of
all was to ensure that the role of women in our struggle was not forgotten. We especially wanted to honour our comrades who died for Irish freedom and to offer our support to their families. We sincerely hope that we achieved that.

Presentations were made to the families of the following comrades who have died:

- Patricia Black
- Margaret Mcardle
- Maura Drumm
- Rosemary Bleakley
- Ann Parker
- Annmarie Pettigrew
- Mairead Farrell
- Bridie Dolan
- Dorothy Maguire
- Maura Meehan
- Eileen Mackin
- Laura Crawford
- Catherine Mc Gartland
- Sheena Campbell
- Ethel Lynch
- Julie Dougan
- Bridie Quinn
- Pauline Kane
- Vivienne Fitzsimmons
Sonny Weir woke, as usual, in mid morning when he could no longer dismiss the noise of daily routine through the walls of his caravan. He eased back the grimy duvet and sat a while dangling his powerful legs. He ran his hands through his greasy, tangled hair, scuffed the days-old stubble on his face, and gave his piggish red eyes a tired rub before stepping gingerly onto the cracked lino, carefully avoiding the sticky remnants of last night’s supper. As he padded over to switch off the TV, Sonny wheezed and gasped for air. An accident in a chemical plant had virtually destroyed his lungs and now, barely forty, he was medically unfit to work and had to make do with a small pension that he occasionally managed to supplement.

Always a driven type, Sonny had emigrated when young and travelled thousands of miles, changing from freckled youth to tanned adult along the way. Not one to settle, he had never thought of marrying or raising a family despite being slowed down by his polluted lungs. After years of travel, Sonny developed a crushing urge to return home, even now he couldn’t fully comprehend his actions for what was there here? He secretly entertained notions of meeting someone nice to settle down with but his journey home had been extremely difficult, barriers were placed at every turn. Sonny lost all sense of direction in life and he mulled continuously over his youthful hunting grounds searching for memories but always coming away with the feeling that his life was increasingly shallow.

He had enjoyed fishing when younger and now took to the sport again with enthusiasm. After dressing, he loaded his small car with tackle. He drove, as always, at high speed the half mile or so to his favourite spot beside the old oak. Its reassuring bulk seemed to attract fish in great numbers. After casting Sonny nibbled at a swiss roll he had found lodged in his coat pocket, as he took his first bite his line swished tight and began to veer to the side. Sonny compensated for his lack of skill as an angler by using very strong line and this, coupled with the application of sheer brute force, ensured the fish was swiftly hauled ashore on its back. It was a reasonable size, eight to ten pounds, and was dispatched without ceremony with a sharp knock to the head before being tossed behind him where it lay on top of a discarded crisp bag, its glassy eyes staring accusingly at Sonny.

As a licence was required to fish this stretch and Sonny didn’t possess one, he decided to drive at once to a local restaurant to see if they would buy the catch. He flung his gear into the back of the car. The fish was placed in the passenger seat. Engine whining noisily, Sonny sped off. He headed towards the new road, scattering water and gravel in his wake. Approaching the
junction, Sonny rammed through the gears to prepare for the casual swing into the left lane. Just short of the turn, he was attracted to a glint of silver, amid the sudden confusion of sound and colour the stunned fish wallopéd and flippéd inside the car causing Sonny to strike out with his hands to protect his face, the car shot across the road straight into a low stone wall. Never in his life had Sonny experienced such a brutal and ripping force, the sudden loss of momentum forced his breath outwards as he squeezed back into the comfort of his seat as though he was trying to curl up and hide before catapulting forward in a jerky motion, finally escaping the confines of the car as his smooth shiny forehead burst through the windscreen sending silver droplets of glass in a graceful shower over the clear blue bonnet. He continued on his powerful arc, twisting and gyrating, his head at a strange angle flopping back towards the vehicle as though tethered there, Sonny was finally deposited gently and noiselessly into a cool moist growth of green nettles where he lay quivering, his face skywards. His eyes, staring, bulged slightly outwards, his mouth made popping noises, like a child blowing bubbles as he fought to breathe. An excited crowd had witnessed the event and huddled closer, craning to see. Among the low murmur of comment they tut tutted and shook their heads until the ambulance finally arrived. ‘Phew, this un’s a big un and no mistake!’ said an attendant as Sonny was carried, face up, through the crowd as though he was being paraded for their approval. His eyes, wide in fright, were glassy and hard, his mouth, pursed in surprise, was still. Nearby, two old men stood and watched as the ambulance drove away. ‘I tell you’ said one ‘he was that far from hitting the youngster when he crossed the road’ holding his hands two feet apart to emphasise the distance involved.
There is no group in Irish society that has experienced the level of systematic discrimination, harassment, and inhuman treatment that the travelling community has. Media coverage, particularly the print media, has consistently portrayed travellers in a negative light, often associating them with crime and violence seldom recognising the discrimination, poverty, and prejudice which is their daily experience. Travellers are very often refused service in shops, pubs, and places of entertainment. It is not uncommon to see travellers physically ejected from these places or from houses, buildings, parks, or indeed, streets. Having been refused service in pubs, travellers are invariably arrested for drinking in the streets, charged with vagrancy, usually convicted, and more often than not, jailed.

The Irish travelling community comprises a small but highly stigmatised minority group. The name for their treatment by the rest of Irish society is racism. This racism is perpetrated on this minority group despite the fact that our society has been both unable and unwilling to provide the travelling community with even the most basic housing, adequately serviced halting sites, health services, or educational opportunities. All of us have, at one time or another, experienced, been witness to, or been the perpetrators of this racism. Those of us who have not actively practised this racism, have from time to time turned a blind eye or given the deaf ear to such instances. We have looked the other way in shops, pubs, hotels, etc, as travellers were shown the door, and we have pretended not to hear as they have been verbally humiliated and treated as less than human by officials in housing, welfare, and health departments. By choosing to ignore the racism in our midst, we deny the travelling community the right to be treated as equal citizens. By turning our backs on this atrocious situation we are guilty of racism through indifference. Our reluctance to face down the racism we see around us is cowardly. Our continued silence on the issue is a shameful disgrace.

We can all, no doubt, recall examples of the treatment meted out to travellers in our own communities. A couple of years ago, a number of travellers on the Avilla Park site, a permanent halting site in the Finglas area of Dublin, decided to enter a travellers’ soccer team in the Dublin Amateur League. They approached a local pub, The Cardiff Inn, seeking sponsorship for their jerseys. The owner obliged them with a full rig out amounting to a couple of hundred pounds, and in return, he asked that the jerseys advertise the name of the pub. All went well and Avilla United played and won their first match. After the game they retired to The Cardiff Inn for a celebratory drink but the owner
 refused them service on the grounds that he had a ‘No Travellers’ policy. It would be funny … but it is not.

Around the same time, another Avilla Park resident, Martin Collins, was the recipient of Ireland’s Young Person of the Year award for his educational work with young travellers. On the night of his award, he went to The Drake Inn in Finglas and was greeted with the ‘No Travellers’ policy. He could be presented with an award from the President but was not apparently presentable enough to be served in his local pub.

Witness the dole payments from the men’s labour exchange in Dublin’s Gardiner St. Everyone signing on is classified alphabetically: A-F sign on Mondays, G-M sign on Tuesdays, and so on. They are all given set times to turn up so there will not be over crowding at any given time. It’s like that all week – Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday. I left out Thursday. Well, Thursday is different. Thursday at 11:00 a.m., all the travellers assigned to that dole office, regardless of alphabetical order, are brought in together. Herded in, paid out, and herded out again. You may decide for yourself why this might be so, but lest you think (as the common assumption goes) that it’s done to prevent them ‘doing the double’ or signing on in more than one dole office, then think again. There are many, if not more, settled people involved in this activity as there are travellers. And when you think about it, this type of fraud says more about the derisory nature of dole payments than anybody’s dishonesty. It’s humiliating enough to have to put your hand out to feed yourself or your family, but to do it twice deserves a medal. Besides, whatever revenue may be pinched from the government through this type of activity is but a drop in the ocean compared to the business and finance scandals going on in this country, day in and day out. If as much effort and energy were put into detecting irregularities by those at the upper level of the social scale, and if these people, once detected, were dealt with by the due course of law, they would have to build new jails to accommodate them all.

A few weeks ago, we had a visit from Neil Peterson, the singlehanded yachtsman, who came in to tell us of his experiences as a coloured South African and particularly of his time spent in this country after being shipwrecked in the Atlantic. He spoke of the generosity of the Irish people, how they provided the materials to repair his boat and the money to finance the continuation of his journey. During the discussion which followed his talk, Peterson was asked whether he had encountered any racism since he had been in Ireland. Sure he had, but he was not the victim. Rather, he was shocked to see how Irish society treated the travelling community. A familiar tale really. The Irish, champions of the underdog, the dispossessed, the poverty stricken, victims of famine, oppressed minorities. Dedicated, committed, tireless campaigners on behalf of all these causes, any cause really, as long as it’s not in this country.

If any of us were to take just a moment or two to reflect upon our own experiences of how, as Republicans, we have been the victims of political
isolation and attempted ostracisation because of the stand we have been prepared to make, we get some small notion of how society treats the travelling community. But bear in mind that, as republicans, we make a conscious decision to go the road we choose, in some cases giving up a lifestyle, which, while not necessarily always comfortable, is nonetheless cosy to the extent that we have limited access to housing, education, health care, and (although now rapidly disappearing) employment opportunities. Should our commitment to the Republican Movement falter or lessen in any way and we decide that this road is too long or too difficult for us, we can at any time decide we have had enough and go back to our ‘cosy’ lives. While of course the vast majority of republican activists would not choose the easy option, it is precisely the fact that we could make this choice that ensures we will see this campaign to its conclusion. Travellers have no such choices. Born into an ethnic minority they quickly become aware of the dehumanising limits of second-class citizenship.

Despite the well-to-do appearance of some, most travellers exist without the comforts of electricity, running water, refuse collection, or sanitation. They have high birth rates, low life expectancy, and a high level of illiteracy. Since the early 1960s, the Irish government and many voluntary organisations have sought to eliminate what they regarded as the ‘problem’ of itinerancy by settling travellers and assimilating them into mainstream society. ‘Recently, however, travellers have begun to demand the right to maintain their nomadic lifestyle and ethnic identity.’ (Gmelch, Ireland From Below).

The Irish travelling community is just one of many itinerant minorities of traders, artists, and entertainers who live in complex societies around the world but particularly in Europe. Whilst the traveller population in Ireland is somewhere in the region of 25,000, they have a worldwide collective strength as travellers/gypsies closer to ten million. According to Sharon Gmelch, who has carried out extensive research on the travelling community, ‘travellers form a large biologically self-perpetuating group that share fundamental cultural values and have an overt unity of cultural form (that is, they share certain externally observable behavioural and material traits). Moreover, travellers interact primarily with each other, interaction with the settled community being largely limited to economic dealings and formal institutional settings such as the courts and hospitals.’

The travelling community, then, is constantly a clearly-defined ethnic group. Twenty-five thousand people is perhaps a relatively small minority, even in Irish terms, but statistics show that the travelling community has doubled in size in the last 20 years, and due to a continuing high birth rate (the average family consists of twelve), this trend is likely to continue.

BACKGROUND

Traditionally, Irish travellers lived in tents and horse-drawn wagons. Up until the 1960s in fact, 90% of travellers still lived in this fashion. They generally
earned their living going from house to house peddling tin and copperware, sweeping chimneys, picking crops, and doing odd jobs on farms. Most travellers would base themselves within one or two counties. One exception to this would have been the horse dealers who rounded up horses and Connemara ponies in the West and brought them to fairs or to Dublin’s Smithfield Market to be sold. In early winter, they might settle into rented cottages or abandoned houses and take to the roads again in spring. Travellers formed single communities on the basis of shared lifestyles and family relationships. One of the most disruptive features of evictions of travellers today is that it often forces them to live in groups or on settlements not of their own choosing. Family clans can be split as only limited space becomes available on some sites while some families are forced to live in large settlement camps with families they may not get on with.

The migration of travellers from rural to urban areas began in the 1960s. The introduction of plastic and enamelware containers following the Second World War gradually eliminated the need for the itinerant ‘tinker.’ Likewise, road improvements and the increased ownership of cars gave rural people greater access to shops, etc., thus reducing their dependency on the rural peddler and itinerant tradesman. Mechanisation on the farm did away with the need for large numbers of farm labourers and there was a decreasing need for the traction animals sold by the travellers. As a result of this, travellers moved from rural areas to cities to look for work. In 1950, there were fewer than 10 traveller families living in Dublin. By 1973, it had risen to 310 families. In 1981, it was 580, now it’s 1200. Travellers today generally live in urban areas. They make a living by collecting scrap metal, dealing in used car parts, and selling household goods from door to door. Whatever income they manage is supplemented by state welfare benefits.

The migration of travellers to urban areas in the late 1950s/early 1960s and the pitching of tents and wagons in city areas alarmed urban dwellers who complained about the potential health hazards from the camps, the danger of wandering horses, and the nuisance of being repeatedly asked for water and handouts. Opposition to travellers was often strongest among the working-class residents of the new housing estates built in the city suburbs. The reason for this was that these people had been generally transferred from inner-city tenements and they saw their improved standards and expectations of upward mobility threatened by the siting of large and unsightly traveller camps beside them.

By 1966, the report of the Commission on Itinerancy was published and this focused national attention on what had by then become known as Ireland’s ‘itinerant problem.’ The report drew attention for the first time to the problems of poverty, illiteracy, ill health, and the high mortality rates among travellers, and this in turn aroused a measure of public sympathy for their plight. Itinerant Settlement Committees were set up with the aim of improving the living standards of travelling families by building serviced campsites with ‘tigins’
Brian Kenna

(small houses), running water, toilets, and electricity. The ultimate goal was to absorb travellers into the settled community. Today, about 50% of the travelling population in Ireland has been settled, either into chalet type houses on official traveller campsites or into conventional housing. However, the other half of the travelling community is still nomadic, living in caravans or trailers on the roadside or official halting sites. Ironically, due to population growth, there are more travellers living on the roadside today than before the settlement movement began.

In recent years, we have seen the growth of the Traveller Rights Movement. Apart from the frustration and hardship created by frequent evictions, many urban travellers feel a growing sense of deprivation. Living in close proximity to the comparatively well off urban dwellers, the travellers have become disillusioned. The living conditions for most travellers are still far from good. Evictions not only disrupt economic activities, they also scatter social relationships, disrupt medical care, and discontinue children's education. Eviction policies and continuing public harassment have given the travellers a strong impetus to organise themselves. In 1982 the Committee for the Rights of Travellers was formed, and although initially it was run by traveller and non-traveller people, by 1984 a new organisation had been formed, ‘Minceir Misli’ (Travellers Movement). This traveller-run organisation calls for traveller rights and organises protest marches and demonstrations. Today, they are a very efficient organisation with their own regular newspaper. Much of their energy is put into securing full legal rights for travellers, a campaign to end discrimination and negative stereotypes, and to help traveller/non-traveller relations. They seek consultation in any government development programme aimed at the travellers and they campaign for more housing as well as more camping sites for those travellers who wish to remain nomadic.

The most complete statement of traveller goals is articulated in the draft Charter of Traveller Rights. It contains twelve articles (e.g. housing, free expression, the vote, state welfare, education, and health) covering their rights as a minority group as well as specific rights to travel and to accommodation that is compatible with a nomadic lifestyle. The Charter also calls for recognition of their distinct identity and the right to maintain this identity through their traditional way of life.

How we, in the settled community treat the travellers says everything about our society. There is no such thing as limited equality. We cannot deny one sector of society equal rights and then demand civil, legal, political, and human rights for ourselves. The travelling community is different from other sections of Irish society. They have their own ethnic cultural background but they form part of the rich diversity of Irish culture. If we are to seriously address the problems of social inequality in our society, perhaps the rights of the travellers would be a good place to start.
Regular readers of the Red Spider will be aware that quiz shows can perplex the most knowledgeable of POWs, especially those from the Lower Ormeau/Markets/Short Strand districts. (Remember Terry Clinton’s claim that Christopher Columbus hailed from somewhere near Miami?)

This time Paddy Devenny does the honours. All the lads are out sunning themselves in the yard on the first (and only) day of summer. As usual, the radio was blaring away waiting for the daily quiz to begin. By the way, did you know that Paddy has a passing interest in South Africa and the victorious struggle against apartheid? Anyway, fingers on buzzers and the DJ asks: “For one point, who might wear a ‘tutu’?” Paddy jumps up and blurts out: “An archbishop!” Another scandal rocks the clergy?

***

Strange and disturbing reports of confused behaviour are being received almost daily from the Red Spider spies. Take the case of Anto Murray. He was weight training with Gerry McConville and, as ever, they were arguing about which exercises to do, trying to out-expert the expert. Or maybe they weren’t able to figure out how to use the new multigym with its range of bars, pulleys, and fearsome contraptions. Finally, Anto said, ‘Look, Gerry, see that apparatus over there? Use it right and you’ll end up with arms like a stallion!’

Or Dan Hughes. Someone asked him what video was on. ‘Some oul wildlife programme,’ he replied. ‘What’s it about?’ he was asked. Says Dan: ‘The Tamil Tigers.’ Or Cianin Murray. He walked into the canteen where the lads were watching a music programme. ‘What’s the name of that show?’ he asked. ‘Larry Grogan’s Golden Hour,’ he was told. ‘Oh,’ said Cianin, ‘how long’s that on for?’ Or Eddie O’Connor (this is to be taken as a warning not to get out of bed and go straight into a political discussion) who left the lads in bewildered silence with his exasperated outburst: ‘Look, you are only making problems out of mountainholes!’

***

I suppose it was bound to happen sometime. One of the lads, writing to a supporter in Los Angeles, was listing his hobbies and interests. He told about learning Irish, studying, playing snooker and he added, ‘there’s nothing I like better than a bit of crack with the lads.’ Three weeks later came the reply; ‘Do you not realise that crack kills hundreds of young people every year and destroys the lives of thousands of others?’

***
During a big search in Crumlin Road jail, one of the new lads was on full alert, staring out through a small gap in the side of his door, ready to report any suspicious activity to his comrades further down the wing. He saw dozens of screws milling about, some with sniffer dogs, trained to sniff out explosives. Then suddenly he noticed one screw holding the jail cat (whose job was to keep the rats at bay in the Victorian jail). Quick as a flash the new comrade informed the others about this sinister development, 'Hey lads! They've got a sniffer cat with them.'

***

A film shown in H Block 8 recently was Sleepless in Seattle. Tómas Maguire and the other lads were following every soppy detail and many's a heart missed a beat when The Empire State Building appeared all lit up as a valentine heart. Tómas, to break the tear-jerking moment and engulfing silence, broke in: 'I remember that building when Hong Kong was hanging off the top of it!'

***

Jimmy O'Reilly sent for the cooks. He had a growing list of complaints about the food and he paced the cell in high dudgeon, waiting for the showdown. Through the grilles came the fat cook and the skinny cook (lean, mean, and hungry looking). Jimmy brought them into the big cell and went through his list: the Sellafield fish that even the seagulls rejected, the burgers that would make wonderful insoles, and the chicken legs that the lads could cut up to restring their banjos. Eventually, he came to the straw that broke the camel's back: 'We got vegetarian pasties last week and I opened one up,' he said, leaning forward. 'There was nothing except two peas in it.' 'Oh,' said the fat cook slowly, looking across at his mate, 'That's where those two peas went.'

***

The things kids say or, surrealism is alive and well and living in the visiting room in Long Kesh. When one of the lads asked his five-year-old daughter what she wanted to be when she grew up, she replied, 'A car engine.'

***

Talking of the visiting room in Long Kesh, the piped music they play there is picked by a screw who has developed a cruel sense of humour. As prisoners sit in the visiting boxes with their partners, two songs get played rather too often. They are: 'You're My Favourite Waste of Time' and 'Torn between Two Lovers.'

***

A screw, on duty in H4, was stumped at why several of the most obvious answers to clues in his Daily Star crossword were clashing with 5 across. Its clue had read: 'Two people in first garden (4, 3, 3),' and had been the first one
he had solved. He eventually threw the paper on the table in frustration, at which point one of Ireland’s finest picked it up. ‘Ahem,’ said our diplomatic comrade, ‘I think “Bill and Ben” is wrong …’

***

One day two soul mates, Brendy Mulvenna and Tommy Loughlin, came in after a walk in the yard and sat down to eat their tea of burgers and chips. They both immediately noticed that the kitchen had also sent up tasty jam sponge cakes for everyone. There were two slices in front of them, one less than half the size of the other. They both eyed the large slice greedily as they performed the difficult task of eating their tea as quickly as possible while giving the appearance of relaxed indifference. Brendy Mul speared his last chip, put it in his mouth, pushed his plate away, and lifted up the large slice of cake in a movement so quick and effortless that Locky blinked and missed it.

Mul bit into the cake, his hand cupped beneath his chin and his eyes closed in ecstasy. ‘You dirty, stinking rotter’ (or words to that effect), said Locky. ‘What? What’s wrong?’ said Mul, wide eyed and innocent. ‘You greedy git! You took the biggest piece!’ cried Locky. ‘Wha’? Well, which one would you have taken?’ asked Mul, offended. ‘I would have taken the smallest piece,’ said Locky proudly. ‘Well then, what are you complaining about?’ replied Mul.

***

One of my Red Spider spies claims that, during a prison-yard discussion on the merits of the IRA’s weaponry, one over-excited POW enthused: ‘Here, do you see that Semtex … it’s dynamite!’
The Pain of Child Abuse: A Personal Experience

A Republican POW

Recently, vast media coverage has highlighted the issue of child abuse. While most of this coverage concentrated on the more public and controversial cases involving paedophiles abroad, it also included some in Ireland. This recent attention has given me the courage to speak about my own personal experience as a victim of child abuse. I still want to, or need to, remain anonymous, however, and after 20 years, this underlines how distressing it is for me and for others like myself who have suffered. I find it extremely hard to come to terms with my experiences in my own mind, let alone deal with the knowledge that my family, friends, and neighbours might be aware of what happened to me. For me, it’s very much one slow step at a time towards some sort of ‘recovery’ and I hope that this article will be the first step along that road.

My experiences began as a seven-year-old child. I was as normal and mischievous as most children of my age, and having been brought up in a strict household, I was taught to respect my elders and ‘betters.’ Like any child, I believed that grown ups knew everything and trusted their judgement without question. One adult in particular, abused this trust. He was always kind and playful towards me, how could I as an innocent child perceive his intentions? He walked around unconcerned, so smug in the knowledge that I could never tell. Who would my parents believe should it be discovered? They would never doubt this man; he would never be capable of such acts.

This thought, and his many threats, made me feel very frightened and unwanted. With no one to turn to, I suffered in silence. I wanted to be on my own where I would hold my pillow tight to my face and cry. No one could hear me then or see my face, my shame. I still find myself reaching out for that pillow when I recall my suffering. I believed him when he said that it was me who had done wrong. My dad would kill me if he ever found out, that is what I believed.

I felt many things during that period without understanding why. I felt lost, alone, frightened, and vulnerable. How I yearned to be comforted and to feel loved, but how could I tell my parents? I still cannot bring myself, not even for this article, to outline in detail the form of abuse that I was put through by this person.

As I got older, everything was a constant reminder of what had happened to me as a child. Paranoia played with my mind. Grown ups playing football with young lads, school teachers paying too much attention to a particular pupil, and even older boys baby sitting, had ulterior motives in my mind. That part of my life was unstable – why me? I kept asking myself.

I felt like a freak because I knew of no similar experiences to my own. I needed to feel that I was not the only one, but then the issue was taboo! I had nightmares where I would wake up sweating and crying which really worried
my parents, but how could I explain to them what was wrong with me? My school work suffered. I shied away from people and became reclusive, trusting no one. When I was 15 or 16 years old, when most young boys discover girls, I met with more problems. One night while out with a girl, she began to touch me—Suddenly it wasn't her touching me, it was him again. I pushed her away and ran home where I needed to be on my own.

For the first time I discovered that it was not just a psychological problem I had, but a physical one, also. I have encountered many problems that I feel are directly related to this period of my childhood and I wonder if it will ever end. One man used his power as an adult to abuse and hurt me for his own personal satisfaction, never once thinking about the nightmare I would suffer for the rest of my life.

As can be seen from my personal account my hurt continues, but what of the person who abused me? How has he handled the last 20 years? Given that the issue of child abuse has never been fully explored or understood, it is virtually certain that he has never been confronted and therefore would still pose a threat to young children, possibly a greater threat because he feels he can get away with it.

Now that I am an adult, I do not feel that the public are concerned enough about addressing this issue and I still fear being labelled a freak if I were to identify myself. I have since read quite a bit on the issue of child abuse and paedophilia and I was shocked at first to learn how these abusers of young children are treated once they are caught (which is seldom). In most cases, the abuser is given a short prison sentence with no counselling available while they are in jail. Counselling is only available to those who are sentenced to four years or more, and because of the lenient sentences that child abusers receive, most do not fall into this category.

It is inevitable, therefore, that more children will face a nightmare of sexual abuse because the offenders have not been made to confront their problems, even within a controlled environment. According to a leading expert in dealing with sex offenders, Ray Wyre, (who runs the only rehabilitation centre for offenders in Britain, the Gracewell institute in Birmingham) there are more than 2,000 sex offenders waiting for release from prison who are capable of similar offences and who could even go on to kill their victims. ‘Paedophiles have the highest re-offending rate of any category of criminals, most commit a similar crime within three years, because they believe they are doing no wrong.’ He further states, ‘Most paedophiles believe that the children they abuse welcome and enjoy the experience.’

I, and thousands of others, are testimony to the fact that this most certainly is not the case. What we have had to endure physically and the mental anguish which we continue to suffer, probably for the rest of our lives, is hard proof of that.

Looking back, I wonder if my parents would have coped with such a complex and delicate situation if they had been confronted by it? They had little or no
understanding of child abuse then, nor do they have any greater understanding of it today. Would they have brought him to court? Statistics show that families are almost never willing to bring the abusers to court for numerous reasons. Some believe the child will get over it, that the abuse will somehow disappear from the child’s mind. (The recorded facts prove the contrary.) Others do not wish to have their family stigmatised. Another reason is that you have to be able to prove beyond reasonable doubt that you have a winnable case. Remember it’s a child’s word against that of an adult. The most common reason, I believe, is that the family may feel that the child will only have to endure further hurt and suffering should the child have to go to a court room to relive their horror. Some, but not all court buildings, are equipped with facilities known as a telelink, which goes some way to help children give evidence in child-abuse cases. They should be introduced into all courts.

We all have a responsibility for the sake of our children to confront the issue of child abuse, particularly within our own communities. There should be no cover-ups, no disguising or dressing up the issue. If we turn a blind eye to it, if we ignore it, how will we ever understand and help those, like myself, who have suffered and help save others from having to go through the nightmare of child abuse? There are many (like me) who suffer in silence. Like me, they have the same reluctance to come out and say they have been abused for fear of the reaction they will get from their communities. I believe that most adults know of at least one person, possibly more, who have suffered child abuse. Yet how many of these adults know of cases where those involved have been prosecuted or imprisoned? Very few, I believe, which gives an indication of just how widespread the problem of child abuse is and how such a serious issue is not being confronted.

How do we go about initiating change and getting people to respond and treat child abuse with the seriousness it deserves? People in places of influence must use whatever powers they have to highlight the issue. Prison sentences should be increased and obligatory counselling should be introduced in prison. There is also a great need for rehabilitation centres for sex offenders. But firstly, and more importantly, proper counselling and professional help should be made available for those children who have been victims of this abuse.

The subject of child abuse seems to be strictly taboo, one to be swept under the carpet. But as the recent coverage shows, it exists and will not go away simply by ignoring it. By refusing to ignore its existence, by being concerned about and learning to understand the reality of the suffering caused by it, we may, however, be able to thwart similar instances of child abuse.
Let's Talk

*Martina Anderson and Ella O'Dwyer*

*Durham Women's Prison*

We increasingly notice that women approach communication and the expression of emotions very differently from men. While men are conditioned to control their feelings, coming to jail was our first conscious encounter with this type of self suppression. It became eminently clear to us how an institution or a social arena can mould and stereotype its members.

Women collect in jail the structured repression of feelings that men learned in childhood. Men appear to bring in that structure from outside and have it intensified in jail; prisoners harden themselves against their own emotional wants, or what are commonly confused with weaknesses. We here found ourselves doing just that – something we would have ridiculed men for doing. For example, we over-censored what we wrote and said, we restricted conversation when screws were listening. The establishment was not allowed to see us cry, and we seemed to care more about what the system thought of us than about the impression with which our loved ones were left. Seeing the dangers of this, we reviewed the system we had adopted for jail and challenged our conditioning as women. This marked the beginning of ongoing change in us.

Male feminist POWs, like those in Long Kesh, claim to have come to recognise and acknowledge the importance of women in the movement and men’s traditional repression of them. Such recognition, however, is heavily tested beyond the prison gates, suggesting that these men need to direct and apply their thinking to the community in which they are going to live.

Far from being ‘liberated,’ these men are repressed threefold. The emotional self-repression to which men are conditioned in society and which was intensified in jail is topped up by the blind illusion that they have been liberated during their sentence. Given that the goal of our struggle is to free ourselves, are we going to allow ourselves to be so suppressed because of a lack of clever and far sighted thinking? The expectation to the self-professed radical is that he/she will extend such liberated thought to the outside world and to their relationships. Imagine the disappointment of long-waiting partners when they feel the emotional gulf between them. No wonder that, after years of waiting, partnerships fall apart.

If we do not inspire confidence and trust in a partner, how can we inspire it in a nation? If liberated views on women fall down before the challenge of application, will theoretical notions about liberation and freedom generally fall just as flat come the real opportunity to change our country? Or is it that the liberation analysis has extended only to the broader question of rights, status, and power, while the liberation of communication has been left off the agenda?
Such men are to the fore in discussion about the bigger issues of power, women’s freedom and so on, while not looking at the need to liberate themselves nor recognising women’s relative progress in the area of communication.

The exclusion of the communication issue from the liberation programme may account for the disappointed expectations and the emotional gulf referred to earlier. Can men not see the possible long-term consequences if such a gulf is allowed to go on growing?

Come liberation of both country and women, men are going to have to unburden themselves of the shackles of the threefold conditioning talked of earlier; the silencing effects of conditioning, jail, and the struggle. It would be wrong to blame this gulf on the sacrifices inherent in the struggle. While there are sacrifices to be made, why punish ourselves further? We do not have to wait for ‘Brits Out’ to unburden ourselves of some of some of this suppression. Do we need machismo to help carry the burden of our war? And who needs the oppressive weight of British and male self oppression borne by women? We don’t.

We resent the image traditionally attached to women of nagging, hysterical people who have lost control. We are especially angered by this label when our frustration can be the accumulated effect of years of restriction at the hands of emotionally-constrained men. Accompanying this emotional restriction is a form of machismo which, though generally tolerated in an amused vein, is boring and even unattractive in personal relationships. The typical male self image, whilst difficult to abandon, may be blocking off richer identities behind it. One way of investigating this notion would be to develop and probe the matter within close relationships. This would gain the triple achievement of unburdening oneself of ‘machoistic’ self restraint, allowing a rich flow of human communication and unburdening women of the loneliness and frustration of trying to understand for two.
Life in an English Jail

Gerry Mackin
H Block 7, Long Kesh

On arriving at the Kesh in August 1995, I was expecting the familiar set up as is found in every jail in England: come through reception; strip search; get your towel, sheets, cup, knife, and fork; and be shown to whichever cell the screws decide to put you in for the duration of your stay. Often you will find yourself to be the only republican prisoner in the jail, and while many of the ordinary English prisoners will be supportive, at the end of the day you can only depend on yourself in the constant battle to survive. However, this was not to be the case in Long Kesh. I was totally taken aback by the surroundings and the warm atmosphere created by the lads here in the blocks. Besides the conditions, the fact that we are not isolated from each other makes the blocks the complete opposite to conditions under which fellow POWs in English jails have to endure.

By far the biggest problem for all POWs in any jail is trying to maintain some sort of contact with their families and friends. This problem is compounded a hundredfold in England. All visitors, even close relatives, have to wait anywhere between three and nine months before the Home Office will grant them security clearance to visit the POW. Prior to such clearance, a closed visit (i.e. no physical contact) may be arranged at the discretion of the prison governor. However the inhuman conditions under which such visits are conducted, with the POW never able to touch or hug his loved ones, means that POWs generally refuse these visits. Often, even close relatives will be refused security clearance and thus visits with them will be impossible. When clearance does finally come through, that is the start of more problems.

Since most of the jails in which POWs are kept in England are out in the country and off the beaten track, journeys to them from Ireland are not only long but are complicated by many changes of transport on the way. This adds to the problems of journey time and cost. As a result, most POWs only receive visits twice or less each year. Visitors also have to run the gauntlet of security checks at port or airport terminals; often being stopped, questioned, arrested, threatened. They also suffer the constant threat of deportation under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) whereby they know they will never be able to visit their loved ones in England again. Once they reach the jail, they may be faced with petty indignities and the bigotry of the screws. They may find the visit disrupted, cut short or even cancelled due to the vindictiveness of the prison regime. Worse still, they may find that the POW has just been 'ghosted' hundreds of miles away to another jail without their being informed. In such cases, often all they can do is return home without the visit.

Visits themselves are never private but are under the constant eye of screws and cameras, and they are often recorded. Physical contact is also curtailed
between visitors and POWs. As a result, visits are often conducted under conditions of extreme tension, which is further compounded by the fact that visitors know they have to make the same long journey home, facing the harassment and intimidation again and the debts accrued to pay for the journey.

Since the ceasefire was announced in August 1994, Irish POWs in English jails have witnessed a marked deterioration in conditions, particularly in relation to visits. After the Whitemoor escape in September 1994, closed family and legal visits were forced on the prisoners involved. Then in June 1995, these closed visits were extended to cover all POWs being held in what are called Special Secure Units (SSUs) at Whitemoor and Belmarsh. The POWs have refused to accept these conditions, and as a result, many have not had a visit for the past eighteen months.

Officially, contact between prisoners and their families is encouraged by the British government. Britain has also adopted the Ferrers Report (1992) and the European Convention on the Transfer of Prisoners (1983), both of which advocate the placing of prisoners in jails (and in countries) closer to their families. However, the British have continually placed barriers in the way of republican POWs to prevent them being moved to jails in Ireland closer to their families. Anyone who has been transferred to Ireland to date has only achieved that transfer through the pressure of legal or protest action. Despite the peace process and the ratification of the European Convention by the 26 county government last summer, not one republican POW has been repatriated to the 26 counties to date (February, 1996). About a dozen POWs also remain in Britain because they have been refused transfers to the North. Among these are the five Irish prisoners currently being held under appalling conditions (22-hour lock-up, closed legal and family visits) in Belmarsh jail, London. They are Liam McCotter, Liam O'Duibhir, Danny McNamee, Peter Sherry, and Dingus Magee (who is also on protest).

When it comes to the issues of family illness or death, it becomes even clearer that the prevention of links between POWs in England and their families is part of a deliberate and vindictive policy practised by the British government. No Irish POW in England will be allowed compassionate parole to visit a seriously ill family member or to attend their funeral in the event of a death. Since the ceasefire, both Brendan Dowd (Whitemoor) who has served 21 years in jail, and Pat Magee (on temporary transfer to Maghaberry) have been refused parole to attend the funerals of their mother and father respectively. The same has happened prior to the ceasefire for many other POWs in English jails from the 1970s right through to the 1990s. No Irish POW in England will be granted compassionate parole for any reason.

Phones have been introduced to all English high-risk jails over the past three to four years. These are a great boon to Irish POWs in particular who have very few visits. However, they are highly restricted and restrictions have increased in the past year. POWs are only allowed to phone people who have been previously cleared as visitors by the Home Office and all such calls are recorded. Limitations have also been placed on the amount of phone cards that
can be bought, which is particularly disadvantageous to POWs phoning the 26 counties. Attempts have also been made to link the buying of phone cards to money earned from doing prison work etc., and to 'good behaviour.' Besides phone cards, POWs in English jails also depend heavily on the mail to keep in contact with family and friends. The delay or 'loss' of mail is a favourite tactic of the prison authorities to harass POWs when it suits.

One of the major problems associated with jail in England is 'ghosting.' At about 6:30 am in the morning, often on the morning of a visit and with no prior warning, a prisoner's cell door will be opened and he will be told he has ten minutes to get ready, he is on the move. He will not be told where he is going until he arrives at the next jail several hundred miles away. Neither will his family be informed where he is going, even should they arrive at the prison gate for a visit. He will be strip-searched and told to wear prison uniform. POWs tend to refuse the prison gear and travel naked and handcuffed in the cubicle of the armoured lorry or 'horse box' as it is known. The journey often lasts from seven o'clock in the morning until five in the evening with maybe a stop off in the punishment block of some jail while the screws get their lunch. In this block, the naked POW may be subjected to taunts or harassment from the local screws. The prisoner will not be allowed to bring any belongings with him. These will arrive along with phone cards and any money he has in the shop a month or so later. As a result, ghosted POWs will have to borrow clothes, phone cards, and so on from other prisoners. Often, a lot of his belongings never arrive, having been 'lost.' Delays in money arriving also prevent POWs from buying stamps and phone cards, the main methods for keeping in touch with families. Ghosting has a very unsettling effect on long-term POWs and their families and is used as a punishment to disrupt friendship circles, routines, education, or planned visits. It is akin, on a grander scale, to the way red book POWs in the Kesh were moved around from block to block on a regular basis.

Life in jail in England is much different from life in jail in Long Kesh at the present time. It is much more akin to the film version of what life in jail is like. Republicans there find themselves in jails with few or even no other republicans. In a jail of 800 there may be only half a dozen at the most. Due to the stand of the first republican POWs in the 1970s and since, most ordinary English prisoners respect republican POWs and many build up friendships and show solidarity with them. However, jail culture in England is much different from here. One of the biggest problems in English jails is the drugs problem and the other problems this spawns. Most ordinary prisoners in England are on drugs of one form or another. The taking of hard drugs such as heroin and crack is widespread. Most of the violence among prisoners in English jails (stabbings, beatings, etc.) occurs as a result of drugs: inability to pay drug debts, different sellers impinging on others territories, and so on. The same could be said for most of the theft among prisoners, which is an everyday occurrence as addicts try to get valuables to exchange for drugs.
Prisoners do come together in solidarity to protest at conditions in the jails in England and Irish POWs will usually be to the fore in such protests. As a result of such actions, Irish POWs have earned a lot of respect over the years from other prisoners in the high-security jails. Protests occur regularly and Irish POWs have been through the lot to bring about better conditions. Some have experienced years living in punishment blocks in solitary confinement being denied visits and suffering beatings at the hands of screws. Over the years, protests in which Irish POWs have been involved have often been linked to general prison conditions affecting all prisoners within the jail, i.e., food, visiting facilities, and so on. However, Irish POWs have also been involved in protests which have specifically affected them, in particular over the issue of transfer. Two POWs, Michael Gaughan and Frank Stagg, died while on hunger strike over this issue during the 1970s.

As we write this article, Paul Dingus Magee is now on blanket protest in Belmarsh jail, London. Dingus, like four other Irish prisoners, Liam McCotter, Liam O Duibhir, Peter Sherry, and Danny McNamee, has been without visits for the past year-and-a-half. Paddy Kelly and Mick O’Brien were moved out of the special secure unit at Whitemoor after a prolonged protest against conditions. Due to tireless campaigning and massive international pressure, Paddy has now been transferred to Portlaoise Prison. However, he is dying of cancer, at least in some part due to neglect while in prison in England. Along with this, ten POWs are now into their twenty-first year of imprisonment in England.

As I wrote at the start of this article, things have very much changed since I arrived here in Long Kesh. We can receive family visits each week and phone home 24 hours a day if required. This means a lot for our families. The children can come to visit each week, smiling and laughing, telling fathers of everyday things like how school is going. It may not seem like much but if you are one of the families who had or have a relative in an English jail it means a lot. Our thoughts are with the POWs in England and their families who face torment and torture now as we speak.

**THE LONGEST SERVING POWs**

- **Eddie Butler**, Limerick, was 26 when arrested in 1975 (Full Sutton)
- **Hugh Doherty**, Donegal, was 25 when arrested in 1975 (Full Sutton)
- **Vince Donnelly**, Tyrone, was 35 when arrested in 1976 (Frankland)
- **Brendan Dowd**, Kerry, was 28 when arrested in 1975 (Whitemoor)
- **Paul Norney**, Belfast, was 17 when arrested in 1975 (Maghaberry)
- **Joe O’Connell**, Clare, was 24 when arrested in 1975 (Full Sutton)
- **Harry Duggan**, Clare, was 23 when arrested in 1975 (Frankland)
IRISH POWs IN ENGLISH JAILS

There are a total of 43 Irish political prisoners sentenced in England serving sentences ranging from 16 years, in the case of sixty-eight year old Joe McKenny, to the tariff of 50 years in the cases of Paul Kavanagh, Tommy Quigley, and Pat Magee. Seven of the prisoners are now in their twenty-first year of imprisonment. Twenty-four are held in jails in England, nine are on temporary transfer to Maghaberry jail, and ten are on permanent transfer, six of whom are in Long Kesh. Those in England are categorised as High Risk Category ‘A’ prisoners and are currently held in four high-security jails at Belmarsh, Full Sutton, Frankland, and Whitemoor. All of the prisoners in England have witnessed a deterioration in conditions since the IRA cessation in August, 1994. New restrictions and rules have been introduced which make their situation worse than at any time since the mid 1970s.

SPECIAL SECURE UNITS

From the 20th June 1995 the British Home Secretary, Michael Howard, introduced closed visits for all thirteen High Risk Category ‘A’ prisoners, eight of whom were Irish, held in the Special Secure Units (SSUs) at Whitemoor and Belmarsh. This move was the latest in a series of draconian measures against Irish prisoners in English jails introduced in the wake of the IRA cessation in August, 1994. Closed visits are the latest step in the policy of aggression against the prisoners and their families. The Irish prisoners refuse to cooperate with the new visits regime and thus have no contact with their families. Within the SSUs, a restrictive regime of association with other prisoners was introduced along with forced prison work. Access to gym, library, education, training facilities, and religious services has been denied. Exercise has been limited to one hour-per-day in a small, caged area. The prisoners are subjected to regular cell and strip searching. Each SSU contains approximately six to seven prisoners confined in a small space year in, year out, and watched at all times by cameras and twelve screws. The atmosphere is thus very claustrophobic. Prisoners never leave the SSU except to avail of the hour’s exercise. Since they refuse to engage in forced prison work, all Irish prisoners are on twenty-three hour lock up in their cells.
Gay men and lesbian women have been involved in the struggle for national liberation and independence as long as any other section of our people. You might claim that you have never known nor met a gay man or a lesbian woman but you have met one or more today, last week, last year, 27 years ago for they have been there among us, in struggle alongside you. The primary reason you have not noticed them is that the prevailing culture in our society in relation to sexuality in general, and to homosexuality in particular, compels gays/lesbians to conform, thus their sexuality becomes invisible.

Women as a whole were also once virtually invisible in the national struggle. In recent years, however, they have argued forcefully that women’s liberation must be an integral part of the struggle. In order that the concept of women’s liberation be recognised and accepted as an equal, valid component, women comrades confronted their male counterparts with the contradictions of sexist words and actions. While there is still a long way to go to overcome male chauvinism and sexism, at least today, women have succeeded in putting feminist issues on the agenda of the anti-imperialist fight.

It is now time, indeed long past time, to open up debate among republicans on the issue of gays and lesbians, our oppression and its causes, and on our right to be visible equal partners. I believe that, by its very nature, national liberation incorporates gay/lesbian liberation as an integral part, and it is only through open debate leading to an understanding of gay/lesbian experience that our equality in struggle can be made a reality.

Social and economic oppression is something the people in the whole of Ireland have suffered, and in the North, the weight of British occupation is an added burden. As gays/lesbians, we are doubly oppressed, for we have had to endure further oppression within our families, local communities, and within the Republican Movement because of our sexuality. This manifests itself in many ways and affects every part of our lives.

The state discriminates against gays/lesbians and denies us equality in marriage, education, social welfare, employment, adoption, life insurance ... the list is endless. The legal status of gays/lesbians reflects attitudes in the wider society. All the churches promote traditional, stereotypical views in relation to matters like contraception, abortion, sex education for young people, and the rights of women in marriage. The Catholic Church in particular seeks to maintain its control over our lives and our sexuality, and it has spawned organisations such as family solidarity whose views on homosexuality range from the patronising and arrogant to the downright chilling: ‘
If homosexual acts are legalised, the likelihood is that this will be interpreted as a major reversal in social policy, and as recognition by society that for those who are so inclined, engaging in these unnatural, unhealthy, and immoral acts is now to be seen as a right… [Legislative reform] would send shock waves through every part of society, the structure of marriage and the family would be interfered with, the rights of children and their parents violated, and the freedom and autonomy of religious institutions and schools would be seriously breached.’ (Family Solidarity News, Spring 1991)

In short, the end of civilisation as we know it because of men loving men and women loving women! Such attitudes, which are based on intolerance, misinformation, and fear, serve only to demonise gays and lesbians in the minds of Irish people, evoking images of us as depraved men and women wreaking havoc throughout society.

While oppression from the state and the institutions of society adversely affects the quality of life for gays/lesbians, there are other forms of oppression which are as much, if not more, detrimental. Gays and lesbians face oppression daily from family, comrades, neighbours, and friends due to the irrational fear of and deep prejudice against homosexuality.

The most direct expressions of such homophobia are insults, derision, and threatened or actual violence. Indirect expressions are sometimes harder to pin down but are nonetheless just as offensive: the pressures to ‘be what you are but to keep it secret and don’t rock the boat.’ This is nothing short of moral blackmail as it is usually accompanied by comments like ‘What will the family think?’ or, ‘It will harm the Movement/struggle.’ Thus gays and lesbians are forced into invisibility within both the community and the Republican Movement, and consequently within the struggle.

This is a situation which must be confronted not only by gays and lesbians but by everyone who espouses the ideals of republicanism. ‘We declare that we desire our country to be ruled in accordance with the principles of liberty, equality, and justice for all,’ states the 1919 Democratic Programme of Dáil Éireann. Republicans who have always been to the fore on issues of justice and equality must begin to recognise the oppression of gays/lesbians and to identify with their needs. Republicans must acknowledge and resolve the contradictions in their attitude and behaviour which add to that oppression.

Our participation in the national liberation struggle is not a detraction from its nature and objectives; on the contrary, our involvement is a reinforcement that the struggle is indeed about the freedom and equality of all who are oppressed. No one should feel excluded. Gay men and lesbian women, especially gay/lesbian comrades within the Republican Movement, must begin the process of full integration and acceptance into the struggle by becoming more visible and making our voices heard on issues that affect us. The prejudices of others can be resolved only by confronting them and by exposing the oppression that those prejudices give rise to, with the resultant fear,
isolation, and violence. The experience of such feelings is not imaginary; they are a daily reality for gays and lesbians in the Bogside, Falls, Monaghan, Dungannon, Ardoyn, Ballymun, Crossmaglen, and every other town and village in Ireland.

The key to gay/lesbian liberation lies in the success of the national struggle. Gays and lesbians must be a visible part of that struggle so that everyone will recognise that we fought to end the oppression of all. This vital necessity is stressed by those involved in other wars of liberation.

Simon Nkoli, a gay activist involved in the Delmas treason trial in South Africa in 1966, has this to say:

There are lots of gay activists involved in political organisations, but because of the pressure put upon the gay and lesbian community we are afraid to come out. ‘What will people think if they know I’m a gay person? I’d better fight against apartheid in a hidden way.’ The danger of that is that, when South Africa is liberated, we as gay people will seem never to have taken part in liberating our people. What will we say if people ask, ‘What did you do to bring about change in this country, where were you during the battle?’ We’d have to come back to them and say, ‘We were with you but we didn’t want you to know we were there.’ That would be a foolish answer.

Gays and lesbians need to seek out the strength and support of each other, and of those around us who are receptive to the cause of our liberation. There is a need for gay/lesbian comrades to discuss together the issues that affect our lives and which retard participation in the national liberation struggle. In isolation, we stand alone and remain invisible, continuing to be oppressed not only by the state but within our own communities.

Through mutual reinforcement and support, we can break down the isolation that each feels and discard the cloak of invisibility that has for too long made a misery of, and destroyed, the lives of gays and lesbians. Together, we can articulate the relevance of gay/lesbian liberation, confront the homophobia that faces us, and attempt to resolve it through dialogue and discussion. This can only be based on logic and facts, not on the myths and mistruths deliberately fed to our people by those who seek to maintain control over every aspect of our lives: social, political, cultural, economic, and sexual.

Everyone has a role to play in the struggle to end all oppression. Those who are themselves oppressed have an obligation to ensure that they do not contribute in any way to the oppression of others. To do otherwise is to deny the essence of the struggle for ‘liberty, equality, and justice for all.’
Festival Drama in the Blocks

Paddy O'Dowd

H Block 4, Long Kesh

As part of Féile an Phobail (the West Belfast Community Festival), republican prisoners in Long Kesh recently staged a performance of their play The Crime of Castlereagh an adaption of the Bobby Sands’ epic trilogy of poems, ‘The Crime of Castlereagh,’ ‘Diplock Court,’ and ‘H Block Torture Mill.’ It charts the experiences of a prisoner as he moves from the physical and psychological torture of Castlereagh, to the farce of a Diplock trial, to the mixture of brutality and comradeship during the blanket/no-wash protest in the H Blocks.

This production had been nine months in the making. The previous week, the cast had spent many hours rehearsing and preparing. The capacity audience, which had packed the canteen, was full of expectations. At the end of the night, no one was disappointed. Indeed, what took place over the next hour-and-a-half far exceeded anything that might have been expected. This production was excellent and must be the most thought-provoking, emotionally-charged, and energetic play ever performed in the H Blocks.

The first scene wasted no time in setting the standard for the rest of the night. The curtains opened to reveal an iron bed from beneath which emerged two black-clad ghouls in grotesque masks, filling the state with an evil mischief. There was no room for idle props in this production, with the two figures using a towel as a noose, creating a mock gallows from the bedstead, and staging a mock hanging with both, all the while laughing menacingly.

The arrival of the prisoner (Frankie Quinn who brought great energy to a very demanding role) was swift and brutal as he was thrown onto the stage and ably assaulted by the guard or ‘Watcher’ (Tony Doherty who performed all his roles with a zeal). With the Watcher’s departure, it soon became clear that the ghouls were the torments of the prisoner, all his fears and doubts come to life. Amid all their taunting, his loneliness and terror came across clearly, evoking a sympathy that was almost choking when the narration began:

I scratched my name but not for fame
Upon the whitened wall.

Micheál Mac Giolla Ghunna’s delivery was perfect, the slow drawl carrying the feel of history and, as he was hidden from the audience’s view, the walls themselves seemed to speak the words. And what better narrator of this trilogy than the walls of a H Block.

Bobby Sands was here, I wrote with fear
In awful shaky scrawl.
The audience had no difficulty in relating to the plight of the tormented figure on stage. The tension was razor sharp, built up with the music and sound effects of Eddie Higgins and Paddy Devenny using everything from bodhrán and whistle to kitchen utensils. Many a hair stood on not a few necks as the narration continued:

When Christ I stared as at me glared
The death name of Maguire.

'Maguire ... Maguire,' the ghouls echoed hauntingly (Brian Maguire died under controversial circumstances in a Castlereagh cell in May 1978).

After exploring the psychological torment of waiting for the interrogation, the scene shifted to physical pain. A casual costume change on stage (subtle but effective) transformed the ghouls into two interrogators. Dan Kelly and Mairtin Óg Meehan managed all the 'qualities' of these roles, even instilling a little humour amid the tense proceedings. Meanwhile, Johnny McCann and Marty Morris, as torturers' assistants, graphically demonstrated some of the ways they use:

To loosen up your tongue ...  
Till a man cries for the womb  
That give him birth to this cruel earth  
And torture of that room.

The use of the sparse props throughout was superbly imaginative to which description on paper could never do service. Within this one scene, a pole was used in all manners from a torture rack to a stairway and none of it seemed out of place. To the strains of 'The Blanket Song,' the prisoner climbed to the top of that stairway, signalling his defiance in the face of the interrogators, and the end of the first scene. Thirty minutes had passed and no one was leaving their seats.

The second scene was set in a Diplock court. Its opening confronted us with the operatives: the doctor, who only diagnosed self inflicted wounds; the branchman and the prosecutor, all sharpening knives like butchers. The prisoner was dragged in by a screw, past this terrifying sight. Isolated, the prisoner was placed in:

That dock a lonely island there  
And I a castaway,  
The sea around alive with sharks  
And hatred's livid spray.

In terms of imagery, this was unsurpassable: the re-enactment of torture, the physicalised murder of truth, the slithering snakes of witnesses, swooping
prosecuting hawk, pig in wig judge, the circle of lies all done effortlessly and still with the ability to induce an emotional response from the audience. If the farce of Diplock and its central role in the conveyor belt system was ever 'captured,' this was it. The dignity of the prisoner was brought to the fore as he emerged from a repressive scrum of characters trying to bury him:

And see that splendid sun
That splendid sun of freedom born,
A freedom dearly won.

The audience was even more engrossed as the curtains closed a second time. The opening of the third and final scene brought us to the 'H Block Torture Mill.' This conveyed the horrors of the blanket/no-wash protest, as well as the strength of those who endured the physical and psychological torture while tending others’ wounds and pulling a comrade back from the edge of mental breakdown. Full credit to the cast for managing to put so much into one scene without it seeming disjointed or unreal. The sight of the three blanketmen lying in the background upstage while the death and funeral of the screw/torturer took place downstage was a striking image, one for the self-righteous politics of condemnation:

Yet! Whinging voices cried aloud,
What did this poor man do?
He only done what madmen done
Upon the silent Jew.

The part of the POW who is losing control in face of all the brutality was a great performance by Johnny McCann. Even the blankets around the men’s bodies were used as props to signify the claustrophobic pressure whilst the selective use of sound effects cued us easily into the mounting degrees of tension. The pain of imprisonment was brought out by a fine piece in which, to the strains of ‘Only Our Rivers Run Free,’ one of the POWs escapes the squalor around him and dreams of a life beyond his concrete tomb:

To dance and prance to love’s romance
Is elegant and neat …

But he is jolted back to terrible reality by his comrade’s need to use the toilet which for him is the corner of the cell:

To eat and sit where you’ve just shit
Is not so bloody sweet!
The tension climaxed when the POWs were dragged out one at a time by the screws using various brutal search procedures. The cell was cleaned and the men were returned individually and badly assaulted, signifying all the horrors of the wing shift and the opportunism of the screws to systematically degrade and beat the prisoners. Yet the comradeship and unity of the blanketmen could not be broken:

And to our door we stood in scores
To conquer their black fame
For loud and high we sang our cry,
‘A Nation Once Again.’

And while singing this song, the three POWs smeared the walls of their cell again. This was no romantic struggle, this was resistance by the only means available and a determination not to be defeated.

For the closing of the scene and the performance, the narrator emerged to walk among the cast reciting with conviction:

We do not wear the guilty stare
Of those who bear a crime.
Nor do we don a badge of wrong
To tramp the penal line.
So men endure this pit of sewer
For freedom of the mind.

The closing of the curtains ended an unforgettable performance, one greatly appreciated as shown by the sustained applause. This type of theatre had not been tried in the blocks before, and all involved carried it off superbly. Prisoners toughened and made cynical by long years of struggle were close to tears. With the lights turned on again, I sat in the brightness of the canteen amid the appreciative buzz of my comrades. The banner above the stage was so appropriate: ‘Nor Meekly Serve My Time.’ The words and imagery of Bobby Sands created under the most appalling circumstances have come a long way, from the darkest days of the blanket protest to the jail conditions that such sacrifice has achieved for us today, enabling his poetry to be brought to life by a new generation of republican prisoners. For those of us privileged to see it, this play was a proud reminder that we are part of that same noble struggle.
Objects in the Rear-View Mirror

Dan Kelly
H Block 6, Long Kesh

Twilight submitted to dusk as Joe lit a cigar and turned onto the slipway of the Boston Interstate. A light snow flurry brushed the dusty windscreen and soon became a proper snow shower. The radio played ‘Merry Christmas everyone.’ Joe laughed and sang along, tapping his fingers to the beat on the steering wheel.

Snow is falling all around,
Children playing, having fun.

He felt good about himself. At 35 he was the number one salesman for ‘Calco’ fascia board house fronts, and had been so for the past three years, since knocking Kenny Spring off the number one spot. They were bitter rivals. Kenny, in Joe’s eyes, was a sucker or a sad story who took no for an answer too easily. Only the best deserved the ‘extras’ the number one position brought: choice of new car, free holiday, and 10% higher cut of commission, not to mention the prestige. Joe had become very used to the attention, and the almost celebrity status associated with the position and he wasn’t about to give that up lightly. The three newly-signed contracts in his briefcase would ensure that.

The sweeping wipers formed little ridges of snow on each side of the screen until blown away by the car’s motion. The road was quiet, usually he preferred some traffic – lonely travellers of the night, unified by some unseen bond that lasted the short space of time they were visible to each other. Eventually, a set of headlights appeared in the magnified mirror. He noticed the sign at the bottom of the mirror; familiarity had made him forget it: ‘Objects in the rear view mirror may appear closer than they are.’

As if on cue, the radio played Meatloaf singing, ‘Objects in the rear view mirror.’

‘Hold on a second,’ Joe said to his stubbled reflection. ‘Is this guy psychic or what?’ He was making connections between songs and events. ‘Get a grip of yourself, Joe,’ he smiled.

He was still smiling when the car behind started to overtake. As it drew level, the passenger slowly turned his head to look at Joe. They both passed an overhead light, and for a split second, it shone on the man’s face. Joe slammed on the brakes forcing the car to skid on the slushy surface, it careered onto the hard shoulder. He stared hard in disbelief at the red tail lights disappearing into the swirling snow. The blood in his veins ran cold, he could almost hear the palpitations of his heart, his breathing quickened, white-knuckled hands felt weak. He lifted them off the steering wheel and covered his ashen face. ‘It couldn’t have been,’ he said. ‘I know it couldn’t have been … but it was … It was George.’
Joe’s parents divorced when he was fifteen. While they were sorting out the messy details, he had stayed with his Uncle George and Aunt Mary on their small holdings farm in San Francisco. Although they were strict on both principles and morals, they were also fair, giving him the respect his own parents had not. He remained with them for the rest of a happy adolescence. The relationship turned sour however, when some years later George accused his nephew of shady dealings concerning lease holdings with the neighbouring farm. Joe always regretted not making his peace with his Aunt and Uncle before they died in an horrific car crash three years ago.

‘Get a grip of yourself,’ he repeated, slapping his face as if to waken himself. ‘I need a break, that’s it; I need a break. I’ve been on the road most of the year. As soon as I get these contracts registered, I’ll take the family on a short New Year vacation. Bella has been nagging me about the hours anyway.’ The radio still blared its music but now it began to bug him. He punched a button; any button. Some Reverend preached a sermon over the air waves, not really Joe’s scene but somehow it was soothing to the ear.

‘I’ll rest here for a few minutes,’ he thought. Still feeling a little weak, he lit a half Corona and inhaled heavily, laid his head on the headrest and blew a pall of grey smoke at the car’s roof. It rolled along the padding like the plume of a miniature explosion. The voice on the radio faded to a smooth drone. His eyes relaxed, blinked, then closed.

‘Have you earned money ignobly today?’ the radio blared. His eyes jarred open. ‘Yes you! I’m talking to you, if you’re thinking about it, then I’m talking to you.’ The Reverend was laying it on thick, Mississippi style. Joe blinked his eyes preparing to drive off.

‘Give it back, redeem yourself and give it back.’

‘Yeah yeah,’ he said nonchalantly, then switched back to the music channel.

‘The truth hurts, doesn’t it Joe?’ His head jerked towards the radio but it was playing music.

His eyes crept towards the mirror. The beam from a car’s lights travelling in the opposite direction pierced the darkness in front. His eyes continued in the mirror’s direction, almost afraid to look at it. In the flash of light caused by the passing car, he saw reflected in the mirror his uncle’s unmistakable likeness, his salt and pepper beard the most distinguishing feature. Joe’s whole being jumped with shock. He drew a sharp breath that pained his chest, he could hear his own pulse pounding in his ears. The cold shiver returned and tingled the length of his body from head, through spine, to his toes. He could feel a breath of cold air on his neck. Cautiously he edged his head to look over his shoulder, fearing what he was about to see, while nervous eyes watched what was now just an outline in the mirror. Then with quick jerk of head and body he turned to face the back seat. Nothing.

‘There’s nothing there,’ he sighed with great relief.

Joe looked at his open shaking hands. His heart was still pounding. He rubbed his face as though he were washing. ‘Jeez I’m cracking up,’ he said. Once again he checked the mirror – nothing. He reached for the glove
compartment, took out a bottle and swallowed two large slugs. His face was still cringed from the taste of raw whisky when the voice returned.

‘What did I always tell you about drinking and driving?’ He looked at the mirror once more. Still nothing. His face distorted as he put the bottle to his head again.

Ten miles were clocked before the voice returned in whispering tones. ‘Give it back Joe.’

He was determined not to look, but disobeying eyes drew to the mirror like pin to magnet. ‘Go Away,’ he screamed. ‘Go away and leave me alone, you’re not there, go away.’

‘How can I go away if I’m not here?’ the voice asked.
‘You’re only my imagination, go away. I’m not going to think about you.’
‘Call me what you will Joe, I’m here.’ The voice hung in the stuffy, smoke-filled air of the car.
‘Go, leave me in peace, get out of my mind.’
‘Give it back Joe, and I’ll leave you in peace.’
‘Give what back?’

‘The contract you got tonight, and the other two in the case with it.’ The flash of lights from an oncoming car blinded him for an instant.
As his sight was returning he could have sworn he saw George finishing the sentence.
‘Those people can’t afford new house fronts.’
But when he checked again there was nothing. With a shake of his head he asked, ‘Why am I talking to myself?’
He laughed aloud, a nervous laugh, and said, ‘Joe man I think it’s time to lay off the booze as well.’
‘They can’t afford it,’ the voice whispered. Still there was no shadow, just a voice in his head.
‘Of course they can afford it, they wouldn’t have signed if they couldn’t.’ His ice blue eyes danced between mirror and road.
‘You’ve had the Herrins’ contract in your case from Monday. Would you like to see what happened to the Herrins, Joe?’
‘No.’
‘Look at the mirror Joe,’ the hypnotic voice demanded.
‘No!’
He tried not to look, but suddenly the mirror came to life, like a miniature television screen. Both the Herrins stood by the Christmas tree, embracing each other, both crying. The two-year-old twins played with the unfinished Christmas decorations.
‘They weren’t like that when I left them,’ Joe protested. ‘They weren’t like that when I left them.’
‘No they weren’t,’ the voice sighed. ‘But Mr. Herrin hadn’t lost his job then.’
‘I can’t help that, I’m only trying to do my job. Anyway I’m sure he’ll find another job soon enough.’
‘They can’t afford it Joe.’
His eyes moved nervously from mirror to road. Why was he torturing himself like this, he thought.

‘Remember Mrs. Martin, Joe? You sweet-talked Mrs. Martin into signing, with promises of easy repayments, and the best after-sales services. You knew she was vulnerable, going through a bad patch with her husband. Then you, a sweet-talking, good-looking young man chat her up and she falls under your spell, but look at her now. Look at her,’ the voice demanded.

Again his eyes drew unwillingly towards the picture. The Martins were in the middle of a heated argument, presents scattered across the living room floor. Then Mrs Martin was walking out of the house, carrying a suitcase in one hand, a child clung to the other, and two others followed in her wake. All in tears.

‘I’m not a Goddamn marriage guidance counsellor,’ Joe snapped. ‘Their marriage was probably on the rocks anyway.’

‘It was tough Joe, but they would have made it.’ ‘I want you to look at the Baker household six months from now.’

‘NO! NO. I don’t want to look at these stupid pictures.’

The mirror showed a picture of Mr. Baker, the man who had signed the contract that very night, sitting on his settee. Then the picture panned out to show him fitting a false hand to the stump of his right wrist.

‘Mr. Baker was finding it hard to make the repayments, so he started moonlighting at a meat-processing factory at nights, but the two jobs were taking their toll on him. He fell asleep at one of the machines.’

‘Look, you can’t blame me for the world’s wrongs. I’m sorry for Mr. Baker, but I’m sure the insurance will look after him.’

‘Wrong Joe. You see he was moonlighting, and the insurance company, like your own, has fine print too.’

‘You were the one who told me it’s a competitive world, and to get out there and take my slice.’

The voice became harsh and loud. ‘Not at other people’s misery and expense. When I told you these things, you had a heart. Do you think you would have done as well without my help?’

‘I got to this position on my own steam,’ he barked, thumping the steering wheel.

‘Did you? Did you now? And how long ago would that have been then?’

In a whispered stammer, he replied. ‘Three ye ... Three years ago.’

‘Since my accident ... All I ask you to do is to search your heart and give these people a chance. You have in your briefcase the opportunity to change their lives.’

His head slowly dropped from mirror to road. He drove in silence for some time. I must be going crazy, he thought to himself, hearing voices, seeing images.

Joe drove the next five miles recalling cases where families, through their ambition to improve their homes with a ‘Calco’ house front, had actually forfeited their mortgages when they couldn’t keep up the repayments. The
pictures of the three families appeared in his head time after time after time. His conscience gave him no rest. Eventually he relented. 'Okay,' he said solemnly. 'Okay, Monday morning I'll post the contracts back to them.' Suddenly, as if hitting a series of small ramps, the car shuddered and he felt drained and cold. He turned the heating to full, then noticed the sign for the turn off for his home town.

Bella greeted him at the door. After the family dinner, when kids were tucked into bed, he explained his experience on the motorway.

'Joe,' she said sternly. 'I didn’t want to bring the subject up again, especially at this time of the year, but you know wh...'

'Don’t start this all over again Bella, I’m sick listening to it.'

'You may be sick listening to it Joe, but you’re doing nothing about it. Your health has run down to such a state that you’re hallucinating, or maybe it was the drink. Your boss wouldn’t be so proud of you if he knew you were doing that, would he?'

Joe sat with his head bowed.

'No I didn’t think so. You would be out quicker than Jack Flash.'

'Look,' Joe snapped, finding his voice again. 'I do all this for you and the kids and ...'

'Don’t give me that Joe,' she said with raised voice and scornful look. 'You haven’t seen your kids most of the year, you couldn’t even make it to one of their birthdays. How many times am I going to have to ask you for the sake of our marriage to give that job up.'

They argued for most of the weekend, both getting nowhere.

Monday morning arrived. All two hundred sales representatives of 'Calco' fascia board house fronts were present in the dining hall, as was required by the management. Eleven a.m. was the deadline for the final contracts to be included in this year’s tally, deciding who would be top dog. A cushion-stuffed Santa Claus and two mini-skirted helpers passed out sandwiches and drinks. Most of the reps had put their contracts in between nine and ten a.m. There were only a handful left. Protocol dictated that the five top men were last to go, in order of running from five to one. By the time Kenny Spring walked to the tally desk, there was quite a buzz of anticipation. It died down as he removed the contents of his briefcase. He held slightly aloft four contracts. The captivated audience cheered and whistled.

Joe watched the crowd applaud and yell messages of congratulations and support to Spring. His tally came up on the board, two more than Joe’s. As Spring walked by him with a wry grin, they both glared at each other.

'Joe?' the girl at the tally desk said, with an outstretched hand. He looked at her hand, then slowly turned to look at the now quietened crowd. Someone popped a balloon, bringing a ripple of laughter.

'Joe?' she repeated. He felt his briefcase and stared at the crowd. Little beads of sweat glistened on his brow. One by one they started to egg him on. 'Joe, Joe, Joe.' The whole crowd seemed to be chanting in unison. 'Joe, Joe, Joe.' They were like supporters at a football match and Joe felt like the star
of the team. He smiled at them, felt the leather-bound case once more, then in
a quick jerking movement, put it on the girl’s desk.

‘Three,’ he said.

‘Did he say three?’ someone in the crowd asked.

‘Look’s like it’s Joe’s,’ another said.

A murmur of excitement swept the room.

He watched the girl open the case. A charred piece of paper whirled into the
air. Joe watched astounded as it floated past his face. He looked to the case,
his eyes widening with horror. He plunged both hands into the ashes and
rummaged through it. The girl stared at him in amazement, the hushed crowd
looked at each other, then to Joe. His tally went up on the board, the crowd went
wild cheering, popping balloons, and throwing streamers. Spring was lifted
shoulder high and carried out of the canteen. Joe, stunned, was looking into
empty space when the girl at the tally desk eventually got his attention.

‘Joe, Joe,’ she said, tugging at his sleeve. ‘The boss has just phoned. He
wants to see you in his office right away.’

‘This is Peter Burnstein,’ his boss said. ‘He’s a very good friend of mine …
He’s with the Boston P.D.’

Joe shook hands with the tall slim figure, who then turned and sat on the two
seater by the wall.

‘Take a seat,’ his boss said, an order more than a request. His boss Karl was
a burly six-foot-two of a man. He sat on the corner of his desk, the corner closest
to Joe’s chair, his towering frame intimidating at such close proximity. He
looked down at Joe, who dropped timid eyes.

‘You’ve been with us how long now Joseph?’ He always called people by
their full Christian name.

‘Six years,’ he replied.

‘And how many of them at the top?’

‘Three,’ he answered proudly.

‘I expected better from a man in your position.’

Joe felt his face flush. He could do without a dressing down in front of the
boss’s friend. ‘It wasn’t my fault Karl, if I …’

‘Wasn’t your fault?’ he said, getting off the edge of the desk. ‘Wasn’t your
fault?’ His tone was sharp. ‘Well if it wasn’t your fault, whose damn fault was
it?’

He thought about trying to explain the charred remains of the contracts, but
decided it would be better to remain silent.

‘I’ll be back up there next year Karl, I’ll be on top of the pile again, it’s just
that ….’ He lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘It’s just that I’ve been having a
few problems at home, but I guarantee I’ll be back on top next year.’

‘Not with this firm you won’t,’ Karl said.

Joe’s lower jaw dropped an inch. ‘Won’t be … Won’t be back?’ He couldn’t
believe what he was hearing. ‘You mean to say … let me get this right,’ he said,
wiping the back of his hand across a sweating brow. ‘You mean to say you’re
going to let me go because I didn’t make it back to the top? What kind of …’
‘Back to the top? What are you talking about man. Surely you know why you’re in here and it has nothing to do with any tally.

Joe was puzzled for a moment, then turned to look at the slim figure sitting quietly behind him. It was only then he realised his boss’s friend wasn’t here for a Christmas reunion.

‘Where were you on Friday night Joe, say between the hours of eight and midnight?’ the policeman inquired. Joe’s heart pumped a little faster now, realising he wasn’t in the office for a dressing down.

‘Friday night?’ His thoughts went into overdrive. ‘Friday night? Ah ... I, ah ... Yes!’ he said, with a certain degree of relief. ‘I was driving on the interstate between those hours.’

‘In your own car?’

‘Yes, well, in the company car,’ he said with a twitching grin. He could feel a little trickle of sweat plough its way down his back.

Karl fed a video tape into the machine, the picture came up with a still photo of his car, the number plate quite clear. ‘This is your car Joe?’ he asked pointing to the time, date, and location record in the corner.

‘Yes ... Yes it is,’ he said, still puzzled.

‘And by your own admission, you in it.’

No answer was given, and none expected. His boss hit the play button. Joe watched in horror as his car swerved from lane to lane cutting across other traffic. The speedometer recorded speeds at times in excess of 110 mph.

‘You see Joe, Peter here has agreed that seeing as no one was hurt in this madness,’ he said, pointing to the screen with a pen, ‘that the action I am about to take will suffice instead of lengthy legal proceedings.’ The words just whirled around in Joe’s head as he glared at his actions on the video.

‘Even though you are one of our best reps and we are in the mouth of Christmas, I can’t ignore actions such as these. There is no doubt in my mind that you must have been drinking on Friday night. You know we have a very strict policy about that. It must be quite clear to you that our company can’t afford multi-car pile-ups. I’ll expect your resignation on my desk by the end of business today. The rest of the staff will know nothing of this, they’ll simply think you’re a sore loser. By the way,’ he added, as a stunned Joe walked out the door. ‘You can also leave the keys of the car.’

Snow had fallen all weekend and lay thick on the branches of the tree-lined avenue. Joe arrived home in a hired cab. There was another sitting outside the house with its engine running. He wondered who it might be for. As he walked along the pathway he got his answer. Bella was coming out carrying a suitcase, with three children in tow.

‘What’s goi...’ He knew what he wanted to say but the words wouldn’t come easy, they choked their way out. ‘Bella ... What’s happening? What’s going on?’

‘Go on kids, into the cab.’ She ushered them past their father, leaving fresh footprints in the virgin snow.
‘For God’s sake Bella,’ he said, taking her by the wrist. ‘Tell me what’s going on.’

She looked with cold eyes, then walked back into the house with him. ‘I think it’s pretty clear what’s going on Joe, we’re leaving.’

‘What do you mean you’re leaving?’

There was panic in his voice, mixed with nervous laughter, the type that makes one’s own voice unrecognisable. ‘I don’t ... I don’t understand.’

‘That’s the problem Joe. That has always been the problem. How often have I told you that you were a stranger to your own kids. They didn’t even want to kiss you goodbye for God’s sake.’

Fury didn’t mix well with confusion. His eyelids half closed. He lifted a hand and slapped Bella hard on the face, something he had never done the whole time of their marriage. Her face turned with the slap. He lifted his hand to slap her again. ‘Why now? why now?’ he yelled.

She didn’t try to cover her face but simply stared at her husband, his hand remained above his head. The sparkle of a tear appeared in her eyes caused not by pain, but at what had become of him. He crashed his hand against the door frame. They both stood a moment in awkward silence, searching each other’s eyes.

‘Bella forgive me please,’ he said. ‘Let’s work this out, we can work it out. I’ve left my job. I’ll have more time for you and the kids. Please Bella, I’ll never raise a hand in anger again, you know that. I love you and the kids. Please don’t go.’

She stared at him still but with eyes of pity, not love. ‘It’s too late Joe. You received love freely but you wouldn’t give it back. It’s too late,’ she repeated in a whisper as a tear fell from her cheek. He didn’t want to, but something made him loosen his grip on her wrist. She lifted the suitcase and walked out the door without a backward glance. He knew he had lost them.

Joe fell into his chair in the study, buried his head in his hands and cried.

‘It’s all going wrong. I’ve lost a job and a family all in one day. What have I done to deserve this?’ He sobbed for some time. Self pity eventually turned to anger. Taking the bottle of whisky from the drawer he tried to open it with his right hand but it had throbbed painfully since he crashed it against the door frame. He took the bottle in his left and smashed the neck on the desk. He stretched his right hand trying to ease the pain, but the whisky eased it better. He fell into a drunken slumber.

The pain in his hand woke him some hours later. It took him a moment to focus on the empty bottle on the table. Then he lifted his hand to check the throbbing pain. Rubbing his eyes to look again, still not believing what he thought he was seeing, he turned on the table lamp. His eyes widened with shock. Before him was a hand twice its normal size and almost black. He screamed an unmerciful sound that echoed around the empty house. ‘NO...! GEORGE PLEASE ... NO.’
Peter wasted no time alighting from the tractor and bounding down the slope at a gallop. Peadar Ned made heavy work of it. He chose his footing carefully, leading with his left foot and wedging the bill hook against tufts of grass before easing his trailing leg further down the incline. Both men had come prepared in their own way for the day's work. But only when Peadar Ned had found his footing at the bottom of the descent did he realise how unprepared he was for the sight ahead. He stared in at the hellish, black-charred devastation. He choked on the acid-like stench before covering his mouth with a large white handkerchief.

Peter had marched on ahead, indifferent it seemed to the rough uneven terrain or the burning smell. 'There's a job to be done,' he scornfully thought, glancing over his shoulder at the white flutter pin pointing the old man amidst the blackened forest and losing neither speed nor step as he did so. 'There was little point in calling back or in even waiting or the old man to catch up. It would evoke little response and less haste,' he contemplated. And so he tramped on.

Peadar Ned made steady progress now. He was a good thirty to forty paces behind the younger man, but even at that, he found himself wading through a storm of flaking black ash, which billowed in his wake. He wondered if some young entrepreneur wouldn't soon come up with an idea to market the stuff. 'Confetti Ash, the latest in funeral fashion.'

The figure ahead cut a strange shape as it swathed onward. The bright-red chain saw swung from side to side giving the appearance that he was slashing his way through the forest's undergrowth. Except there was no undergrowth worth mentioning. What was left of it crumbled into black powder at the slightest touch, making the presence of a chain saw seem ridiculous for the task in hand. The contrast between the yellowing barley field at home and this desolate place sent a cold shiver through him as he passed the rows of naked, black skeletons one after the other. 'What in God's name possessed anyone to do the like of this,' he was thinking when the scream of the engine cut across his line of thought.

Peter sent frail, charred, brittle branches flying in all directions. The chain saw roared again. Within seconds he had stripped the remaining branches from the trunk. The old man, only a short distance away now, looked at the lonely naked figure with its torn white flesh. But it was gone with one final scream, the cold steel ripping through the base of what had been a healthy young
sapling. Another and another and another fell before the younger man looked around.

‘Strip that lot tay yer left.’ Peter nodded and turned back into his work. Peadar Ned removed his hat and large overcoat and carefully laid them on a high, dry spot, concealing beneath them a canvas shoulder bag. He licked his thumb and ran it over the gleaming bright edge of the bill hook. Satisfied, he made his way towards a group of prematurely balding young fir trees. He swung the hook over his left shoulder and cleaved off the highest branches with one clean swipe. As he went lower down, the impact jarred his wrists and shoulder. ‘That was only to be expected, since the lower branches are thicker and I’m not yet warmed to the task,’ he felt. He soon moved into a smooth methodical rhythm that wouldn’t over tax him in the day ahead. He had only taken a few short breaks in the two hours or so, just to catch his breath and mop the sweat and dirt from his brow. But now that the younger man was speedily working up behind him, he felt he had to push on, regardless of the tiredness and pain he was feeling in his left arm.

‘You may start piling those posts while I shoot down and get the tractor to bring a load out,’ the younger man shouted, the chain saw not yet having time to fall silent. The old man turned to speak but looked into a black cloud of charred bark, resembling a swarm of flies, that the young man had just vanished from. Peter practically raced across the bog. He knew there was a small fortune to be made, if only he could get the job done before the authorities sealed the place off. Peadar Ned obeyed the instructions and set about piling all the posts in a convenient spot for loading on to the tractor. He began by tossing the logs a short distance into the clearing, but as he moved along the row, his throw was falling short of the pile. It was extra work to have to lift the logs a second time in order to stack them properly. So he resigned himself to carrying them all the way. ‘Two weren’t so heavy,’ he felt to begin with, ‘If only his damned arm wasn’t so painful. But he would take a rest and a bite of lunch soon after he finished the remainder on this side.’ He carried a few more, single logs, this time on his right shoulder only. ‘A bite to eat would replenish his strength,’ he thought. He spread his coat on the heap of logs, to sit as he opened his bag. He put the bread to his mouth but felt no urge to eat it. ‘Strange,’ he thought, ‘The country air usually gives a body a good appetite.’ He caught the burnt smell in his nostrils and replaced the bread in its wrapping. ‘Maybe a drop of tea will revive me,’ he thought, pulling a tea-filled HP-sauce bottle out of a thick woolen sock, which kept it warm. He put it to his lips, ‘Too warm, it’s too warm to drink.’ He felt up tight and ill-at-ease, as if his shirt was too tight on him, but he could find nothing wrong. He decided to rest himself hoping the discomfort would pass.
As he lay back, he recalled the day’s events: the dispute he had with Peter when he said he hoped the culprit that set fire to the forest would be caught, and that no good would come of anyone who’d profit from that sort of behaviour.

‘Well! I’m not one for looking a gift horse in the mouth,’ Peter had quipped, ‘And sure, isn’t it an ill wind that blows no good and I may as well have the posts before somebody else gets their hands on them,’ he hurriedly added, in a bid, albeit in vain, to better his argument.

‘There’ll be wooden posts when we’re dead and buried,’ the old man concluded. All around the forest lay silent, not a bird nor even a breeze stirred. The place was deathly quiet and lifeless.

Peter stood rigid and cold as his grieving mother and family, clad in black, comforted one another. The bereaved watched on the burning scent of candle wax still in their nostrils as the priest blessed the coffin being supported over the open grave by two freshly cut paling posts.
Birth of the Blanket Protest

Ned Flynn
H Block 4, Long Kesh

Ned Flynn, from Andersonstown in West Belfast, was nineteen years of age in 1976 when he was sentenced and became the second man to enter the historic blanket protest in the H blocks. As we commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the beginning of that campaign, he reflects on how the protest started.

Twenty years ago, Britain’s three-pronged strategy to break the republican struggle was in full swing, i.e. normalisation, Ulsterisation, and criminalisation. Normalisation involved the British Government portraying the conflict to the international community as one which was well under control, with a degree of normality now evident. Ulsterisation involved the six-county, sectarian militias of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) taking primary control of security, with the British army now playing a secondary back-up role. Criminalisation was a media-orientated policy, overseen by Northern Ireland Office (NIO) officials, that portrayed the republican struggle as acts of criminals, with terms such as ‘mafia-type gangsters,’ ‘godfathers,’ ‘racketeers,’ and ‘drug barons’ being circulated daily by the media. Furthermore, the struggle was represented as sectarian, and this portrayal was fuelled by British military intelligence who organised Loyalist death squads and even recruited a Military Reaction Force (MRF) within the nationalist community, mercenaries who were ordered to carry out attacks on nationalists and attribute them to loyalists. To reinforce criminalisation, Britain declared that any republican prisoner captured after March 1, 1976 would be classified as a criminal rather than a POW, and as such, would be treated accordingly.

To enhance the success of their three-pronged strategy, the British Government set up a conveyor belt system to remove political opponents and community activists from the streets. It was a quasi-legal alternative to the use of internment without trial which was ended in December 1975 due to international and human rights pressure. The conveyor belt system began in Castlereagh RUC interrogation centre where people perceived as a threat to the state were tortured to extract a false confession. This was later confirmed to Amnesty International by none other than the resident physician, Dr. Irwin. After a long period on remand, the victim was then brought before a Diplock, non-jury court where a single judge appointed by the British Government would blatantly reject the medical evidence of torture and convict on the word
of the RUC interrogator. The end result was the victim being dispatched to the H blocks of Long Kesh to serve out his or her sentence.

Like so many other young men and women who entered the jail system in 1976, I was incapable of articulating Britain's cleverly-designed strategy but, as time would tell, the contribution of the men in the H blocks and the women in Armagh jail was to prove crucial in turning Britain's three-pronged strategy on its head and reviving republican morale within the nationalist six counties. However, the cost in terms of sacrifice was high indeed. In the summer of 1976, Crumlin Road jail was overflowing due to the RUC's systematic round up of nationalists. The talk on everyone's lips, besides their own impending 'trial,' was what lay ahead of us when we ended up in the H blocks of Long Kesh. No republican POW incarcerated after the 1st of March had been sentenced yet so we didn't know how Britain was going to enforce their criminalisation policy. While the fear of the unknown was playing on everyone's mind, we were sure of one thing: we were republican POWs, and irrespective of the consequences which lay ahead, there was no way we were going to let the British Government demonise us or our struggle.

In October 1976, three weeks after Kieran Nugent, the first man sentenced, entered the H blocks, I was sentenced to three years imprisonment. I found myself in the unenviable position of travelling to the H blocks of Long Kesh in a 'meat wagon' (an armoured lorry) with five loyalist prisoners. While the loyalists were generally chit-chatting amongst themselves on the journey up, I was overburdened with the sense of being all alone, wrapped up in my own thoughts, wondering what the impending welcoming party held for me.

On entering A and B wing of H1, which housed ordinary criminals, I told the screws there was no way would I wear the prison uniform or conform to prison rules because I was a Republican POW. At this they laughed and told me in a threatening manner that I would change my mind very shortly. From that moment onward, the screws tried every conceivable method the British Government could conjure up to try and dehumanise us into submitting to their criminalisation policy. They moved me to C and D wing H1 which was not in use. I was put into a bare cell, given a blanket to cover myself, and then the screws left without giving me any food or a mattress to lie on. I was in need of a friendly voice to give me some reassurance, so I got up to the door and called out to Kieran Nugent thinking he would be somewhere in these two wings; but, all I heard was my own echo resounding up and down the corridor. I was on my own.

Over the next number of days, the screws kept up the psychological pressure, informing me at every opportunity that I was on my own as Nugent had put the uniform on; but after a few weeks, I found out he was in a cell in A and B wing. As the days went by, I began to lose all track of time as well as weight because they were just giving me the bare minimum to keep me going. However, when they saw that this and the isolation was having no effect, they switched tactics.
I was taken to the punishment block within the camp where I was charged and sentenced to 14 days loss of remission, 14 days loss of privileges, and three days solitary confinement, which was a bit ironic since I had been in solitary confinement since I entered the blocks and would remain so for the rest of my sentence. The real reason for my move to the punishment block became apparent when a number of screws came into my cell and gave me a beating. All I could do was curl up into a ball and wait until it was over. Undoubtedly, this was one of the lowest points of my time in jail; I was on my own, isolated from my family, friends, and comrades, and the screws took great delight in informing me that much of the same and more was to come.

From what seemed like an eternity of complete isolation, but which in effect was only about three weeks, I was moved to A and B wing H1 where six of my comrades, sentenced a few days beforehand, joined Kieran Nugent and myself on what was now called the blanket protest. After my ordeal over the previous three weeks or so, I can only describe the joy of hearing a friendly voice as akin to somebody giving me a million dollars. Sadly the luxury of spending time with my comrades, even if the conversation was conducted between walls, was short-lived. Two days later I was on the move again.

The NIO was obviously desperate to fragment our unity from the inception of the blanket protest and they thought this was best done by singling out the younger members of the protest for specialised treatment in order that the blanket protest would crumble. Therefore myself, Kieran Nugent, and Paul McEnarney, all under 21, were moved to H2, me to D wing, Paul to C, and Kieran to B. Once again the administration were hoping that isolation from our comrades would sap our will to continue the blanket protest, and that us breaking would have a domino effect on the rest of our comrades.

Isolation was only one part of their strategy. Inhuman and degrading treatment as well as mental and physical torture were all methods designed to cause the collapse of the protest. Initially, what little food they gave us was brought to the cell by ordinary criminals, but after a week or so, they said if I was not fed, I had to leave the cell naked and go to get it. On one side of the wing, there were ordinary criminals, on the other side, the cells were all empty except for the one I occupied, so in order to get my food, I had to go naked into a canteen full of men. The screws took great pleasure in making lewd remarks about certain parts of my anatomy and they encouraged the criminals to do likewise. At every available opportunity, they paraded us like cattle. For example, every fortnight they forced us to go out to the circle (the central area of the block) naked so that the doctor could examine us and declare us fit to be punished. Picture the scene: on a freezing December morning a naked blanket man forced to stand for thirty minutes in front of seventy criminals and numerous screws; he is blue with cold and shivering from head to foot, yet this so called member of the medical profession declares him fit for anything. The NIO would go to any lengths in order to try and degrade us into capitulating and
accepting their criminal status. For example, they told us we would be deprived of going to Mass unless we went naked or wore the prison uniform and so it was, that rather than miss the sacraments, we went to Mass naked on Sunday.

As well as the humiliating and degrading treatment, we also had to contend with the physical abuse and the constant threat of it which was worse than the actual beatings. One screw in particular was given a free hand to do as he wished to the blanket men and no one was left unscathed. Any young lad coming onto the blanket was put through a gruesome ordeal. He was always brought up to H2 at 5:00 pm when all the screws were in the circle, and when he declared he was going on the blanket, many of the screws joined in on stripping him naked and beating him senseless.

The deprivation was all encompassing. We were locked up 24 hours a day, put into a bare cell at 8:30 each morning, and moved into a cell with a bed in it at 8:30 that night. We had no books, radios, tobacco, writing material, or anything of that nature; all of these things were confiscated when we went on the blanket. By Christmas 1976, I had been in the H blocks three months. I did not even know if the outside world knew I existed because I had not seen any of my family as the screws would not let us take visits unless we wore the prison uniform. Our only statutory entitlement was being allowed to write a one-page letter to our families every month, and in return, we were allowed to get one back; but, when I had my first visit eighteen months later, my family told me they had received nothing. It later emerged that the screws ripped our letters up and held back mail from us to give us the impression that we were forgotten.

Christmas 1976 was a very bleak period for the blanket men, but through all the trials and tribulations, we persevered. Our resolve to remain steadfast to our principles and ideals as republican POWs was far greater than the resolve of the British Government to break us.

The blanket protest continued for another five years, escalating into a no-wash protest and culminating in the 1981 hunger strike. By that stage, Britain’s criminalisation strategy, and indeed its international reputation, lay in tatters. The Republican Movement was resurgent, providing a solid foundation for the further development of the struggle and culminating in the present peace process. As for conditions in the H blocks, mindful of the sacrifices endured during our jail campaigns, I write this article twenty years on in an environment where we have de facto recognition as POWs and where we have created the opportunities for personal and collective development beyond anything we imagined possible in 1976.
This coming new year will no doubt bring with it the usual round of resolutions. We’re going on a diet,’ said a few of the girls at the start of this year. ‘We’re going to run every morning,’ said the fitness fanatics. And the majority of smokers declared with great determination that they were most definitely quitting this time.

That was almost a year ago and, fair play to some of them, they’ve battled through it. I broke after a week, and may I say it was the worst week of my life. As a substitute for cigarettes, I stuffed myself with the remaining Christmas cakes and a half-a-pound of brandy balls, was violently ill, broke a tooth, and made everyone’s life a misery with my short temper. No way, I’ll die for Ireland any day as long as I have a fag in my hand.

Apart from all that, I couldn’t think straight and when I listened to some of the others I found they had the same problem. Maire, an ardent smoker for the last twenty years, was looking for the tweezers, but instead asked if anyone had seen Ailish’s eyebrows. Ailish, in the meantime, was talking back to front and informed us all that she was going to tumble dry her hair.

As for the ones on a diet, I caught them scoffing chocolates and drinking Coke. When I tackled them about it, I was told (in a very serious manner I may add) that it was Diet Coke and plain chocolates, not milk ones, as if this made an enormous difference. When I think of the fitness crew, the film The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner comes to mind, and Rosie is out there come rain, hail, or shine. (Funnily enough, my sources in Long Kesh tell me that Ned Flynn is seen pounding the yard in the weeks before an inter-prison visit. Is there a connection? I ask myself.) The excuses from the others varied: ‘It’s too cold,’ ‘I’ve a visit,’ or ‘I’m not well’ were a few of them. But the excuse that took the biscuit (the one the dieters didn’t actually eat, that is) came from Ann Marie who stated, ‘I can’t run this week, I’ve got a sore finger.’ Ah well, Shauneen and Patricia are still doing their work-out to the over ’50s video.

We all talked about it again and made firm decisions. The runners are definitely running after hallowe’en. The dieters are definitely dieting after Christmas, and I’m definitely stopping smoking come what may. As a matter of fact, it’s top of my resolutions for ’97.
There is now widespread recognition of the importance of a process of British
demilitarisation if we are to move towards a just and lasting peace. The future
of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the fate of political prisoners are
central to this process. Indeed, the two issues are inextricably linked, as it has
been human rights abuses by the RUC that has led to many people being behind
bars. Therefore a brief look at the nature and function of interrogation centres
would be useful at this time.

Between 1969 and today, individuals or groups who have opposed the
British presence in the Six Counties have been met with the full force of the
RUC’s huge powers. It has proved extremely difficult for nationalists to secure
protection or redress against RUC abuses of their human rights and dignity. A
remarkable feature about their lack of success is that the abuses have been high
profile, substantial in volume and severity, and sustained in frequency over the
years, with the tacit approval of the British government.

From the mid-1970s, the main RUC interrogation centres such as Castlereagh
or Gough barracks became synonymous with torture. It was these centres that
were charged with the extrication of ‘confessions’ through whatever means
necessary. During the 1971 Guinea Pig experiments, (in which eleven men
were tortured by British intelligence to find out the best methods of breaking
a human being, physically and psychologically), the British learned that the
removal and isolation of a suspect was an absolute prerequisite to the extraction
of a ‘confession.’ Under the Emergency Provisions Act (EPA), the RUC have
the powers to detain a person incommunicado: no contact with a solicitor,
family, friends, even talking to other prisoners is not allowed. Children as
young as ten can be detained under the EPA, and this has been strongly
criticised by the UN committee on the human rights of the child.

These seven days allowed ample time for the extraction of a ‘confession.’ A
report compiled in 1992 by the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers found that
90% of all defendants in Diplock courts have made confessions. These courts
not only accept such forced confessions but actively encourage the ill-
treatment of detainees. For example, the onus of proof in the case of forced
confessions is on the defendant, whose word is rarely accepted by judges even
when there is substantial medical evidence to support the allegations of torture.
Consequently, in the late 1970s, 97% of convictions were based wholly or
mostly on uncorroborated confessions. This encouraged the RUC, as a matter
of operational policy, to extract confessions rather than to focus on the evidence
against a suspect. However, the most blatant example of judicial encouragement of ill-treatment is the notorious judgement of Lord Justice McGonigal in May 1977. He distinguished between acts of torture and brutality prohibited by the European convention and mundane ill-treatment, arguing that 'a certain roughness of treatment' including 'slaps or blows of the hand on the head or face' was permissible. He ruled that an interrogator may 'use a moderate degree of physical maltreatment for the purpose of inducing a person to make a statement.' This judgement became known in sections of the legal profession as the 'torturers’ charter,' and it was an important development in the creation of a hostile, psychological atmosphere in interrogation centres.

Beatings and torture became part of administrative policy. The catalogue of horrors was widespread and staggering. Father Denis Paul and Father Raymond Murray produced a pamphlet, Castlereagh File (1978), in which some 25 methods of torture used as normal practice are listed, including: pulling of hair, beatings, strangulation, hooding until the victim is asphyxiated, forcing a person to stand in a fixed position against a wall for extended periods, pouring freezing liquid into the ears, simulated execution by clicking a gun behind the victim's head, torture by electrocution, cigarette burns, forcing a person to do exercises until point of exhaustion, threats to set the prisoners up for assassination, and a whole series of degradations. Among degrading treatments imposed on the victim were: making prisoners lick up spittle or vomit off the floor and forcing them to imitate an animal such as a horse as the interrogators sat on his back. Women detainees in Castlereagh also experienced sexual abuse; the threat of rape; and obscene, intimidatory language.

However these tactics of torture are being constantly refined over the years, the RUC have learned that beating a detainee senseless does not always produce the most effective results. Thus, physical and psychological torture are correlative. Although physical torture may not always be applied, the threat of its use is ever-present. Everything contributes to make it so: the dimly lit and empty corridors; the gloomy behaviour of the silent guard; the interrogators’ loud and authoritative commands; the direct murder threats made against the detainee’s family, in some cases threatening to show the detainee morgue photographs of a previously murdered relative; the display of personal family items taken from the detainee’s home (confirming they have the power to breach the sanctity of the home). All these things add to the detainee’s sense of vulnerability and fear.

In a recently released report by the Council of European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, this point has been addressed. They state that detainees in RUC custody, ‘run a significant risk of psychological forms of ill-treatment.’ They also question the whole reasoning behind incommunicado detention and feel that all detainees should be allowed some degree of legal advice upon their arrest (at present they must wait forty-eight hours). Interestingly, although supporting reforms like the electronic recording of RUC interrogations, the committee’s recommendations on Castlereagh is that it be closed down on the
grounds that, those being interrogated there, run ‘a significant risk’ of physical and psychological torture. They are highly critical of the conditions afforded to detainees, which at times amount to sensory deprivation: no natural light in cells; no fresh water or toilet facilities in cells; disruption of sleep or rest due to the cell light being left on 24 hours a day; disturbing noise levels; no radio or reading material permitted for mental stimulation; detainees not permitted cigarettes, sweets, or fruit; no exercise permitted; being kept incommunicado from family and legal advice. These are all factors in the mental well being (or otherwise) of someone in Castlereagh, before consideration is even given to the degrees of oppression and coercion that detainees come under while being interrogated.

Given the sophistication of psychological torture and the risks of physical torture while detained incommunicado, it is extremely alarming that there are no safeguards to protect a detainee against being compelled to make a false, self-incriminating statement. This is especially significant considering that 90% of Diplock court decisions of guilt or innocence are not based on the truth, but on a detainee’s lack of fortitude while under several days of physical torture in Castlereagh. While the Committee for the Prevention of Torture are quite right in calling for the closure of Castlereagh, it must be part of a process whereby the legal framework for torture (the EPA and Diplock courts) are dismantled, the RUC is disbanded, and the victims of torture are released from jail.
Since the early 1970s thousands, of women have trekked to jails for visits week in, week out, year in, year out. With their partners serving lengthy sentences, they have had to struggle on their own, often in dire circumstances. Here is one woman's story, but it is typical of many.

Marie (not her real name) was still a teenager when she was married in 1973. Within a few years, her husband was arrested and she was left to raise a young daughter by herself for the next six years. Her husband’s release heralded but a brief period of married life together; two years later, he was arrested again and sentenced to an even longer term of imprisonment. Marie was then pregnant with her second child. By the time of his eventual release, they will be twenty years married; fourteen of these, Marie will have spent on her own.

With courage and honesty, Marie speaks of her life – the loneliness and doubts, the hardship and struggle to keep her family together. She talks candidly of the strains in the relationship with her husband, and of the unrealistic expectations imposed by people in the republican and the wider community. Marie’s experience reflects the reality for many partners of prisoners.

How did your life change after your husband's arrest, both the first and second time?

The first time he went into prison in 1977, I thought my whole world had fallen in; it was like a death, I was in mourning for a long time. I had to listen to his family going on about ‘our poor Sean’ but what about me? I had my daughter Orla to bring up, no money, and I was running up every week to see him. At times I used to say, ‘I wish I was dead, I can’t handle it,’ but I always put on a front, it was really hard. Then I had to be both a mother and father to my daughter and try to explain to her why her father was in jail. I just never thought he’d end up in prison, I’d just blocked it out of my mind.

If my daughter was sick, I had to sit up with her and make all the decisions too. I felt very lonely many a night and I was on my own, and to me, both our families didn’t understand one bit how I felt; I was doing time just as much as my husband but they would say to me, ‘You have your freedom.’ Oh I used to hate him and them at times! Then there were nights when you felt like having sex. You had to put that to the back of your mind, but I know I must have been hard to stick as I felt I was missing out on a lot of things my personality would change. Then I got a wee job and it made life a bit easier but I still had to put up parcels, clothe him, and put money in for his tuckshop.
The second time, he was arrested in 1985. It was hard, but not as hard to accept, as always in the back of my mind I knew he could land in jail again. I knew I had to be strong as I was pregnant again and on my own. The two years he was out he was my husband, lover, and best friend all rolled into one, and it was hard to take in that he was away. Still, I had days when I didn’t care about him. I would say to myself, ‘That’s it, I’m not going up to see him any more, I don’t care what the families say.’ The first time around you would stay by your husband and even your mother would say things like, ‘you have to stick by him,’ now I wouldn’t listen and if I wanted to leave him I would and nobody would stop me. They still don’t know what it’s like. ‘Good old Marie, she stuck by her husband’ but it was a fighting battle I know I’ve overcome as the years have gone by.

It is hard to explain how I felt when I went into hospital to have Liam, our second child. It was great when it was over. Me and the baby was perfect, but then I used to see the other women’s husbands or boyfriends in visiting and I’d have mixed feelings – I’d love and hate my husband at the same time. I didn’t stay long in hospital, I asked to get out early. When I walked into my house, there was nobody there, only Orla; my sister was with me and I just felt like screaming out of me, ‘Will someone help me!’ Oh they all helped, but still didn’t understand the lonely feelings I had and I felt as if no one cared. I know it was my fault, I never would say anything; maybe if I had, they might have understood a bit more.

I always had to get someone to look after the baby when I was going up on visits. Thank God this time around I was near his mother and she watched the child all the time. I can’t thank her enough. It got to the stage for a while that I didn’t want to go up to the prison, but I never said. I had to get up very early those mornings, about 6:30, get Liam ready and in a good mood, then take him down to his granny’s. But then I’d an older child too, I had to think of her. Although she was a great help too, she was like a wee mother to the baby, I don’t know how I would’ve managed without her.

It took me a long time to get used to him out of the house. Every day around teatime, he would have come in for his dinner, and if I heard the door open around that time I would say to myself, ‘That’s Sean,’ and if I was making the dinner, I would forget and put a plate out for him. Sometimes out in the kitchen, I would look at the clock, if it was the time he used to come home I used to have tears in my eyes knowing he wasn’t coming. It hurt very bad.

How did jail affect your relationship? Did/does it cause problems?

It does cause problems and you have to work at the relationship. When I was younger, going up to see him the first time he was in, I took it for granted – we were married and I didn’t need to work at the relationship. Then later on, when I got the wee job in the bar, I noticed things were changing between us, he would ask more questions like, ‘Does anyone tap on you? Do you miss sex a lot?’ At the time I just said, ‘No’ to keep him happy, not that anyone did tap me up
anyway but I did miss sex now and again. If any fella in the bar had said to me, 'You're looking well tonight, Marie,' I wouldn't have told my husband as I knew he would've taken it the wrong way; but, it made me feel good all the same, it made me feel I was a woman. At the time, I felt I was put under pressure and he didn't trust me enough. Anyway, even if I had wanted to, how could I get up to much? All his friends either drank or worked in the bar (a republican bar) so if I'd put a foot wrong he'd have been told right away. It used to get on my nerves that, their eyes were always on you. Sometimes on the visits, we'd be talking and he'd tell me he'd never be in jail again, that he loved me. Most times I believed him; other times I'd say to myself that he's just saying all that to keep me coming up to see him. In those days, we couldn't talk to each other very openly; we were still close and I knew he was worth waiting for but, yes, sometimes he did take me for granted. I always held back too in my letters if I was down, I never told him. I remember one time someone on the bus going to the jail talking about some other girl. She was saying the girl's husband had told her own husband, 'My wife's always moaning about something and is always down.' Guess what the person says? 'Do you not think her poor husband, locked up and all, has enough on his plate? She shouldn't be telling him things like that.' That stuck in my head, that's the way it was with some people.

The second time, I knew what to look out for and I wasn't going to be taken in by him. Now don't get me wrong: he didn't hold me down and I didn't run up to jail because I felt sorry for him. I wanted our marriage to last and I love him. But I noticed myself he'd changed and was thinking of me more and he trusted me more too, I think. As the years rolled by, we started to talk more and more openly with one another and the relationship between us was blooming. I felt great. Now a few times we'd talk about sex. Yes, I do miss sex, but he knows I'm not going to run out and try and pick someone up—no way! There's times months would go by without me even thinking about sex, then maybe something on the TV would make you think about it and I would say to myself, 'Is Sean worth all this? I have to go without a lot of things.' It is a fighting battle at times but thank God I've got to a stage where it doesn't bother me any more. Oh I think about sex still now and again, but I don't question myself any more. I can wait till he comes home.

With the kids you have to work and try and build a good relationship with them and their father. I would talk to them all the time, when they were young, about their father and still do with Liam, the youngest one. I'd buy wee presents and say, 'They're from your daddy.' I remember saying to Liam, 'That's your daddy, say hello when you see him and give him a big kiss.' Sometimes, there were problems when they were up on visits, maybe not taking him on enough and I'd be saying things like, 'That's the way kids go on.' But sometimes, I knew he'd be hurt if they didn't want to sit on his knee or give him a kiss, children don't understand those things. Nowadays, they're bigger and it's far easier, they all get on great. To me, we had to work on everything through the
years to get the way we are now in our relationship. I hope I don’t upset Sean in some of the things I say here, but I know we are very close now and it feels wonderful.

What do prisoners or people in your community expect of a prisoner’s wife? Does this extend to her behaviour?

Well, I’m not really sure how to answer that but I’ll start with the prisoners. I think that a prisoner takes his wife or his family for granted at times. They listen to what he says but he mightn’t listen too much to what they are saying to him at times. Say there’s a march coming up, you would have to go ‘cause that’s what he wants you to do. It’s expected of you. Now I’m not saying I go just because of that, I go because I want to go as well. A prisoner’s wife is supposed to go up every week to see her husband and stand by him; we’re supposed to hold the family together and have no social life, we’re supposed to be strong.

Now the second bit of that question is nearly the same as the first. It’s like if you go out to a bar you are allowed to drink but not to get drunk, or if you go up to dance everyone is looking at you. I remember when I worked in the bar, I would only dance with fellas who were friends of my husband so people wouldn’t talk. If you did go out with a few friends and were enjoying yourself, people would look at you. You’re supposed to sit there nice and quiet and not make any noise. Every time you’d move you’d see the eyes following you. I remember when I worked in the bar, I would only dance with fellas who were friends of my husband so people wouldn’t talk. If you did go out with a few friends and were enjoying yourself, people would look at you. You’re supposed to sit there nice and quiet and not make any noise. Every time you’d move you’d see the eyes following you. Do people think that a prisoner’s wife is only out for one thing, sex, just because her husband is in jail? We have rights too. We are just like other wives who go out for the night to enjoy themselves; but, because you’re married to an IRA man, his friends and everyone else expect too much. As I said before, you stand by your husband, go up and visit him, and yet you’re not supposed to show any feelings that it’s getting to you. At times, I feel mad, they wouldn’t even ask how you are keeping, it’s always, ‘How is he?’ At times, I would say, ‘Sure, he’s a well-kept man.’

I know both families look at me at times and say I’m a great mother and all that, but I’m supposed to be like that. I wondered at times if I were ever to say that I’m not going up to see him any more, what they’d say then. I think it would hurt them very bad. But as I said before, I’ve changed too; I don’t let anyone stop me from doing what I want to do. After all, it’s my life not theirs. Before, if anything happened with the children or if one of our parents were sick, it was all, ‘Don’t tell Sean, it’ll upset him.’ Big deal! It upsets me as well! They would say that he’s no one to turn to, but they forget: who have I to turn to? Sure, hardly anyone visits me, so I’ve to bottle up my feelings.

Do you think that you’re treated/viewed as a prisoner’s wife or as a person in your own right? Does this change in different circumstances?

I think I get treated mostly in my own right; but, then I don’t be out and about very much to meet different people. Right enough, I noticed when I started training again with my friend Anne last year and we went down to the leisure
centre and we met these other girls who knew Anne. Well, they must have heard me saying to Anne that I was up seeing Sean (they never asked me or I’d have been proud to tell them) so they found out that Sean was inside, and when they talked to me there was pity in their voices. So it does change in different circumstances. If you’re in company and you’re talking away, you’d see their faces change when I mention Sean’s in jail. To tell you the truth it doesn’t bother me.

What I notice too is if there’s any bother in the families or if somebody wanted to find out something, they would come and ask me could I help. They’d think, because Sean’s inside, that I could do something. Then you get the people who look upon you as if you’re a god. ‘Look at her, isn’t she great, she’s a prisoner’s wife.’ I know too that some people, even those I know, would look at my kids to see if I dress them nice. They think, just because Sean’s not here, I should be down and out, that’s why I make my business to keep the kids and the house nice. I know myself there are other prisoners’ wives who just can’t manage it all but they would do their best.

To me, I’m the same person I was before Sean went inside again but some people look at you and make excuses just ‘cause he’s in jail. What I mean is, say I don’t wash my hair and run up the town for something, well someone would see you and say, ‘Sure, her man’s inside.’ A girl I know said, ‘You’ve lost a lot of weight,’ but I was always thin. Or if I get my hair cut they’d say, ‘You’re looking great.’ All I did is get my hair cut. So what I’m trying to say is people make excuses ‘cause your husband is in jail. It’s the way they must expect you to be, sorta down and out.

Earlier you said you felt that you’d missed out on a lot of things, that it changed your personality. In what ways and why do you think it changed you?

Well, it boils down to jealousy. Even with our Orla and her fella I’d see them really happy together, sitting on the sofa holding hands and all lovey dovey, and I’d be a bit cranky and get on to her now and again. It’s just that I feel that we’ve missed out on a lot: us growing up together, being able to hold hands, or make love whenever we’d want to. Our life seems to be put on hold all the time. Times I was mad at him on the visits, we’d be kissing and we still couldn’t be at ease. That’s a few years back. Now it’s better because I can handle it better and I can understand my own feelings more too.

When I did work in the bar, I’d see a lot of couples having a good time and I’d wish I could too. But, I knew I couldn’t as after all, I was married to Sean and wanted our marriage to work. Don’t get me wrong: it wasn’t always easy and maybe for a few seconds I’d say to myself, ‘To hell with him, I’m going out to enjoy myself’ and I’d hate him at the time. It was always a fighting battle between me and my conscience. I’d see a fella looking at me and maybe I’d even flirt a bit but in my mind, that was all. It just made me feel good. Even now there’s a bar we go to and I always try to look my best, even a bit sexy as there’s no harm in that. But, I think I must have a sign on the back of my head
that says, 'Look and Don’t Touch' as no one (and I mean no one) would try or
ever has tried to tap me up.

What I do miss very much is Sean sitting beside me, just his arms around me,
holding me tight, making me feel I’m wanted — that’s what hurts most. Thank
God I don’t think I’m as bad now, you get used to not having sex. But one thing
I have noticed about myself is that I’ve got hard on the outside, you build a wall
around yourself so you can’t get hurt. I dare say, I’ve given people the wrong
impression of myself in the past. I think that’s when my personality changed.
Sometimes you hate to see others just so happy but I’ve come a long way now,
as people would say, ‘She’s a big girl now.’ That’s true. I’m a big girl now and
I can understand myself better.

*Your life has been a battle. Why did you keep going and not give up?*

The way I look at it is the day I married Sean, I had a small battle on my hands.
What I mean is Sean was on the run, I was having a baby, and we’d no money,
no nothing. It wasn’t a good start, but I was happy. I think both our parents had
their doubts if the marriage would last. Then Orla came along and there was
me trying to be a mother, a wife, and a housekeeper as well but it didn’t bother
me. It was something you had to do. Looking back now it was a battle to
survive. Then, as I said before, Sean being inside was a battle on its own —
keeping a family going and together, going up on visits, and keeping a good
relationship between us. Then there was the battle because you were cut off
from sex. You’d be fighting against your own conscience asking, ‘Is he worth
it?’ And there was showing both parents I can do this, keep my family together
and try and manage on the money I had. I think if I had a wee bit more money,
life would be a bit better.

As for keeping going, I kept going because I had to and I wanted to. I wanted
to keep my family together but the big thing was did I love Sean enough to go
through all these years waiting on him. The answer is yes, I did love him, and
as the years were passing, that love was growing. Then Sean was never a bad
person. He was always good to me and Orla and he was a good husband, father,
and lover. What I mean is he cared for me and took my feelings in as well. I
know we’ve had our ups and down but who hasn’t had? So if I was having any
doubts, they would last for a few seconds only as all the good points would
come back into my head.

When we were just married, I noticed Sean was out looking for a job or
anything to make things easier and everything he did was for me and Orla. In
my eyes he seemed so strong. I kept going because I didn’t want to throw
everything we had out the window. Let me tell you, I thought of giving up a
few times. I was just that mad at him leaving me for a second time; then too
I was scared myself. I didn’t know if I could wait it out or not. It’s like an illness.
At the start, you’re a bit ill, then in the middle it gets worse, and now I feel
stronger and it’s getting better. Does that make any sense?
If the roles were reversed, you in jail and your husband outside, would the marriage have lasted?

No I don’t think so. Men want sex more, it’s more, it’s more important to them, and I think Sean would be the same after a while. Ach, I think he’d try his best but it wouldn’t last and he’d give in. Then too, people would say, ‘Sure, it’s only natural as his wife’s in jail,’ but if it was me or any prisoner’s wife, they’d be going out and running you down as no good. That’s the way people are. They make excuses for a man flying his kite, but if a woman does it, she’s a tramp and no good. It’s not right but I don’t think it’ll ever really change. But it’s just not right anyway.

Finally, what are your hopes for the future?

Well, just to be happy. What I mean is I would be daydreaming, having a picture of us sitting in the living room just watching TV but we’re all there. Sean out working, coming in home, although I know rightly he might not get a job, but just knowing we are happy, and to be loved. What I miss most too is we mightn’t have any more children. Christmas is great having the children around. I know we’ve both missed out, Sean not being there to see the kids growing up or opening their presents on Christmas morning or their birthdays. But that is all behind us and I believe him this time that me and the kids come first. To tell you the truth, I can’t wait. I don’t really look into the future too much. The way I feel now is I’m just waiting for Sean to come home, that’s my future.
I was once in Winslow, Arizona. 
Such a fine sight to see
Where the earth seeps dust
And the heat surrounds a lethargy
So deep the people
Turn their heads
In slow motion.
The bars breathe guilt
Round lonely drinks;
Life is on the highway
En route to somewhere else
And the town’s streets
Are teeth
In cynical jaws.

Yet American culture
Is a mask
So bright
That in Dundalk
On Friday night
‘Round the chip vans
You’d find lots of people
Who’d say they’d just love
To live in Winslow, Arizona.

Worn by the constant
Battle to make do
Buffeted on high
By searing winds
Poetry

Broded
In briny seas
Shunted and pulled
And pushed
Along mascara tracks
Thrown up and thrown
Out In
Sick bags for the children
Intimidated by self
Amid the strangers
Smothered
In mumbled words
Frightened and raped
By the PTA
Scarred
Broken against high grey walls
Severed on the razor wire
And lost touch across a table
With nothing left to give
For daring to be
Aged by the lonely walks home
While couples walked arm in arm
Chained by the expectations of others
Don’t look back it’s gone
If you drop the wait
They didn’t win
Destruction
Isolation was their aim
There’s no victory in that
Only pain so
Don’t be hard on yourself
You invite guilt
That was never yours
Go with a smile and
Be

* PTA = Prevention of Terrorism Act: a set of Machiavellian laws introduced in Britain which in effect legalises racism towards Irish people.
For ages
our bodies kept apart
we touched one another with our words
written small but caressingly
we made love from a distance.

The words
chosen carefully, thoughtfully
took the form of lips
or of tongue
now a hug, a kiss, an embrace
now two bodies entwined.

And I wondered how literate I was
and if my movements were clumsy.
Did an elbow jar you?
A verb or adjective cause you pain?

It's difficult to affix to paper
an expression
or write a smile which speaks in silence
words of intensity.

Yet together
we've shaped over time
fingers from our words
and our sentences
are as hands which reach out
to hold, to embrace, to touch.

For ages now
though we're apart
we've touched one another with our words
written small but caressingly
we've made love from a distance.
When darkness falls a mantle of blackest velvet
covers our world of impenetrable darkness
From which iridescent lights, orange and yellow
poke fingers in the sky,
Fingers that soon disappear in the inky blackness
but nevertheless keep illuminated
The wall and wire, and steel and stone
while black cadaverous mechanical beasts
hover overhead in monotonous hum;
Predators hunting for unsuspecting prey
trying to escape the night.
When darkness falls the lights come on
in defiance of nature’s law,
Nothing but light may surround
our ignoble prison town;
Least we miss the look of gloom
which flickers across each ashen face
every once in a while
like a wicked malevolent smile;
For the chained will always strain to be free
and not surrounded by walls,
For walls can grind the spirit down
unless the spirit soon learns
how to build walls of its own
to fight for survival on its own holy ground.
It was the first Winter morning.
Cold clear air.
She announced Autumn,
and deferred
politely.
Summer has been long
in dusty stuffiness
and machinations.

A Claddagh Heart crested watch
for a birthday present.
Prescriptions
for cop on tablets
followed shortly.
You're in no position
to play reality:
wombs and homes,
social mores and things.
she soothed.

Dreams gurgled
in the grip of brinkmen
born to lead.
Determining the Future

Gery Magee
Long Kesh

‘Forget Irish freedom, we’re all Europeans now!’ So goes the claim that the republican struggle is long past its sell-by-date. Of course, the people who make this claim have always been virulently anti-republican; but, now some academics are promoting the theory that national self-determination is no longer relevant to the new world order. They point to processes such as globalisation and internationalisation which have created a more interconnected world. In Europe, this theory is being further advanced with the embryonic single market which, in economic terms, is making national frontiers appear obsolete. The expanding European Union increasingly classifies territory in terms of regions rather than nation states, and on occasions, bypasses national governments. As republicans striving to achieve national self-determination for Ireland as a whole, it is important that we analyse and debate the relevance of this objective in light of these changing international relations.

Republicans have traditionally held to the analysis of James Connolly who spelled out in detail the benefits of national self-determination for Ireland and linked it to a socialist model of international relations. He contended that, ‘the most perfect world is that in which the separate existence of nations is held most sacred.’ (Workers' Republic, 12 Feb. 1916)

He believed that a national democracy was the essential basis from which all other freedoms in a nation could be developed: ‘the first requisite for the free development of the national powers needed for our class.’ (Workers' Republic, 8 April 1916)

In other words, governmental structures in Ireland would be more representative and more accountable to Irish people than similar structures governing Ireland from Britain or elsewhere. They would act as, ‘the natural depository of popular power’ (L'Irlande Libre, Paris 1897). For this reason, the establishment of national self-determination in Ireland was an important component in the overall struggle for social justice. But is this view of the world still relevant to the needs and aspirations of the Irish people as we approach the twenty first century?

In theory, it is still a widely-held view. Self-determination is universally accepted to mean a nation’s right to political freedom: to determine its own social, economic, and cultural development without external impediment and without partial or total disruption of the national unity or territorial integrity. This right is underlined in the principles of international law.

Article 1 of the United Nations' Covenants of 1966 states: ‘All peoples have the right to national self-determination. By virtue of that right they determine their economic, social and cultural development.’
Resolution of the United Nations' Organisations on 12th December 1970, states:

All people have the right to self-determination and independence, subjection of the peoples to foreign domination constitutes a grave obstacle to the maintenance of international peace and security and to the development to the peaceful relations between peoples.

In the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Peoples, Algeria, July 4th, 1976, it is stated: 'Every nation has the fundamental and inalienable right to self determination. It defines its political status in all freedom without external foreign interference.'

Based on these internationally agreed principles, Sinn Féin has consistently asserted that the Irish people as a whole have the right to national self-determination and that the exercise of this right is a matter of agreement among the people of Ireland. This right to nationhood, independence, and sovereignty has been asserted by Irish people in every generation since 1798. Ireland has also been universally regarded as a single unit, one people and one nation throughout history, before and after partition. British jurisdiction in the northern six counties is clearly in violation of international principles. Therefore the British Government should not be allowed to dictate how we exercise our right to self-determination.

When it comes to the actual exercising of this fundamental principle of self-determination, it is important to recognise that a variety of options are available, and that full independence may not be feasible, practicable, or the preferred option of the people living within each nation. Other options include various levels of autonomy within a multi-national state and a federation of states within a union. An example of such a federation exists in Belgium, made up of French speaking Wallonia and Flemish speaking Flanders. Independence, however, is not a major issue with either the Flemish people, who have been involved in a long struggle for parity of esteem, nor with the Walloons, who have benefited with the greater economic dominance since the formation of the Belgian State in 1830. Whatever option is exercised, it is crucially important that the people of each nation have the free and democratic right to choose how best they can determine their political, social, cultural, and economic development. A nation must be able to do this without repression, domination, partition, or any artificial obstacles being placed in the way, such as the unionist veto in Ireland, or the Spanish Constitution which lays a claim of sovereignty over Catalonia, Galicia, and the Basque Country.

Some unionists in Ireland have made the analogy with the Basque Country and claim that Articles 2 and 3 of the 1937 Irish Constitution are likewise undemocratic with claims to sovereignty over the whole island of Ireland. This point immediately calls into question the definition of a nation. Each nation is
defined as a distinct and homogeneous people who belong to a particular geographic locality and have deep historical roots in the area. Nationalism, which is a territorial ideology, links historically and culturally-defined communities to political statehood, either as a reality or as an aspiration regardless of class or other social divisions. A nation must have at least some of the important elements such as a distinct language, religion, ethnicity, social customs, sporting traditions, and other forms of cultural identity.

The Basque Country, like Ireland, historically has always had a separate and distinct identity, with a unique language that bears no resemblance to any other European tongue. The six north-eastern counties of Ireland on the other hand, have no historically separate identity of their own, and have always been regarded as an integral part of the Irish nation making any comparison with the Basque Country a flawed analysis. These northern counties were partitioned from the rest of Ireland by an Act of the British Parliament in 1920. This Act, a mere lottery based on a sectarian head count, did not receive a single Irish vote either north or south. It was only during the twentieth century following partition, when unionists adopted the features of a British identity in order to sustain an elitist power at Stormont.

However, with the growing prominence of the theory that we are now living in a post-nationalist world, could it be argued that the case for national independence is becoming redundant? It is important to recognise that the status of a nation needs to be defined, not in any pre-dated idealistic fashion, but with reference to the global realities of the twenty-first century. Human-kind has moved on from the basic needs of food and shelter that could be provided within a single geographical locality, to the essential requirements of modern times such as cars, oil, gas, electricity, high-tech engineering, computers, fax machines, and so on, which require trade through international cooperation. Territorial boundaries are becoming more diluted with the accelerating pace of global integration in political, economic, and social terms.

This globalisation process can be clearly illustrated by the significant expansion of telecommunications and international mass consumerism during the past three decades. Fashion trends in clothing, pop music, videos, fast food chains, indoor shopping centres, and so on, create images that are promoted by the advertising industry and these reflect a drive by transnational corporations to achieve ever greater marketing of diversity. National identities are being sidetracked as a new Western culture sweeps the globe.

Sovereignty, a nation's capacity to control its economic and political development, is gradually being reshaped by globalisation. National governments are limited in their ability to formulate policies on behalf of their citizens due to the constraints of the inter-connected global economy. Transnational coalitions of bureaucrats are exercising greater control over national economies than elected politicians in many countries. Military power to enforce state demands has also been weakened or made irrelevant by the shift to multilateral
diplomacy under the UN umbrella. In addition, many political, social, economic, environmental, and other issues often must be addressed through international cooperation nowadays hence the pre-eminence of international structures such as the European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), and so on.

However, while we must recognise that world conditions are changing rapidly due to globalisation, and the relevancy of the nation state is being challenged, it would be wrong to argue that self-determination is becoming an out-dated concept. The maintenance of international peace, for example, is largely dependent on the order and security provided by nation states. When the right to national self-determination is denied to a people, whether through the partial or complete occupation and domination of one nation over another, or through some form of outside interference, the maintenance of international peace is seriously undermined. In the Balkans, as in the north east of Ireland, an undercurrent of friction existed below the surface for decades due to certain conditions created by injustice before armed conflict erupted. Other European-based conflicts have occurred over the political status of the Basque Country, Kurdistan, and most recently (January 1995) in Chechnyra. Yet, in a developed Europe approaching the twenty-first century, armed struggle should not be required or left as the only effective method for each nation to bring its case for self-determination to the fore.

Moreover, the idea that increasing international trade cooperation will diminish sovereignty completely is misleading. States have always operated under constraints of all kinds, none has ever been free to act completely independently from external pressures. In addition, international economic decisions are in the main implemented through the structures of the nation state. The post-nationalist theory is also challenged by the sweeping changes in Eastern Europe during the past five years. Many nations grasped their right to self-determination following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the break up of the former Yugoslavia, and the separation of the Czech Republic from Slovakia. In part, this desire for nation statehood is driven by the realisation that only nation states can negotiate in a global economy to protect and advance their people's interests. Many are now seeking to form alliances with the EU or a new economic realignment of Eastern European states, both of which strategies require as a prerequisite the status of nation statehood. Therefore, for many people in Eastern Europe, national self-determination is essential for economic progress as much as for social and cultural development.

Even within the constraints of the global economy, national self-determination enables a government to decide on what basis international relationships should be formed, the terms of cooperation, and to bargain for what they determine to be in the best interests of the nation. This is essential as each nation, in accordance with its climate and geographic location, will have traditional, locally-based industries which are the backbone of national econo-
The fishing industry, for example, is significant for countries along the Atlantic Coast, the same with the production of wine in France and timber in Scandinavia. These industries need to be nurtured and protected, and this requires the correct management of international trade by government.

National governments are also essentially responsible for policing, the administration of justice, education, and health. Providing that self-determination is properly exercised, the national government is the main institution to which the people will generally give their allegiance. This is important for several reasons. Confidence and public accountability is vital for the functioning of a police service and the maintenance of civil law and order. Education should be tailored to suit the particularities of local employment, and especially to accommodate national languages which are among the most important symbols of nationhood. In countries like Ireland, where the first language is in minority status due to a history of suppression, positive discrimination is required to the education system and national media to ensure its survival and recovery. As these public services require the greatest public expenditure, they can only be properly supported by government through the control of the national budget and public spending, although this should occur in a context of decentralised and fully accountable local-government structures.

Another argument, used to undermine nationalism generally, is the growing rise of semi-fascist parties and movements in France, Austria, Belgium, and Germany, already attracting several million voters. There has also been a huge increase in the number of attacks on Arab, African, Turkish, and Kurd immigrants in these countries. Nationalism is categorised in two very different ways: ‘progressive’ in nations suffering a legacy of colonialism (such as Ireland and many Third World countries); and ‘xenophobic/racist’ (opposed to an ‘enemy’ within) in countries with an imperial past. Those who are opposed to our progressive type of nationalism often, for political reasons, make the false analogy of linking it with images of racist parties such as the National Front. The two aspects are clearly distinct; although, in the most extreme circumstances, nationalism can evolve into racism by trying to ground national supremacy on pseudo-biological criteria.

It is therefore important we acknowledge that people living within each nation must be recognised in inclusive terms, not exclusively. In the modern world, no nation exists where all its members are gathered within its geographic territory. Irish people, for example, are scattered to every corner of the globe. Likewise Indian, Chinese, and Italian people have settled in this country. The rights of all citizens, both indigenous and immigrant, and all minorities, such as travellers, must be accommodated without oppression or discrimination. This can be best achieved within a progressive society in which the right to national self-determination has been properly exercised.

However, the most important aspect of the nation today, and in every generation since the Middle Ages, is the focus it provides for personal and
communal identity. As republicans, we only have to examine the commitment and sacrifice of the many thousands of men and women from a wide range of backgrounds who have taken part in the struggle for national liberation in Ireland. In broader terms, almost every citizen can have some sense of national identification through sporting affiliation, language, music, and so on, especially among immigrants overseas. The potency and symbolism of nationalism was clearly evident during the 1994 soccer World Cup, particularly among the Irish, Swiss, and Swedish peoples.

As our struggle progresses ever closer to the achievement of Irish national self-determination, we can be assured the status of the nation will remain of the utmost relevance. Politically, it provides the most effective and democratic framework for addressing the contemporary problems of our society and its future needs. Culturally and psychologically, it remains of critical significance in structuring the political and social organisation of people. Far from being secondary or obsolete, the nation, nationalism, and the idea of the national interests will remain central elements in contemporary European and world politics.
We are all familiar with the adage, regurgitated by establishment politicians, that the only border that exists in Ireland is the one in people’s minds. This is to ignore the reality of military repression, social deprivation, and economic underdevelopment, all of which can be linked, at least in part, to the artificial partition of Ireland.

Almost one million Irish people live straddling Britain’s border – 20% of the island’s population. Partition has imposed many social failures on the whole country, but this 20% of the population has had to suffer many extra burdens.

When border roads were closed by the British, they didn’t just shut one county off from another, they split communities; communities that didn’t know the boundaries of counties. Not only were communities split, but in many cases families. No longer were people free to associate with friends, neighbours, or family members. They were isolated from their local churches, schools, and even their own property. Because of road closures, many journeys that would have been considered local in the past now amounted to a detour of many miles, and in some cases, became impractical. These border roads are now being reopened, in large part due to the constant and courageous campaigning of local people, but it will take many years to undo the social and economic damage caused by Britain’s version of the Berlin Wall.

In the southern border area, there has been a drastic economic decline. Businesses are losing out to their counterparts on the northern side of the border because of the existence of a different economic framework there, and obviously this has a knock-on effect on the rest of the community. A major problem, brought on by the economic decline, is the depopulation of the areas. This is not due to a simple demographic shift, but to unemployment and the consequent high levels of emigration. And as usual, the emigrants are young and educated. Not a new problem for Ireland.

It seems that border counties in the 26 counties have been forgotten about or ignored by successive governments. There hasn’t been any real investment in these areas, nor has there been any proper structures set up to help these counties cope with their special needs. In between elections, the attitude of the past governments seems to be ‘out of sight, out of mind.’

The six-county border areas have many of their neighbours’ problems. With all the hype that surrounds any major new investments in these areas, it is very easy to believe that the local communities are benefiting from it. Yet, behind each British government minister and local clientelist MP patting each other on the back for a job well done, there is an even happier multinational. These
investments, which aren’t and never were meant to be rock solid, can be terminated at any time by these ‘good weather’ foreign companies. They take full advantage of grants, tax benefits, and cheap local labour, then shift their capital investment elsewhere to reap extra benefits and new profits.

Nationally, the partition of our country has been a living nightmare. The basic right of National Self-determination has been denied to the Irish people; not just over the last 70 years, but since the British first came here. With partition, the British made sure that they still have a foothold in Ireland and can do whatever they please with the six north-easterly counties, no matter what the Irish people say.

The main ploy utilized by the British is sectarianism and indeed partition represents the institutionalisation of this ploy. They have always sought to divide our people, and they have succeeded in driving a wedge between one fifth of the population in the north east and the remainder south of the border. In addition, it has kept the people of the six counties divided by discriminatory social and economic structures and a repressive state apparatus. All of this has led directly to 25 years of war in the recent past.

A visitor to the six counties may be forgiven for thinking that there wasn’t such a thing as nationalism or Irishness. The discrimination practised by those who hold the reins of power has ensured that nationalists are kept out of official sight. Nationalist flag or emblems are not displayed, have been banned in the past, and are still removed by the Crown forces. The nationalist culture has been swept under the carpet and hidden out of sight for fear it taints any visitor’s view of this part of ‘Britain.’

But sectarianism isn’t just practised by one section of the Irish people or by one part of our divided country. Sectarianism in the six counties tends to start at the top and works its way down, right to the bottom. However, sectarianism in the twenty-six counties merely tends to be more subtle. It would seem to a visitor that everyone is a Catholic, or at the very least a Christian. Prayers in Leinster House before parliamentary sittings, the Angelus at six on the TV, and laws which would appear to come from Rome. It doesn’t matter what way you turn in society, there always seems to be someone with a dog collar pulling the strings. Not very inviting for any self-respecting Orangeman, or republican, for that matter.

Economically, partition seems to be a total disaster. Not only are the six counties at the bottom of the scale in the British economy, but the twenty-six counties seems to be lower still. It is estimated that Britain pumps over 3 billion pounds into the six counties statelet each year, making it one of the most economically unviable areas in Europe. The twenty-six county government pays one million punts per day to bolster Britain’s artificial border, which is a huge sum to take from such a small country’s coffers. Both sums of money are paid by people who don’t agree with partition, i.e., the British people and the Irish people. It is ironic that, after so many years of partition, the British and
Irish governments are only now beginning to discuss the fact that it would make economic sense to promote Ireland as a single unit.

Apart from the obvious military presence, these are only a few of the difficulties encountered as a direct result of partition. As barriers are breaking down, we may be able to benefit from any new changes, but whilst the main cause of our problems, British occupation, remains we will always be a divided people.
Cover Illustration: Míchéal Doherty, 1996.

Cover Design: Collective Press, Vancouver.