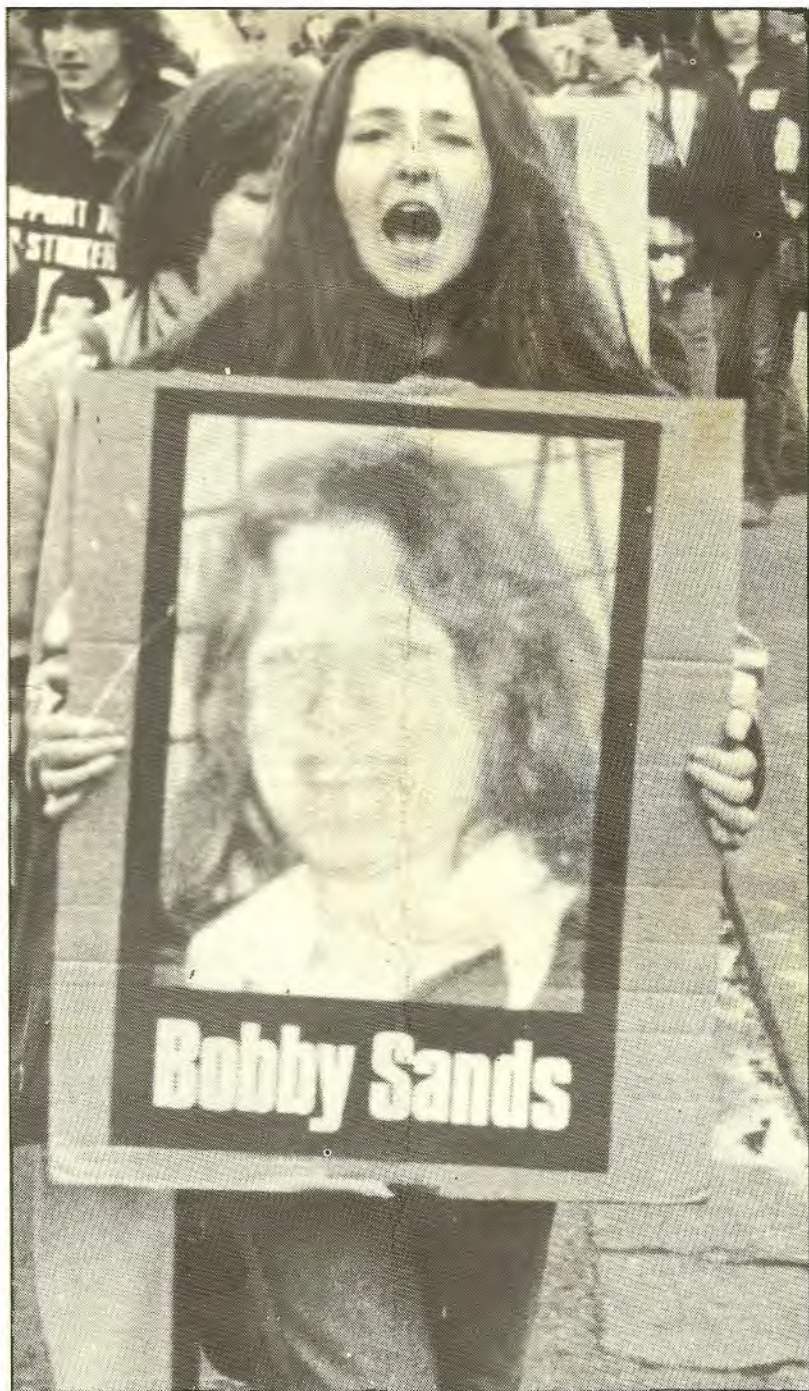




The Writings of
Bobby Sands



THE WRITINGS OF BOBBY SANDS

A collection of prison writings by
H-Block hunger-striker Bobby Sands,
IRA Volunteer and Westminster MP,
with an introduction by fellow republican
Gerry Adams.

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BOBBY SANDS

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● Enjoying political status in the cages of Long Kesh, in 1975, with Bobby Sands (right) and Gerry Adams (front) is 'Tomboy' Loudon (centre), another H-Block blanket man, and Brendan Hughes (left), whom Bobby succeeded as Republican O/C of the blanket men, when Brendan led the first H-Block hunger-strike late last year.

INTRODUCTION

by Gerry Adams

BOBBY SANDS has been the most prolific writer among the H-Block blanket men. This booklet contains some examples of his writings, particularly under the pen name 'Marcella' (his sister's name). He also wrote, following his sentencing in September 1977, as 'a young west Belfast republican' and as PRO of the blanket men in the H-Blocks 3, 4 and 5.

During 1978 many of his pieces were published in '*Republican News*' and then, from January 1979, in the newly-fused '*An Phoblacht/Republican News*'. The choice of articles published in this collection is restricted to creative pieces — writing of an extremely high standard — as Bobby describes life in the H-Blocks in a compelling and graphic manner. When one recalls that all of his writing was accomplished in the most off-putting of conditions, scribbling furtively on sheets of toilet paper, with a ball point refill as a pen, then one cannot but admire his achievement, an example of the ingenuity and determination of the republican prisoners about whom he writes.

Of the ten pieces published here, readers will pick their own favourites. I was particularly drawn to 'I once had a life', 'A thought in the night', and 'I fought a monster today'. Two examples of verse written by Bobby are also printed here, including a fine protest poem, 'Modern Times'.

There is a premonition of personal tragedy running through Bobby Sands' articles: that his H-Block cell will, literally, become a tomb, when the monster of British imperialism, and the prison regime it has created, kill him, following their failed attempts to destroy his spirit. He also admits his frustration at being unable to adequately describe the psychological struggle of the blanket men and the forms and various effects psychological torture has taken in the H-Blocks. His admiration for his comrades and his feelings for supporters and for oppressed people outside of prison emerge in the words which he so expertly uses as a weapon against a regime which tries vainly to break and dehumanise him.



Who then is Bobby Sands? On Friday 10th April, on the forty-first day of his hunger-strike in the H-Blocks, he was elected as Westminster MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The election, held against a background of harassment and intimidation of his election workers by British crown forces, was unique, not least because of pressure put upon the nationalist electorate by the SDLP leadership, the Catholic

church, and British politicians. Despite these pressures, Bobby Sands received 30,492 votes, a clear sign — for those who doubted it — that the nationalist people recognise republican prisoners as political prisoners and support their prison struggle.

Furthermore, although Bobby Sands stood — representing the H-Block blanket men and Armagh women protestors — as a political prisoner on an anti-H-Block/Armagh ticket, the British intervened in the election and made it into an acid test for the electorate's attitude to the IRA. Bobby Sands' election by the nationalist people, after twelve years of armed resistance, gave them their answer. As the April 12th editorial of the influential *'Sunday Times'* commented: *"The election result finally puts paid to the notion.....that the Provisional IRA enjoys no general popular support."* But, despite the election result, the intransigent British government continued to deny the validity of the prisoners' just and reasonable demands.



Bobby Sands was born in 1954 in Rathcoole, a predominantly loyalist district of north Belfast. He joined the Republican Movement in his late teens. At eighteen he was arrested and in 1973 was sentenced to five years' imprisonment on an arms charge. I first met Bobby in the cages of Long Kesh where we both enjoyed special category status as political prisoners. Ironically these cages still exist, with prisoners there enjoying the status which Britain has denied for five years to other political prisoners held in H-Blocks only a few hundred yards away.

In those days Bobby was a slightly-built young man with a mane of long hair, an intense manner whether engaged in a game of football, a political discussion or a guitar lesson. He read profoundly, and wrote quite a few arrangements and songs for his guitar.

Bobby was released in April 1976, and continued as an active republican before being re-arrested in October 1976. Sentenced to fourteen years' imprisonment in September 1977, this time — in keeping with Britain's attempts to project militant Irish republicanism as a criminal conspiracy — he was denied 'special category status' and was imprisoned as an 'ordinary prisoner' in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh. Selected as PRO of the blanket men, his statements traced developments within the prison: the build-up of the blanket protest, the beginning of the no wash protest, the beatings, cell shifts, and mirror searches, and throughout it all the determination and dignity of the blanket men, who, despite the violence and the propaganda of the British government, continued with the longest protest ever by so many republican prisoners.



During the first hunger-strike, Bobby succeeded fellow Belfast republican Brendan Hughes as O/C of the H-Block prisoners and was centrally involved, after the ending of that hunger-strike, in the aborted efforts by the blanket men to bring their protest to a principled end on the basis of five conditions. These were: the right not to wear prison

uniform (or prison-issue civilian-type clothing); the right not to do prison work; free association among political prisoners (that is, segregation from other prisoners); educational, recreational and visiting facilities; and full restoration of remission. But the British government — having secured the ending of the hunger-strike and the defusing of a potentially explosive situation both inside and outside the prisons — refused to resolve the prison crisis.

Subsequently, despite many attempts to avoid it, the prisoners were back on the slippery slope to another hunger-strike. Bobby Sands commenced that hunger-strike on March 1st. He was followed a fortnight later by Frankie Hughes of South Derry, and a further week later by Raymond McCreesh of South Armagh and Patsy O'Hara of Derry city.

That the republican prisoners are political prisoners is without question. Bobby Sands' writings say that better than I can ever hope to. And the importance of popular mobilisations is also recognised in his writings. Bobby wrote in 'I fought a monster today': *"My body is broken and cold. I'm lonely and I need comfort. From somewhere afar I hear those familiar voices which keep me going: 'We are with you, son. We are with you. Don't let them beat you.' I need to hear those voices. They anger the monster. It retreats... Sometimes I really long to hear those voices. I know if they shout louder they will scare the monster away and my suffering will be ended."* And, in the same article, written more than two-and-a-half years ago, he concluded: *"I remember, and I shall never forget, how this monster took the lives of Tom Ashe, Terence MacSwiney, Michael Gaughan, Frank Stagg, and Hugh Coney, and I wonder each night what the monster will do to me tomorrow."*



Once had a life

First published in An Phoblacht/Republican News, March 17th, 1979

THE SUN hung high above, seemingly like a gaping hole in the still blue sky, out of which the golden light came pouring down like honey to feed the land and ripen the barley, while sending shimmering hazes quivering above the melting tarmacadam surfaces. It was hot and humid, the beads of sweat lined my forehead like an ornate jewel.

I walked along the well-trodden path that lay on the perimeter of the forest and which rose steeply before me. I was in no hurry. I had plenty of time to take in and enjoy the beautiful surroundings. A gentle breeze sighed, sending ripples across an ocean of shining green and rustic brown ferns that lay ahead of me.

Clusters of timid yellow primroses lined both sides of my avenue. A young rabbit scurried across my path and vanished. Everything was alive and buzzing, but there was peace in the activity of nature. A passing crow cawed but the bees fed undisturbed upon the flowers, while the refreshing scent of pine carried upon the breeze.

CLIMB

I mastered the twisting rising climb and crossed a clearing of lush green grass, where a solitary young sycamore threw its shadow towards a family of bluebells that flourished by a little trickle of a stream. I sat down upon an earthen mound and gazed down the hillside at the sweeping landscape of deep green and every shade of brown, speckled with orange and yellow and splashed with a million white dots.

Where the life of the forest receded and fought to guard its flanks and outermost perimeter, a road in its infancy lay hollowed out in the black hardened clay, clustered with machinery. A row of houses appeared beyond, then another, leading to a massive concrete jungle where tiny figures moved to and fro.

There were deck-chairs in the gardens where the sun-worshippers gloated in contentment. A group of young lads played with a garden hose, the cool white jet of water rising into the air before toppling down upon them in a thousand shining little silver drops.

BELFAST

To the right lay Belfast, belching out the sweat of the early morning risers, and the cranes of the shipyard towered towards the cloudless sky; in the distance stood another dogged giant, the Divis Tower, in the shadow of its like-named mountain; and, nearer by, 'Napoleon's Nose' kept a watch on the city, perhaps in remembrance of Wolfe Tone who

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visited it all those years ago.

I retraced my gaze and found with ease our old house. Nobody I knew was there any more, just strangers, who trimmed the lawn around the ash tree that I grew up with. The fence needed a coat of paint and the front garden had been deflowered of its colour, my mother and father's pride and joy. An old dog chased its tail on the street where we once played 'kick the tin' and the old fellows made their way to the bookies for the first two across the card.

Farmer Thompson's old faithful dog brought his sheep in, a few fields away, and a wood pigeon fell to a distant shotgun, as I arose, not from my panoramic platform, but out of the inky blackness in the corner of my filthy, cold cell, where, wrapping a dirty, flimsy blanket around me to cover my naked body, I stepped towards the barred window and leant my head against it.

The harvest Britain has sown

First published in Republican News, September 16th 1978

A STRETCH of tarmac surrounded by barbed wire and steel is the only view from my cell window. I'm told it's an exercise yard. I wouldn't know. In my fourteen months in H-Block 5, I haven't been allowed to walk in the fresh air. I'm on 'cellular confinement' today. That is the three days out of every fourteen when my only possessions, three blankets and a mattress, are removed, leaving a blanket and a chamber pot.

I'm left to pass the day like this, from 7.30 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. How I spend my day is determined by the weather. If it's reasonably warm, it's possible to sit on the floor, stare at the white walls, and pass a few hours day-dreaming. But otherwise I must spend my day continuously pacing the cell to prevent the cold chilling through to my bones. Even after my bedding is returned at 8.30 p.m. hours will pass before the circulation returns to my feet and legs.

TIME

Methods of passing the time are few and far between, so I am left with many hours of contemplation: good times, bad times, how I got here, but, most importantly, why I am here. During moments of weakness I try to convince myself that a prison uniform and conforming wouldn't be that bad. But the will to resist burns too strong within.

To accept the status of criminal would be to degrade myself and to admit that the cause that I believe in and cherish is wrong. When thinking of the men and women who sacrificed life itself, my suffering seems insignificant. There have been many attempts to break my will, but each one has made me even more determined. I know my place is here with my comrades.

I think of the only break in the monotony, the forty minutes I spend at Mass each Sunday — 'turn the other cheek', 'love thy neighbour' — and I wonder, because over the months I know that bitterness has grown inside me. A hatred so intensive that it frightens me.

I see it also in the faces of my comrades at Mass: the hatred in their eyes. One day these young men will be fathers and these attitudes will

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inevitably be passed on to their children.

FRIGHTENING

This is the harvest Britain has sown: her actions will eventually seal the fate of her rule in Ireland.

It is frightening to see men become aged at eighteen and nineteen. Young men who were fit and strong in mind and body a year ago, now resemble shrunken shells of human beings. Every aspect of H-Block life, from cold, empty cells and denial of every comfort, to refusal of medical treatment, is designed to grind down our resistance, but it will not succeed.

They may hold our bodies in the most inhuman conditions, but, while our minds remain free, our victory is assured!



The window of my mind

First published in Republican News, November 25th 1978

WHEN one spends each day naked and crouched in the corner of a cell resembling a pigsty, staring at such eye-sores as piles of putrifying rubbish infested with maggots and flies, a disease-ridden chamber pot, or a black, disgustingly-scarred wall, it is to the rescue of one's sanity to be able to rise and gaze out of a window at the world.

My cell window, fortified by thick concrete slabs which serve as bars, affords me with a view of nothingness, unless a barbed wire jungle and rows of blank faceless tin timbers offer an artistical appreciation unknown to me. It's what passes by, lingers, or materialises, in front of my humble little window that saves me, that can dampen depression, allow me to contemplate, serve as an enjoyable distraction from my surroundings, and provide me with a once unknown pleasure.

On a dreary, dull, wet, morale-attacking November afternoon, when one's stomach is empty, and when the monotony begins to depress and demoralise, it is soothing in many respects to spend a half-an-hour with one's head pressed against the concrete slabs, gazing in wonder, and taking in the antics of a dozen or so young starlings bickering over a few stale crusts of bread. Circling, swooping, sizing up and daring an extra nibble, continually on their guard, and all their tiny nerves on end, the young starlings feud among themselves, the greedy one continually trying to dominate and always wanting the whole haul to himself, fighting with his comrades whilst the sparrow sneaks in to nibble at the spoils.

But the ruler of the kingdom of my little twenty-yard arched view



of the outside world, is the seagull, who dominates, steals, pecks, and denies the smaller birds their share. The seagull takes it all. In fact, his appetite seems insatiable. He goes to any length to gorge himself. Thus I dislike the seagull, and I often wonder why the starlings do not direct their attention to the predator, rather than each other. Perhaps this applies to more than birds.

SUMMER

During the summer months, finches were abundant, and the music of the lark a constant symphony of sound and a reminder of life. The various crows, the odd magpie, and the little wagtails are still to be seen and heard from dawn to dusk.

In the late evening, when most of the prisoners of war are sleeping, when a hush descends, amplifying the gentle sound of a breeze, one can gaze upon the ocean of sky and the multitude of stars that seem embedded and ablaze in that black roof of nothingness that not even the moon in all her beaming regalia can penetrate, and one can dream a thousand dreams of yesterday, of childhood and happiness, of love and joy, and escape through make-believe and fantasy. The evils that engulf each day, forgotten about, and tomorrow as far away as the unreachable stars.

On many a summer evening and cold winter night I stand with only my old shabby blanket wrapped tightly around me, my breath pouring out into the blackness, in ghost-like clouds, just dreaming. Many a day in the eternal hours, I stand watching the birds and listening to the lark, trying to discover its whereabouts in that stagnant blue ocean above me that represents the outside world, and I long for the liberty of the lark.

I suppose, to many, a few birds, the sound of a lark, a blue sky, or full moon, are there, but unnoticed most of the time. But, to me, they mean existence, peacefulness, comfort, entertainment, and something to view, to help forget the tortures, brutalities, indignities and evils that surround and attack my everyday life.

Today, the screws began blocking up all the windows with sheets of steel. To me this represents and signifies the further torture of the tortured, blocking out the very essence of life: nature!

A few words I once read came echoing back to me today: 'No-one can take away from a person his or her ability to contemplate. Throw them into prison, give them hard labour, unimaginative work to do, but you can never take away from them the ability to find the poetry and music in life.' And I also realised that, here, my torturers have long ago started, and still endeavour, to block up the window of my mind.

A thought in the night

First published in Republican News, January 6th 1979

THE WIND howled mournfully and swept across the brilliance of a thousand lights illuminating the surrounding sky, while from the outer darkness the heavy rain came hurtling down in sheets of silver crashing upon the black tarmac surface, sending a million fairy-like figures jiggling and leaping in a frenzy of movement.

A thousand miles of grey barbed wire wavered and shook in protest as the wind weaved and attacked it relentlessly. An unlocked gate clanged, and the panic-stricken barks of a distant guard dog hugged the wind and were carried into the night. Then, as if the Good Lord had snapped his fingers, a silence fell.

The wind was tamed and the fairies clung to the grey wire like a mul-



Bobby Sands' mother and sister, Marcella

itude of sparkling pearls. The ensuing calm and sudden hush were eerie until disturbed by a moan from the unlocked gate and the sharp piercing cries of the unseen night travellers, the snipe and the curlew. The pools of silver rain glimmered as the passing night settled to recuperate from its raging ordeal and I gazed at a distant star to dream in the newly born tranquillity, as the cold dampness of the December evening descended.

FAMILY

My thoughts were of my home and family, my wife and son. I tried to visualise the fading faces of my mother and father whom I have not seen for a long time, whom I fear I will not see again. Then came an old companion of mine: depression! It tore at my heart and engulfed me with its unseen shroud of misery. The more I thought of home and family, the deeper I plunged into its darkest depths.

The smile, the soft warm tender smile of my wife, kept coming up out of the darkness in front of me, and I heard her plaintive gentle voice: 'I miss you, and I love you, come home'. And my son lay sleeping like an angel, innocent and unaware of his mother's hardship and loneliness, with no father to tuck him into bed, to love or emulate as he grew; and he sighed as only an innocent sighs, and rolled over in his dreamy sleep.

FACES

Then came the faces of my family, my sisters and brother, growing up in my absence. And I knew just how much I loved them, and how I longed to share this short life with them and my poor mother. Lord, my poor tortured mother, grey and marked with a lifetime of worry and hardship that only she knows the entirety and toll of. And I said: 'I'm sorry that you have suffered through my sufferings, mother.' As ever, she replied: 'Don't be humble. You're my son, and I'll always stand by you.' My father, quiet as always in his own way, stood beside her. 'Take heart, son', he said, 'take heart'.

The sky began to grey as the dawn threatened, and the birds awoke to proclaim the existence of life and nature. In the outer corridor of silence a key jingled and footsteps approached from afar. Depression slipped away unnoticed, as tension attacked my nerves and fear fell with the dawn.

Three hundred and fifty naked bodies stirred, a million thoughts and dreams fled, and a nightmare descended as the sun shone clear. Another day began. The footsteps grew louder and louder, and a voice said: 'Get up, you bastards'. I braced myself and thought: 'Oh for the darkness of a stormy night.'

A break in the monotony

First published in Republican News, January 20th 1979

A THIN LAYER of virgin snow covered all but a few spaces on the raven-black surface of the small, barren, tarmac yard which lay dormant outside my cell window. The first snow of an unwelcome winter had just fallen as the grey light of another dying day faded.

The sky was a swirling mass of white snow clouds which hung threateningly, biding their time, waiting to release their monster load of freezing wintry flakes to consume the land and to paint the countryside a brilliant white.

It was bitter cold. I had been huddled up in the corner of my freezing cell. The thin foam mattress which serves as my bed upon the cold concrete floor was damp, worn and dirty. I was sitting upon it trying to find some warmth with the flimsy worn blankets that I had tightly wrapped around my body.

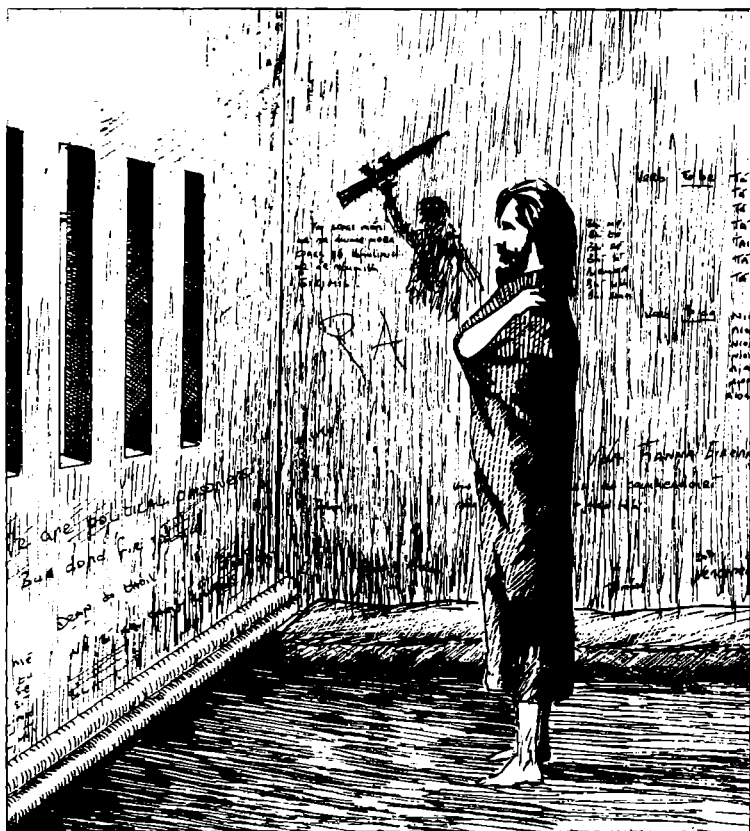
Suddenly I was drawn to the window by the burst of chatter and excitement that came from two or three of my naked comrades a short distance away, as they announced the nasty change in the weather from the windows of their cave-like cells. It was a break in the almost eternal boredom and an unexpected change in the eye-sore scenery of the grey steel criss-crossed wire and corrugated timbers.

The thin covering of snow glistened and glittered, blocking out the greyiness and painting a new picture. It was something new to view to help pass the never-ending hours, and, with the imminent promise of more to fall, the attraction drove the rest of the lads to the windows and the chatter built up.

MEMORIES

Old, almost forgotten memories of winters gone by were dug up from the back of scarred minds and were shared one after the other out the windows. The latest news was passed across to the boys on the other side of the wing who, being unable to see out of their recently blocked-up fortified windows, were driven to their doors by curiosity to seek the answer to the abnormal commotion from their excited comrades.

Another thin fall of snow fluttered through the descending darkness and a thousand coloured lights of orange, white, and red, illuminated the surrounding area, sparkling and reflecting off the frosted timbers, flashing upon the miles of snow-covered barbed-wire, varnish-



ing the smooth carpet that lay upon the yard. The snowflakes appeared like magic from out of the blackness above, floating as if to the music of the sighing wind to their earthly destination.

Clouds from my warm breath departed out of the paneless window into the night. Flakes of snow and frost clung to my long shaggy beard, and my eyes watered as the cold cut at my face and attacked my naked body. Who would imagine such a beautiful night could be found in a place filled with so much misery and pain, I thought, as I rubbed my hands and stamped my bare feet in an attempt to bring some warmth back into them. The chatter was dying at the windows, only the hearty and lonely remained braving the cold. Another sleepless night, I thought.

COLD

The concrete floor was so cold that to pace the floor would be impossible in one's bare feet. Three small flimsy blankets and lying upon a damp mattress would not provide enough warmth for escape through sleep. This night will be another night, huddled up in the

corner, fighting the intense cold amidst despairing thoughts when pain and depression become almost overwhelming.

The wind is rising and growing angry; it will carry the blankets of falling snow in through the paneless windows. I am very, very cold now. I can stand here and freeze at the window gazing upon this barbed-wire jungle of colour and whiteness, or I can retreat to my little den in the corner of my tomb and gaze at my nightmarish surroundings upon the dark sinister shadows which the filthy walls conjure up, or on the piles of scattered, once putrifying, now stinking rubbish which scars the floor.

Cold, tasteless porridge for breakfast tomorrow morning, the promise of yet another beating and another eternity, and another cold, cold night.

The monster is shedding its coat of a million snowflakes, the other monster is sleeping somewhere, tomorrow is the last day of the year. No one else is at their windows now. Dear God, I wonder how things are in Siberia?

The woman cried

*From humble home in dead of night,
A flitting shadow fled,
The yellow moon caught sharpened pike,
Where the night shades danced and played.*

*A bramble clawed at trembling hand,
And a night owl watched unseen,
Through bog and glen a United man,
Marched out to win a dream.*

*Cold black water lashed and splashed,
And played around a tattered reed,
By dying embers, to God a woman prayed,
That the Gael might but succeed.*

*The silver nails of a rugged boot,
Scarred a lonely lifeless stone,
'Cross rambling hill he marched afoot,
To fight along with Tone.*

*Six days he fought,
Midst dying piles of gory mutilated heroes,
And the English cannon roared,
Upon the ghosts of Celtic bones,
A nation's blood was poured.*

*Thousands fell in screaming bloody terror,
Whilst the informer hid cowering close by,
But there were none left amongst that bloody fray,
To hear the woman cry.*



The battle for survival

First published in An Phoblacht/Republican News, January 27th, 1979

THE GREATEST part of each seemingly eternal day that I face, is filled with thought. I have nothing else to help pass the time during the long, never-ending hours. Boredom and loneliness are terrible things, continual and unrelenting. I have but one weapon to overcome them: my own thoughts.

To pass the time and to keep warm I pace the floor. Sometimes I stand gazing out of the cell window at the grey barbed wire or simply just sit upon my dirty damp mattress on the floor in the corner of my dungeon-like tomb. But all of the while I'm thinking of something, somebody, or some place. It may be deep, serious thought or day-dreaming to escape the reality of my nightmarish situation.

Again, I might be, and often as not I am, worrying, thinking of what is going on around me, or what may lie before me. Each day my comrades and I face a psychological battle for survival. It is a very intense struggle and the enemy is unmerciful.

For someone who is contented, or unconcerned with any great worry, living what is termed an everyday life, you may find my psychological circumstances hard to comprehend. For two reasons: firstly, my inability to describe the psychological struggle of myself

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and of my three hundred and fifty comrades; secondly, it is terribly hard, if not inconceivable, to conjure up in one's imagination the pain and stress of psychological torture or to know its many forms or to understand its various effects.

IMAGINE

Imagine how it would feel to be locked up naked in solitary confinement, twenty-four hours a day, and subjected to total deprivation of not only common, everyday things, but of basic human necessities, such as clothes, fresh air and exercise, the company of other human beings.

In short, imagine being entombed, naked and alone, for a whole day. What would it be like for twenty torturous months!

Now again, with this in mind, try and imagine just what it is like to be in this situation in surroundings that resemble a pigsty, and you are crouched naked upon the floor in a corner, freezing cold, amid the lingering stench of putrifying rubbish, with crawling, wriggling white maggots all around you, fat bloated flies pestering your naked body, the silence is nerve-wrecking, your mind is in turmoil.

You are sitting waiting on the screws coming to your cell to drag you out to be forcibly bathed. You have heard and seen the horrible results of this from many of your comrades at Mass. You know only too well what it means: the skin scrubbed from your body with heavy brushes. The screws have told you that you are next. You wait all day, just thinking. Your mind is wrecked. Maybe they've forgotten, you kid yourself; but you know they never forget.

They don't come. The next day is the same, and the next, and the next. You become more and more depressed. For days your thoughts have been the same, a mass of fear, fearing what lies ahead.

BEATEN

Consider being in that frame of mind every day! Knowing in your mind that you're to be beaten nearly senseless, forcibly bathed, or held down to have your back passage examined or probed. These things are common facts of everyday H-Block life.

It is inconceivable to try to imagine what an eighteen-year-old naked lad goes through when a dozen or so screws slaughter him with batons, boots, and punches, while dragging him by the hair along a corridor, or when they squeeze his privates until he collapses, or throw scalding water around his naked body. It is also inconceivable for me to describe, let alone for you to imagine, our state of mind just sitting waiting for this to happen. I can say that this physical and psychological torture in the H-Blocks has brought many men to the verge of insanity.

We are in a very, very bad state now. What will we be like at the end of the day, or in the years to come? My mind is scarred deep. It is as equally a worrying thought that we may end up unable to even think at all! With that in 'your' mind, I will leave off. Think about it, but just don't leave it at that.

Alone and condemned

First published in Republican News, January 13th, 1979

THE HEAVY steel door of the punishment cell slammed shut behind me. In a bewildered daze I vaguely heard the jingle of keys and the steady footsteps fading away in the wake of its thunderous echo. An ungodly silence fell, leaving only the sound of my sharp rasping breaths.

My eyes flashed at the bareness of my humble surroundings. A wooden board for a bed, a concrete block for a stool, a concrete slab as a table. A bright light burned high above me, reflecting off the chalk-white walls, and the severe cold bored through my body and numbed my bare feet. Naked, alone, and condemned, I began to pace the small, freezing cold cell; my thoughts in an entangled mess, riddled with panic, worry and fear. Condemned! 'We'll be back in eight hours', that's what they said. Jesus, what time is it now? Eight hours, that's all I've left.

It will hurt. I know it will hurt. Everyone says it hurts. Oh God, it's not happening to me. It's not happening, I'm trapped. Entombed! No escape! Nowhere to hide. And nowhere to run. I'm condemned to face what awaits me in eight hours. I can't appeal, I can't plead, they won't even listen, they just laugh, they're glad, they revel in it. That's why they give me a warning of eight hours, to watch me sweat and worry. They have it well planned.

WATCHING

They're watching me now. They're watching me through that little slit in the cell door. They won't give me peace, but what peace can I find? I'm so scared, I can't even think right. I wish I was at home. I wonder what the family are doing now? Sitting around the fire in a nice warm room having tea. Jesus, it's getting colder. My feet are blue. I wonder what they are thinking? What would they think if they knew what is to happen to me? It would only make it worse, they would suffer, they would worry so much, but maybe they have secretly been expecting this, and never said so. Maybe it's better they don't know.

They won't break my spirit. I won't let them do that. They can do what they will with me, but I won't concede my spirit. Yes, that's it. Calm down, fight back, show them your spirit, settle down, and get ready for them..... There's a bible in the corner — flick through it and stop thinking about it. Six hours! Take heart.... The prophet Sirach: 'Blessed is he whose heart does not condemn him, and who does not



BOBBY SANDS

give up his hope.' Remember that. Remember those words. I'm alright. I won't give up hope. No, I won't give up hope.

They're watching again. Ignore them. Let on you don't see them. Jesus, it's freezing. It's so quiet, it's ghostly. Walk again, keep moving, get your body warm. How long left now? What time is it? I'm losing track. Have a guess. Five hours left, maybe less. I must be ready. I'm shaking again. Don't fail now. Get it right, they'll be back. I'm depressed! Jesus Christ! I'm cracking, I'm going insane... I wish I had someone to talk to, even for a few minutes.

Keys! The jingle of keys. Footsteps! They're coming back. Jesus it's not time yet. They've tricked me, they're coming for me now. Don't fail, remember your spirit. 'Blessed is he who does not give up his hope.' Jesus, Mary and Joseph, watch over me and protect me. Key in the door. It's open. Oh, dear God...

"Grub up! What are you gaping at, son? Take it." (You'll pay some day, you bastard, you'll pay.) *"Don't stir. Take it in, you tramp."*

Got it. He's shutting the door. Slam! Keys jingling. They're going, they're leaving. Thank God. Thank God, they've gone. Don't give up hope, there's hope still.

Cold food, no knife, no fork, only a plastic spoon. I'm not hungry, my stomach's turning. Nerves again. I must calm down. Meet them with dignity. That's a word: 'dignity'. They can't take that from me either. Naked as I am, treated worse than an animal, I am what I am. They can't and won't change that.

A cigarette would be nice. It's so long since I've had a cigarette or

warm clothing or slept in a dry bed, I forgot what it's like to live. I must be shocked, I don't even feel the cold any more. I've lost the feeling in my poor tortured feet. It doesn't matter. It won't be long now. It's creeping closer.

FOOTSTEPS

Two hours. Time waits on no man. I'm exhausted. God, I'm tired. I wish I could lie down and go to sleep, and wake up out of this nightmare. They're watching me again. Keep walking. I'm sure they don't even feel guilty. Money consoles their conscience. That is their purpose in life, to gain as much of it as possible. They're mindless, merciless parasites. Torture mongers. Yes, that's what they are. Some day their turn will come. They'll have to answer for everything!

It's getting dark. Winter nights. I hate winter. It's so cold and dark and lonely. I wish I was free... God, my head's splitting, migraine again. I feel really bad. It's the waiting, that's worse than anything. When it happens it will be over and that will be it, but it's the waiting.

I feel like the only person left in the world. I'm so isolated. Fear is a terrible thing, but I must keep my head up. My spirit will survive. They expect me to give up, to break down, but they're going to be disappointed. I shall resist. It's only natural that I should be afraid. Who wouldn't be? It must be nearly time. I can hear them moving about. There will be plenty of them, there always is. God, life is hard for the oppressed, but to fight back is a victory. To remain unbroken in spirit is a great victory.

Here they come, keys jingling and their heavy footsteps clattering. Get ready, face them. Jesus, this is it. This time, dear God, protect me. *"Get on your feet, tramp, we're coming."* I'm shaking again. Remember your spirit. They won't break that. Keys in the lock, the door is open. Jesus, there must be a dozen of them. *"Right, you, let's go."*

"I'm... I'm not going." (Laugh all you want you torture mongers.)

"What did you say?"

"I said I'm not going." (Some day you will all laugh on the other side of your faces.)

"You're going alright, son. Get him out."

Jesus, they're on top of me, kicking and punching... I'm out of the cell, and in the corridor. Jesus, they're dragging me by the hair. My head's on fire, my eye is bleeding, they'll kill me!

"Right, get him into it. Get him into it!" Jesus, it's stinging the eyes out of me! *"Get the brushes."* They're scrubbing the skin from my back, my flesh is burning, they're murdering me. My face and body are covered in blood and marks.

"Give it to him right. Give it to him right, so the rest of these bastards will see what they're going to get too."

Jesus! They're killing me. They're killing me. My head's light. Remember your spirit. 'Blessed is he who does not give up his hope.' Don't give in, don't give in, they can't break your spirit, they can't.....

Modern times

*It is said we live in modern times,
In the civilised year of 'seventy-nine,
But when I look around, all I see,
Is modern torture, pain, and hypocrisy.*

*In modern times little children die,
They starve to death, but who dares ask why?
And little girls without attire,
Run screaming, napalmed, through the night fire.*

*And while fat dictators sit upon their thrones,
Young children bury their parents' bones,
And secret police in the dead of night,
Electrocute the naked woman out of sight.*

*In the gutter lies the black man, dead,
And where the oil flows blackest, the street runs red,
And there was He who was born and came to be,
But lived and died without liberty.*

*As the bureaucrats, speculators and presidents alike,
Pin on their dirty, stinking, happy smiles tonight,
The lonely prisoner will cry out from within his tomb,
And tomorrow's wretch will leave its mother's womb!*

I am Sir, you are 1066!

First published in Republican News, July 1st 1978

I MUST have died last night, because when I awoke this morning I was in hell. I don't really know how I got here. I don't think I've done anything to deserve being here. But I am here, and I am suffering terribly. I think I am in some sort of tomb. I can not see, as everywhere is in total darkness. I have no clothes on, except some sort of rag around my waist.

The floor of my tomb is covered in a wet mushy substance, the source or nature of which I don't know. There is a revolting stench lingering in the darkness and the air is warm, heavy and humid. There is something soft and damp lying in the corner, which seems to be some sort of bedding to lie upon.

I can hear heavy booming noises echoing all around me like thunder. Somehow it reminds me of heavy doors closing. I check the four walls of my tomb; there appears to be some sort of a door in one of the walls.

I can't understand my being here. What, I wonder, will become of me? I know I am a human being, although I'm naked and bearded. I can think and breathe. Am I in hell or some sort of limbo?

APPROACHING

I can hear heavy footsteps approaching. They stop quite near to me. There is someone or something nearby. I can hear it moving and breathing. It is watching me. More noise directly outside my tomb, a rattle of metal against metal. A square form of light begins to materialise, revealing an entrance as a door swings open. A figure stands in the grey dim light of the doorway. It is a human figure, dressed in what appears to be some sort of black uniform. It stands scrutinising me in silence for several seconds, before letting out a terrifying yell that sends shivers through my body.

"*I am Sir!*" The words echo around my tomb. "*I am Sir!*" it bellows again. "*I am Sir, you are 1066!*" The door slams shut with a loud explosive boom, killing the dim light where the entrance had been. Still afraid to move I stand in the total darkness.

What is 1066, I think? Obviously it is me, but I can think, speak, smell and touch. I have all my senses, therefore I am not a number, I am not 1066, I am human, I am not a number, I am not 1066! Who, or



what, is a Sir? It frightened me. It was evil. I sensed its hatred of me, its eagerness to dominate me, and its potential violent nature. Oh, what will become of me? I remember I once had a family. Where are they now? Will I ever see or hear of them again?

WATCHING

It's watching me. Once more the door opens. The dim light gives off a little illumination, revealing the black uniformed figure at the doorway. "*I am Sir,*" it says, "*here is your food, 1066.*" A bowl is thrust into my hands as the door slams. Before the light dies I catch a glimpse of the floor. It is covered in filth and rubbish. There are several maggots clinging to my legs. The walls are covered with a mass of fat bloated flies.

Once again I am terror-stricken. I pace the floor, aghast at my sur-

roundings. The bowl in my hand is cold, it contains some sort of porridge or gruel. The smell from it revolts me. I set it down on the floor. Pacing the floor in total darkness, I become engulfed with depression and despair. I wish I was dead. *"But I am dead,"* I say aloud. I can't even kill myself, I think.

A breeze: I feel a breeze coming from the wall behind me. Feeling about, I touch a piece of cloth. I tug it and it falls. A light of great intensity hits my eyes, temporarily blinding me. My tomb becomes illuminated with light, revealing a window divided with concrete bars. Stepping closer, thousands of lights of every size and colour appear in my view. These lights are perched upon mountains of barbed wire that glitter and sparkle on the ink-black horizon.

Another step forward, and still looking straight ahead, a small building looms up in front of me, displaying a dozen or so windows all of which are brightly lit up. Several naked figures appear at the windows. The building is thirty yards away. I can see that all the figures are bearded, they all seem to be fairly young, but all their faces are pale and haggard. They are young men, but have old men's faces. Am I gazing at death? These figures keep staring out at nothing, or pacing to and fro.

FOOTSTEPS

Footsteps again! I turn, apprehension again gripping me, to await my door being opened again. My new-found curiosity having diminished, I fall deeper into the depths of depression and despair. The thought of what lies on the other side of that door tortures me.

The door swings open, and several black uniformed figures stand there, surrounding a very small, fat, evil-looking person who evidently is their leader. They all glare at me, and then begin to shout at me: *"I am a Sir," "I am a Sir," "You will conform," "Conform," "Conform."* They all grab me and start to beat and kick me while screaming: *"You will conform," "You will conform in H-Block 5."*

I awake, shouting and rolling on a filthy mattress on the floor. *"Where am I?"*

"Are you alright?" asks my cell-mate.

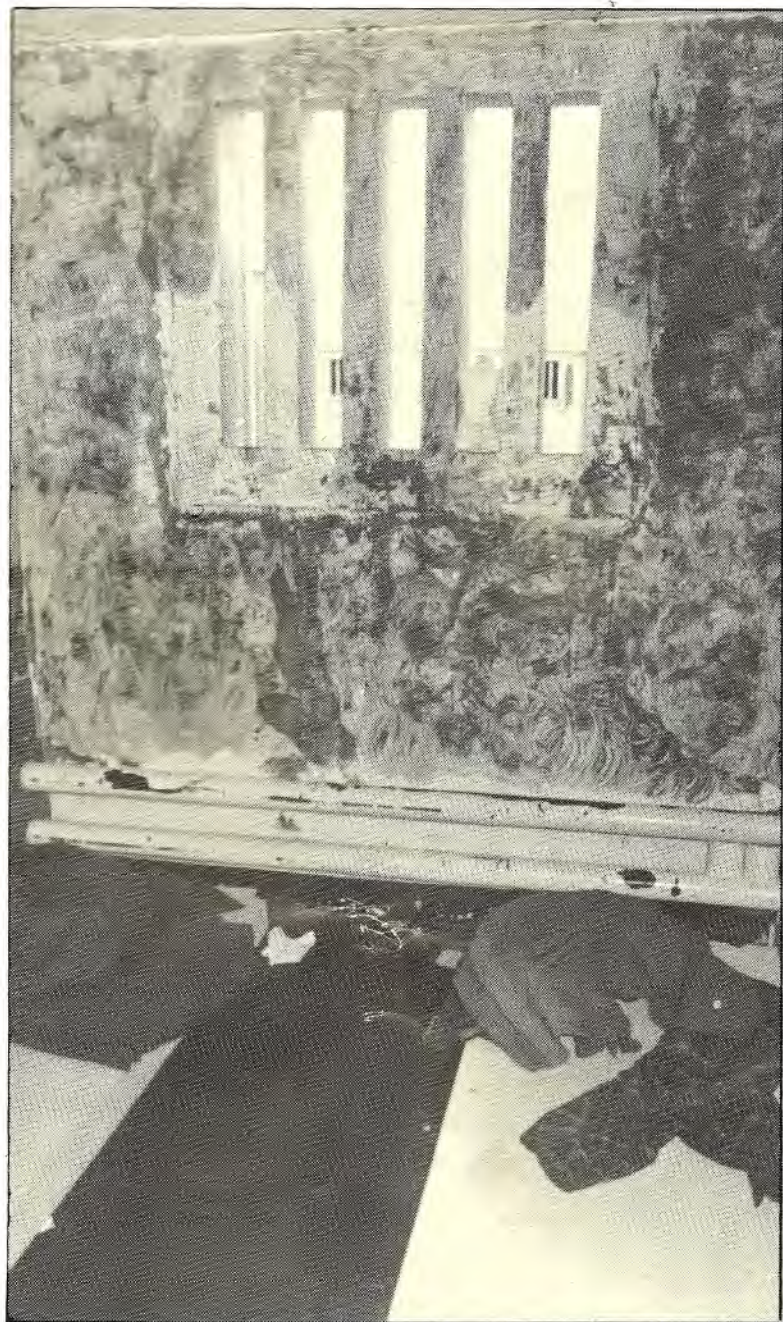
"Where am I?"

"You are in your cell, you must've been having a nightmare," he says.

Our cell door opens and a black uniformed figure stands there, *"Food,"* he says.

"What was that, Mister?" I ask.

"You call me Sir. You're in the H-Blocks now! You're in H-Block 5. Don't forget it, 1066!"



I fought a monster today

First published in Republican News, October 7th 1978

I FOUGHT a monster today and once more I defeated the monster's army. Although I did not escape, I survived to fight another day. It was hard; harder today than ever before, and it gets worse every day. You see I am trapped and all I can do is resist. I know some day I will defeat this monster, but I weary at times. I think and feel that it may kill me first.

The monster is shrewd. It plays with me, it humiliates me, and tortures me. I'm like a mouse in comparison to this giant, but when I repel the torture it inflicts upon me I feel ten feet tall for I know I am right. I know that I am what I am, no matter what may be inflicted upon me, it will never change that fact.

RESIST

When I resist, it doesn't understand. You see it doesn't even try to comprehend why I resist. 'Why don't you give in to me?' it says. 'Give in! Give in to us!' the monster's army jibes. My body wants to say: 'Yes, yes, do what you will with me. I am beaten, you have beaten me.' But my spirit prevails. My spirit says: 'No, no, you cannot do what you want with me. I am not beaten. You cannot do what you want with me. I refuse to be beaten.'

This angers the monster. It goes mad. It brutalises me to the point of death. But it does not kill me. I often wonder why not? But each time I face it, death materialises before me. The monster keeps me naked. It feeds me. But it didn't feed me today because it had tried so hard to defeat me and failed. This angered it once more you see. I know why it won't kill me. It wants me to bow before it, to admit defeat.

INHUMAN

If we don't beat it soon it will murder me. Of this I am certain. It keeps me locked up in a dark smelly tomb and it sends its devils to keep me on edge, to keep the torture going. Each time the door of my tomb opens, the black devils attack me! They nearly won yesterday. It was inhuman. They beat me into unconsciousness. I think, 'is this really happening to me?' and, 'can this happen in this day and age?'



Monsters do not exist. Nor do devils. There cannot be so many devils. I'm mad. Yes, that's it; I'm insane. But my pain, suffering, and grief are real. It must be all real. No, I'm right, I know I'm right. I must resist, I have nowhere to run. My tomb may be my grave. I'm surrounded by a barbed wire jungle. The monster roars at me: 'You shall never get out of here. If you don't do as I say I shall never release you.' I refuse.

My body is broken and cold. I'm lonely and I need comfort. From somewhere afar I hear those familiar voices which keep me going: 'We are with you, son. We are with you. Don't let them beat you.'

I need to hear those voices. They anger the monster. It retreats. The voices scare the devils. Sometimes I really long to hear those voices. I know if they shout louder they will scare the monster away and my suffering will be ended.

I remember, and I shall never forget, how this monster took the lives of Tom Ashe, Terence MacSwiney, Michael Gaughan, Frank Stagg, and Hugh Coney, and I wonder each night what the monster and his black devils will do to me tomorrow.

They always have something new. Will I overcome it? I must. Yes, I must. Tomorrow will be my seven hundred and fortieth day of torture — an eternity. Yes, tomorrow I'll rise in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh. Yes, tomorrow I'll fight the monster and his devils again!



The Lark and the freedom fighter

First published in An Phoblacht/Republican News, February 3rd 1979

MY GRANDFATHER once said that the imprisonment of the lark is a crime of the greatest cruelty because the lark is one of the greatest symbols of freedom and happiness. He often spoke of the spirit of the lark relating to a story of a man who incarcerated one of his loved friends in a small cage.

The lark, having suffered the loss of her liberty, no longer sung her little heart out, she no longer had anything to be happy about. The man who had committed the atrocity, as my grandfather called it, demanded that the lark should do as he wished: that was to sing her heart out, to comply to his wishes and change herself to suit his pleasure or

benefit.

The lark refused, and the man became angry and violent. He began to pressurise the lark to sing, but inevitably he received no result. So he took more drastic steps. He covered the cage with a black cloth, depriving the bird of sunlight. He starved it and left it to rot in a dirty cage, but the bird still refused to yield. The man murdered it.

As my grandfather rightly stated, the lark had spirit — the spirit of freedom and resistance. It longed to be free, and died before it would conform to the tyrant who tried to change it with torture and imprisonment. I feel I have something in common with that bird and her torture, imprisonment and final murder. She had a spirit which is not commonly found, even among us so-called superior beings, humans.

Take an ordinary prisoner. His main aim is to make his period of imprisonment as easy and as comfortable as possible. The ordinary prisoner will in no way jeopardise a single day of his remission. Some will even grovel, crawl, and inform on other prisoners, to safeguard themselves or to speed up their release. They will comply to the wishes of their captors, and unlike the lark, they will sing when told to and jump high when told to move.

Although the ordinary prisoner has lost his liberty he is not prepared to go to extremes to regain it, nor to protect his humanity. He settles for a short date of release. Eventually, if incarcerated long enough, he becomes institutionalised, becoming a type of machine, not thinking for himself, his captors dominating and controlling him. That was the intended fate of the lark in my grandfather's story; but the lark needed no changing, nor did it wish to change, and died making that point.

CONTRAST

This brings me directly back to my own situation: I feel something in common with that poor bird. My position is in total contrast to that of an ordinary conforming prisoner: I am a political prisoner, a freedom fighter. Like the lark, I too have fought for my freedom, not only in captivity, where I now languish, but also while on the outside, where my country is held captive. I have been captured and imprisoned, but, like the lark, I too have seen the outside of the wire cage.

I am now in H-Block, where I refuse to change to suit the people who oppress, torture and imprison me, and who wish to dehumanise me. Like the lark I need no changing. It is my political ideology and principles that my captors wish to change. They have suppressed my body and attacked my dignity. If I were an ordinary prisoner they would pay little, if any, attention to me, knowing that I would conform to their institutional whims.

I have lost over two years' remission. I care not. I have been stripped of my clothes and locked in a dirty, empty cell, where I have been starved, beaten, and tortured, and like the lark I fear I may eventually be murdered. But, dare I say it, similar to my little friend, I have the spirit of freedom that cannot be quenched by even the most horren-

dous treatment. Of course I can be murdered, but while I remain alive, I remain what I am, a political prisoner of war, and no-one can change that.

Haven't we plenty of larks to prove that? Our history is heart-breakingly littered with them: the MacSwineys, the Gaughans, and the Staggs. Will there be more in H-Block?

I dare not conclude without finishing my grandfather's story. I once asked him whatever happened to the wicked man who imprisoned, tortured and murdered the lark?

"Son," he said, "one day he caught himself on one of his own traps, and no-one would assist him to get free. His own people scorned him, and turned their backs on him. He grew weaker and weaker, and finally toppled over to die upon the land which he had marred with such blood. The birds came and extracted their revenge by picking his eyes out, and the larks sang like they never sang before."

"Grandfather," I said, "could that man's name have been John Bull?"

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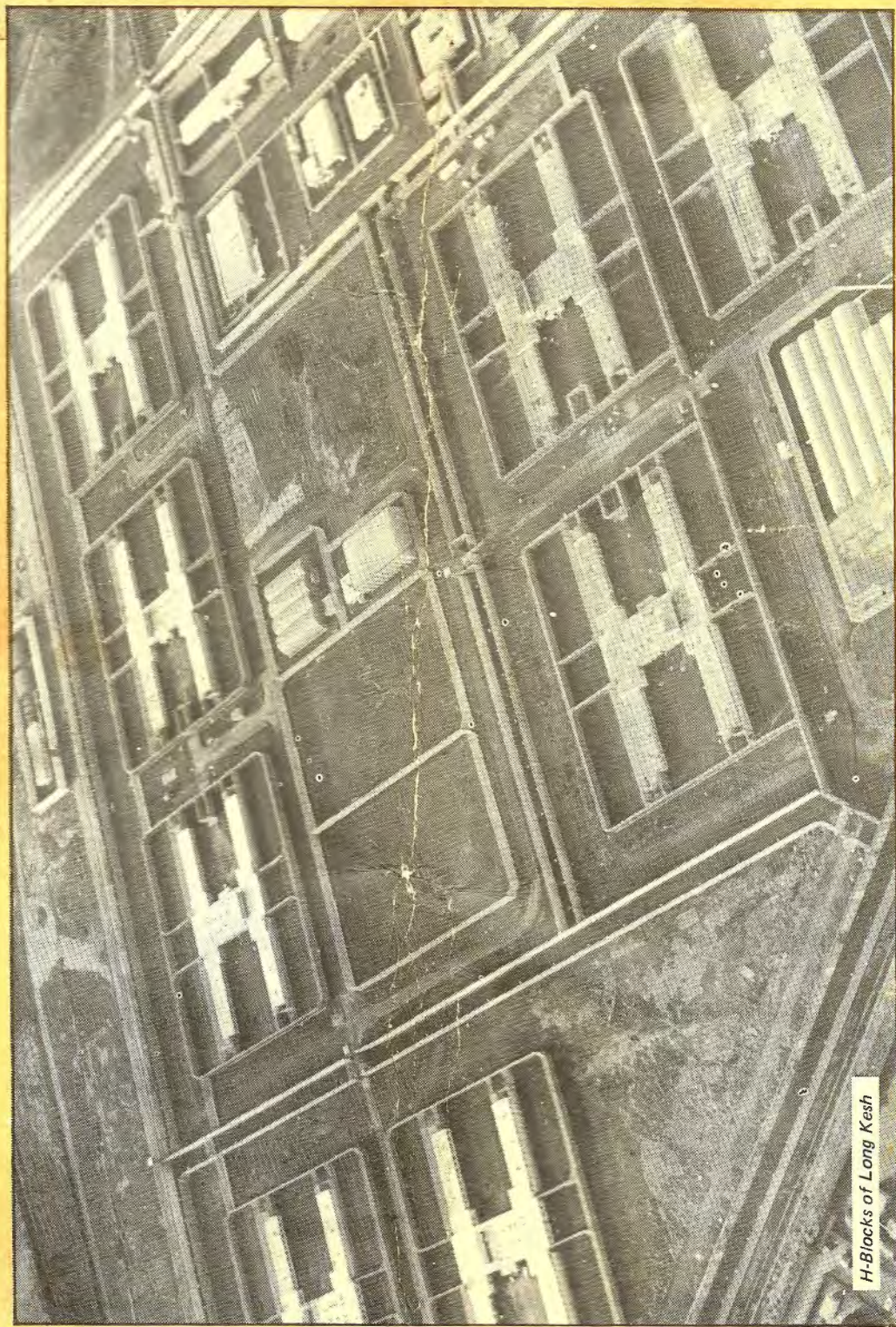
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