

When they came in the morning

by John McGuffin

On Monday, 9th August, 1971, I was kidnapped from my bed by armed men, taken away and held as a hostage for five and a half weeks. I was not in Uruguay, Brazil, Greece or Russia. I was in the United Kingdom, an hour's flight from London. Belfast.

A crashing on the door awoke me. It was 4.45 a.m. I went downstairs in my pyjamas to answer. As I opened it I was forced back against the wall by two soldiers who screamed at me: 'Do you live here?' Overwhelmed by their perspicacity I admitted that this was so, whereupon they ordered me to get dressed. I foolishly asked why. 'Under the Special Powers Act we don't have to give a reason for anything', the officer said. 'You have two minutes to get dressed.' Through the window I could see in the dawn light half-a-dozen armed men in our tiny front garden.

I was given exactly two minutes to get dressed while a young soldier boosted his ego by sticking a SLR up my nose. My wife, not surprisingly was almost in tears as I was dragged down the stairs and into the street. She ran after me to give me my jacket and was roughly ordered back into the house. Our quiet residential bourgeois neighbourhood hadn't seen such excitement in years as I was frog-marched at the double down the avenue by eight soldiers. As we sped down we were joined by a dozen more who had been hiding in nearby gardens. Those who looked out into the early morning mist must have imagined that a Vietcong patrol had been sighted in the locale.

'Tie him up and gag the fecker' (*sic*), an educated English accent ordered. 'That's hardly necessary', I said, as I was frisked for the second time up against the lorry (or pig as they called it). This was accepted albeit reluctantly by the corporal who was positively twitching with desire to practise his Boy Scout knots upon me. My shoes were taken off me and I was put none too gently into the back of the 'pig'. Two men with Sten guns covered me. 'Nice morning', I ventured. 'Shut your fecking Fenian mouth.'

I sat there and watched the army manoeuvres. Back up the avenue they scurried, obviously to a friend's house I thought. Obviously however they were out of luck. But, never ones to return empty handed, they came back with another friend, William, who lives at my house. He was barefoot and had, it subsequently transpired, been arrested in error for someone else. The two other houses they raided in the area were empty and so, after casually wrecking the two flats they hastened back, each man covering the other. There wasn't a soul about and their antics seemed surrealistic. Any amusement soon evaporated however.

Sitting shivering in the back of the pig I began to try to work out

what was happening. I had known, as of course had anyone involved in Irish politics, that Internment was on the cards, but had never expected to be involved. For three years I had been a member of the People's Democracy, a libertarian socialist group and had attended meetings, marches and pickets, all perfectly legal. I had contributed articles to their weekly paper *The Free Citizen*, again perfectly legal. My wife and I had received compensation from the government for being beaten up at Burntollet by B Specials. But the public had been told over and over by the Prime Minister, Brian Faulkner, that only IRA and UVF¹ men could be interned. What therefore were William and I doing freezing in a lorry with Sten guns covering us at this ungodly hour? Could the discredited Faulkner have so panicked that to prop up his Orange State he had to arrest unarmed socialists? It appeared so.

We were driven to Annadale TA camp and forced to stand, legs apart against the Nissen huts. Then back to the pig where we were joined by another PD member, Michael Farrell, and an unknown man (whom I later discovered was Harry McDowell). They too were barefoot and when ten soldiers joined us in the back of the pig we were very cramped. We sped through the deserted early morning streets, with no idea where we were being taken. Each time we passed a police station I mentally crossed it off the possible list of destinations. Up through Carlisle Circus and past Crumlin jail. 'Christ, it must be Rathlin Island', McDowell said. No one spoke, and the pig made a sudden sharp right turn through to the Antrim Road; then up a side street and into what we were later to learn was Girdwood Barracks.

Four lorries were in front of us and slowly disembarking were other men mostly in pyjamas. A helicopter, engine revving, stood on the turf outside the TA hall. Another half-an-hour was spent shivering in the back of the lorry until we were told to jump down, without our shoes into the mud and make our way, guns in our backs, into the hall. Soldiers, RUC² and Special Branch thronged the corridor and entrance hall as we were 'processed', Polaroid flash pictures taken and affixed to a card. A further search. Watches, rings, belts were taken and we were pushed into the gym hall, where about 150 other people were squatting on the floor. Many were in pyjamas or shirtless. Heavily armed soldiers walked up and down, incessantly bellowing, 'No talking, you scum'.

Every five minutes or so groups of six were called out. The first three groups didn't return. The fourth did. They were dishevelled and several were bleeding, including a young man I knew called Murphy. Was this the treatment we could all expect? I tried to comfort myself by thinking, 'Westminster must have sanctioned this internment, they'll have to behave themselves'. Then I remembered

¹Ulster Volunteer Force: an illegal armed organization of right-wing Protestant ultras.

²Royal Ulster Constabulary: the civilian police.

Cyprus and Aden and Hola Camp in Kenya. My optimism flagged. The familiar lines of R. W. Grimshaw came back to me, 'what can you expect from a pig but a grunt?' I braced myself and looked around. Very few faces I recognized. Mostly old men and very young boys. A man was led in by the police. 'Good Christ!' He was blind! What sort of people were these, at whose mercy we were? (The army also detained three winos, picked up at Dunville Park bus shelter drunk, and a dog. All were released after twenty-four hours. It is not reported what the dog was suspected of—people will find this hard to credit, but it is absolutely true.)

My name was called. Apprehensively I shuffled forward. I was taken by two young Special Branch officers, who identified themselves—the only ones to do so during my four interrogations—into a room and desultorily questioned. They obviously knew very little about me and cared even less. Name, address, occupation (lecturer) and a few general comments such as 'Well, it's at least five years for you'. What interested me more was the view past them through the window. On the lawn outside the helicopter stood, engines still revving and blades rotating. A dozen or so barefoot men were being forced to run the gauntlet between two rows of military policemen who were clubbing them with Sten gun butts and batons. Those who fell were badly kicked. When they reached the helicopter they were grabbed in and then thrown out again almost immediately. The helicopter drowned any noise of screams.

The interrogators noted my concern. 'That's nothing to do with us', one said, 'that's just the army letting off a bit of steam.' 'I'd like to see my lawyer', I said feeling foolish. They laughed. 'I'm entitled to see a lawyer and to know what I'm being charged with.' I tried again. They stopped laughing. 'Listen, you smarty bastard, under the Special Powers Act we can keep you here as long as we like. You can't see anyone. No one will know where you are and we don't have to charge you with anything.' 'If one of those soldiers happens to shoot you, there'll be no inquest either, you bastard.' Having read the SP Acts I knew this to be true. They lost interest and led me out again, this time upstairs to a crowded room where about 220 people were crammed on the floor. A faded sign on the door, under a regimental motto said: 'Merry Xmas.' Beside that, a portrait of Elizabeth R. gazed serenely down.

People were still being brought in and I saw another two PD members, John Murphy and Oliver Cosgrove, president of St Joseph's SRC. I sprawled down beside William, who was looking very pale. I glanced down and saw congealed blood on his leg. 'What happened?' I whispered. 'Helicopter run', he grunted. (It was only later that I learned that he and others had been taken about four feet up in the air and pushed out backwards, believing that they were much higher off the ground, having been told so by the soldiers.) The door opened and a young lad, his arm covered in blood, was

thrust on to the floor. A policeman completed the job by going over and kicking him in the ribs. (I later discovered that his name was Patrick McGeogh and that he'd had to run the gauntlet three times.)

MPs patrolled us, preventing anyone from dozing off or talking, but with over 200 sprawled on the floor whispered conversation was possible at times. The young man in front of me was obviously in pain. He was Eamonn Kerr. Then I saw the pus oozing out of the sores on the back of his neck. Soldiers under the orders of a Major had stubbed out four cigarette butts on him in the pig. William Burroughs has said: 'a paranoid is someone who has some small idea of what is really going on.' I began to see his point.

New military police wandered in and out making jocular remarks about 'getting the Fenians to sing the Queen'. No one stirred. At about 11 a.m. we were ordered to the door in groups of six to get a cup of warm swill. An English gentleman put his head around the door and announced that he was a priest. Did anyone want to see him? His accent seemed to put many off. Only four queued up shamefacedly. 'You'll all be needing the last rites soon enough', the military policeman beside me smirked. Slowly they began to call out names. Those called were taken away in groups of six, apparently the mystic number, and disappeared from sight. By lunchtime our numbers had been reduced to eighty-seven. We were then taken down-stairs again for 'lunch'.

Again we sat in ranks on the floor. No talking, no dozing, no sprawling. As different NCOs came on duty the 'rules' changed. We were shuffled in order and made to walk in circles. Throughout the afternoon we were called out for further questioning. The boredom and uncertainty dragged on. We had little idea of time, what was happening outside, where our friends were, what was going to happen to us. Most of the eighty-seven were old men or youths. The blind man (Peter Farran) was still there. By now they had given him a table to sit at.

The sergeant began to play a very real role in our lives. It was apparently his job to invent as many petty regulations as possible to make our lives uncomfortable. To go to the toilet necessitated queueing in a corner, looking straight ahead and putting one's hands on the shoulders of the man in front. Failure to comply exactly with this occasioned anything from a rebuke to a Sten gun butt in the kidneys depending upon which NCO was guarding this vital installation. Time dragged on. 'Tea' was as unappetizing as 'lunch'. Watery 'stew', 'and you're fecking lucky to get anything'. 'Eat it, it may be your last.' More reassurance. RUC men sat around the room, but it was clear that they were mere message boys, the army were in control. Requests by some for a doctor were scornfully refused.

Uncertainty was the worst enemy. A man, later identified as

Geordie Shannon, was taken off to hospital. He suffered from ulcers and had been forced to squat, head between knees, for an hour. It was four days before he was brought over to the jail. The night shift came on to guard us. They of course had new sets of rules for us to obey. A new 'game' was introduced. It consisted of going down the line pointing at men and saying, 'tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, fecking nailbomber!' Whereupon the fifth man would be set upon and beaten. Exhaustion had set in but people were still being called out and interrogated. At about 11 p.m. we were ordered to erect camp beds and given two blankets. 'Those Irish bastards smell, give them showers', the sergeant said. That we smelt was true, but hardly surprising, since men, still in their pyjamas in many cases, had been dragged through the mud. Everyone's feet, with or without socks were encrusted with filth.

The showers proved another opportunity for jocular fun. Several youths were forced into showers that were boiling hot, the next lot into freezing ones. We were issued with army socks and toothbrushes, 'compliments of Her Majesty', I was told. At midnight lights were dimmed and we piled into the rows of camp beds. I fell asleep but was soon awakened by a soldier shining his torch into my face. 'O'Hara?' he asked. 'No', I mumbled. He moved down the line. I dozed off again. Suddenly there was a thunderous sound. Batons hammered on the walls. 'Get up, you bastards.' We fell out of bed. It was 3 a.m. 'Roll call.' A Branch man came round and solemnly took everyone's name yet again. 'What are you doing standing there, get to bed!' We dropped off once more only to be aroused at 5.30 a.m. for 'breakfast'. Half a bowl of stale cornflakes. The beds were dismantled and we resumed squatting on the floor. People were still called out singly for further interrogation. Police walked in grinning and held up the morning newspapers to show us headlines, 'Thirteen shot dead'. 'Ardoyne burnt to the ground' (an exaggeration). The sergeant, refreshed from his sleep was also forthcoming. 'That's thirteen less of you Irish pigs, none of ours was got.' Word filtered back from those who'd been interrogated again. The death toll had risen to eighteen, including four women and a priest.

I got talking (in whispers) with my neighbour, George O'Hara. After doing the 'helicopter run', he too had been dragged into it, but, unlike the others he had been taken up some 200 feet into the air. Two MPs had then told him to 'talk or we'll shove you out'. Shades of Vietnam!

My further three interrogations were tragi-comic. At no time was I questioned about the IRA, UVF or bombs. All questions which could be termed in any way relevant were concerned with what was socialism. Bizarre jokes were thrown in such as 'Did I know that Farrell was getting Moscow gold?' So help me! Moscow gold! I explained that libertarian socialism as advocated by the PD and Farrell in particular was directly opposed to state capitalism as

carried out by totalitarian regimes like the USSR. 'That's just the KGB's cleverness', I was told. They clearly didn't believe it for a minute, but, any smear in a storm. Next I was asked about Jerry Rubin. Was it not all a part of the International Conspiracy, the trouble here? The next questioners were the most bizarre. A lugubrious gentleman gave me a lecture on the evils of atheism (I am an agnostic but this theological distinction passed my Presbyterian inquisitor by). Did I believe in hellfire? Did I know that I would burn in all eternity? He didn't quite spell it out but the clear implication was that if I confessed to some crime or other—unspecified—he would be able to put in a supernatural good word for me. Next I was asked what I was doing in the same room with a band of child-murders, rapists and mad bombers. All of them? All of them! 'Even the blind man?' I explained that I had been dragged there by armed men, knew virtually none of the men and boys in the room and rather doubted the allegations so wildly hurled about them. (A view backed up by the Special Branch themselves when they released over eighty of them that day.) They didn't seem very interested in me after these exchanges and contented themselves with telling me that I'd get 'at least five years'—for what? 'For speaking at civil rights meetings' (perfectly legal meetings in fact) which had led to 'all this trouble'.

Their tactics with me may have been innocuous enough, but what others suffered was not. Quite a few were badly beaten—a fact obvious to all who saw them emerge from the interrogation room; many were told that the streets where their families lived had been 'burnt down by the Orangemen', that their relatives had been shot, sons arrested, their friends had 'squealed and told all about them', that everyone believed that they had squealed and that only the Special Branch could smuggle them out of the country, that they had lost their jobs (about the only true statement made) and finally, that if they didn't talk 'we'll rip out your teeth with pliers'—which were brandished by a well-known Branch man.

By lunchtime on the second day discipline had relaxed slightly. The sergeant graciously permitted one cigarette per man before and after the 'meal'. Then we had a period of exercise—five minutes' walk outside. Soldiers gathered to make humorous remarks about 'the animals'. A playful corporal kept slipping the leash of his alsatian as we passed him until the bewildered beast turned and tried to bite him. We were hastily rushed back inside lest we laugh.

Rumours began to spread that they couldn't keep us more than forty-eight hours without officially charging or interning us. (Technically this was incorrect. They can do anything they like under the Special Powers Act, and most of the men we met in Crumlin Road jail who were from out of Belfast were kept six days without being issued detention notices, let alone internment notices.) We continued to squat on the floor. Many were afraid to go to the toilet because of the

blows some received there. Everyone was stiff and very tired, but still we were told nothing. Eventually at 9.30 p.m. we were ordered to collect the bags containing our 'personal effects' and to put on our shoes. Suddenly there was a bustle of activity. About twenty-five MPs and a dozen RUC men entered and surrounded us. Guns were cocked. The Special Branch entered and a senior officer appeared with a list. As he read from it those called were to stand up and move over towards the door. The list was obviously incompetently compiled. Many of those called weren't in the hall or had been released earlier. The dates of birth of several people were incorrect but the Branch refused to recognize this and so sons were still mistaken for their fathers and vice versa. Eventually seventeen men were marched out. Were they being interned? Or released? We had no idea. My friend William who had been arrested in error for someone else was the last to go.

Then it became really frightening. The Special Branch withdrew leaving the soldiers. They began to drill us, shouting what presumably to them were merry quips. 'You're the feckin' bomber then, are you?' (This to a 77-year-old dignified man who never for a minute deigned to complain.) 'Haven't got your Thompson now, have you? You'll have to be fitter than that to join the British Army' (this to a 70-year-old asthmatic who had had seven hours' sleep, and that interrupted, in the last sixty-five hours and who was quite unable to keep up with the exercises). Some of us were given 'fatigues' to do, which ranged from cleaning out toilet bowls with our bare hands to dishwashing. I was more fortunate and was given the task of sweeping the floor under the tutelage of a pimply teenager, eager to impress his superiors with his wit. My efforts were clearly regarded as inadequate by him and he let me know by constantly prodding me with the butt of his Sten gun. 'Keep awake, you dozy sods', they continually yelled. It was now 2 a.m. My mind started to drift off. Things took what I felt was a very surrealist turn. In front of me was the company notice board, upon which were pinned three notices—all were blank! During the day one had been taken down and replaced with a blue notice, but it too was blank. (On looking back I thought that I must have imagined this, but others who were standing in the front row with me have confirmed it.) I kept trying to work out some kind of secret message from the board. Was it in the colour of the drawing pins? In the different shapes of the blank paper? Invisible ink? I felt myself falling asleep and a kind soldier awakened me with his baton across my back. 'Feckin' bastard.' I began to wish that if they must swear so repetitiously they would at least use the real word instead of this emasculated surrogate.

A quarter to four. Surely they must let us go. After all, the blind man was still in our group along with most of the very old men, and the only two other people in the hall whom I knew were not only not

terrorists, but clearly couldn't be mistaken for terrorists. I wasn't even a Republican, a political belief quite legal in any democratic society. But then William Craig had banned Republican clubs hadn't he, and the House of Lords had upheld the ban. I began to think of getting home and getting some sleep, surely it was just all a bad dream? 3.50 a.m. the military police massed in strength again, this time even more threateningly. Most of us had had only a disturbed seven hours' sleep out of the last sixty-seven hours. Was it to be a mass beating? Mentally I tried to resign myself to it. But no. Out came the lists again. Of the sixty still remaining fifty of us were called up in groups of six. As I stood waiting to be taken out a Special Branch man began to talk to me. 'It's Crumlin for you all, lads, and they've brought back the B men.' 'Not even Faulkner's that stupid.' 'Just joking lads.' Some joke! 'Are you interning the blind man?' 'Yes, at night he can see better than all of you put together.' We were taken out into the entrance hall and photographed again with an RUC man holding us by the collar. We had been forty-six hours in Girdwood Barracks. At no time since our arrest had we seen a doctor although later Brigadier Marston Tickell was to claim 'those arrested were given a medical inspection both on arrival at the "police station" and again on moving into the place of detention'. (Army press briefing, Belfast, 20th August.) 'These medical tests are available for inspection', he went on to say. This in fact was totally untrue. No one was inspected. About ten men saw someone who it was alleged was a medical orderly. His only action was to order Edward Campbell to have his head completely shaven because he had 'venereal scabies'. No such disease exists.³ Pressmen who asked to see the mythical medical records were refused.

'Draw pistols', came the order. The six of us were forced down a corridor to our right, an RUC man holding us by the scruff of the neck and a red-cap with a pistol at our heads beside each of us. I could hardly stand for fatigue. 'If there's any sniping out there we can afford to lose two of you bastards on the way over', the corporal said. Then we were out of the building and on to the path. We were rushed over the by now infamous 'obstacle course'—broken glass, barbed wire, sharp stones, etc. We were more fortunate than people like Michael Farrell who had had to traverse it in daylight—with bare feet. We at least had our shoes on, but one slip meant a cruel beating. Then we were rushed through a hole in a wall and found ourselves in the grounds of Crumlin Road jail. A rapid dash over the football pitch, with soldier snipers all around it. A final dash down a grassy slope and inside the walls of the prison itself. We were out of the hands of the soldiers. The screws couldn't be as bad?

They weren't. Throughout the five weeks I was to spend in Crumlin they were well behaved. Conditions were at first poor, but we elected a committee to take all complaints to the governor and 'concessions'

³For a full account of this see report by Dr David Nowland, *Irish Times*, 21st August.

were granted. We were allowed out of our cells more or less from 7.30 a.m. to 8 p.m., later, 9 p.m. Sundays we were locked up at 4 p.m. but eventually this too was changed to 9 p.m. We could get letters and parcels in and buy cigarettes in the prison shop once a week. We played chess or cards or read most of the time. We had a small and overcrowded exercise yard and a twice-weekly game of football, though by the time the numbers were swelled from 130 to 160 it meant that most men got a game once a fortnight. Still, we were more fortunate than those men on the Maidstone, a rotting hulk moored in Belfast Lough. They were even more cramped and only got out for four hours a day on deck. Also, as we soon found when we started to meet the men brought in after the first week, our treatment had been a picnic compared to theirs. Men like P. J. McLean, Pat Shivers and Hugh Montgomery had been kept for five days without food or sleep and with a cloth bag tied tightly around their heads. They had been subjected to 'disorientation techniques': taken up and flown around in helicopters for hour after hour, moved about in the backs of lorries, repeatedly beaten and questioned for hour after hour. They had no idea where they were and their families couldn't find out for over a week where they were eventually taken. All lost between 10 lb and 20 lb in weight and entered Crumlin looking like ex-inmates of Belsen.

Throughout the time we were in Crumlin we were subjected to the vilest slanders from the politicians outside. 'Everyone detained (the technical euphemism for interned) was a child-murderer and a terrorist.' (It is interesting to note the semantics of the BBC in this matter. According to them a member of the IRA is a 'terrorist', a member of Al Fatah or the Tupamaros is a 'guerrilla' and a Czech student street-fighter is a 'freedom fighter'.) We were powerless to reply. For weeks we couldn't see a lawyer. Actions for habeas corpus or bail were curtly refused. We had to prove our innocence—without even being charged with anything. Wives and children suffered even more. Ninety per cent of the 'detainees' lost their jobs while social security officials made it almost impossible for many women to claim with their endless red tape and total lack of sympathy. The spirit of resistance of the people outside with the rent and rates strike kept our morale high however. We knew that Internment was a disastrous mistake for Faulkner. All non-Unionist organizations came out against it and even Paisley and Boal from within the Unionist ranks. The violence escalated.

On 14th September, after over five weeks in jail twelve men were suddenly released. I was one of them. We were given two minutes' notice and thrown out into the rain. Next day 219 men were served with internment notices and on 19th September moved to Long Kesh concentration camp near Lisburn. (Concentration camp is an emotive phrase, but a reasonable one if you look at the camp—it can be seen from the M1 motorway. Rows of huts surrounded by barbed

wire with armed guards in 12-foot high towers at each corner. No exercise facilities. Totally inadequate food which is brought in pig swill buckets. Gross overcrowding—sixty men in one hut for example with not enough room between the beds to stand to make them and two dry toilets per hut of sixty men. Seven wash-basins for 120 men. Constant noise all night from barking dogs and sentries hitting the iron huts with their batons. Inadequate heating and water running down the walls soaking bedding. No educational facilities. Visitors subjected to physical abuse from neighbouring ‘loyalist’ housing estate and then subjected to up to four hours’ wait after humiliating body searches—plus the financial problem of having to take taxis to get there costing £4.)

These men are held without charge or trial as political hostages for the Unionist party. As I write (29th September) the review board hasn’t met. But how can you prove your innocence to them when you are not told what allegations are made against you? Many of those now interned (and there are sixty men in Crumlin still ‘detained’), are old men arrested merely because they were interned in 1938. Liam Mulholland (77), was first interned in 1929. Many are in no illegal organizations, but how can you prove that you’re *not* in something? Faulkner says that these men cannot be charged in the courts because there are no witnesses against them or if there are they are too frightened to give evidence. This is like saying that in order to wipe out illiteracy we should close all the schools. You cannot preach ‘law and order’ and then introduce internment and expect anyone to have much confidence in your sincerity.

Internment caught no IRA leaders since they had been on the run for months. Merely a handful of rank and file members and a large number of old men and political opponents of the Unionist government. PD and Civil Rights members were picked up and held it is admitted because they would have spoken out at public meetings against internment. Who could blame them? This troubled country cannot hope to see any lasting peace until Internment is ended and all repressive legislation repealed. If the Unionists aren’t prepared to do this, then Westminster must. Or are they going to introduce internment in Upper Clyde Shipyards?

Structures in Space

—An Account of Tel Quel’s Attitude to Meaning

by Graham Dunstan Martin

At one point of Nathalie Sarraute’s novel *Les Fruits d’Or* two Parisian intellectuals are discussing the book:

‘To my mind, what causes the—“prodigious” is not too strong a