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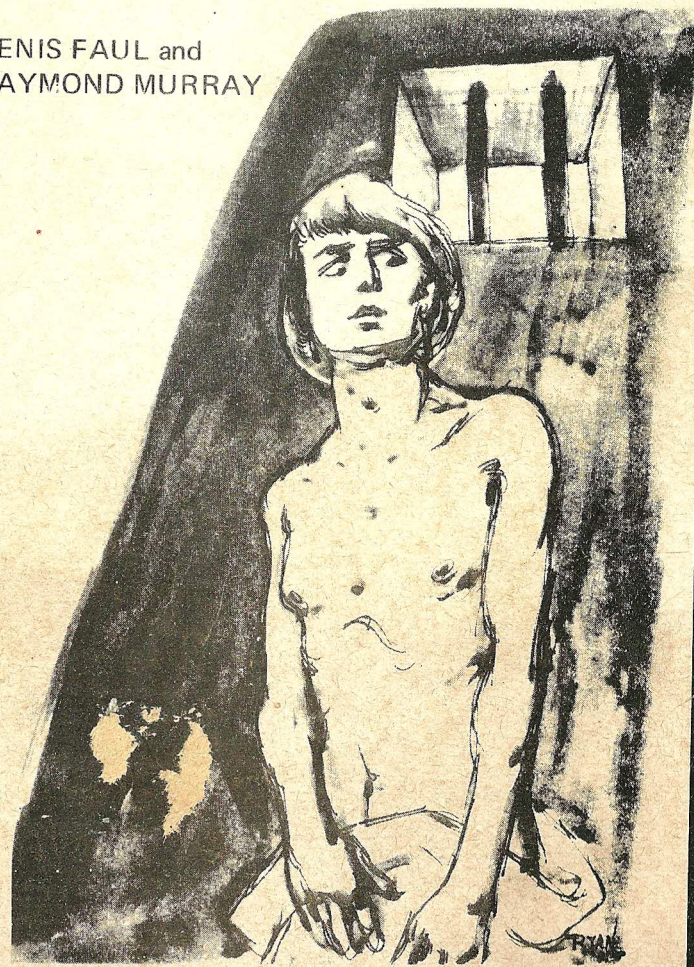
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H-Block and its Background

DENIS FAUL and
RAYMOND MURRAY



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The time — 4.30 a.m. 9 August, 1971 — conscious of a soldier standing in the bedroom. He hit me with the butt of a rifle to awaken me. I tried to get up and dressed, but I wasn't in fact given time, just put on underpants and trousers — no vest or anything — and had to go barefooted.

On Tuesday, 10 August 1971, at 4.30 a.m., I was taken from the cell and beaten over to Girdwood Barracks by military police and RUC. I was made to run over the obstacle course, being beaten with battons, kicked and punched. I was bitten on the knee by a guard dog. I was taken into a room and told to lie on a camp bed. After some time I was taken out of the room. One of the RUC men was from Springfield Road Barracks. A hessian bag was placed over my head and I was then handcuffed.

Long Kesh Concentration Camp is now a derelict jungle of twisted iron and mangled corrugated sheeting. For burning this hell-hole to the ground we made no apology. We repeatedly warned that we would do so. (Statement of Internees, 18 October 1974.)

I was then taken by the same tall dark haired man and at another stage he hit me a massive box in the stomach which fired me straight across the room without my feet or anything touching the ground until I spattered against the wall. I was back in the nude again at another stage. They took my underpants, which had been severely soiled with sweat and excretion. They were then put above my head and hung down over my face and I was made run around the room while they mocked and jeered at me concentrating on my private parts, making references to the fact that I had seven children and I was then left again standing on my toes with my hands out in a very awkward stance again. I never in my life ever sweated as much as I sweated during that period. (Bernard O'Connor, teacher, April 1977.)

Internment 9 August 1971, torture in the interrogation centres at Holywood and Girdwood Barracks 1971-72, the burning of Long Kesh Internment Camp, 15-16 October 1974, the torture of a teacher in Castlereagh RUC Interrogation Centre 1977 — these little snippets are insights into the prison world of Northern Ireland 1971-1980. A term has been coined for the Judicial system — 'The Con-

veyor Belt'. The problem of prisoners is the problem of peace in Northern Ireland. There will be no peace while nationalists (Catholics) are arrested under special powers, tortured and illtreated in special interrogation centres, brought before special courts, and put into special prisons. Once again Long Kesh, now under the title H Blocks, the Maze Prison, will attract world attention with the announcement that the prisoners on protest for special prison status, granted in 1972 but revoked in 1976, will go on hunger strike on 27 October 1980. Over the months September 1976 to April 1978 some 350 prisoners refused to wear prison clothes and do prison work. The British answer was to impose excessive punishments which taken together and over a period of several months amount to illtreatment. These punishments were: a complete removal of remission; 24 hour lock-up; deprivation of mental stimulation of any sort — reading material, newspapers, books, television, radio, games, hobbies or writing materials. This was combined with very intimate body searches.

WHO IS A CRIMINAL?

The growth in the number of prisoners from 712 in 1969 to 2,728 on 10 February 1980 is due to the political conflict involving Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The British Government do not like the international statistic of thousands of political prisoners, Irish Republicans and nationalists, in a tiny corner of the United Kingdom. So on 1 March 1976 Special Category Status was removed from Irish persons imprisoned as a result of the political conflict. This has been termed 'criminalization'. British Government begins and ends all statements about the men on protest in H Block, Long Kesh, and the women on protest in Armagh Prison with the words — 'They are criminals' — and make no apology to Pope John Paul II for applying to these men and girls the phrase 'Murder is murder'.

Who is a criminal in the Northern Ireland context? Look back on every decade of the Northern Ireland statelet and it is clear that this label has a two edged meaning. Is a person who plots and does evil against his neighbour a criminal? If so, is not the government minister a criminal who created a system of gerrymander that ensured unionist control of Derry city even though it has a huge Catholic majority. The unionists discriminated against Catholics in the Belfast shipyards and the Sirocco engineering works in East Belfast, discriminated against Catholics in houses, jobs and promotion all over Northern Ireland for fifty years. The Government Ministers and judicial persons who maintain permanent systems of special powers and emergency laws directed solely against Catholics because of their religion — are they criminals? The filth and misery of the 300 men

interned on the prison ship *Argenta* in the first years of the state were repeated in every decade to the prison ship *Maidstone* in the 1970s and the atrocious conditions of the H Blocks and Armagh Prison in the eighties.

Father John Hassan wrote of the conditions of the *Argenta*:

Catholics, many of them belonging to the most respected families, have been arrested in hundreds by the Orange Government and, without any charge whatever, thrust into prison or, what is worse, sent on board a wretched ship lying near Carrickfergus. The unfortunate prisoners are huddled together in sections of forty, like cattle in a pen. The food is execrable and has to be eaten off the floor. The lavatory accommodation consists of a few buckets placed openly at the end of the apartment.

ESCALATION

This compares with H Blocks and Armagh Prison today. On 1 April 1978, after nearly two years on protest naked in their cells with only a blanket, mattress, and towel the men escalated their protest by refusing to wash, to clean out their cells or to co-operate with prison staff. This escalation began as a protest against internal searches of the body, deprivation of letters, removal to punishment cells, and beatings of young prisoners. The girls in Armagh Prison followed suit after they were beaten by male officers in February 1980. One girl, Lynn O Connell described her beating:

On Saturday morning, February 9, I was taken from my cell by two female officers and once on the Wing I was pulled around to be forcibly searched. Before I knew what was happening I was attacked by several male officers and thrown to the ground. While I was on the ground I was continually punched and kicked all over my body but particularly on my face. At this stage I felt very heavy throbbing round my eyes and my nose appeared to be bleeding very heavily.

Emergency laws and discrimination have been used as a political weapon to bludgeon Catholics. There was no chance of democracy. The Catholic birth rate was high but that was offset by enforced emigration. Did the administrators of law then not do evil deeds against their neighbours? E. C. Ferguson, a Unionist politician said in 1949 that the Catholic majority in County Fermanagh would have to be 'reduced and liquidated'. His colleague, L. E. Curran, a Parliamentary Secretary in the Unionist Government told the Stormont House

of Commons that 'the best way to prevent the overthrow of the government by people who had no stake in the country and had not the welfare of the people of Ulster at heart was to disfranchise them'.

FAIR JUDICIAL PROCEDURES?

If a criminal is a person who is convicted in a court of law, then that court of law must be one which is recognised as such by fair and impartial persons throughout the civilised world. It must conform to recognised legal standards and charters of human rights. It must be based on standards of police interrogation which are not tainted by violations of human rights. Can we say after the two Amnesty International Reports, 1972 and 1978, after damning decisions of the European Commission of Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights against Britain, after British domestic reports on interrogation and police procedures like Compton, Parker-Gardiner, Bennett, the payment of over a million pounds in damages to arrested persons, that the processes of investigation in the British Army and RUC interrogation centres from the Ballykelly, Holywood and Girdwood days of 1971-72 to the present procedures in Castlereagh and Gough Barracks, are in conformity with recognised standards? The special courts, known as Diplock Courts, after Lord Diplock, chairman of a Commission set up to consider legal procedures to deal with 'terrorist activities' in Northern Ireland, in some cases accepted degrees of physical ill-treatment short of what they judged to be 'torture or inhuman or degrading treatment' (Conclusion k, paragraphs 73-92, the Diplock Report). This meant that kicking, punching, prolonged standing, prolonged forced physical exercise were allowed. Signed confessions could be extracted by these means (Amnesty International Report 1978, Diplock Courts by Dr Korff). Alleged verbal statements by the accused have been presented by RUC officers in the courts and have been accepted by some judges even in very serious cases. There was no possible proof that these were not concocted. The list of scheduled offences were greatly extended and the granting of bail based on these was reserved to the High Court which meant long periods awaiting trial for persons arrested and charged, often on the basis of suspect confessions. At the conclusion of these bizarre court cases extended sentences are imposed. The climax of this court system was reached perhaps in October 1980 when a Catholic man, father of six children, alleged to have acted as a look-out in a murder case, was given 'jail for the rest of his natural life'.

MURDER ALWAYS WRONG

'Murder is murder'. We are reminded frequently of Pope John Paul

II's remark. Over 70 innocent Catholics have been killed by the British Army and the RUC from John Gallagher on 14 August 1969 to Michael McCartan, James McCarron, Michael Donnelly and James Bell in recent months. Over 800 persons have been tortured and ill-treated in interrogation centres. No British soldiers or RUC officers were sentenced for these crimes committed while on duty in Northern Ireland. Did these 70 killings not include murder? Is it right to call these particular killers and torturers criminals?

One cannot help concluding that the British Government uses the words 'murderer' and 'criminal' in a selective way to suit their own political purposes.

Pope John Paul said on 1 January 1980:

'Restoring peace means calling by their proper names acts of violence in all their forms. Murder must be called by its proper name; murder is murder, political or ideological motives do not change its nature. . . . Torture must be called by its proper name.

'... So must all forms of oppression and exploitation of man by man, of man by the state, of one people by another people.'

Murder and torture are wrong for everybody, be they IRA, Loyalist paramilitaries, or agents of the British Government.

THE PRISONERS' WORLD

Against this background we must examine the present position of the prisoners in the H Blocks, Long Kesh, and Armagh Prison. They are the third or fourth generation of unemployed. The middle class historians rant romantic about Irish revolutionaries of the past as if their deeds were something clean and pure and come down like a sledge hammer on the present prisoners who are the victims of the sins of British/Unionist sectarian governments. Their families were treated with vicious bigotry. Basil Brooke, a former Prime Minister in Northern Ireland (1942-1963), described all Catholics as disloyal. He was made a peer and enrolled in the Order of the Garter. The present prisoners who average 18-23 years saw their fathers and brothers imprisoned without trial for long periods, in many cases for declaring publicly a wish for Irish unity, a love of the Irish language and culture, and a desire to foster Irish music, games and dancing. Every non-violent expression of Irishness or Irish republicanism was crushed by racist laws.

The present young prisoners have never known a world dominated by decent, humane, and Christian standards. They were eight or nine years of age when the present conflict broke out. They saw brothers and fathers dragged off to torture and internment in 1971. Peaceful protests against bigotry, discrimination, Special Powers Act, were met by the Orange jackboot and the mailed fist 1968-69. The back-

ground has developed from a world of pogrom, burning of houses and intimidation, 40,000 refugees in Belfast, ghetto living, non-stop harassment by men in uniform, to an offensive war. The Catholic population of Belfast is virtually denied access to the city centre. Catholics are made to carry documents of identification. When the Catholic name is seen it is — 'Get out of the car! Bonnet and boot!', standing on the road sometimes for hours, youths up against the wall. Every form of abuse of special powers has been used in a spirit of racist sectarianism.

There is no escape for these young people of the poor ghettos. They have been demoralised. If they go to England, even on route to work on the continent, they are held for seven days and are returned home. They are hemmed into Warsaw-like ghettos. Ballymurphy is a name that has been much in the Northern Ireland news. It will come as a surprise to people not familiar with West Belfast that it is really quite a small place. But very ugly. Built by ugly men who assumed that the poor Catholics should live boxed up tight in small jerry built houses, no playing grounds or greenery, narrow little streets because the unemployed there would not need cars! It has a population of 3,500. In 1972-73 unemployment among men was over 40%. Now it is over 50%. Some sixty civilians have been killed, many of them murdered, some murdered by the British Army. Two priests were shot dead there by the British Army while administering the sacrament of anointing. Hundreds were interned and hundreds jailed. Every home was raided. When the British Army withdrew its bigger armoured cars known as Saladins from other areas they were retained in Ballymurphy, like huge monsters bearing down on the poor populace.

The Short Strand is a Catholic ghetto in East Belfast, in recent years greatly depopulated from 8,000 to 2,500, a result of a combination of factors: the war in the north and unenlightened redevelopment. They have the reputation of being a kindly, hospitable community. Great injustice has been done to them over generations. They have been deliberately denied work and adequate housing, by deliberate policy of the succeeding Unionist governments. The great engineering works, the Sirocco works is within their boundary. The few Catholics employed there go in after the skilled workers leave to sweep the floors and clean the lavatories. When he came first as bishop to Belfast Bishop William Philbin exchanged letters with the company urging them to share work and opportunity with the Catholic community. He did not succeed. Pity. The Strand has suffered a lot in the past ten years. Over forty of its residents have been killed, five Protestants, and two British soldiers. The ghetto resembles a huge prison camp. It is literally caged in by huge netting walls. The houses are continually raided by the British Army and the

RUC. Arrests are numerous. There are over sixty men and girls from the Strand in prison. The women folk of the Strand have been particularly harassed. Because they live so close to the city centre they were chosen for British Army attrition following incendiary fires in Belfast. It was thought that by degrading one set of women that this would act as a deterrent.

At a recent meeting in Belfast there was a large gathering of parents and relatives of H Block prisoners. It was sad to cast an eye over them. A suffering people. Hemmed in. Harassed because of sons or daughters in prison. The younger members of the family continually arrested on suspicion and thereby inexorably driven towards violence by violence done to them illegally by forces of 'law and order', without a voice being raised in their defence by many Church leaders and professional men. With justice Bishop Edward Daly of Derry once said that long hair and denims and residence in the Creggan and Bogside were not a sufficient reason for arrest and detention and that young people were driven into paramilitary groups by this type of conduct. The political situation in the north of Ireland has come to the door of the relatives of prisoners. It is made worse when they are met with harshness from the Northern Ireland Office. Time and time again prisoners have been refused compassionate leave on the death of a member of the family. Relatives have often spoken out against maltreatment of prisoners — forcible bathing, intimate searching of the anus, banging on cell doors throughout the night, continuous use of electric light, withholding of letters, inadequate food, hosing cells and naked prisoners, use of punishment cells for the slightest pretext. Relatives spoke out loud and clear on 4 May 1980 against the beatings of the girls in Armagh Jail by male officers on 7 February 1980, the subsequent denial of access to the toilets, February 7-12, denial of laundry and visits from concerned persons, the 23 hour lock up of the girls, the searching of the girls before and after visits in the toilets even to removing on occasions their sanitary towels. Sometimes when relatives make a simple visit to the prisons they are met with an unsympathetic attitude and difficulties are sometimes put in their way by prison staff — young girl visitors to Armagh Prison have sometimes had their jeans unzipped and all female visitors are intimately searched under their clothes before and after a visit and sometimes again if they go to the toilet in the waiting room. All this and at the same time prison authorities who adopt an attitude that they own the very lives of the prisoners are mesmerised by the heroism of the same prisoners. They have seen them over four years endure cold and hunger, deprivation of association and mental stimulation, beatings, degradations. Now the British Government must face a hunger strike for demands that any humane prison system would allow: (1) voluntary work; (2) free association;

(3) wear their own clothes; (4) one visit, letter, parcel per week; (5) restoration of full remission.

ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

It is strange how Irish Catholics instinctively come back to the Mass — that was the reaction to the announcement of impending hunger strike in Long Kesh. Centuries of practice, of meditation, of endurance, of choice leads them to suffering and death as the price of freedom and redemption. Padraig Pearse saw this and phrased it in 1916 — Easter Death and Resurrection. The ultimate protest of hunger strike against an unjust system and tyrannical oppression and bigotry ought not to be too unexpected of a country too small and helpless to throw out the centuries old oppressor who bribes and divides and tortures and covers up with pharisaic respectability and can find plenty of Irishmen, lay and cleric, to play the Roland as Friel says in *Translations*.

It is strange how the half educated and unemployed six county Catholics, more or less rejected now by the materialist people of the Republic who salve their conscience by saying that 'one side is as bad as the other' or 'When they finish killing each other, we might take them in' — extraordinary how they now use the ultimate weapon — sacrifice — to shame the wise and comfortable among us.

Sad, but who that aspires to be Christian, will not admit that the protest of suffering and rejection as a sign of moral strength is better than violence against others. Christ died himself alone; he offered his own life, not the lives of others, to achieve redemption. No man has a right to call upon others to die violently. He can lead men by the voluntary sacrifice of his own life. By suffering and death endured, moral power is created; by suffering and death inflicted on others immoral evil enters the world — better for Irishmen to select the first option and reject the second.

Do not follow any leaders, who train you in the ways of inflicting death . . . Give yourself to the service of life, not the work of death (Pope John Paul II at Drogheda).