

"Compelling, inspiring and alarming"

"A gripping story"

"Riveting and enlightening"

"Splendidly crafted"

"Wonderful. Warrants five stars"



BAD HARE DAYS

JOHN FITZGERALD

Bad Hare Days

One man's fight against a cruel blood sport!

By John Fitzgerald

In Ireland the humble hare has been the subject of great controversy.

After years of an abusive sport, which resulted in its child-like death screams being heard regularly throughout Ireland, a result was achieved.

For those few dedicated people trying desperately to save the gentle creature from the horrors of the cruel sport of hare coursing, the struggle was painful and fought against great odds. The author writes about his experience of a campaign against this barbaric blood sport, focusing mainly on a controversial phase in the 1980s when the State deployed a police heavy gang to suppress anti-coursing activism.

The author's own peaceful and non-violent action and that of, initially, a few others' did arouse the public and achieve what at first appeared to be a hard-won benefit to the hare. But the hare's troubles were - and are - far from over.

Though it can no longer be torn apart by greyhounds, now muzzled, it can still be mauled, injured, and tossed about like a rag doll on the coursing field.

In addition to highlighting the hare's sad plight, this is also a campaigner's story. The author recounts vividly the ups and downs of his own fight against animal cruelty. He and others paid a major price for their role in the campaign.

The gentle hare, apart from its use and abuse in coursing, has now become an endangered species in Ireland, and this book reinforces its right to be protected.

About the Author

John Fitzgerald is a free-lance journalist and writer living in Callan, County Kilkenny, Ireland. Before taking up these twin pursuits, he had worked for almost a decade in a farmers' Co-operative, during which time he wrote hundreds of letters to newspapers exposing cruelty to animals in general, but hare coursing in particular, as part of a national campaign against blood sports in Ireland.

He has been involved for almost three decades in Ireland's anti-hare coursing movement and the present book focuses on a tumultuous phase in the campaign that had a devastating immediate and long-term impact on his life.

John Fitzgerald has contributed articles to a number of national and provincial Irish newspapers and to the popular Ireland's Own magazine.

He is also the author of four previous books, all dealing with aspects of his native county's heritage, history, and folklore: *Kilkenny – People Places Faces*, *Kilkenny – A Blast from the Past*, *Callan in the Rare Old Times*, *Callan through the Mists of Time* and *Are We Invaded Yet?*

Bad Hare Days

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Contents

1. View to a Bleeding	8
2. A Living Link	13
3. Supper with the Hare Catchers.....	16
4. Crusading Zeal	20
5. A Tin-Pot Coliseum	22
6. My First Sight of the "Antis"	27
7. How to Resist?	30
8. Michael D Bids to End Hare Coursing	32
9. I Join the Campaign	36
10. Coping with Bullies	39
11. Tensions Mount	41
12. Threats and "Friendly Advice"	44
13. Punch-bag Day at the Co-op	50
14. "Get Rid of the Thundering Eejit!"	55
15. The Fixer and the Foreman	57
16. "A Catch 22 Situation"	61
17. Limbo	66
18. Constructive Dismissal	69
19. "Inflammatory letters"	72
20. "A Co-op is Like a Church"	76
21. A Curious Sense of Elation.....	81
22. "Ye're Not Wanted in These Parts"	84
23. Showdown in Tipperary.....	86
24. Sabotage.....	91
25. Don't Wake the Cat	93
26. Duress	97
27. Capitulation.....	104
28. Learning About Section 30	110
29. The Bigger Picture	115
30. Freed Hares, Glassed Fields, and Burning Haybarns.....	119
31. Second Visit.....	122

32. The Tipsy Branchman.....	127
33. Another "Little Statement".....	131
34. Holding Out	135
35. Losing my Seat	139
36. An Appalling Vista	143
37. Drinking on Duty	147
38. Tricks and Threats.....	152
39. False Charges	157
40. A Bird Man or a Hare Man?	159
41. Arra Sees the Light	161
42. Kafkaesque.....	163
43. The Book of (Fabricated) Evidence	166
44. Making a Hare of Justice	171
45. Opening Shots.....	175
46. "Che Guevara" Takes the Stand.....	178
47. Sevenhouses Coursing Club, Pray For Us!	184
48. Legalistic Ping-Pong	187
49. The Prosecution Takes a Hit	190
50. Perchance to Dream... ..	195
51. "Daddy, Mammy and Uncle Tom"	197
52. Closing Speeches	202
53. Waiting.	206
54. Deadlock	209
55. Aftershocks	212
56. A Political Legend Joins the Battle Against Hare Coursing	217
57. The Campaign Goes International	219
58. Democracy Denied.....	222
59. Muzzling Cruelty	225
60. An Anti-Hare Coursing Protest..On Fifth Avenue.....	226
61. The Irish Hare Still Cries Out For Protection... ..	230
Epilogue.....	236
Glossary Of Words That May Be Unfamiliar Outside Ireland	239
Reviews of Bad Hare Days	241

Prologue

Every cause carries a price tag. It makes demands on your time...on your family and social life. It can bring discomfort, enmity, misunderstanding, and social isolation, though these downsides can to some degree be offset by the sense of camaraderie that comes with being part of a group or campaign involving people from all walks of life.

I paid a high price for my campaigning. The loss of my job with a Farmers Co-operative at a time when jobs were scarce in Ireland; followed by arrests, lengthy interrogations, false accusations of guilt, and five tension-racked, emotionally shattering court cases.

All for my efforts on behalf of the humble hare, a creature hailed in Irish legend and folklore, a proud part of my country's wildlife heritage, but that Irish law permits to be abused in a cruel game of chance called hare coursing...one of the world's most barbaric blood sports.

Though I have been protesting in one way or another against this shameful activity for almost three decades, the following memoir focuses mainly on a period in the 1980s.

A period when I could hardly close my eyes without being assailed by dark and fearful images. Images and sounds of tall men in suits banging on the front door of my home. A period when I became so familiar with the insides of court buildings that I could sketch them blind-folded.

These were the years of bullying and organised harassment. There was plenty of humour and black comedy too, easing the pain and stigma of the dark times. I hope readers will see the funny side of my experience. As I do...if only with hindsight.

I write this book not to deter others from taking up causes they passionately believe in, but to relate my own experience of what can happen when one's activism, though peaceful and non-violent, ceases to be just a minor irritant and begins to well and truly rock the establishment boat.

Animal protection is just one of many causes that people may feel drawn to at one time or another in their lives. It is by no means the most important cause on earth, but a legitimate one that any man or woman ought to be entitled to champion to the utmost within the law.

Another cause I cherish is the right of every Irish citizen, and indeed every human being, to his or her civil liberties. That basic right was flouted in the period I deal with in the book, and some of the people who suffered harassment, apart from myself, are still coping with the effects of that experience.

I dedicate this book to my family and to campaigners for justice everywhere.

Important Note: The memoir that follows is presented in a "novelistic" style, partly to make it more accessible to readers of all ages, but also to comply with the strict libel laws in Ireland. I have been advised that this format is most appropriate given the nature of my experience. Though my story is true, I would stress that none of the fictitious names of police or legal personnel used in this memoir bear any relation whatsoever to police or legal personnel in any part of Ireland who happen to bear such names. The same applies to all names of coursing officials or fans. These names also are fictitious and any similarity to the names of real people anywhere is entirely coincidental. Some dates and place-names have also been changed to comply with legal requirements.

1

View to a Bleeding

I stumbled upon hare coursing for the first time at age fourteen.

I was out walking in the countryside, about two miles from Callan, my hometown in County Kilkenny, Ireland. It was a beautiful autumn day. Not a cloud in the azure blue sky apart from tiny puffs of white on the horizon.

The chirping of birds was a great chorus of joy and celebration. Their sweet music was accompanied by the humming of tractor engines and chainsaws somewhere in the distance...out of sight.

I had developed a liking for the unspoilt terrain of boreens, gently rolling fields, winding laneways, and abundant plant life that is still, to a large extent, at the heart of what makes rural Ireland so attractive to misty-eyed foreign visitors.

Precious to me too was the clean fresh air of the outdoors...appreciated all the more when you were in the throes of the psychological meat grinder that was the Irish school exam season. A very necessary part of growing up it was...but no fun while you prepared for the big test of your knowledge and mental competence.

The direful warnings from teachers, and the prospect of perpetual doom and gloom that awaited anyone who failed to make the grade, or excel in his studies, turned the brain of many an anxious lad into a veritable pressure cooker.

How refreshing then was that glow of sunlight and the gentle breeze when you stepped out of the house, away from thoughts of study and being "assessed" by faceless strangers.

After hours of cramming your head with figures, facts, bits of Irish grammar, and all sorts of undoubtedly useful information, it was like entering Heaven from Purgatory.

This break from mind-numbing studies for my Inter-Cert had become a daily routine since the three-month run-up to the Day of Reckoning had commenced. Though it was only the so-called Christmas Mock, a dry run for the real exam in June, it loomed as a fearful challenge to be met and overcome.

But my euphoric thoughts of freedom and joy at escaping the mad world of exam fever were shattered on that sun-drenched autumn afternoon.

Loud voices interrupted my day-dreaming...men were shouting and calling to each other in fields somewhere to the far right of where I was walking.

As I progressed along the winding stone-encrusted path that ran close to a wood, the noise grew louder.

Startled birds ascended to the sky, squawking and shrieking as if indignant at whatever human agency had sent them hurtling from their work or play in the depths of the forest.

The shouts became noisier, until it seemed to me that I was listening to the sound of an approaching army, or so I fantasised.

I had with me a pair of cheap binoculars. The magnification was low, but they afforded a sharp enough view of the surrounding countryside.

Looking over the high ditch, I beheld scores of men and boys, many of them wielding sticks, fanning out across three or four fields. I estimated they were a half-mile or less from my position and approaching in the general direction of where I stood.

The first thought that occurred to me was that they must be searching for something or maybe a missing person, like you sometimes saw on TV, but I thought it strange that there were no guards with them.

Curiosity got the better of me and I decided to investigate. Climbing over the ditch, and getting stung by a big clump of nettles in the process, I set off towards the noisy band of shouters.

I crossed the field immediately inside the roadside ditch and entered the next field.

Taking another look, I focused again on the group of walkers. I could now see their faces. Something about their appearance sent a slight shiver of apprehension through me.

There was, I thought, that look of suppressed guilt and callousness that you expect to see in people who are up to no good. I decided not to make my presence known to them. I climbed over a stile into another field.

I found what I hoped would be a safe spot from which to observe this cross-country ramble, trek, search, or whatever it was.

Pushing aside a mesh of thick thorny foliage and wild flowers, I entered the ruin of a long abandoned church.

The four-acre field containing it was known as the Church Field. I had visited this crumbling relic of past times throughout my childhood, and was familiar with its layout.

Its interior was overgrown with weeds and bushes, but I knew that a large opening at the top of a stone stairway, formerly a window, would afford me a panoramic view of the fields that lay between the walkers and me. I mounted the moss-covered broken steps.

The opening in the wall was partly obscured by a fuchsia bush. Though this made it more difficult for me to focus the binoculars, it also ensured that anyone outside looking in would be unlikely to perceive my presence, especially from a distance.

Scanning the fields around me, I gleaned a clue as to what was going on. What at first I took to be a large rabbit appeared as if by magic from somewhere behind my ancient hideaway. It paused for a moment or two, looked about, and then darted at considerable speed towards the opposite side of the field.

With difficulty I followed its rapid progress, fascinated by the way it leapfrogged so gracefully through the long grass. Within seconds it became evident to me that this was no rabbit, but a hare. I knew that much from my school nature studies.

Focusing on this "poetry in motion", I observed the animal's protective coat of fur, white on the underside and reddish brown above...and those large glassy eyes on the sides of its head.

Then, suddenly, it came to an abrupt halt. Just as it seemed about to pass through a gap in the field, close to a gateway, it appeared to collide forcefully with an invisible wall or obstruction. It doubled up in mid air and fell in a bundle to the ground, struggling to free itself from something that at first I couldn't see.

Adjusting the focus on my binoculars, I discovered the cause of its plight. It had become entangled in a net of some kind that had been spread across the gap in the ditch. In great distress, the animal thrashed about in a vain attempt to break free.

Suspecting a connection between this unhappy scene and the approaching warriors, I thought it prudent to stay put and not to intervene to rescue the stricken hare. I felt bad about this, but the odds wouldn't exactly favour me if I confronted these people, or so I reasoned.

As I continued to observe the trapped animal, my attention was diverted again to the sound of raised voices and shouting from the human dragnet that was drawing ever closer. Another hare dashed across the Church Field, this one avoiding the fate of its entangled fellow creature in the net.

Both animals, I guessed, had been running from the noisy band of humans, or had been frightened out of their habitats by them. I wondered what on earth what was happening.

I had heard of people who went hunting with beagles and other dogs in the countryside. But these fellows had no dogs with them. Yet it was apparent that trapping of some kind was in progress, as somebody had laid the net that held the struggling hare.

About ten minutes passed. What I expected would be the moment of truth drew nearer as some of the walkers entered the field I was in. There were fifteen or more of them, nine men and maybe six young teenage boys. Other walkers were exploring fields adjoining my one.

A man who appeared to be the leader of the group in the Church Field consulted with another man. Both led the way for the rest, pointing as they crossed the field to the gap where the net had been laid. A loud cheer went up from some of the men...seemingly in response to the hare's capture.

The entire group in the field converged on the gap where the hare lay entangled. They seemed in high spirits, with laughter and lively banter audible to me as I observed them from the old church.

But then the mood changed. I heard loud curses from the men clustered around the gap.

As they blocked my view of the hare in the net, I couldn't see at first what angered them.

Then, the cause of their aggravation became obvious: One of the men emerged from the huddled gathering with the hare held by its hind legs. Another man, the apparent leader, was pointing to the animal and shaking his head in frustration or annoyance.

He had a vacant and, I thought, slightly crazed expression.

He was tall, heavily built, with huge jowls, a prominent facial birthmark and a head of bushy flaming red hair.

His bomber jacket was too small for him, as were his woollen pullover and corduroy trousers. His dress sense, and general demeanour, reminded me of the Frankenstein Monster. He looked as if he had been stitched together from body parts.

After taking a swig from a whiskey flask, he said something to the other fellow and pointed to the ground.

The man dropped the hare. It started to limp back towards the gap, but was barely able to move. Throwing his hands in the air, the head honcho turned his eyes heavenward and roared, "the fucking thing can't even walk, let alone run. It's fucking no use."

He picked up the injured hare and began to move in my direction, followed by the others. My heart pounded.

What if they intended to enter the ruin? What would they do to me if they found I was spying on them?

There was no way of leaving my hiding place without being spotted, so I opted to stay put. If they found me there, I would pretend to have nodded off while taking a rest in the old church.

I backed further away from the wall opening, though still kept them in view. They were getting closer. They stopped within a few yards of the ruin.

Some of them, including the grumpy Leader of the Pack, stood almost directly below my vantage point. He was still holding his injured captive.

Calling over a boy who was not much older than me, he handed him the hare and rasped: "Young lad, you're going to have to learn someday about dispatching. Stiff that fucker for me".

"I'd rather not if you don't mind" the teenager responded meekly.

"Ah go on, the lord loves a tryer. Give it a go anyway" the leader insisted.

The others congregated around the two of them as the boy, his hands trembling, gripped the terrified hare by its hind legs. Steeling himself, he gritted his teeth and swung the animal, smashing it against the wall of the church ruin.

I heard a dull thud, followed by a loud cry that rose to a higher pitch as the boy backed away nervously from the still live hare that lay on the ground before him. It sounded like the sobbing of a baby...the pain must have been unbearable, I thought.

I lost sight of the hare, until the red-haired giant of a man picked it up again. The dying and now mutilated animal was in a dreadful state.

The child-like wailing continued. The hare was speckled with blood, which dripped from its body onto the grass. Its tormentor held it flamboyantly aloft for his colleagues to see.

An eye dangled from one of its sockets, swinging to and fro like a pendulum as the slightly inebriated man swaggered about, passing from one man or boy to another, dangling the hare in front of them.

"I'll show ye how to kill one of them fuckers"! he bellowed.

He proceeded to batter the hare against the church wall in a mounting frenzy of excitement.

After almost half a minute of this relentless pummelling, another man tapped him on the shoulder. "I think it's dead now, you're okay", he chided.

Ignoring this reminder, the man continued battering the hare off the wall.

He seemed beside himself with rage...though the cause of his anger was unclear. I half closed my eyes during this barbaric ritual of death, still not daring to make my presence known to these men.

I felt my stomach churning. I thought I was going to be sick. I had seen men out shooting many times. I had seen pigeons dropping from the sky. I knew about the captive bolt pistol that stunned livestock in factories.

But this was different. This was something deeply sinister and unnatural...every fibre of my being rebelled against it. Yet I felt powerless, or unwilling, to intervene. I feared the consequences of tackling these people.

I looked again at the harrowing scene, peeping through a tiny clearing in the fuchsia bush. The hare-killer had ceased his "dispatching", as he called it.

After taking another swig from the whiskey flask, he picked up the blood-soaked carcass and threw it at the feet of the boy who had failed to kill. The lad had tears streaming down his face.

"Get used to it," the man roared at him, "or you'll be fuck all good to anyone".

The group began to disperse.

Though I had stopped looking again, I could hear the voices getting lower, until they grew almost inaudible.

Peering through the fuchsia bush, I saw that they had left the field and were out of sight.

I thought I glimpsed movement, and heard shouting, further on, two or three fields away...the men had probably switched their attention elsewhere having drawn a blank in the Church Field.

I climbed down from my hiding place. Tentatively, I moved towards where I saw the frenzied man throw the hare.

A ghastly sight greeted me. The once graceful creature that I had watched scampering across the field just fifteen minutes earlier was now a picture of death and horror.

While I clearly recognised a dead though severely mutilated animal in the long grass in front of the ancient place of worship, its head was so disfigured and out of shape as to be unrecognisable.

The blood-saturated ball of flesh and fur, with only the ears still relatively intact, had been almost severed from the rest of its body.

My eyes were drawn to a pair of dandelions...crushed against the wall at the spot where the “dispatched” hare had met its end.

The bright yellow flowers were pasted to the old stonework and speckled with crimson dots. Blood was smudged too on the wall immediately above where the hare lay in a crumpled heap.

I turned away from the scene in disgust and returned home. I was determined to do something about the cruelty I had witnessed...but what?

Before I reached my house, I met a wise elderly man of the district who had extensive knowledge of nature and wildlife.

I greeted him and immediately blurted out what I had seen.

He agreed with me that what the men did was wrong and indefensible, but added with a shrug that there was nothing that he, I, or anyone else could do about it.

But why? I asked.

Regretfully, he intoned: “Them chaps are from the coursing club, there’s a big meeting coming up. They want a fair few hares and they’re scouring the fields for them. If you take my advice, you’ll say nothing...not a word about the lad bashing the hare off the front of the old church. You’ll get yourself into a lot of trouble. Say nothing”

With that, he excused himself, bid me good evening, and continued on his walk with quickened pace.



2

A Living Link

When I got home I asked my father about hare coursing. What was it? I wanted to know, and why were those men I had seen so eager to capture hares? He explained briefly and patiently that coursing involved setting greyhounds after hares in a wired enclosure. The contest was between pairs of greyhounds, with the hares serving merely as bait.

It was a bit like track racing, except that in coursing real live hares were used instead of the mechanical ones that we saw on TV at places like Harold's Cross and Shelbourne Park, in Dublin.

There was no onus on a greyhound to catch or kill any hare at coursing events, he explained, but this inevitably happened, and many hares came to a grizzly end. A lot of them died without ever being coursed, while being netted in the fields.

I asked him if he knew of any people who objected to coursing. In a tactful and slightly worried tone, he told me that there was a small group, operating from Dublin; that picketed coursing events, and made occasional statements to the press in opposition to the cruelty.

But nobody "down the country" dared speak out against it, he added, as the coursing people were "very powerful".

They had connections in high places. Yes, a lot of people in rural Ireland were revolted by what happened to the hares...they hated to see them being ripped to pieces for fun. But they had to keep quiet.

You couldn't criticise coursing when there were greyhound owners, trainers, and coursing fans living in the same parish, village, or townland.

Changing the subject slightly, he suggested I look up information about the hare in the family encyclopaedia. I quickly found the relevant entry, and also read about the fascinating creature in a wildlife magazine.

I discovered that the Irish mountain hare was considered a "living link" with the ice age fauna of 10,000 years ago and as such was a treasured part of Ireland's multi-faceted wildlife heritage. Sadly, though, it was fast becoming an endangered and declining species.

Despite this, it was still being hunted and baited by all sorts of gangs and so-called sporting groups around the country. Apart from these activities, it was threatened by urbanisation and modern farming practises.

I learned that the lifespan of a hare is about two and a half years. Understandable, when you consider that from the moment of birth it lives out in the open. The "form" in which it rests during the day consists of a shallow depression or hollow in the ground. One end of this is deeper than the other to make room for the hare's large hindquarters. And the animal quite often constructs the form so that he can sit with his back against the wind.

Though not the most sociable of animals, they more than make up for this during the mating season, when groups of male hares (jacks) throw caution to the wind in a no holds barred pursuit of females (does). A jack will traverse huge areas in search of his prospective mate. But locating a doe is only the beginning of his quest for love.

When competing for a doe's attention, the jack engages other jacks in those famous boxing matches that have long intrigued nature lovers and naturalists. They rise up on their hind legs, and spar with their forepaws.

They are a sight to behold, as they dance and gyrate in the fields, their hind legs thumping the ground. After his long pursuit of a female, and mating with her, the jack doesn't hang around his beloved for more than a few days. He moves on in search of other mates.

By contrast, the doe is more settled in her ways. She gives birth to her family of leverets (baby hares) in a chosen part of the countryside and then, after a short while, moves them around to different forms. Come sunset, the mother visits each of its young in their various little "homes" to offer suckling.

Each "flying" visit lasts not more than three minutes. Interestingly, a doe will also suckle young that are not her own. If "strange" leverets turn up in the form, the doe will not begrudge them her attention.

From day one, each newborn hare is more or less "on the run" and at risk of being picked off by predators. It quickly becomes fully mobile. By instinct, a leveret will lie completely still in its "milking form" for the first weeks of its life. The prospect of death is never too far away.

Unlike rabbits, it has no protection of the kind afforded by an underground burrow or other secure hiding place. Once it ventures into the open, it can at any moment be swept away by a fox or swooping bird of prey. It is when they begin to munch into grassy plants that they become vulnerable to foxes.

Due to predation and exposure to the elements, around 50% of leverets die within a month of birth. The doe makes up for this high mortality rate by having several litters a year.

The first litter arrives at the end of February and the last in about mid-October. The size of each litter increases as the season progresses. A litter of up to five leverets would be common enough later in the year.

In its bid to survive in a hostile environment, the adult hare has the advantage of highly sensitive hearing. It can pick up the sound of approaching danger from miles away. Thus forewarned, it uses its large eyes on the side of its head to keep vigil. Being able to see behind it is a huge advantage.

From the instant that possible danger looms, it will run as fast as it can in the opposite direction from the perceived threat.

Its muscular hind legs can take it to a speed of 35 miles per hour and enable it to jump a height of two metres. The animal's strong heart gives it considerable stamina.

But the hare has a fatal weakness, one that, when I reflected on it, sealed the fate of the hare in the Church Field: a sort of "blind spot" immediately in front of its eyes. It thus has a habit of bumping into objects.

The hare that came to such a grizzly end at the hands of the Frankenstein look-alike would probably not have seen the net stretched across the gap before it.

Prior to the introduction of Ireland's decimal currency in 1971, the hare was proudly depicted on our three-penny bit coin. The encyclopaedia reproduced the design. I remembered spending this tiny silver coloured coin on sweets as a child. How strange and sad I reflected, that the rulers of Ireland saw fit to honour the hare in this way and yet permitted its abuse by cruel men.

I was intrigued also to learn that the hare has featured prominently in the mythology of numerous world cultures. A replica of a hare appears on the face of the full moon, seemingly holding an egg, and the animal was revered throughout the ages as a manifestation of the Moon Goddess. Some legends attributed magical powers to the humble creature.

During the witch persecution craze in Europe, women were accused of changing into hares, and in some cases burned at the stake for the alleged offence. The hare's child-like cry, which I had heard all too clearly and disturbingly in the field, was compared in past times to that of the mythical Banshee that foretold death.

The poet William Blake, I learned, had written in his *Auguries of Innocence* the haunting words: "Each outcry of a hunted hare/A fibre from the brain does tear". So he was obviously moved by its plight.

And the acclaimed Scottish poet Robbie Burns railed against the shooting of a hare he had been admiring: "Inhuman man! Curse on thy barb'rous art/And blasted be thy murder-aiming eye".

But while all this information about the hare's place in nature, poetry, and mythology was intriguing, I couldn't find any reference to hare coursing. I wondered too why I had never seen the "sport" on TV.

That was strange, I thought. Especially if it was as widely pursued in Ireland as my father had told me it was. There was plenty of sports coverage, but I had never seen or heard of coursing on the goggle box.



3

Supper with the Hare Catchers

When I casually broached the subject of coursing at school next day somebody suggested I talk to a classmate whose uncle was involved in "rounding up hares for greyhounds to run after them".

I got talking to this pupil. I was careful not to let him know either what I had seen in the Church Field, or what I thought of people who inflicted such cruelty. Curiosity had taken hold of me. I wanted to know more about this mysterious game that I had never seen, or heard about, prior to my encounter with the stick-wielding net men.

He offered to let me have a look at what he called the "holding compound" of his uncle's local coursing club in a neighbouring county. My classmate, however, was as much in the dark about what happened at a coursing event as I was. "I don't know what they do on coursing day", he admitted vaguely.

He had not witnessed coursing yet, but was familiar with behind -the-scenes activities that were part and parcel of the sport: "I've been around the compound where the hares are kept. And I've seen the hares being trained. They have to be trained for their own sake. They're taken out and prepared in a kind of dry run before the real thing. That gives them a good chance of dodging the dogs and not getting eaten alive".

I winced at the words "eaten alive". I arranged with him to visit the coursing venue that weekend.

Nervously, I arrived on a Saturday afternoon at my classmate's house in the countryside. From there we walked a mile or so to his uncle's home, a wealthy farmstead located on prime agricultural land.

A jolly man in his fifties, he smiled broadly and invited both of us in for lemonade and biscuits, which his wife served us in the kitchen. My friend introduced me.

"Ah you're young Fitz from the town of the ructions. And what brought you out here?" she intoned.

Before I could answer, her nephew explained that I wanted to see what coursing was all about.

She gave both of us funny looks, shook her head, and remarked sadly: "'Tis time enough you'll know about it. 'Tis terrible what they do to those poor hares. I wish to God they'd stop being so cruel to little defenceless animals...that never harmed anybody".

I felt an urge to agree with her, but suppressed this, as I knew it would put the coursing men on their guard and then I might never get to see them in action...training the hares, giving them practise runs...and whatever else they got up to. It baffled me that this woman had the exact opposite view of coursing to her husband and yet was living under the same roof.

We had scarcely drunk the lemonade when the housewife proclaimed: "I hear them, they're coming".

She explained that the engine she heard indicated that a consignment of captured hares had arrived.

We were sitting at the table with her when a large van pulled up in the farmyard. We ran first to the window. We saw a dozen men emerging from a disused hay barn. They quickly encircled the off-white badly stained vehicle. Side doors slid open.

Out jumped two heavily built fellows. One was a man in his early twenties, and the second I immediately recognised as the Frankenstein look-alike who had battered the hare in the Church Field. My heart missed a beat at the sight of him. I gave no indication to my friend that I had seen him before.

The men in the farmyard began to unload small wooden crates from the van. My friend whispered to me: "The hares are in those boxes".

The woman of the house seemed unhappy and uncomfortable with the arrival of the van and its contents in the yard.

Casting an icy look through the window, she said coldly: "out ye go if ye want to see what they're doing. I'm staying here to make the tea and sandwiches for them. I don't want to know anything about their coursing, bad cess to it".

We went out into the yard. There was a lot of shouting and excitement as the men unloaded the boxes and conveyed these to somewhere behind the farmhouse.

"Where are they bringing the hares?" I asked.

"To the scape" my friend replied.

This, he added, was a large compound enclosed by heavy wire.

He called to his uncle, who was helping to unload the van: "Can we have a look in the scape?"

"No problem!" the jolly farmer retorted.

We followed some of the men who were carrying boxed hares to the compound. The "hare camp"- as I dubbed it in my own mind- was an extensive wired off- section of a field.

The field in turn had high ditches all around, with strands of barbed wire entangled across the tops of the ditches. We stood at the entrance to the compound. Just inside, a few of the lads were opening boxes, with the meshed door closed behind them.

A hare darted out of one box, and ran around the compound, seemingly terrified because it ended up at the opposite side of the enclosure, desperately trying to leap over the wire. But the other hares seemed reluctant to leave their boxes. The men were prodding them with sticks, and attempting to poke them out with broom handles.

One by one, all the hares, about twenty-five, were extricated from their boxes. They were petrified, dashing to the far corners of the compound in a bid, I presumed, to avoid contact with their captors.

My friend must have read my mind. When I gave him a searching look, he confirmed my suspicion: "The hares are used to being in the wild. They have no dealings with human beings, so they'll run in any direction except towards people".

Then my attention fixed on a hare that was moving slower than its compatriots. It was limping along to join the others, but making little progress. I immediately thought of the hare in the Church Field, and feared that somebody would bash its brains out against a wall or perhaps off the wire.

This fear had no sooner popped into my mind than a burly teenager strode into the middle of the compound and picked up the hare. He was one of those "maneen" types who act and look twice or even three times their age to fulfil some macho delusion.

"It has a broken leg!" he shouted back at my friend's uncle.

"Okay, keep it for Dick" the farmer instructed.

"What's Dick going to do to the hare?" I asked my schoolmate.

"Dick's a trainer. I think he'll be feeding it to his dog, as it's no use for running" he answered awkwardly.

I failed to grasp his meaning. I assumed the animal would be dead before being thrown to the greyhound.

I looked on in silence at the strange spectacle of hares scurrying and leapfrogging about at the other end of the "scape". A man who had emerged from the compound remarked that the animals would be fed later.

I ventured a question to him: "How often do you feed the hares?"

He seemed flattered to be asked about his work. "Oh often enough...these lads will get their carrots later on".

This struck me as unusual, as I had read that hares were used to different kinds of food. I mentioned this.

"You're right. They're not used to carrots, but they'll bloody well eat them when they're hungry. Starve them a bit and they'll get the message".

With all the hares in the "scape", the men dispersed and my friend's uncle invited me to join them in the kitchen for tea and sandwiches. On the way back to the house I asked my schoolmate if the hares would have been fed earlier in the day.

He seemed taken aback at my ignorance. "Of course not. Most of them were caught before noon. The lads drank in the pub from at least three o' clock until half an hour ago. 'Tis thirsty work, and exhausting, rounding up all them hares, so they need the few drinks. The hares had to wait in their boxes in the van outside the pub for several hours while the lads quenched their thirst."

He then offered me an intriguing insight into the practise of a coursing club in a neighbouring village. "Their hares are not as lucky as the ones my uncle's men catch...They sometimes don't use boxes to bring them to the scape. They just leave them crumpled up in the nets, one on top of the other, and crammed into car boots.

"I saw them do it last year. And there was water in the scape. It was damp and dirty and loads of hares died from disease. My uncle says that lot should lose their coursing license".

Back in the kitchen, the housewife had laid a hearty spread on the long table. Willow pattern plates stacked with neat piles of exquisitely cut sandwiches drew deep sighs of appreciation from the hare catchers.

"Jaysus, there's nothing better after a feed of drink than a ham sandwich" a thankful diner bellowed.

The woman's husband pointed to me and declared that I had come on a fact-finding visit to see what coursing was about. Before anyone could react to this, his wife reproached him and his colleagues: "Did ye tell him what ye do to the poor hares at the coursing?"

Her husband raised his bushy eyebrows and grinned. "Shush for God's sake woman, coursing is a sport fit for any young Irishman".

Turning to me, he proclaimed: "Did you know that Finn McCool and the Fianna in the days of yore were coursing men? No sooner had they feasted in their forts or in the forests than be God they'd be off with their hounds to catch a hare be the arse!"

He laughed loudly at this, and the other men around the table joined in, almost falling off their chairs with laughter.

"Ah Jaysus Bob yer a howl!" one man interjected, wiping tears from under his eyes.

This compliment unleashed another wave of laughter, and the man with the tears almost choked on his ham and mustard sandwich.

The housewife frowned. Standing over us at the table, she nodded sadly and uttered, almost in a whisper; "Ye'll never have luck for ill-treating God's creatures".

"Ah don't mind her", advised a slightly irked husband, "coursing doesn't agree with her. But sure what am I saying? Some things don't agree with me either...like the smell of slurry from that bollix's pig farm down the road when I'm havin' me breakfast".

Roars of laughter again, and the housewife left the kitchen.

Turning to me, he winked and said: "I'll tell you what. If you want to see coursing at its best, come along to the meeting next month. It's the greatest show on earth...the coursing in these parts. Some of those hares out there could turn on a sixpence. They'd give the best greyhound in Ireland a run for his money".

As he spoke, I became aware that "Frankenstein", who sat at the head of the table, was eyeing me with a cynical glare. His tall, bulky presence towered over the proceedings.

Though I was sure he couldn't have seen me in the Church Field, there was something about him that made me more than a little nervous. He munched on a large bone while the others devoured their sandwiches.

He was the first to leave the house. "I'll be over tomorrow to start training those pussies", he rasped, addressing nobody in particular. He staggered slightly as he rose from the table, pushed an ill-fitting baseball cap onto his flaming red mop, and said his goodbyes.

There was silence for a few seconds after his departure. Another man at the table muttered ominously: "I hope those hares are quick learners. There'll be no second chances with Masher Whelan. He'll ate the poor sods alive before the greyhounds ever catch a sight of 'em".

The others made no response to this. They continued eating, in silence, with heads bowed.

"Masher Whelan" I repeated to myself. So that's the hero I saw from my rustic hideaway. I wondered why the men seemed to be in awe of him. Was it his sheer size and menacing demeanour?

He was certainly no friend of Ireland's wildlife, I reflected. I saw again in my mind his savage pummelling of the injured hare on what, in centuries past, was "holy ground".



4

Crusading Zeal

Back home later that night, I tried to interest my brother and four sisters in my newfound curiosity about hare coursing. I blurted out the days' events in a rush of enthusiasm, but they weren't listening. It meant nothing to them.

They each had their own priorities and preoccupations, among which the fate of a hare somewhere in the Irish countryside didn't rate too highly.

All four sisters were glued to Top of the Pops on TV and almost jumped down my neck when I tried to engage their attention. My brother was repairing his new bike in the garden shed. The welfare of hares was not uppermost in his mind either.

This attitude proved to be more or less the norm in the months and years that followed from many people who, while not cruel to animals in any way, just didn't have the time or inclination to become active in opposing cruel practises.

I had no problem with that. If somebody had approached me a few weeks earlier and tried to lecture me about hare coursing, I might have been even less receptive than my family was.

Next day, I resumed my bid to convert family members to my crusading zeal to do something about the cruelty I had witnessed. To no avail. They agreed that setting dogs after hares was nasty, but had no intention of speaking out against it. They felt it wasn't worth the hassle that such a stand would entail. I supposed they had a point.

Nor would any of them accompany me to the coursing event at which the hares I had seen in the compound were due to perform in front of a large crowd three weeks hence.

Even before attending this fixture, I resolved to register a protest against the whole idea of taking hares out of their natural habitat to be used as pawns in a silly game.

A leaflet might be the way to spread the word, I calculated...and to convert as many people as possible to my plan to defend the hares of Ireland. I considered distributing leaflets in the school, and maybe outside the two local churches. But I decided not to do anything until I had seen the upcoming coursing event.

What if it turned out to be a harmless affair? What if the hares were as much at home at this big outdoor occasion as they had been in their forms back in the fields, glens, and on the hillsides where they had nothing to do, it seemed, but lie in the grass all day, on the alert for predators?

My schoolmate had assured me that this was the case...that hares, according to his uncle, enjoyed being chased by greyhounds and could hardly wait for a chance to prove themselves in action. He hadn't explained why he had yet to see coursing firsthand despite his family's association with the game.

Then again, he hadn't told me either that the injured hare that Dick the trainer had procured from the compound had been fed live to a greyhound.

He confirmed the fate of the animal at school next morning when I asked him what had become of the hare that couldn't run.

"Oh sure the dogs have to be blooded or they won't run well. It's not only hares that get chawed by the dogs. The trainers give them cats, birds, rabbits; hedgehogs...any warm-blooded live bait will do the job."

I found this revolting. "Doesn't it bother you that people are doing things like that to animals?" I queried.

He looked alarmed for a moment. The tone of the question had alerted him to my true feelings on the matter. Head bowed, he admitted that it troubled him "a bit".

"I don't like it when cats are used"; he said slowly, "It takes them a long time to die. It's the skin...it's a lot tougher than on a hare".

Avoiding eye contact with me, he added: "Are you sure you want to go to that coursing meeting? ... I'd say you wouldn't like it. If you're worried about animals and all that you won't be very impressed with coursing".

He went on to explain that he had doubts about "the game" himself. His aunt had put him off seeing it whenever he visited her house.

He liked the atmosphere on his uncle's farm in the weeks leading up to coursing day...when friends and neighbours converged on the house to enthuse about greyhounds, hare catching, betting, and prize money. They sang songs too and reminisced about coursing in other years.

He loved when they bought him lemonade in the pub, and he listened to their tall tales about dogs and hares. Oddly enough, he reflected, he had never once heard any of the men speak of cruelty to the hares, or of the animals getting killed. They made it sound pretty much a harmless affair.

But he had no wish to see something his aunt had warned would make him "sick for a week".

Despite his misgivings, however, he agreed to accompany me to the coursing event. I made no mention of my vague plans to somehow protest against the cruelty involved at a later stage. I knew he would have freaked out at the idea.



5

A Tin-Pot Coliseum

The morning of the coursing event arrived. I learned that it was to be a "two-day meeting"; so there was going to be a double dose of whatever lay in store for the hares.

It was an ice-cold November day. Approaching the venue in a car driven by my friend's uncle, we got caught up in a tailback. There seemed to be dozens of cars, trucks, vans, and tractors on the road ahead of us. "A nice turnout by the looks of things" breezed the driver.

The coursing track was located in a field that was three fields in from the road. At the roadside gateway, two fur-coated men wearing cowboy hats and Wellingtons collected the entrance fees.

The first field teemed with betting stands, manned by sturdy fellows who rattled off advice and information in a language that bore only a passing resemblance to English. There were half a dozen sweet stalls, around which children and teenagers clustered.

A large yellow marquee occupied almost a quarter of the field, and close by, hamburgers were being vended from the side of a battered pink van that had the slogan: "Coursing is our Pride and Joy" emblazoned on its rear.

I recognised a few people I knew from my hometown and its hinterland in the field... a bank official, a store salesman, and a few farmers. And then, to my surprise, I spotted Fr. Hooley, a well-known missionary priest.

A tall, stately figure; he was leaning against the hamburger van puffing on a fat cigar. Clouds of smoke swirled about him, the way it does in a stage magician act where the lady disappears.

He was dressed completely in black...black suit, black Macintosh raincoat, shining black boots. Only his white collar broke the monotony of his blackness.

I asked my friend what interest a priest like Fr. Hooley would have in greyhounds running after hares. He nudged his uncle and referred the question to him. The man was in deep conversation with three other coursing fans, and seemed a bit rattled by the interruption.

Thinking for a moment, he joined his hands together as if in prayer and said solemnly: "The priest is here today in case any hare might need the last rites".

He then blessed himself slowly and his three pals laughed. So my query remained unanswered. I thought it peculiar that a "holy man" could be implicated in something disreputable and unholy.

I looked at the priest again. He was now standing in a long queue leading to the pink van, waiting his turn to buy a hamburger.

A reversal of roles for him, I thought, as the man dispensing the hamburgers reminded me of Fr. Hooley giving out Communion at Mass. Others in the queue were coughing and wheezing as cigar smoke wafted its way up their nostrils

When my friend and his uncle had collected their burgers, we entered the next field, which was choc-a-bloc with greyhounds and their owners or trainers. Some dogs were being led around on leads; others were on their haunches while men rubbed them down with some concoction that smelt of alcohol.

"What are they rubbing on them? I asked my friend.

"Poitin" he answered breezily, "it's illegal to drink that stuff but it's okay to use it on dogs".

The next field contained the coursing track or arena, a 400 by 800-yard enclosure. Barbed wire and thicker sheets of mesh covered all ditches that ran alongside the enclosure.

This, I discovered, was to prevent the escape of any hare from the designated sporting venue.

There was, however, one small opening in the enclosure through which a hare might make its bid for freedom. This was situated at one end of the track. My friend informed me that once a hare reached this sanctuary, he was "home and dry" and a pursuing dog couldn't catch him.

Spectators had begun to gather in front of this latter-day tin pot coliseum, though the game would not commence for at least a quarter of an hour.

Hip flasks were in evidence among the mainly male audience. Some fans were swigging from these. One elderly fellow, sitting on a wooden stool he had taken with him, was filling up an empty flask from a bottle of Paddy Whiskey.

And almost every man held a betting card. Someone pushed one into my hand as I dreamily surveyed the venue.

This gave details of all the dogs taking part in the competition. Each greyhound had an odd-sounding name such as Fluffy's Lad, Hairy Turnip, Mad Maggot, or Scuttery Glen.

But the hares had no names. They didn't even get a mention on the card. This baffled me, as without the hares there would be nothing for the dogs to chase. To ignore their essential role in the game seemed downright insulting and ungrateful.

Binoculars hung from a fair few sturdy necks in the crowd- I had my own with me too- and many of the men sported extra large and ridiculous looking cowboy hats with chicken or crow feathers protruding from them.

The children, all boys, were dressed in a typical coursing "maneen" fashion, with caps designed for older heads almost obscuring their vision, and long coats belted by binder twine reaching to their ankles.

This was entirely new to me, and called to mind a scene from Oliver Twist where the urchins have to act older than their age. My friend and I felt out of place in this peculiar setting. We had dressed normally, as we would on any weekday after school.

I noticed some men advising their offspring about the new game they were about to see. "Don't let it bother you now, Georgie, if a bunny starts roaring or a dog gives her an auld nip. That's nature and it's part of life".

Another parent, somewhere behind me, was muttering: "Listen Michael. No crying or complaining...if a hare gets his head chawed off. As the lad once said, it's no skin off your nose, so there's nothing to worry about. It's like watching television. Okay?"

There were scarcely a dozen women present, all in thick winter clothing; and these were mostly aggressive types who I guessed had long since eliminated feelings of compassion from their view of the world.

Or at least that was the impression that floated into my mind as I scanned the growing columns of fans that gradually filled up the space in the field looking onto the coursing venue.

The ladies looked as hard as nails and as tough as old shoe leather combined. Their eyes were fierce and pitiless, and fixed patiently on the long stretch of sward over which the competing hares and greyhounds would soon perform.

It struck me that the crowd seemed to be caught up in a time warp, judging by appearances and attitudes. The immortal words of Mr. Spock on the Starship Enterprise popped into my mind: "It's life Jim...but not as we know it"

With only minutes to go before the official opening, Fr. Hooley had elbowed his way to the front of the crowd that stood waiting in front of the wire-meshed coursing track.

Cigar in one hand and a betting card in the other, he took up his position beside three uniformed guards, who were studying their own betting cards and exchanging news, views or information about the upcoming event.

Then a voice called for silence...The first course was to begin. A man at the opposite side of the track from the escape hatch held two greyhounds on a leash.

"He's called the slipper"... I was told. One dog had a white collar, the other a red...for identification purposes.

This man reminded me of a foxhunter- the kind you see depicted on table mats- or of someone togged out for a fancy dress party. He wore a cap like one you'd see on a jockey, a pink jacket, and snow-white trousers. And his shining black footwear put me in mind of Nazi jackboots.

A costumed man on horseback also caught my attention. He was dressed like the slipper, and mounted on a chestnut brown stallion. The sight of him fascinated me. What on earth was he up to? I asked my friend.

I thought for a moment that he must be a foxhunter who had strayed from his cross-country dash, got lost, and ended up on the coursing field.

"He's the judge", the voice beside me corrected; "he decides who wins and who loses".

The greyhounds were straining to break free. Then, suddenly, a hare darted from somewhere behind him.

After it had run about forty metres; the slipper trotted a few paces, panting and wheezing, and released the two dogs. They bounded forward like rockets on legs, surging towards the hare. The judge on his steaming mount galloped alongside them.

The hare was about half way to the escape, towards which it was leapfrogging in a straight line as it had been trained to do. Just as the dog that was leading appeared to be within inches of snapping at its tail, the wily bundle of fur swerved and ran behind him, almost colliding with the second dog but narrowly avoiding her too.

The first dog tumbled head over heels but quickly found its feet again. The hare was now within about ten yards of the escape, with the dogs closing in again.

They seemed about to catch their prey when it scuttled through the escape hatch, leaving the greyhounds fumbling around aimlessly for a few seconds until men ran onto the track to remove them.

There was loud cheering for the dog that the mounted judge had declared the winner. This was the one, my friend explained, that had succeeded in diverting the hare from its straight run down the track. He had to shout to be heard above the excitement.

"Turning the hare" was the main point of the game, and the first dog to achieve this was liable to win the course, though there was a whole carefully thought-out points system to make sure the best dog always

scooped the honours. There would later be run-offs, semi-finals and so on until one dog was declared the overall winner.

With the track cleared, the next course got underway. This time, I had my binoculars trained on the approximate spot from which the first hare had materialised. I saw the second one emerge from a small box and followed its rapid progress.

Seconds later, the slipper released the second pair of dogs. They gained ground fast on the hare and had the creature looping all over the field after one of them had "turned" her.

She was less than half way to the escape. Managing to evade them for another few precious seconds, she was now just yards from the elusive hatch. I breathed a sigh of relief...This hare would survive too, I assured myself.

But no. With the hatch in the rusty galvanised barricade within almost spitting distance, one of the dogs made contact with its prey. It sunk its teeth into the hare's neck, wrenching it off the ground.

The second dog grabbed her close to the tail. A tug-of-war began. Even over the shouts and laughter of the crowd I could hear that child-like wailing...a haunting shriek that echoed around the coursing venue.

It pierced the winter air like a siren. Exactly like the cry I had heard in the Church Field.

My hands shook as I held the scene of naked cruelty in focus. Blood gushed from the animal's gaping wounds.

Something splashed against the back of my neck... a warm liquid. I looked around to find a boy had vomited over half a dozen fans. As I rubbed the foul-smelling puke from my neck and coat, I heard a man say to the boy's father: "His first time eh?" Somebody else had to abandon a cowboy hat. It was speckled with vomit

After about half a minute had passed, and the crowd had tired of this hare's performance, a man strolled onto the track and ambled at a leisurely pace up to the dogs and their plaything.

He patted the greyhounds gently and pulled the dying hare from them. Carrying it by its back legs, he brought it behind the barricade containing the escape hatch. "He'll put her out of her misery", I heard my friend's uncle calmly reassure his horror-struck nephew.

"This is sick," the boy whispered to me. I agreed. Sure hadn't I some of it on the back of my neck?

Though I shared his feelings, I decided to wait and see the rest of the event. I also noted the mixed reaction in the crowd to the unfolding scenes of torture. The young boys looked uncomfortable, some more than others.

A few of the men too seemed ill at ease in the wake of the killing. They fidgeted with their betting cards and looked down at their feet or up at the sky, as if in denial of what their sport was all about.

Others were smiling and making jokes about the hare. Others still were drinking from their hip flasks. Fr. Hooley was in deep conversation with a Garda Sergeant. Whatever the subject was, it had both of them in high spirits. The Man of God was certainly not there to grant Last Rites, I reflected. At least not to hares anyway.

The coursing continued. The next two hares escaped, but other kills followed at regular intervals, each one accompanied by that dreadful sobbing of the hare as the dogs pulled its body asunder. There was no let-up in the cruelty. It just went on and on for what seemed an eternity, with an hour-long break for lunch.

After tea, soup, and sandwiches in the yellow marquee, the madness resumed. In all, twenty-seven hares were mauled or battered to death on that blood-spattered field. All for the sake of a cheap thrill and a "flutter" on the dogs.

It ended at 4 PM. My friend and I were nauseated by what we had seen. His uncle, realising that the boy was anything but impressed by the "game", patted him on the head and promised that no hares would be killed the following day. The slipper would give them a longer start before letting off the dogs, and this would save them, he predicted.



6

My First Sight of the "Antis"

Intrigued at the idea that the killing and the cruelty could be eliminated in this way, I opted to re-visit the event next morning.

In the minutes before starting time, I could hear people around me repeat what my friend's uncle had said... that no hares would be killed today. So everyone seemingly knew about this. What a mysterious game, I pondered.

The action commenced, and sure enough, one hare after another ran to safety. This was accomplished by the very simple expedient of not releasing the dogs until the hare was more than half way to the escape.

I asked my friend why the organisers didn't extend the same act of mercy on opening day. He referred the question to his uncle. The man responded icily: "There's a chance the antis will be here today...either picketing outside or in here watching us like hawks".

Who were the "antis"? I wanted to know. "Oh the coursing men say they're just a bunch of ignorant folk from Dublin who don't understand the game and want to stop it" my friend informed me.

That, I assumed, must be the organisation opposed to coursing my father had mentioned. As the hares seemed to be doing well on the track, I decided to move through the crowd to see if I could spot any of these "ignorant folk" who might have infiltrated the gathering.

I felt they would stand out from the coursing fans, as indeed would any non-coursing observer. A young low-sized blonde woman wearing dark glasses, a dainty transparent blue headscarf, and a red duffel coat caught my attention.

She was standing apart from the rest of the crowd with arms folded and binoculars around her neck. I reckoned she was one of the infiltrators. If she was here to witness cruelty, she had come on the wrong day. She had been conned.

I couldn't think of an excuse to approach her and explain why hares were escaping today...after the slaughter on Saturday. I wondered if she or her colleagues (if indeed she was an "anti") knew about the bloodshed that dominated the previous day.

I wandered back to where my friend stood. He was happy that no hares were being caught. But there was no great sense of relief evident in the faces of the adult fans.

I could hear grumbling...they felt that the possibility of an "anti" presence had forced the event organisers to interfere with the way the slipper handled the dogs, compelling him to go easy on the hares lest the silent watchers see anything that could be used to discredit coursing.

As I contemplated this defensive attitude, I caught sight of a second possible infiltrator: A young man in a dark blue anorak. Like the young lady, he was standing apart from the other fans. He seemed a bit lost, and rather nervous.

He kept looking over his shoulder as if he expected someone to reproach him for being in the field. When another hare ran to freedom, he ticked an open notebook in his hand. I noticed he did this after each course. Probably keeping track of kills and escapes, I presumed.

My instinct regarding the two out-of-place observers proved well founded. At the half-way stage, when the meeting broke for lunch, the blonde woman joined the man in the anorak. He showed her his notebook and they conversed quietly about something. As the fans made straight for the yellow marquee, or opened flasks and boxes of sandwiches, those two discreetly left the field.

Inside the marquee, I was eating a plate of biscuits with my friend when somebody rushed through the entrance, almost out of breath. "They're outside...the fuckers are outside...on the road" he rasped.

His meaning quickly became clear: There was a picket on the meeting. Protesters had arrived in this remote country district to state their opposition to coursing.

A few fans headed off to see the protest. My friend and I followed them to the roadside exit. Walking in silence up and down on the road outside the entrance to the first field were about fifty men and women, all carrying placards.

The placards were quite colourful and bore striking messages. "Coursing is Cruel," screamed one. "Ban Hare Coursing!" another stated, and a number of signs demanded: "Hounds Off our Wildlife!"

I wanted very much to approach them and tell these people I supported their cause. I wanted to tell them how sickened I was by the carnage I had witnessed. But I held back. There was such a burning hostility from the fans towards that group on the road.

This wasn't the time to commit myself. I just stood and looked on from behind the ditch along with the smirking, jeering fans; who were shouting catcalls and obscenities at the picket.

"Go on home ye Dublin Jackeens!" a burley fellow in a sheepskin jacket and Soviet-style fur hat howled at them.

Directing his glare at a young woman on the picket line, another man hollered: "What you need is a good fuck!" The woman blushed but declined to make eye contact with him, let alone retaliate.

But an elderly woman on crutches broke away from the picket, to the apparent consternation of her colleagues, and hit the foul-mouthed man over the head with her placard.

"Hillary, for God's sake, don't do that," another elderly female pleaded. Too late. A man standing beside the fellow who had been struck pulled the placard from the irate lady and ripped it to pieces.

A male protester, who to me looked more like a coursing fan, eyed the group of us behind the ditch. A smallish man, he wore a long grey coat and a cap to match. In a strong sharp Cork accent, he declared: "What's happening in there today is a national disgrace!" So much for the claim that all these antis hail from Dublin, I thought.

The irate lady, having suppressed her anger, had resumed her silent walk, minus her placard.

A man who I thought was the spitting image of a well-known TV character of the 1970s also held a placard, head bowed in silence.

I could have sworn; I nudged my friend, that it was the actor John Cowley, better known as the famous Tom Riordan of RTE's weekly rural drama series: The Riordans. Somebody overheard me and said mockingly: "That's him. I gave up watching the programme when feckin' Tom Riordan joined that crowd".

I stared at the celebrity as he paced along the road with his placard that read: "Coursing Belongs in the Dark Ages". It must have been a major boost to the anti-coursing cause, I reflected, to have won the backing of this much-admired actor whose TV Alter Ego was a household name across Ireland.

From behind me I heard a loud cry: "Get away from that ditch. Ye're only encouraging them". It was a coursing club official. "Return to the venue and totally ignore the picket", he urged.

As we turned to leave, I waved at the protesters. A rather pointless gesture to let them know I wasn't in favour of coursing. Nobody waved back.

I went home fired up with enthusiasm, determined to do something about the awful scenes I had witnessed the previous day. Excitedly, I told my family that I had seen Tom Riordan protesting outside the coursing field.



How to Resist?

A missionary zeal took hold of me. Starting with my teachers at school and my fellow pupils, I would tell the world of the great injustice being perpetrated against the timid and defenceless hares of Ireland, and win the backing of all right thinking people for a ban on coursing.

But as the days went by, this passion waned. School exams loomed. Endless hours of study, and the constant fear of failure, dominated the remainder of my mediocre school days. Gradually, those grand plans to mount a campaign on behalf of persecuted hares evaporated.

Apart from my studies, there was another factor that made me think twice about voicing objections to coursing within or outside the school classroom. The previous year, a pupil in a school in another part of Ireland had tried to muster backing for an act of defiance on an issue that concerned him.

He had taken to heart a casual reference by a teacher to the fact that a leading publisher of Irish schoolbooks had served with distinction during World War Two in the Waffen SS, Hitler's private army whose reputation was well known to us school-goers from our history classes and addiction to weekly imported comic strips.

The rest of the kids in the classroom concerned had heard the teacher speak too, but hadn't dwelt too closely on the significance of his remarks. But this one pupil had. And it troubled him. Don't you all know about the Holocaust? He asked his classmates, and didn't it bother them...just a little bit... that a former Nazi was publishing the very texts we use in our classroom?

They agreed that it wasn't very satisfactory, but what could any of them do about it? He suggested they avoid doing any homework for two weeks in protest at the use of the schoolbooks. "Ah now hold on there" somebody whined, and most of the pupils echoed this sentiment, pointing out that the consequences could be dire for them if they went down that road.

Corporal punishment was an integral part of the Irish education system in those days. You could get whacked with a coin-reinforced leather strap or bamboo cane for just about any infringement of school rules...even for answering a question wrongly or not quickly enough. If the boys didn't do their homework for a fortnight, they could expect the mother of all canings, if not expulsion from school.

But the young rebel persisted, and four other boys, having listened to his heartbreaking cogitations on the Holocaust, decided to support him in the boycott.

The remainder of the class politely or otherwise made it clear that they wouldn't be joining the boycott. They had their futures to think of...the exams were on the horizon...and what about the glowing references they might need from the school for prospective employers?

That night, the five rebels tossed their schoolbags aside in their homes and did no homework.

Next morning, they were asked to account for their actions by the Principal, who happened to be teaching the first subject of the day. He was a stocky, bald headed man who had a laser sharp understanding of the psychological profile and school performance record of every boy in the class.

He was also a firm believer in the power of the cane and the leather as educational persuaders.

The pupil who initiated the boycott put his hand up, begging permission to speak, and explained the reasoning behind his act of defiance. The Principal reflected for a moment or two, surveying every face in the classroom.

Suddenly...with an abruptness that caused some pupils to quake in their shoes, he barked: "How many of you in this class think this No Homework business is a good idea?"

The five put up their hands, tentatively...nervously. But a sixth hand was also raised.

And it was this gesture of support that proved a poisoned chalice to the worthy cause. The pupil in question was a boy who had scant regard for school and rarely did his homework anyway.

Pronouncing his name in triumph, the Principal beckoned this chap to stand beside him, in front of the class. Catching him by an ear, he cited his surname mockingly and joked:

"So you're not going to do your homework because you don't like the logo on the schoolbooks. Aren't you the brave boy, hah? What do you think lads? Listen here to me now, me young bucko...I don't think you're too worried about the Nazis...Would you know where to find Germany on the map, what? I'll tell ye lads, this fellow here wouldn't do his homework if t'was the Pope himself or the Blessed Virgin Mary that was publishing our school books!"

Uproarious laughter erupted from the class. Allowing the pupil to return to his desk, the Principal, still basking in his conquest, pointed briskly at the boy who had instigated the homework boycott and called him to his side at the top of the classroom.

With tittering and laughter still rumbling, he grabbed the boy's right hand and whipped out a leather strap. He slapped him six times with great force. "Left hand, come on...quick!" Six more slaps.

Grasping his pain-wracked hands, the chastised pupil walked away from the Principal to return to his desk. The rest of the class, including the ones who had laughed at the lazy pupil, were stunned into silence. Before the slapped boy could sit down, he heard the roar "You, back up here. I'm not finished with you yet!"

Handing him a piece of chalk, the teacher instructed the pupil to write on the blackboard, fifty times, "I will complete my homework every night in future, come hell or high water". The boy complied without a whimper.

The planned homework boycott over the use of Irish schoolbooks published by a Waffen SS veteran ended after one day.

This, when I heard about it, was my first important lesson in how difficult it was to motivate people of any age to adopt a cause that didn't benefit them personally or that had the potential to be damaging or unfavourable to their self-interests.

If people couldn't be swayed by an issue linked to disapproval of the most heinous crime in the history of the human race, how likely was it, I asked myself, that they would put themselves out to alleviate the plight of hares on coursing fields?

Forget about it, I told myself, and I shelved my ambitions to mount a crusade against coursing.



8

Michael D Bids to End Hare Coursing

Despite putting aside my starry-eyed plans to mount a campaign against the blood sport, occasional media references to it caught my attention. In late 1975, a year after I attended my first hare-baiting session, I noticed a report in a national newspaper headed Coursing Ban Attempt Fails.

Almost an entire page was devoted to a fiery and acrimonious debate in the Senate. At age fifteen I wasn't in the habit of reading reports on proceedings in our national parliament. But this was about coursing.

More specifically, it concerned a proposed amendment to the Wildlife Bill, a piece of draft legislation being considered by members of the Dail and Senate, Ireland's two houses of parliament. The Bill would become law the following year as the 1976 Wildlife Act.

The proposed amendment, tabled by Labour Party Senator (and future President of Ireland) Michael D. Higgins, would, if passed by parliament, have made hare coursing illegal.

Ferocious exchanges ensued when the legendary Michael D announced his intention to put an end to what he considered "a cruel and cowardly abuse of a gentle creature that threatened nobody".

He was backed by Senator Mary Robinson, Dr. Noel Browne, and two other Senators in his challenge to the legality of coursing, and faced overwhelming opposition. It was obvious from the start of the debate that the amendment hadn't a snowball's chance in hell of being adopted.

But what I found intriguing, at a time in my life when I had little interest in, or knowledge of, the political system, were the arguments for and against the blood sport that emerged in the course of the debate. And also the emotionally charged words and phrases that were tossed back and forth.

Up to the point that Michael D had broached the subject of coursing, the debate on the Wildlife Bill had been lacklustre. This was obvious from the tone of the newspaper report. The Minister for Fisheries and Forestry was telling everybody what the Government's proposals for the Bill were.

He was droning on about hedges, bats, bull frogs, rare birds, fungi, exotic flowers, and tree-planting...You could visualize Senators nodding off or yawning as the Minister went through the routine of informing them.

Then, at the mention of coursing, everyone sprung to life. Senators, who had left the chamber or taken a break, were called back in by colleagues who dashed out of the hallowed Upper House to retrieve them.

A buzz of excitement and frenzied anticipation transformed the atmosphere in the building as empty seats quickly filled up. It was as if a national emergency had been declared, and these Senators were the exalted ones who would do their utmost to safeguard the nation's wellbeing.

They regarded Michael D with shock and incredulity...as they might have greeted the arrival in their midst of the Anti-Christ foretold in the Book of Revelation. The modest, self-effacing, and inoffensive County Galway man had, without even raising his voice, expressed a desire to "render coursing illegal" by means of a simple amendment to the Bill.

This proposal sent shock waves through the corridors of power and set off alarm bells in the ranks of every coursing club in Ireland. Impromptu Red Alert messages crisscrossed the phone-lines between the Senate building and the homes of leading hare-catchers and greyhound owners from Cork to Donegal.

A provincial newspaper, in a melodramatic but deadly serious commentary, likened the near panic induced in the coursing heartlands by the Senate debate to what happened in America when Orson Wells made his notorious "Invasion from Mars" broadcasts in 1938. The editorial called upon "all true followers of the leash to stay calm and keep the faith".

Suspicion stalked the land. Prayers were offered. Churches filled on weekdays. Hare baiters feared that the proposed amendment to the Wildlife Act could signal the beginning of the end for a whole way of life in the countryside.

It wasn't so much a belief that Michael D could succeed in his anti-coursing bid, which everybody knew was doomed to failure. The mere fact that such a challenge to the game was in the offing startled the coursing clubs and their backers in both the Dail and Senate. It would, they knew, give solace and moral support to the antis and encourage opponents of coursing to persevere in their efforts.

Senators Dr. Noel Browne and Mary Robinson spoke in favour of Michael D's amendment, provoking a vigorous response from the pro-coursing Senators. Their case against a ban on coursing was like a sketch from a New Year Pantomime, or a piece of satiric black comedy.

They eulogized the blood sport. It was; they pleaded, essential to the future of the greyhound industry that hares be coursed. Jobs depended on it, they asserted.

The hare population would "die out completely" if it didn't have the friendly and hard-working coursing clubs looking after it and, if hares weren't coursed; they would die of numerous natural and unnatural causes.

Travellers would shoot them...cars would roll over them...crows might attack them...some hares would die of boredom or commit suicide while others would become totally confused or panic-stricken without the reassuring presence of the coursing men who cared deeply for them "twenty-four hours a day".

Imagine, one Senator enthused, a poor hare dying of liverfluke on a lonely hillside, pining away...and contrast that with the pleasures of a coursing event.

Other hares would resort to the "deadliest mischief", another supporter warned, if not subject to the scrutiny and conservation management of coursing clubs...such as eating the bark off trees in the gardens or fields of unfortunate country folk.

And they got up to worse mischief than that, he hinted darkly. He recalled "a recent sad and worrying case in a foreign land" where coursing was illegal. A large hare was spotted skulking about on the fringes of that country's capital, attempting to grab babies from prams and run away with them.

Were it not for the timely intervention of a police marksman, the Senator added ruefully, that mad hare would have made off with the babies. Sharp intakes of breath and sighs of profound concern greeted his revelation.

A fellow Senator cited this "remarkable" instance as proof that "hares at a loose end would be bad for the country". Coursing "kept them out of trouble", he told the House.

Coursing clubs didn't set out to kill hares, the Senators claimed. That was an unfortunate "side effect" of the sport. Though hares were mauled to death, this gave no pleasure at all to the sportspeople, who hated to see any hare getting injured, let alone killed.

Another speaker listed the mouth watering menu available to captive hares...oats, turnips, carrots, sallies...all served up to the hares by men who, if the truth were known, actually "loved" these animals. This food made the hares strong and sturdy and capable of out-running the dogs, he insisted.

Dr. Browne delivered an eloquent rebuttal of these arguments, calmly demolishing the case for legalised hare splitting.

Being a tradition didn't necessarily make hare coursing something acceptable or worthy of support, he opined. Cockfighting and bear baiting had long traditions behind them. Yet there was no lobby pressing for these field sports to be re-introduced.

Throwing Christians to the lions was a great field sport in ancient Rome and no doubt had its fervent supporters in the Roman Senate who saw it as an entertaining traditional pastime that was vital to the economy.

He conceded that hares also died of disease, were killed on the roads, and died as a result of predation by foxes or exposure to the elements...but how, he asked, did this justify the cruel killing of hares in coursing? Could one justify a rape or a murder by referring to the far greater level of rapine or killing or warfare that occurred elsewhere in the world?

As for coursing being "as natural as an Irish breakfast", he held it was the exact opposite. The hare was a wild animal. For coursing, it was snatched from its natural domain, confined in a compound, trained or coerced to run in a straight line, and then, on coursing day, forced to perform in front of dogs in a wired-off enclosure.

All of this was unnatural...a contrived spectacle, the Senator argued. And whether coursing fans enjoyed the killing and the gore was irrelevant. It happened.

The list of food items dished out to captive hares...and the fact that coursing clubs supported hare conservation; only showed how anxious they were to have sufficient numbers of the animals for baiting!

Sure, jobs might be lost if coursing were banned, he admitted, but these would be replaced by many more jobs...better and more satisfying jobs...created by a switch to drag-coursing, a humane alternative in which no live hares were used. The success of the greyhound industry wasn't dependent on hares being torn to pieces, he declared.

He predicted that after a coursing ban a new greyhound industry, vibrant and untainted by the spectre of cruelty and sadism, could emerge that would be a credit to Ireland.

Reading back over that yellowed page of small print, I am struck by how well organized and powerful the pro-coursing lobby was in those days...and the strength of the grip in which it held so many of our politicians.

But I was also impressed by the calibre of those few Senators who took the anti-coursing line.

Noel Browne for instance. The County Westmeath man was a hero of Irish politics...and even more so of Irish medical history...if not universally deemed so during his lifetime. He was a man of principle who stood head and shoulders above the "brown envelope" culture of sleaze and endemic corruption that riddled so much of Irish life.

His own family was wiped out by the dreaded TB in the 1940s...Noel Browne never forgot that. He became a doctor and later, as Minister for Health between 1949 and 1951, he succeeded in eradicating the disease from Ireland, an achievement of staggering proportions.

His far-sighted and enlightened Mother and Child Scheme brought him into conflict with both Church and State. He simply wished to provide free medical services for nursing mothers. But the Church saw this as a threat to the Catholic concept of the family, and subservient TDs and Senators of all parties backed its high profile interference.

Noel Browne stuck to his guns, emphasizing that the purpose of the Scheme was to reduce infant mortality. Why would anyone object to that? he pleaded. But the Bishops, backed by powerful political forces, increased the pressure and brought down the Government in 1951.

Noel Browne had been a member of almost every political party but each in turn dropped him when he became too honest and too principled for them. That, it seemed, was the lot of any man or woman who put conscience before political expediency. And he had spoken out on many issues of conscience without fear or favour.

So it was this brave man who, in 1975, took on the full power and might of the coursing clubs.

Noel Browne's political CV fascinated me. It seemed the hares that faced the cruelties and horrors of coursing had at least a few decent politicians fighting for their protection.

People too like Mary Robinson. She was a figure of great controversy in the mid-seventies, for much the same reason that Noel Browne was. She fearlessly championed human rights, among these being civil divorce, denied to Irish citizens at the time, wider access to social welfare entitlements, and the right of women to avail of contraception.

She had moved three Family Planning Bills in the Senate. Each one had been shot down in flames. Many Senators believed that an eternity in Hell awaited them if they backed the concept of artificial birth control.

Hers was often a voice in the wilderness, but always a voice for justice in an age dominated by conservatism and lowbrow wheeler-dealer politics.

Just as the Church had opposed Noel Browne's efforts to reduce infant mortality, it also fulminated against Ms. Robinson, and again, as in the case of Dr. Browne, politicians did exactly what the bishops and parish priests expected of them. The future President of Ireland had her work cut out.

She was years ahead of her time. When she spoke in the Senate in favour of banning coursing, an opposing Senator quipped: "Is it a coincidence that it seems to be the same lobby of Senators who oppose coursing that also want contraceptives introduced?"

Other Senators present gave each other knowing looks following this remark. They glared at the liberal Mrs. Robinson as she made her case for a coursing ban.

In the print media, letter-writers of the ultra-conservative kind slated her opposition to coursing. A typical one that appeared in a provincial newspaper went:

"Why should we listen to this lady when she lectures us about the feelings of hares and other vermin? We know she is the same woman who advocates the use of sinful devices to prevent nature from taking its course in the way God ordained. Contraception is a crime against the Holy Spirit that can never be forgiven.

"It would be better that a million hares be savaged by greyhounds than that one Catholic family be shamed by those evil pills and Devil's contraptions. Mrs. Mary Robinson ought to be on her knees praying for the Lord's forgiveness instead of attacking our great sport of greyhound coursing".

At the time I read that letter, which I cut out of the paper for my scrapbook, I disagreed with the writer's support for coursing but was not entirely au fait with his references to the alleged evils of contraception.

Looking back on Senator Robinson's contribution to the Senate debate on the Wildlife Bill, I'm especially impressed by her insistence that no amount of regulation or tinkering about with the rules of coursing would make it acceptable. It was so inherently cruel that only a ban could adequately protect the hare.

The attempt to seek protection for hares via the Senate debate had proven a heroic failure.

But however much one might admire the valiant six who had dared to challenge the legality of coursing, the sheer scale of the defeat they had suffered at the hands of the pro-baiting lobby made opposition to the blood sport seem pointless and futile. The coursing clubs appeared invincible.

I put aside the page and forgot about it.

I Join the Campaign

It wasn't until five years later, in 1980, when I had left school and was working in a local Farmers' Co-operative, that coursing once again captivated my attention. Scanning a daily newspaper during a tea break, I noticed a quarter page advertisement headed: "Wildlife abused for Fun and Games".

A large black and white photograph showed a hare caught between two greyhounds. One dog had it by a leg, while the other was pulling out of its neck. The hare's eyes were bulging with terror. Blood streamed from the sockets.

In the background, close by, a well-fed coursing fan stood smirking, and further behind, in a packed stadium, a large crowd clapped and cheered and threw caps in the air.

It was a shocking picture, and it took me back instantly to that coursing event I had visited with my schoolmate. I read the text that accompanied the picture. It claimed that around 10,000 hares were netted each year in Ireland for use as live bait at coursing meetings.

Hares that failed to escape the dogs, it said, ended up as living ropes that were pulled to pieces by the competing greyhounds. And many more of the animals suffered agonising deaths while being netted.

They became entangled in the nets, breaking legs and sustaining other injuries. Opinion polls, according to the ad, showed that about 70% of the Irish people wanted coursing banned.

At the foot of this hard-hitting message was a simple application form for anyone wishing to join the Irish Council Against Blood Sports.

I took out the page, folded it, and decided I would somehow help the campaign to rid Ireland of this cruelty.

That night, I filled in the coupon. This time, I promised myself, I would strike a blow for the hares. A few days later, I received a membership card and further information on hare coursing. Nothing in the package surprised me, as it seemed that all coursing events were more or less similar, though the level of killing and torture varied from one to another.

I was intrigued to learn that the actual netting involved considerable stress, trauma, and suffering for the hares. I had gained a brief insight into this aspect of the activity in the Church Field when I saw the net men in action.

The anti-blood sports group was the same one that picketed the coursing event I had attended seven years before. It had been around for quite some time...since 1964 according to a brief history of its campaign. Its aim was to secure the abolition of hare coursing, and all forms of live baiting that involved setting hounds after wild animals.

Fox hunting, otter-hunting, and stag hunting came under this definition of a blood sport. Where animals needed to be controlled for reasons of numbers, the group advocated the deployment of expert marksmen as the lesser of two evils. Its main objection was to the gratuitous infliction of torment, suffering or agonising death for the purpose of sport.

Though I concurred with its view of other blood sports, I was resolved that hare coursing was by far the cruelest activity. The fact that it took place within the confines of a wired enclosure meant that the hares had only a limited chance of survival.

I was taken aback to discover in the literature I received that many of the hares that managed to escape at a coursing event were "re-cycled", meaning that they were re-coursed.

So it was a form of Russian roulette in which the animals were subjected to the repeated risk of horrific injury or death...just to keep the fans happy.

And hares were passed from one club to another. The whole "game" amounted to a monstrous and calculated abuse of the most gentle and inoffensive creature in the Irish countryside.

I glossed over the text relating to fox, stag, and otter hunting. Maybe later I would tackle those, I decided. Options on how one might assist the Irish Council Against Blood Sports (ICABS) anti-coursing campaign were set out as "Protesting, observing meetings to gather intelligence and evidence, writing letters to the newspapers highlighting the cruelty, lobbying politicians with a view to persuading them to outlaw hare coursing".

I replied to the covering letter, volunteering to observe the odd coursing meeting and let the group know what transpired. I also indicated I would join the occasional picket.

In the months that followed, I went along to coursing events, usually in the company of another member of the group, and duly reported back to ICABS what I had seen.

This observing was useful to the campaign as it enabled ICABS to issue press releases stating that so many hares had been killed or injured at meetings. It gave a stamp of authority to its demand for an end to the cruelty.

Though much the same procedures and practises were evident at all coursing events, I found that some clubs were more callous and uncaring than others were in their treatment of hares. Longer slips were the norm at certain venues, though hares still died horribly at these events.

But the brutality meted out by some clubs had to be seen to be believed. Hares were tossed about and ripped apart to non-stop rounds of almost hysterical applause. Piles of half-dead or improperly dispatched hares could be seen on some fields, while events were still in progress.

One could only imagine the suffering they had endured. And you couldn't report any of this to the guards. It was a legal pastime...and the local guards in any coursing stronghold would very likely be either among the fans, or directing traffic outside the venues.

Coursing was on display nationwide, with the southern counties notable blackspots for the cruelty. Clubs began to get thinner on the ground the further north you travelled.

Not that the hares fared any better "up the country". On a warm autumn day, I watched them being disembowelled by rakish dogs on a field close to the Western Coast. The killing ground was in County Clare...within a stone's throw of a cliff overlooking the Atlantic.

Seagulls flew over the coursing field, shrieking. The hares, in a grim chorus, complemented the mournful cries of the birds with their own distinctive wailing as they went down in blood. I was struck by the chasm that separated the two sounds.

One was a cry of nature...a sound that echoed millions of years of evolution...a discordant but familiar song of the ocean. The other was unnatural, having being wrought and elicited from the hare in a calculated act of torture.

A seagull swooped down close to the spot where a pair of greyhounds was stretching a hare. It hovered for a moment or two just yards above the grizzly scene, flapping its wings, before wheeling about like a dive-bomber, crossing the field from end to end and re-tracing its path back over the cliff.

After the "sport" ended, I walked to the cliff's edge. The waves of the mighty ocean beat relentlessly against the coastline. I breathed deeply of the salt sea air as I contemplated, for a few seconds, the "Broad Atlantic" that so many Irish people had crossed to escape famine and hard times.

They left behind the struggles and heartache, but took with them at least a few happy memories of life in Ireland. I wondered, looking out over the ocean, if the memory of coursing had been happy or unpleasant for them. More likely, I reasoned, it didn't enter their minds at all. Perhaps there were people for and against it then as now.

Later that evening, there was a lively session in a nearby pub, during which musicians played and coursing fans went into their usual bouts of denial as they celebrated their tradition.

Pictures of dogs and trophies festooned the walls of the legendary watering hole. And photos of coursing heroes posing with their families. Pictures aplenty...but none of hares having their intestines pulled out. The truth about coursing was not; it seemed, to be acknowledged in certain parts of Ireland.

Another interesting feature of the "game" that intrigued me was the practise, from the early 1980s, of preventing the use of cameras at coursing events. At every venue I visited, a sign in large block lettering warned: "All Unauthorised Photography Strictly Forbidden".

At an event in County Cork, I saw a lady who attempted to take a snapshot of a course being approached by club officials. Three or four paranoid-looking fellows had harsh words with the woman, who turned out to be an English tourist. One of them snatched the camera from her, ripped out the roll of film, and handed it back to her with a severe caution not to take any more photos. Anyone with a camera was feared as a potential "anti" observer

Then I started picketing coursing events. I found that observing and picketing didn't mix...the fans, from an early stage in the campaign, had been photographing protesters on the roadsides outside meetings. Some cameras were allowed!

Observers had been ejected from fields, sometimes after being beaten up. So ICABS HQ advised anyone wishing to picket to think twice about mingling with the fans to spy on them. Coursing clubs had observers under close observation.

No longer able to observe meetings, I walked in line outside coursing meetings in the middle of winter, shivering with the cold and wondering what effect this campaigning would ever have on the people who had the power to halt the baiting game.

It occurred to me, having discussed the campaign with other ICABS members, that a huge and sustained publicity boost was needed if the message was to filter through to everybody, including the politicians, that hare coursing was an abuse of our wildlife heritage.

So I added letter writing as another quiver to my bow. I began to write weekly to the national and provincial newspapers about coursing.



10

Coping with Bullies

In the Farmers' Co-op where I worked, fellow workers had known about the weekend protests I supported. They sometimes joked about these, but without reproach or bitterness. It was just another topic for the tea break, or something to chat about in dull moments. Customers at the Co-op hardware store, where I served most days from behind a counter, never mentioned my involvement in the campaign.

They were probably unaware of it. Local coursing fans likewise either ignored my placard wielding, or perhaps had failed to even notice my presence on the anti-blood sport picket lines.

But the letter writing changed all that. From the day I first had a short letter on the subject of hare coursing published in a local newspaper, people began to take notice. Customers at the Co-op would either compliment or criticise me for having slated the cruelty.

But neither my supporters nor critics in the early stage of this public campaigning took the letters too seriously. It was simply a matter of sharing my point of view or disagreeing with it. Work mates reacted too, though mostly in a friendly or sympathetic way, to each letter that appeared.

The local coursing contingent reacted in a scathing and dismissive manner to my letter-writing...not confronting me personally, but taking swipes at me in the pubs, on the streets or in the Co-op. Always when I was out of earshot or out of sight. The same people avoided the subject when I dealt with them across the counter at work.

They subjected me to a surreptitious and cowardly form of harassment. I found that having the right to free speech was one thing...exercising it another. My decision to go public on an emotionally charged and controversial issue carried a heavier price tag than I had expected.

There was a phase in my life when walking up or down the street in my own town was an ordeal.

At various street corners, groups of coursing fans huddled at weekends. As I passed by them, they reacted to my proximity in a variety of ways.

Sometimes, a few of them began spitting...not in my direction but on the pavement in front of them, while screwing up their faces in ridicule or contempt.

Or they would talk out loud to each other so I could hear them, making over the top remarks about how they intended to commit the most bloodthirsty acts against hares, rabbits, cats, badgers, and any other animal they could think of.

They would never address me personally. The idea was to implant fear and to hurt, in the time-honoured manner of the bullyboy. "We'll kill hares tomorrow. Arra-fuck" was the favourite message from one fellow who always waited until I had passed him by and couldn't see him.

He continued with this behaviour for more than five years, with minor variations on the wording of his oblique communications to me, such as: "who gives a fuck about hares?" or "I hope the dogs fuckin' ate the hares next week at Ballyscutter".

Though I knew his real name, I could only think of him as "Arra-fuck". I disliked seeing him on the street ahead of me. He knew this and derived pleasure from my aversion to him.

These heroes persisted with their gutless craven brand of persecution for almost two decades. A teenager who began taunting me in 1995 was the son of a coursing fan who was among the first hostile group I encountered back in 1980. This brought home to me that though times might change, human nature certainly didn't.

Another persistent and dedicated member of the corner gang was a fellow who wheezed "Jee-sus Christ" whenever I passed by, adding a remark or two about killing hares.

As with his colleagues, I mentally used his favourite swearwords to re-christen him. A feeling of mild depression afflicted me whenever I had to pass Jee-sus Christ, Arra-fuck, and Kill 'em all on the street.

An interesting aspect of this harassment technique was that none of those involved throughout more than two decades ever confronted me on a one to one basis.

When alone, and away from the "gang-mentality" influence of his friends, not one of them as much as whispered an unkind word to me or about me from a street corner. It says something about the psychology of bullying.

It was only in very recent times that this weekly dose of street aggravation fizzled out, though I had long grown immune to it. Once you didn't let the bullies get to you, they had no power. That's what my family and friends had advised me.

And this mental antidote, difficult though it was for me to get used to thinking that way, succeeded in turning all the barbs and insults back at the people who uttered them.

When I heard the hissing words of hatred and derision; I consoled myself in the knowledge that if the purpose of such pathetic harrying was to deflect me from the campaign, it was doomed to failure. If anything, this lowbrow tactic made me more determined to persist in my efforts to have coursing banned.

Locals who supported my stance did so very discreetly. They rarely made their views known in the company of a third person.

A woman who frequently spoke to me about coursing in the Co-op store when she dropped in as a customer always looked around her to make sure nobody was listening. Then she would tell me how much she hated what coursing clubs were doing to hares.

A farmer with an equally strong antipathy to coursing took the same precaution. Once he knew the coast was clear, he "let them have it", always adding a word or two about how careful he had to be in voicing his opinion of the game.

This private and guarded form of support from my fellow townspeople for the position I had taken became the norm in the years and decades that followed.

Somebody considering the behaviour of those people from the perspective of a safe non-coursing urban district might regard it as contemptuous or cowardly. That would be unfair, I think.

A very tangible fear lurked in the heart of many a decent, kind, and well-meaning local person. They feared the power of bullying, as most people do at one time or another.

I knew from their body language and perceptible anxiety that fear motivated this caginess. They knew that bullies were watching and waiting for any sign of opposition to their "country pastime". And they knew that those bullies could make life miserable for them.



11

Tensions Mount

My letter writing wasn't an issue for the Co-op management in the beginning, as nobody bothered my employers about the flow of correspondence. At that stage, my writing, though a weekly irritant to the coursing clubs, was not deemed a threat of any great significance to the future of their sport.

They just carried on, largely ignoring my existence, or at least pretending to. The publication of letters from me...and from the other campaigners that sought to foster opposition to coursing through the letter columns might be raising awareness of cruelty in coursing; but the savaging of hares at meetings continued unabated.

Public opinion might have turned increasingly against coursing, but this was not translating into legal protection for the hares, or restrictions on the organised abuse of these animals.

I am not sure at what point the coursing fraternity began to feel really menaced by the campaign. Each year of lobbying, picketing, leafleting, and letter writing seemed to bring us closer to a ban.

This may have been wishful thinking on our part, but what is certain is that, by the end of 1983, when I was four years into the campaign, there wasn't a man woman or child in the country who didn't know what coursing was. And that the vast majority of people, according to opinion polls, were opposed to it.

Apart from the letters, media news reports and features on coursing had become commonplace, and front-page photographs of hares being ripped apart by dogs drew widespread condemnation. These pictures were taken in defiance of the official "No unauthorised photography" rule

The fact that these snapshots of cruelty in progress were taken at the so-called "showpiece" National Coursing Festival-the Ascot or Cheltenham of the game- helped to further drive home the message that this activity gave sport a bad name.

Whatever about the national scene; 1984 was the year when I began to pay the price of my own anti-coursing stance. In the second part of the year, with the coursing season still a few months away, I participated in several local radio debates on the subject.

After each of these, I received telephone threats or anonymous letters telling me off. That didn't bother me too much.

But then, a success in the campaign increased the level of hostility I experienced: a number of key coursing sponsors in various parts of the country withdrew their support from the game. They did so in response to lobbying from ICABS. These included branches of the major banks and a few well-known Farm Co-operatives. I received almost nightly phone calls threatening dire consequences if I didn't quit the campaign.

Most of these were, I believe, from people coming out of pubs... judging by the times they phoned and the quality of their oral presentations. Occasionally, I attempted, rather foolishly, to engage in "debate" with these callers.

It only added to their anger and annoyance...but I found it difficult sometimes to listen to somebody uttering murderous and mind-numbing threats in the early hours of the morning.

Simply hanging up might have seemed the best way of dealing with this nuisance, but I couldn't resist an opportunity to reason with them, as if somehow I could "convert" such callers.

The loss of key financial sponsors raised the stakes in the campaign. It meant that we were not any longer regarded as just an irritant to be laughed at...a nuisance to be kept under casual observation by the coursing establishment.

Hitting them where it hurt-in their pockets and bank accounts; awakened them to the very real prospect of being forced to curtail their animal baiting activities due to lack of funding.

And there was the added insult to them of us creating a stigma around the whole coursing scenario. By withdrawing vital funds, the ex-sponsors were saying, in effect "We can't afford to be associated with you people...it's bad for business and customer relations".

But it wasn't the commercial firms who had pulled the plug on coursing that suffered the inevitable backlash. It was campaigners like me who lived and worked in rural districts where the game had a significant backing.

This was not a problem I gave much consideration at the time, though the increasing frequency in the number of late night phone threats should have alerted me to the dangers that were taking shape.

Another big development was on the political front. In May 1984, Deputy Alan Shatter tabled a motion calling for a coursing ban at a meeting of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Legislation. In the days preceding the debate on this motion, the Committee received more than 4,500 letters supporting a ban...and only three written submissions in favour of the game.

If the motion had been passed, the Committee might have been obliged to advise the Government to enact legislation to outlaw enclosed hare coursing.

Though Shatter's valiant attempt was defeated, the coursing fraternity saw it as a near miss, and breathed a mighty sigh of relief. After hours of stormy debate and emotionally charged exchanges, the motion was rejected by nine votes to six. The six Fine Gael Party members split evenly on the issue, the three Labour deputies voted in favour, and all six Fianna Fail Party members voted against.

The main arguments by the pro-coursing members were that the "coursing strain" in Irish greyhounds gave them an edge over dogs in other countries and that the sport provided a "wholesome pastime" for people in remote rural districts.

Shatter's articulate, well-researched and impeccably presented case that coursing was a cruel practise opposed by a majority of Irish people cut no ice with his detractors.

Some of these Deputies had much to lose by conceding publicly that coursing was unacceptable. They represented rural constituencies where a handful of votes could decide the outcome of a final count in a General Election.

Opponents of coursing welcomed the debate as a heartening first step towards abolition. In the last analysis, it was the politicians who would have to wield the axe to cut away the cancer that had for so long tormented Ireland's wildlife heritage. The buck stopped with parliament.

After all the decades of picketing, lobbying, and letter writing, it was in the Dail chamber that the final blow would be delivered. The well-heeled gamblers, business tycoons, and greyhound owners would never halt...or even curb or scale down... the cruelty of their own accord.

Legislation had to come...though this might be years down the road. We had to wait for a government with guts...so that meant a pretty long wait. But we kept that goal in view...as a vision fair and bright...a new law that would protect the fleet-footed hare from its enemies.

Side by side with the Dail debate and sponsorship factor, another front had opened up in the battle against hare coursing. It was not one that most campaigners welcomed, and certainly not ICABS or any of the mainstream animal welfare groups.

From the beginning of the 1984 season, groups of activists mounted nighttime raids on the hare holding compounds of coursing clubs. At venues in many parts of Ireland, but mostly in the Munster (Southern) region, club officials awoke to the early morning news that hares being detained for coursing on club grounds had been freed.

Under cover of darkness, opponents of the game had cut holes in the wire compounds. They had then ushered the captured hares out of "death row" and into surrounding fields.

Club supporters and volunteers frantically scoured the countryside in a bid to re-capture these escaped furry POWs. This sabotage often resulted in coursing events being deferred or cancelled.

Coursing clubs throughout Ireland were put on Red Alert. Men armed with shotguns guarded some venues...to avert what to them was a fate worse than death...the humiliation of having to admit that their hares had bolted.

A leading provincial newspaper in Munster opened its report on one incident, headed "The Great Escape" with the words: "More than 80 hares made a spectacular dash for freedom last night after shadowy figures tied up night watchmen at a coursing grounds and damaged the compound holding the wild animals. At daybreak, coursing club officials untied the two men and raised the alarm. They found the compound completely empty and a large gaping hole in the wire. Gardai are looking into it."

Though no animal welfare group condoned or encouraged this action, coursing clubs were convinced that we were somehow involved, directly or indirectly, in the illegal releasing of hares.

So the 1984 season differed in more ways than one from the many previous five-month baiting free for alls in which the familiar cycle of capture, terror, and agonising death for hares characterised the coursing routine.

Coursing clubs, enraged at these developments, were determined that somebody was going to pay for the financial setbacks and the sabotage. Emergency meetings were held in many coursing strongholds. Fans demanded action to stem the loss of public support and what they called "hare larceny" by the antis. Heads must roll, they decided.

Little did I know that mine was to be one of them.



12

Threats and “Friendly Advice”

In the middle of October 1984, I sat down one evening to write yet another letter about hare coursing to the newspapers. It was no different in tone, style, or content from any of the letters I had written previously on the subject. It described the cruelty in graphic detail and, for the umpteenth time, I called on the Government to ban coursing.

I stamped seventy-eight envelopes and sent copies of the letter to every newspaper in Ireland. Less than a week later, it was published on the same day in three newspapers...the Irish Independent, Irish Times, and Examiner.

I was quite pleased with this well-trumpeted rebuff to the blood sport lobby. The coursing letter was also read out on local radio during a primetime morning chat show.

I should, I know in retrospect, have anticipated a backlash of some kind, but I tended to disregard the consequences of expressing my views when I sat down at a typewriter to bang out those words of counsel and reproach.

The publication of the letter in three newspapers elated me because I saw each published critique of the awful scenes I had witnessed at coursing venues as somehow bringing closer the day of deliverance for Ireland's wildlife.

What inflamed the local blood sport fans on this occasion was the fact that a major local fund-raising event-an over-30s annual coursing dance- was planned for the evening of the day the letters appeared.

So my comments had struck a few raw nerves, though unintentionally, as I had not been aware of the upcoming dance.

The coursing dance was held at the parish hall of a nearby village. The coursing club hoped for a large attendance, with couples from all over the district expected to converge on the spacious hall to dance the night away.

Previous events in the locality to raise funds for the club had been a roaring success, due not so much to the level of sympathy for coursing as to a perfectly healthy desire to enjoy a night out in late autumn or during the bleak winter season.

But the 1984 coursing dance was a major flop. Less than a third of the couples who had weeks earlier pledged to support the event actually turned up. This caused acute embarrassment to the club officials.

What really angered them was the reason or excuse so many people offered for cancelling their night-out: They had decided that coursing was cruel and objectionable...and some of them specifically mentioned the letter that the local radio and the three papers had publicised that morning.

Others, while not voicing any objection to coursing, told the dance organisers that the whole issue had become too controversial and they didn't wish to become associated with it by attending the fund-raiser.

The dance went ahead, with only a handful of less than happy couples shuffling around the hall to the sound of old time waltz music. These were mostly coursing men and their wives or girlfriends. To cheer them up, a

Catholic curate who owned a coursing greyhound mingled with the revellers and tried to boost their flagging morale.

During intervals, he cracked jokes about the "auld spoilsports" who wanted to deny them their bit of fun. "They don't want ye to go coursing", he intoned, "and now they won't let ye dance. But don't mind them at all; they're only a crowd of eejits, with their auld talk about cruelty. Sure we all know my dear people that God created hares so that greyhounds could catch them. I'm telling ye, lads, Christ himself would go coursing if he came down from Heaven to this parish on his Second Coming. So enjoy yerselves and the Lord be with ye."

The coursing club lost money on the dance...and a seething anger swept through the ranks of the normally upbeat and Devil may care "doggie men". A hasty post-mortem by the club top brass concluded that, in the words of its dedicated chairman, "a young blackguard made it his business to ruin the coursing dance".

They had no doubt as to what had turned the smiles of dancing couples into unhappy frowns, what had made the waltzing in the parish hall look more like a Death March.

It was, so the chairman proclaimed in the course of a late-night emergency meeting in a local pub, "that terrible letter that a right young pup sent to the papers and the radio".

The delegates decided after more than five hours of heavy drinking, informed discussion, and frank exchanges of opinion that the Manager of the Co-op "where that blackguard worked" should be approached and notified of the club's concern at what had become of the Annual Coursing Dance.

They agreed to present the Manager with a petition to have me sacked from my job. And they proposed to threaten an organised withdrawal of business from the Co-op and cancellation of their accounts if the required action against me was not taken.

It was more than a fortnight later that I learned of this meeting from the wife of one of the sporting gentlemen who had participated in the Kangaroo Court. But an anonymous phone-caller at 4pm-about three hours after the dance ended- warned me that my letter in the papers was "one bad mistake".

He advised me to take a week or two off from work.

"I'm telling you for your own good", he cautioned, and slammed the phone down.

I was troubled by this, but not troubled enough to take his advice.

I arrived at work the following morning as usual. I remember it better than most other occasions in my life, though the recollection is pallid and brooding: a sepia-toned image of the kind you perceive in nightmares.

It was a freezing winter's day, with a carpet of slippery white frost covering the street.

A car parked outside the Co-op store was belching exhaust fumes as the driver sought in vain to get it moving.

A robin redbreast bobbed about in front of the building. I imagined it made eye contact with me before fluttering away in search of more hospitable territory.

I felt a little shudder of foreboding at this, owing to a vague belief that a robin can sometimes bode ill. Steaming clouds of breath emitted from three fellow workers and the female office clerk, who huddled together at the entrance, waiting for the foreman to open up.

A work-mate clapped me on the back and advised: "that was a right letter in the paper yesterday John. You really told them off. They'll be out for blood after that one though, mind yerself"

I took this advice in jest, not expecting any serious reaction, partly because I wasn't yet aware of what had happened to the coursing dance. But also because I felt almost immune to the criticism and ridicule that I had come to regard as part of the rough and tumble of the campaign.

If I had got used to the crazy hate mail, the weird phone calls, and the name-calling, what else could the "opposition" throw at me that could be any worse?

It began like any other day. The foreman was in the store ahead of me... in high spirits, as he was most days, whistling the air of a hurling song. The other workers took up their posts, and I was assigned to duty in the wallpaper loft.

A big consignment of Wellingtons and hobnailed boots had been unloaded the previous day and I immediately set to work assigning all the pairs of footwear to their respective places on the shelves.

But a mere ten minutes had passed when I heard a voice booming. It was loud and furious. I heard it rising higher and getting closer as I knelt on the floor of the loft.

It was that of a well-known political party activist who also excelled in the practise of netting hares.

"Where's that fucker?" the voice thundered.

I was not within sight of the customer, being in a section of the large building directly above where he stood speaking to the foreman.

Trouble ahead, I thought. The pounding of footfalls on the stairs followed and a small, chubby man appeared before me. I knew him well and asked him how he was, attempting to spike his guns before he could commence firing.

He didn't answer. He stood motionless; staring at me and turning scarlet as rage boiled up within him. He was wearing a big green trench coat that reached to his ankles. Despite the coldness of the morning, beads of sweat had appeared on his forehead, and I thought I discerned steam coming out of his ears.

"An unhappy man... handle this one carefully" advised that Guardian Angel I believed...or hoped...was by my side in tricky situations like this.

I tried to break the ice: I asked: "Do you think it'll snow tomorrow, it's nippy enough, and would you like to have a look at our new Wellingtons. A great selection. They're quite nice. Would you like to try on a few pairs? What about a pair of those lovely green ones for the wife? The women love the green Wellingtons".

He was having none of it. He stubbed out a cigarette he was smoking and almost spat the words at me:

"Wellingtons me fuckin' arse. Do you know something, you should be taken outside and fuckin' shot" he began, his hands on his hips and his face crimson with anger.

"Who put them thoughts in yer head? Ya have a laughing stock made of the town with your bullshitting about hares. Everyone around here knows you're a crank and a nutter. You better apologise in the paper and withdraw them disgusting remarks or you'll be out of a job.

"There are farmers and good coursing people coming in here to do business every day of the week. You remember that. An apology in the paper, d'ya hear? Or you'll be on the dole next week".

I tried to remonstrate, but he turned on his heels and banged his way back downstairs, his trench coat impeding his progress and making a loud swishing noise as he descended. I heard him say to the foreman: "I put him right. Have a word with him".

And he did have a word with me. Within minutes of the customer leaving the store, the foreman ran up the stairs. He had a worried look on his face.

"Ah, God almighty John, what's happening here at all" he asked. I repeated what the customer had said and assured him that I had not returned insult for insult.

He complimented me for showing restraint, but added tersely: "John, there's going to be more trouble about this. There was talk in the pubs last night. Fellows are saying they'll destroy you. The manager is a decent man. You know that. But they'll give him hell over your letters and he might be forced to let you go from this place. I know you have a right to say what you want in the papers, but could you cool it for a few days. Give them time to get over that dance?"

I promised to reflect on his advice, for which I also thanked him. He was right about "more trouble".

I was sweeping the floor of the Co-op store a few minutes later when I heard a delicate cough behind me.

I looked around to find the parish priest standing there. Father Aloysius (pronounced Allah Wishes) Egan was a small middle-aged rakishly thin man with a perpetual smile on his face.

He wore his black outfit and white collar, long black coat, and a black beret that was too big for him and reminded me of those pictures of the French Resistance I used to see in comics. His beady eyes peered through thick magnification glasses.

"Ah John, good morning" he intoned; the smile becoming so broad and intense that his face seemed in danger of cracking.

"Hello Father, how are you?" I greeted.

"Oh fine...fine...ahem, John, ah...could you get me a bottle of White Spirits if you don't mind?"

An apt purchase for a man of God, I reflected, as I went to the shelf behind the counter to fetch the required item. When I gave him the bottle, he clasped my arm and the smile faded quickly.

"John, I need to have a word with you...in private...can we talk in the meal house outside in the yard?"

"Of course, Father" I replied, puzzled and wondering what he wanted. I asked a fellow worker to cover for me as the priest and I went off to talk. I sat on an empty butter crate in the meal house and Father Aloysius seated himself on a bag of calf nuts.

Taking off his beret and holding it like a prayer book in his two hands, he asked me if I intended to continue with the campaign against hare coursing.

"Yes" I said.

He averted his gaze, focusing on something on the dusty floor and gently kicking a calf nut past me.

"I see, John...well, I have a reason for asking you. You remember Father Carrigan?"

"I do."

"Yes, well, you'll probably be aware that he's been a doggie man all his life. He lives for coursing. He loves to watch the greyhounds perform and to observe their skill in outwitting each other. And he has a dog himself now, did you know that?"

"I didn't know he had a greyhound, but I knew he was into coursing", I replied truthfully.

I had heard a lot about Father Carrigan. Two decades previously, when he served as a curate in my town, he had been an active and vocal supporter of coursing clubs in the district.

He had participated in the netting of hares for baiting, and had used the pulpit at Sunday Mass to appeal for volunteers to aid in the netting.

During the winter season, he would follow the final blessing with a favourable reference to coursing or a rallying call. He had the ideal captive audience.

A neighbour of mine remembered him saying at mass: “A coursing meeting will be held at Ballyscutter three weeks from now. Could anyone who has a bit of time to spare please meet me in ten minutes in the sacristy. We’ll be needing all the help we can get to procure hares for the coursing match. There will be refreshments after the netting for those taking part. May the Lord be with you”.

I was glad that the coursing cleric wasn’t still preaching at the local church, as his overt support for hare baiting...especially at mass... would have made it difficult for me to attend his services.

Father Aloysius was silent for a few seconds. He looked tense and ill at ease. Then he spoke again:

“We have a little problem, John. Since Father Carrigan left this parish twenty-two years ago, he was in the habit of making frequent return visits. But he hasn’t visited here for the past two and a half years, did you know that?”

“It’s not something I’d notice, Father”.

“Ah...well...yes John, but the reason he has stopped visiting this town and his old friends...even myself...is...I hate to say it John...is because of you.”

“Because of me?”

“Yes. With all this hu-ha about blood sports, he won’t set foot in this town while you persist with this agitation and protesting and letter writing over coursing. He was on the phone to me last night. It breaks his heart, he said, when he picks up a paper and sees another letter from you attacking the sport he holds dear.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry to hear that, Father”.

“So is there any chance you might drop this anti-coursing thing... I mean for his sake...? Lord above, he’s living like an exile in his own land because of your letters and protests. John, please think about it. You can give me your answer in a fortnight’s time at confession.”

Father Aloysius put his beret back on and the ingratiating smile returned. Arising and stretching himself, he led the way back from the Co-op yard to the hardware store.

Inside, a gathering of customers that were chatting loudly all stopped in mid-sentence upon seeing him as he paced delicately towards the store exit. Two farmers removed their caps in deference. A woman bowed reverentially.

Amid a chorus of “Good day, Father”, “How are you Father?” and “That was a grand sermon on Sunday, Father”, he strode out of the building, tersely acknowledging their salutations.

I never did answer his question. My continued involvement in the campaign, I felt, served as an adequate reply. The logic behind his suggested meeting place was the strict Catholic Church rule governing the Seal of the Confessional. Anything I said to him at confession could never have passed his lips.

I didn’t tell anyone at work about my conversation with the PP. Nor did I mention it at home. My father was a profoundly religious man and the PP’s approach to me on the coursing issue might have upset him.

Like many Irish people, he had been raised to obey the Church without question and to show reverence to its anointed ones. My mother too would have been troubled by the priestly intervention.

I too respected priests...but I felt the request to abandon my efforts of behalf of the persecuted hare population was a clerical step too far. Even if a bishop or a cardinal had made a similar request, I believe I would have refused.

What I found odd and slightly perverse about Father Egan's attitude was that the Catholic Church officially frowned upon cruelty to animals. Yet there he was...attempting to dissuade me from further anti-coursing "agitation"...as he called it.

And worse still, I reflected...priests were among the most visible and vocal supporters of coursing in some counties, despite the example of Saint Francis and other Catholic saints who went out of their way to be kind to God's creatures.



Punch-bag Day at the Co-op

My head reeled from the warnings of the hare catching political activist and the more discreet words of the Parish Priest. And the day's troubles were only beginning.

Less than an hour later, I was folding up sheets of brown wrapping paper behind the store counter, just inside the main entrance, when I became aware of somebody towering above me, his hands touching the counter. I had not noticed him enter the building.

Facing me was a tall, powerfully built, weather beaten looking middle-aged man. Bits of straw dangled from the cap that was pulled down over his eyes. The smell of whiskey I found almost overpowering.

I recognised him as a prominent coursing fan. He was breathing heavily and looked very tense.

"Fitz" he rasped, "I want twenty five snares to catch a few fuckin' hares and rabbits. Don't keep me waiting".

Suspecting that the customer was intent on provoking an argument, or a negative reaction, I decided to be as tactful as I could. I politely explained that the Co-op store didn't have snares in stock.

He drew a sharp intake of breath and said: "well, I'll have an auld trap then if you don't mind to break their fuckin' legs. Hurry up. I'm looking forward to a big saucepan of hare soup this evening. We make soup out of the buggers that can't run".

As he said this, he cast a sideward glance in the direction of the office clerk, who eyed him from behind her glass cubicle about ten yards away. She nodded, and smiled nervously back at him as if to acknowledge his sense of humour.

I retorted that, unfortunately, the traps he sought were also unavailable, but suggested he call to one of the local pubs where he might be served with the kind of soup he had in mind.

"Sorry about that" I added, with as much sincerity as I could conjure up.

Unhappy with my suggestion, he leaped across the counter and caught me by the collar of my shop-coat, dragging me towards him.

"Jaysus, come here ya little fucker", he shouted, "by Jaysus I'll knock the fuckin' shite out of ya".

He lashed out with his fists, punching me several times in the face and chest. I had been taken completely by surprise, despite those obvious warning signs. I was stunned and disorientated, and in a complete daze as he rained punches on me.

Three other customers awaiting my attention had made a quick getaway...to avoid becoming involved...and who could blame them?

One man literally ran out through the front entrance of the store onto the street. Two women left their shopping bags and tins of paint on the counter as they made a less hasty but nonetheless rapid exit from the store.

Though it all happened rather quickly, it seemed to last for minutes, as if time had slowed down. It was a strange sensation. Instead of pain, which is what I would have expected to feel, I instead felt numbness and my head pounded as though bombs were detonating in my brain.

And I found that those stars that people see in cartoons when they get walloped weren't entirely fictional. They swirled around and sparkled brightly within my field of vision.

As he punched, he was shouting obscenities and all manner of acute observations on what he alluded to as "the great coursing game".

"How dare ya insult the coursing men, an' ya know fuck all about it. I'll give ya coursing, ya smart Alec little cur...yehself and yer fuckin' hares. Yer a fuckin' disgrace to the whole town and the whole fuckin' country. Jaysus, I'll kill ya".

Then the punching and the roaring and the obscenities ceased abruptly, though not the pounding inside my head.

I felt a great weight lift from me as I tentatively raised my head to behold the frenzied attacker being pulled away by the foreman. Convulsed with anger, he was still wildly thrashing about and shadow boxing.

"Ah now Charlie, Cool down boy" pleaded the foreman, "That's a good man. We'll all be in trouble over this...I know he's a bloody nuisance, on about hares and coursing and all that, but you'll only give yourself heart trouble carrying on that way. Come into the office and have a nice cup of tea"

The foreman led him aside and gestured to me to "get up the yard fast". He wisely wanted me out of sight before the customer was ready for a second bout of this one-sided boxing match. I was less than a few yards from the two of them when the irate customer broke free and ran after me.

Though just inches away, he failed to make contact, apart from grabbing the tail of my shop-coat. The foreman had grappled him to the floor in a superb rugby tackle.

"Ah for God's sake Charlie, cool it man", the peacemaker pleaded.

I just stood there...open-mouthed and stunned, still dazed and in shock, staring at the two of them on the ground.

Plates, jugs, saucers, butter dishes, and bits of exotic china teapots lay broken and shattered all around them. I held my head in my hands, not knowing what to say or how to react.

Looking up from his position on top of the customer, the foreman shouted: "John, will you for the love of God get up the yard...before the whole bloody place is closed down!"

The customer was beating the floor with his fists and howling the most blood-curdling threats I had ever heard in my life about what he intended to do to me and with me "one of these days".

I was relieved to get into the cold crisp air of the yard, where cars with trailers, and a few tractors, were parked, and half a dozen farmers lazily chatted.

One of them greeted me, and then gazed at me in astonishment as if he had seen a ghost. "What happened to you at all?" he asked, "did you cut yourself?"

This came as news to me. In the excitement I had neglected to check for any signs of injury. I looked in a car mirror and was surprised to find my face covered with blood, big purple marks across my forehead, and hair standing almost on end.

Excusing myself from the group of jolly farmers, I grabbed a handkerchief and wiped away the blood. It baffled me that I couldn't feel any actual pain, given the rather startling effects on my head of having been used as a punch-bag.

My biggest concern was just to keep up appearances and fall back into an admittedly dull but safe work routine, as I had experienced enough nastiness for one day. Oh God, for a quiet life, I prayed. I felt under siege.

With the aid of a mirror in the furniture loft, I made myself more presentable, as I thought, and set about re-joining the non-belligerent society of chatting farmers and carefree locals.

I tried to feign normality, attending to customers, whether farmers or townspeople, as though nothing had happened. Apart from the funny looks I was getting, and remarks about my appearance, the day seemed to be settling down again when the opposition launched another surprise attack.

As I helped a farmer to load bags of fertiliser into a trailer, the yard echoed to the sound of a voice like thunder. Somebody was shouting abuse at me, and demanding to know when I would be apologising for my "disgraceful" letters to the press about hare coursing.

At first I thought it was the political hero in the green trenchcoat again, but it wasn't. All eyes beheld a man who had entered the Co-op yard with a menacing swagger. For a second or two, he stood motionless at the opposite end of the yard from me.

"I'll talk to you in a few minutes when I've finished attending these customers", I shouted back.

He picked up a lump of coal from a huge pile and flung it at me. It missed by inches, smashing through a car window. Everyone ducked as he rained missiles at me, in the process damaging cars, tractors, store windows, and agricultural machinery.

A disgruntled black and white sheepdog barked furiously, having been roused from its slumber in the driver's seat of a tractor. Within seconds, the yard was strewn with broken glass and enough coal to keep a fire burning for the night.

Angry farmers were threatening vengeance on the assailant. A man whose car headlights were shattered promised to "kill the bastard", as he took cover from the barrage.

"Jesus, this is getting out of hand", I heard another voice saying. It was the foreman, for whom I was beginning to feel a bit sorry at this stage. And the irate man's wife was pulling out of her husband, pleading with him to "stop throwing things at people and come home for the love of God".

As the man was led away by his wife, he cursed loudly and threatened to catch me another day. I have a vivid recollection of him, framed in the entrance to the Co-op store yard, with his wife linking him.

He reminded me at the time of a cartoon character who always emerged from the smoke and debris of an explosion with a toilet seat wrapped around his neck.

As farmers inspected the damage, and the workers cleaned up after the melee, the foreman took me aside and informed me that orders had come from management that I was to spend the remainder of the day tidying the furniture loft, away from all dealings with customers.

When I pointed out that four hours were not required to accomplish this task, he emphasised the importance of not being in the firing line for the duration of "this terrible day".

He revealed that, apart from the three unsavoury characters I had met so far that morning, a further seven had been persuaded to avoid confronting me.

One of these, he added ruefully, was "prowling around" on the street outside waiting for me to exit the building.

After I had dusted off all the sideboards, wardrobes, and other items of furniture, I sat down on an upended butter crate and pondered my situation. I wondered what I would tell my anxious parents, my brother, and four sisters about my rather unfortunate and untypical ordeal at the Co-op. I wondered too how they might react.

They supported my stance, not from any special interest in wildlife or animal protection issues, but because they respected my views on the subject. I wondered if that day's turmoil would significantly alter their attitudes.

It fascinated and bewildered me that all this had happened as a result of a letter setting out my opposition to hare coursing.

It seemed unreal to me that people had been so inflamed by mere words. I failed to grasp at the time just how lethal and effective words can be. "Mere words" had wrecked a fund-raiser for hare coursing, and sent the blood pressure levels of quite a few people soaring.

I considered how words had such an extraordinary power for good or ill. The words of a passionate preacher could induce people to become better human beings, whereas the fiery words of an orator in full flight might push listeners over that razor-edged borderline that separates a sober mind from one bent on causing mayhem, as in riots.

A Martin Luther King could shine a light into the coldest or most cynical heart, while an equally gifted but malign orator had the power to replace kind thoughts with feelings of hatred, bigotry, and malice.

Words had changed people's lives for centuries, through speeches, sermons, lectures, chance conversations, books, television, radio, and the print media...if not necessarily through letters to the editor of the kind I had been writing.

Yet my own words, when translated into print, had obviously moved some people to compassion for the animals that were being cruelly abused in coursing. The same words had sent coursing fans into paroxysms of rage and fits of irrational, violent prejudice.

I shuddered in the freezing furniture loft; and not just because of the unheated surroundings on that intolerable afternoon. Though not prepared to quit the campaign, or give into bullying from whatever source, I was gripped by a rising and panicky fear.

I feared where my stance was leading me. I feared being crushed by forces that were far more powerful than I was, or indeed than the combined strength of all the other anti-coursing campaigners scattered around the country, could ever be.

I was familiar with cases of people who struggled against seemingly impossible odds for what they believed in, whether it was protection of the environment, ending the oppression of women, opposing dictatorship, championing justice for the various underdogs of this world, or whatever.

Unequal David and Goliath situations had inspired me. I had read about people like American trade union activist Joe Hill who was famously framed on a murder charge.

Not that I feared any punishment on that scale. This was about greyhounds tearing hares to pieces...not a campaign aimed at changing the face of Irish society. My campaign would never take away livelihoods...its chief aim being simply to replace the live hares in coursing with mechanical lures. It did not involve an extreme or unreasonable agenda.

Though it did of course entail the ending of a centuries old inherited British tradition, one that had become entrenched in many backward-looking and incestuous pockets of rural Ireland.

But it still seemed to me that I was up against Goliath with knobs on! How often had I been warned: Don't mess with these people. "Coursing equals power in Ireland" one politician had smugly boasted to a provincial newspaper reporter, one of those hacks who glorified the killing and mauling of hares and never once used the word cruelty in his writings.

Coursing was among the key beneficiaries of the sleaze-ridden nod and wink brand of politics that had dominated Irish life for decades. You weren't just rocking the proverbial boat by opposing it...you were deemed to be drilling holes in the bottom of the Titanic.

I pondered the absurdity of my position. What on earth was I doing here, practically locked away in a section of my workplace to protect me from angry customers?

I questioned the value and validity of the campaign itself. Though committed to the principle of never giving in to bullies, or abandoning a cause- ANY cause- under duress, I asked myself if the fate of those wild animals was really worth all this hassle.

I was a little angry at the hares of Ireland as I sat on that upturned butter box. Not for the first or last time, I teased myself with the question: Would a single one of them even come close to grasping the significance of a human being putting him or her self out over its plight?

Prior to being netted by a coursing club, a hare had a reasonably carefree and happy life, having the run of the countryside and a freedom that many of us might envy. Not a worry in the world until the stress and terror of captivity, and that sickening few minutes on coursing day when the Men of Blood mocked its cruel demise.

Before that, I reflected, the hare was as free as the wind...in other words for the greater portion of its admittedly short life. But I, in contrast, could face years of mental torment; and maybe a bit of physical punishment too, for taking up the cause of the coursing hare. It seemed bloody unfair, I thought!

Then again, I reasoned; no hare or any other animal had ever asked me to take up its cause, so I could hardly blame them if my life went off the rails. That's what is so different about any campaign for the protection of animals: you can forget about getting a clap on the back from the victims on whose behalf you court trouble and strife.

I was told by a psychic medium that animals lavish praise to beat the band on you in the next world for your campaigning efforts, but that's no consolation when you're struggling down here, I had reminded the good lady. These and other reflections occupied my thoughts as I languished in the furniture loft.

Two hours into my "solitary confinement", I heard the familiar cough of an elderly workmate as he ascended the staircase to the loft. He had been with the Co-op for years and was well liked in the district.

"The boss said you were to have this," he announced cheerfully, handing me a cupful of steaming tea and a sandwich.

He updated me on the situation downstairs. A dead hare had been flung over the wall that enclosed the yard. A message attached to it read: "Fitz will look like this when we're finished with him".

Anything else? I asked.

Not yet, he assured calmly, but management had reiterated its advice that I was to remain in the furniture loft until closing time.

“Get Rid of the Thundering Eejit!”

Strangely enough, as I thought, the following days were relatively strife free, apart from the odd hostile glare from a pro-coursing man or woman on the street or at the Co-op.

This was a kind of anti-climax. I had anticipated further fisticuffs, irate flare-ups, and outbursts of indignation...additional words of warning from the lynchpins of the coursing fraternity.

As it happened, their antics had won them few friends among the non-coursing middle of the road members of the public whose “don’t know” stance on the coursing issue was unlikely to change to actual support for the blood sport as a result of the bullyboy approach. Beating up a prominent “anti” was not the way for them to win over the hearts and minds of reasonable folk.

Word of the assault, the coal-throwing incident, and the threats from the local political bigwig had spread through the town and beyond.

Some people, as I expected, saw the upheaval at the Co-op as indicating that I was a troublemaker who thrived on controversy...I quickly got to hear of such opinions of me via the Bush Telegraph...as well as from workmates, and customers of the Co-op, who tipped me off.

Many people in the district, however, expressed revulsion at how coursing fans had behaved towards me. They were especially critical of the man who seemed to think he was in a boxing ring when he attacked me.

But this negative reaction to Punchbag Day at the Co-op may have worked against me. It seemed to enrage the coursing fans even more.

A few weeks after the assault and "cautions", a special meeting of local milk suppliers and farmers who had substantial accounts with the Co-op was called at the behest of two coursing clubs.

A farmer sympathetic to my views, and his wife, who was an auctioneer’s secretary, attended this meeting. The lady had shorthand writing skills and promised she would give me a full transcript of what transpired at the gathering.

A major milk supplier in the district was the first to speak at the meeting He got straight to the point: "That bastard above in the store is doing terrible harm to the Co-op. That letter he wrote last month nearly ruined the coursing dance. I had to listen for three hours to a poor woman who cried...cried for God’s sake... over the way people stayed away from the dance on account of that hoor’s ghost.

"She’s the wife of a great coursing man. There was never any problem with coursing around these parts until that lunatic head banger started mouthing and writing pure trash in the papers. He should definitely be sacked. He’s scandalising the whole place".

Another delegate, a professional castrator, or "ball-breaker" agreed. "We’ll lose custom if Fitzgerald isn’t reined in. He’s dragging down the Co-op with his ranting and raving. We can expect even worse publicity if he’s allowed to go on like this. The letters to the local paper are the worst. Everyone reads that. Fitzgerald is a born troublemaker. You’d think butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth when you call into the store to ask him for a tin of paint or a half stone of pig meal. It’s all an act to make people think he’s normal."

A dissenting voice interrupted: "But ‘twas a bad business all the same, assaulting him like that. There was no excuse for hitting him...whatever about the coursing letters".

The voice was smothered quickly: "Ah wait now, for Jaysus sake, he brought that on himself. He had it coming. How would you feel if someone were insulting your best friend or your wife day in and day out? Wouldn't you be tempted to hit the fecker?"

"I would, I suppose, but 'tis only the coursing crowd he's after, not anyone's best friend. The chap gets worked up over coursing, and I'll get tell you he has a point. Some of the coursing matches I've seen were a bloody disgrace. I've seen greyhounds ripping the belly out of a hare and the poor animal screaming in agony while some of your pals stood around with their hands in their pockets.

"You mightn't call it cruelty. But whatever you call it, I didn't like what I saw that day. It mightn't happen in our lifetimes, but someday coursing will be banned and that'll be the end of it. John Fitzgerald is entitled to his opinion whatever any of us think of him".

"He might be entitled to his opinion, but not to plastering his bullshit all over the papers...not while he's working for the Co-op anyway. And I resent you trying to make coursing look bad. Are you sympathising with that fucker, or what? You won't have a decent man or woman in this town talking to you if it gets out that you've gone soft on Fitzgerald. If you lie down with dogs, you'll get up with fleas. Remember that."

Another speaker nodded agreement: "Look, the question is...will the Co-op management sack the bastard? They have no choice. He's feekin' dynamite. He's insulting decent men who go coursing and he's stirring up endless trouble. He fattens on it. We can talk till the cows come home about this, but he's still serving customers in the store and dealing with farmers six days of the week. You know and I know that there'll never be peace until he's gone."

The next speaker agreed: "He has to go. That's certain. We've got to think MILK lads, feekin' milk...farmers who are into coursing will take their milk elsewhere... unless we get rid of that thundering eejit. Having him in the Co-op will wreck the whole business...destroy it. We may as well pour all our feekin' milk down the drain".

A delegate who had been silent up to that point came to life at the mention of milk: "Be God lads, that's getting to the heart of the problem. Ye can say goodbye to the tanks of milk pulling into the creamery yard if ye have Fitzgerald writing to the papers.

"'Tis a long time ago since the first poor farmer brought his sup of milk to this creamery on an auld ass and cart, and the Co-op has come far. Jaysus sure we're the pride of the country now, and that lunatic is going to turn our great success into misfortune if we let him. For God's sake, let's get him sacked. Have him thrown out like them fellas that tried to start a union in the Co-op a few years back. He has to go... before he ruins everything!"

The remaining contributions echoed these sentiments, with the exception of the dissenting farmer who again argued that I was entitled to campaign for a ban on hare coursing and that nobody should lose his job for simply expressing a point of view, however controversial.

After more than three hours of heated debate, the delegates passed a motion by fifteen votes to six calling on the Co-op manager, who was not present at the meeting, to fire me.



The Fixer and the Foreman

At noon on the day after this turbulent meeting, the foreman called me into the store office where a man the workers referred to the "Fixer" was also present. A semi-retired farmer, his reputation as an unofficial Fixer for management was well merited.

Though the foreman was officially in charge at the Co-op store, the "real foreman" as the Fixer was also called had more or less the free run of the premises whenever he felt an urge to devote a few hours or a full day to inspection or overseeing.

His unquestioned loyalty to management, which bordered on obsessive behaviour, struck fear into all the workers whenever he made one of his unannounced and relatively rare appearances. His over the top brand of loyalty had sometimes embarrassed even management itself.

His arrival in the Co-op store always signalled trouble for a worker, or disquiet on the part of management. This could be of a minor variety, such as concern that extra lumps of coal were being surreptitiously tossed into bags by customers to bring them over the accepted weight, or might relate to a complaint from a farmer about a worker's attitude.

So I knew a storm was brewing when I saw the "Fixer" in the office. He stood in front of an electric fire heater, the tails of his long brown coat dangling perilously close to the flaming red bars.

A look of intense annoyance was written across his baby smooth face. His blonde head glistened with sweat and hair-oil, reflecting the pale light of the 50-watt bulb that illuminated the office. I entered the office with the foreman.

"Wait outside and I'll call you if I need you", the Fixer instructed the foreman.

Before I had a chance to ask him what the problem was, the Fixer told me to "shut up and listen".

He commenced firing: "Do you have any idea of the trouble your stupid letters are causing? Do you know there are people in this town and for miles around staying up all night worrying about the damage you've caused to this Co-op"?

I began to explain that I saw the whole letter writing issue differently...that I was not breaking any of the rules of the job. Or using the Co-op as a base from which to direct the campaign against hare coursing...that none of the letters to the press mentioned the Co-op.

He interrupted me in full flight..."Just stop it there...You are so full of that bullshit about rights and all that...Listen here sonny boy, there's no union here and there never will be.

"You could have been tossed out on your ear at anytime in the past five years...but we didn't sack you, and why? Because we felt sorry for you, that's why. But you've gone too far in the past month.

"Those poor people at the coursing dance were gutted over losing money and having their night ruined. And they're blaming not just you, but the whole feckin' Co-op. I was stopped on the way out of Sunday Mass last week by a man who shouted at me "Are ya goin' on any demos with that fucker Fitz"...he linked me to that feckin' anti-bloodsports carry-on. Don't you see where all this is going?"

Before I could answer, he pointed a finger harshly and intoned: "we're giving you a chance. You don't deserve it, but feck it, we've been more than reasonable with you. I want a promise from you in writing that you're ending your involvement with the anti-blood sports people and that we'll be seeing no more letters in any of the papers from you".

I began to remonstrate, but he closed his eyes tightly and motioned me to say nothing: "Look, you have a week to hand in a written commitment to quit your letter-writing and trouble-making...or you can collect your walking papers".

I again tried to respond to this, but he promptly opened the office door and ordered, "Get out into the yard...yeah, I know it's raining...and fill twenty-eight hundredweight of coal. I've told the lads outside to give you no help. It'll make up for the racket you started...with that feekin' eejit throwing coal at you and the customers."

Suspecting that this was a ploy to provoke a nasty or angry reaction from me, and an excuse to sack me on legitimate grounds, I assured him I would have twenty-eight bags filled before closing time.

"Don't break the shovel," he shouted cynically as I headed for the coal heap.

As I swung open the door leading to the yard, the foreman confirmed my suspicions concerning what the Fixer was up to. He tapped me on the shoulder and whispered: "Just do what he says; he's testing you to see if you give cheek. If you tell him to where to get off, he'll have you sacked. Play it cool for God's sake."

I took his advice. For the time being at least it seemed prudent not to give management any real cause to fire me...I couldn't be sacked for writing letters about hare coursing, or so I believed.

But refusing to shovel coal, even in the middle of a wet, freezing November afternoon might provide the Co-op with the excuse it needed to rid itself of a "troublemaker".

I had no rain gear, and none was available, so I took the brunt of squally winter showers and ice-cold wind as I shovelled.

An hour later, drenched to the skin, I sat down on the last bag of coal I had filled. As I did I cast a casual glance at a loft window that overlooked the coal heap.

Eyeing me from the warmth and shelter of the loft, one hand pressed against the window, was the Fixer, and beside him stood the foreman. The Fixer was smiling. The foreman looked embarrassed. The moment I caught sight of them they moved away from the window.

A minute later the foreman joined me as the rain began to fizzle out. "That was great work John", he said meekly, "don't worry about that clown, he won't be back up here for another six months."

I made no answer. I had that sinking feeling that I was fighting a losing battle in my bid to carry on working as normal at the Co-op and at the same time pursue the campaign.

The foreman seemed uneasy and awkward, and anxious to distance himself from the Fixer's attitude. Adjusting his cap, he continued: "I think he's gone back to the Creamery now so you'll be okay for a while. John, I don't know what's going to happen over the letters, but it's not looking good".

The foreman re-entered the store, leaving me standing under a grey drizzly sky. I was feeling about as low and demoralised as I thought it was possible for anyone to feel. I hadn't reckoned on the far greater obstacles and humiliations that lay ahead.

Despite the foreman's assurance to the contrary, the Fixer did return to the Co-op store.

One morning, a week later, fifty large and heavy rolls of plastic piping were unloaded in the store yard. Just as the last roll was taken off the lorry, the Fixer arrived in the yard, a mischievous grin on his face.

He eyed me up and down, waited for three fellow workers to walk away from me, and then stood inches from where I was beginning to re-arrange the rolls of piping into neater piles against a wall that ran alongside the yard.

“Okay, what you’ll do now is get everyone of those rolls up onto that loft over there. That will get them out of the way and leave us with more space in the yard.”

Without hesitation, I agreed to do this, though balking at the prospect of dragging all those rolls more than ten yards to the foot of the stairs leading up to the loft and then dragging or pushing all of them upstairs.

“I think I’ll need a bit of help with this”, I retorted, suggesting that I ask one or two of the other lads to assist me.

“No, you’ll do it yourself. You want to get moving. I’ll be back here later to see you’ve done the job”.

He turned on his heels and exited the yard, leaving me to attend to this hefty assignment.

I pulled; half carried, or pushed the fifty rolls of piping up the steps to the loft. It was very hard going and took me the best part of an hour to complete the task. Gasping for breath, I sat down for a few minutes on a bag of pig meal to recover my strength. My relief at having fulfilled my obligations was short lived.

The foreman, his mouth open wide and his eyes blazing, strode towards me. Adjusting his cap with affected disbelief, he blurted out: “John, what in the name of God have you done with the rolls of piping?”

When I told him of the Fixer’s instructions, he was furious. “Didn’t I tell you before...that fellow has no business interfering in the Co-op store, however important he thinks he is? I’m in charge, not him. I want every one of those rolls back down here, pronto!”

He walked away, talking to himself and shaking his head in exasperation.

Though annoyed and confused, I did as requested. Getting the rolls back down was easier as I could wheel them from the loft to the bottom of the stairs.

All was quiet and life went on as normal until an hour or so later, when the Fixer returned to the yard. He went as red as a strawberry and seemed lost for breath.

“What’s this? Didn’t I tell you to have all the rolls up in the loft by the time I called here again?”

I explained that I had to comply with the wishes of the foreman because...”

I paused, not wishing to rattle him.

“Because what?”

“Well, because, I suppose...and please don’t take this the wrong way...the foreman is in charge here...isn’t he?”

“Now listen here to me sunshine...you get those rolls of piping back up onto that loft or I swear I’ll have you in the manager’s office this evening. You’d move those rolls of piping quick enough if they were feckin auld hares about to have their arses chawed off...wouldn’t you?”

Perplexed, I set about reversing the process and returning the fifty rolls back upstairs. Numerous aches and pains afflicted me as I carried out the Fixer’s frantic orders.

My workmates looked on with pity and bafflement as I went about the painstaking work. They dared not intervene, as they feared I had become embroiled in a personality clash, or a conflict of authority, between the Fixer and the foreman.

As I expected, and dreaded, the foreman reacted badly when he saw that the rolls of piping were back upstairs. I had to wheel them back down again. And, just as predictably, the Fixer resurfaced later in the day to demand that I return the entire consignment of piping to the loft.

It seemed the Fixer had won the battle of wits, as the foreman appeared to throw in the towel and concede, just before closing time that day, that it might be wiser not to provoke the Fixer unnecessarily. He had the ear of management and could cause trouble. “You did your best John, we’ll have to leave that stuff where it is”.

I learned next morning from a fellow worker that the whole episode had been a charade, worked out between the Fixer and the foreman to apply pressure on me to leave the Co-op. This workmate said he heard the two of them joking about how foolish I looked dragging fifty rolls of plastic piping up and down a stairs all day long.

Though I felt certain the manager would not have condoned such behaviour, I opted not to broach the subject with him for fear of inflaming the situation. I would still have to face either the foreman or the Fixer afterwards, or maybe both of them.

With the benefit of hindsight I realise I should perhaps have gone straight to the manager and reported what happened, but I am by no means certain that this would have helped me.

I felt increasingly isolated, and that any wrong move on my part would result in immediate dismissal. It was clear to me that the anti-coursing issue was driving all this covert and overt bullying. There seemed to be no end in sight to what I felt sure was an attempt to deprive me of my livelihood.



“A Catch 22 Situation”

In the following days, I experienced no real hostility, apart from the usual jibes on the street. The Fixer stayed away from the Co-op, and there was none of the raucous skulduggery that seemed to go hand in hand with his presence in the workplace.

I went about serving the customers and dared to hope that the furore over my anti-coursing activities had abated.

But this was to prove a deceptive lull before yet another storm.

In the run-up to the 1985 National Coursing Meeting, which was to be held in the first week of February, the anti-coursing lobby received a major publicity boost. World famous French film actress, Brigitte Bardot, voiced her support for efforts to protect the Irish hare and ban coursing.

A celebrated movie icon, Ms. Bardot had become a passionate advocate of animal welfare causes. She made international headlines in the late 1970s for her backing of a campaign to halt the mass killing of baby harp seals on the ice-floats of Canada.

From the day she was photographed cuddling one of the endangered animals, support for that campaign soared to new heights. An unprecedented outcry against the battering to death of the unprotected aquatic mammals resulted.

The seal killers were shamed as never before, and millions of people around the world rowed in behind the Save the Harp Seals crusade.

So when Ms. Bardot wrote to the Cork branch of ICABS and indicated that she might just be able to travel to Ireland in February...to carry a placard outside the National Coursing Meeting, media frenzy ensued.

Every national newspaper in Ireland gave front-page exposure to the news of her stance on hare coursing and her potential visit. This resulted in the campaign being elevated onto a new level of recognition and influence...people who had seldom if ever given serious thought to the cruelty issue began to sit up and take notice.

And the international media zeroed in on hare coursing from the moment Ms. Bardot officially backed the Irish “antis”.

While this raised the spirits of everyone opposed to hare coursing, it also had the effect of escalating the tensions that always simmered wherever those ardently for and against the game came into contact or close proximity.

After weeks of media hype about Ms. Bardot and the upcoming coursing showpiece, and just two days before the big event, I requested permission from the Co-op management to take a day off to join the protesters.

Exhilarated by all the publicity the campaign was getting, and believing that Ms. Bardot would turn up for the protest, I had temporarily let my guard down.

The frightening and outlandish episodes of a few weeks earlier seemed like a bad dream...a dark and sickening aberration that would hopefully not repeat itself.

I was wrong. Instead of being told whether I could have time off to attend the protest- I had passed my request to Management via the Co-op secretary-, my heart missed a beat when the "Fixer" entered the Co-op store where I was serving customers.

"You were looking for a day off John...?" he quipped sarcastically.

"Yes, is that okay?" I queried.

He tossed his hands up in a gesture of mock jubilation: "Oh it's bloody marvellous...lovely hurling...delightful...wonderful altogether...you can have as many days off as you like because we want you feckin' out...are you listening? Out that door this evening...do ya hear?"

"You have some feckin' cheek asking for time off to cause more trouble for the firm. Hell's bells, have you any sense at all? Take the day off...go ahead...but don't come back. I'll tell ya what...why don't you apply to Bridgy Bardot for a job? I heard she needs a new toy boy! Go anywhere...do anything you want...but don't come back here tomorrow, right?"

With that, he stormed out of the building as if someone had grievously offended him.

Stunned by this outburst, I resolved to ask the manager personally if I could have the day off or if indeed I was being fired as the Fixer had implied. The foreman, who had heard the Fixer reprimanding me, advised me strongly against broaching the subject of the protest again.

The Co-op committee was just watching and waiting and praying for an excuse to have me fired, he reminded. I shouldn't dream of joining the protest, or of asking for leave to attend it.

The manager arrived at the store late in the evening, just half an hour before closing time. Joe Carmody was a tall, contemplative, soft-spoken Galway man in his mid sixties. He had been Co-op manager since the mid 1950s and I had, in the past, always found him to be fair-minded and generous in my dealings with him.

Now he looked tense and worried. His face was drawn and he struck me as a deeply troubled man. I knew it was probably not the most auspicious juncture at which to repeat my request for a day's leave. But I felt compelled to ask. There was no harm in asking, I reasoned. The worst he could do was refuse permission.

As soon as I mentioned it to him, he gave a yawning sigh. He cast a despairing look at me and I thought his expression grew even more painful.

He told me he was in an impossible predicament...a "Catch 22 situation"; he called it. If he granted me time off to join the picket, he might be seen to be backing the anti-coursing cause and have the committeemen baying for his blood.

And if he refused permission, he might well draw the wrath of the opposing faction. "I don't want trouble John...I want peace in my life. Why don't you get a job somewhere else? Maybe from the people you write and lobby for?"

Before I could ask him what this meant, and if the Fixer had been acting on his authority, he said an almost tearful goodbye to me and walked out of the store.

I turned to the foreman for guidance. The blood had drained from his face. He shook his head and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry John. You'll have to leave...it's what they all want. It'll be better for you too. Put it there!"

He offered me his hand. It was the weirdest handshake I have ever experienced. He was saying goodbye though it seemed to me that I had not been fired, at least not officially. And I had not indicated any intention to quit the job.

The Fixer had no authority to fire anybody from the Co-op, and the manager had more or less walked away from taking any decision on my continued employment or even the request for time off.

The final minutes of that last day in the Co-op store are burned into my memory. The foreman avoided eye contact when I told him that I would be seeking clarification as to whether I had been fired...or merely "encouraged to leave".

"Forget about it John" he sighed, "Make a clean break. Look, I wasn't supposed to mention this, but I know for a fact that if you tell the manager you're leaving...willingly... he'll give you the best reference he's ever written for anyone who's worked here. Cross my heart. He doesn't want the gossipmongers around this town saying he sacked you.

"You heard what he said...he just wants a bit of peace and quiet. If it gets about that your leaving here was forced by management, you'll never get another job...not in these parts anyway. You'll have the name of a cur and a troublemaker. I know you're none of those things, John, but that's how people think...employers included."

There was foreboding, as well as sympathy, in his tired bloodshot eyes as he again bid me farewell and good wishes.

"I'm sorry it all came to this John...but sure maybe you'll laugh at it some day. You'll get over it."

We were standing outside the long counter of the store as we conversed. The clock said five twenty p.m. Ten minutes from closing time. I walked across from the counter to the wall opposite. I stood, shaking with apprehension, in front of the hook upon which I hung my shop coat at the end of each working day.

I took off the coat for the last time. It was badly stained by coal, oil, grease, cement, lime dust, pig meal, chicken feed, and the other signs of what I liked to think of as an honest day's work for an honest day's pay.

When I turned around after hanging it up, the foreman wasn't there. He had left the store, a few minutes ahead of closing time... disappearing as niftily as a magician's sidekick. The female office clerk was gone too.

I called the names of the other workers, but no answer came...I swung open the door leading out into the yard. Nobody was there either. All had left, I guessed, just after the manager's departure...seemingly in a great hurry. I was left alone to lock up.

Nothing wrong with that... on any other day. It often happened that one of us might lag behind the others, and that person always switched off the lights and closed up.

But on that day in February 1985 I felt that the ship had been abandoned a bit too quickly.

And it was more of a Mary Celeste situation, in seafaring terms, than a Titanic one...because my fellow workers had vanished without trace.

I switched off the lights, plunging the entire building into a murky cobwebbed darkness. I closed the street entrance to the store yard.

Tears welling up in my eyes, I went to close the main entrance, but; as occurred all too frequently, a last minute customer almost fell through the door, gasping for breath.

"Am I late?" he asked.

Normally, I found this Eleventh Hour rush aggravating. But not that evening.

The man standing before me was Paddy Buckley, a cheery farmer with a big heart who had never called to the store without stopping to have a friendly chat. I had conversed hundreds of times with the Man from Holly Hill, as he was affectionately known.

Rapidly wiping my eyes, I retorted: "Late...not at all. What can I do for you Paddy?"

In the semi-darkness, he hadn't noticed my distressed appearance. He wanted a box of nails, which I got for him and charged to his account.

As I wrote out the receipt at the counter, writing slower than usual, I said, without looking up: "Paddy...it was good talking to you all those times you've called here. It looks as if I'm leaving the place today. The Co-op Committeemen and a few other fellows are anxious to be rid of me...it's over the coursing campaign".

Paddy's candid happy smile turned to a shocked expression...and then to anger.

I left the store with him, closing the door behind me for the last time.

I never again set foot inside the building.

Standing outside on the street pavement, he asked me why I was leaving the Co-op. I recounted the events of recent weeks.

He appeared genuinely shocked: "I knew about that eejit hitting you, but I didn't know anyone threatened to have you sacked!"

I told him I would love to continue working at the Co-op and to greet people like himself each day, whether from behind a counter or in the yard where the tractors with trailers pulled up for their loads of meal and fertilizer. I liked listening to their yarns and to their witty remarks about the state of farming or politics.

Working in the Co-op wasn't just about punching in time, I told Paddy. It wasn't just about labour. It had brought me into contact with people from various walks of life, all with stories to tell that I looked forward to hearing every day.

But the pressure to quit my job had become unbearable. I could no longer withstand the efforts of men who hated and resented my presence in the Co-op.

Paddy took my situation to heart, which surprised me.

"Look, I'm going to tell that manager to his face...If you've been sacked, I'll never again take milk to the Co-op creamery. I'll go instead to the other place up the road. Let them put that in their pipes and smoke it."

I thanked him for his words of support, though not believing he was serious about withdrawing his milk supply.

But he was. Three weeks later, when my de facto dismissal from the Co-op was confirmed for me, Paddy walked into the manager's office and told him he was taking his milk elsewhere.

Paddy Buckley was one of those rare people who mean exactly what they say...who put justice and fair play ahead of greed and self-serving indifference.

I consulted with my family on the perplexing question of what exactly had happened...or was in the process of happening, between the Co-op and myself.

It certainly seemed to me that the build-up of pressure over the previous three months, coupled with the Fixer's unambiguous words and the advice of the manager to consider getting a job elsewhere, amounted to dismissal.

My family divided on the issue. Some of them advised me to go straight to a solicitor and sue the Co-op, while others cautioned that, strictly speaking, the manager hadn't said that he had sacked or fired me, or used words that could be construed to mean that I was out of a job.



Limbo

I decided to seek further clarification from the manager. Meeting him at the Co-op creamery office next morning, I asked him if I had been fired. He motioned a female secretary to leave the room.

Sitting back in his chair, he sighed heavily. He told me he had never fired anyone in his life, but that it was "possible an employee might terminate his employment with the Co-op and believe that he had been fired".

I repeated my question: was I free to go back to work? He declined to give me a straight answer.

Looking worried and embarrassed, he said, almost in a whisper: "we can't go back to where we were...that situation can't continue...if the letters stop, John, you'll be more than welcome to return to work. But there's been awful hassle. John, I'm holding back so much...you have no idea what I've gone through.

"You see John; I'm caught between a rock and a very, very hard place. Do you follow me? If I allow you to work in the Co-op store while you're writing about coursing, the coursing men and their friends on the committee will have my guts for garters. And your own supporters will be after me if I don't allow things to go on like before.

"So, John, I'm not sacking you. No, not that. I'm just saying that you can't go back to work with us until you agree to cut out this letter writing. It's a bit of conundrum, isn't it?"

I again tried to press him tactfully on the question of exactly where I stood, but he delved further into evasiveness, displaying a diplomatic sidestepping of the issue that left my head spinning.

I told him, regretfully; that it seemed to me I was in a curious kind of Limbo regarding my employment status, adding that I would have to consider myself out of a job if he insisted on my dropping the anti-coursing campaign as a condition for remaining with the Co-op.

"Sure I've never sacked anyone John", he repeated, the pain of anxiety showing clearly in his wizened features.

Thanking him, I rose to leave his office. My heart sinking, I said a non-committal and suppressed goodbye. "Call in again any time, John, for a chat", he exhorted... avoiding eye contact as he fumbled with a sheaf of invoices on his desk.

Despite my unhappy predicament, I felt a peculiar sympathy for him. I didn't doubt what he said about being faced with Hobson's choice...given the controversial nature of the anti-coursing campaign and the grief those Committeemen had given him. But I had to act quickly, as I was now out of a job and unable to afford the luxury of feeling sorry for this man and his dilemmas.

I opted to seek legal advice. A friend had given me the name of a Dublin solicitor who specialized in unfair dismissal cases. At this stage, I was still hopeful that I might persuade the manager to change his mind and remove the obstacle he had placed in the path of my returning to work. My family shared this hope, and also my decision to go down the legal route if necessary.

Next day was day three of the National Coursing Meeting. Around four hundred people turned up outside the baiting venue for the protest. Brigitte Bardot wasn't there, but her message of support had sparked a huge media presence.

Not that I was in any mood to appreciate this positive development. I was out of a job, or so it seemed... or in a kind of employment Limbo, thanks to my campaigning. I felt cut off from normal society; even as I mingled with people whose views and sentiments I shared.

ICABS members I spoke to were shocked to hear of my standoff with the Co-op. Some of them could identify with my dilemma as they too had come under varying degrees of pressure in the workplace over their anti-blood sports activity.

They commiserated with me. There were plenty of consoling comments and supportive gestures. Lots of sympathy, none of which made me feel any better.

Though I gathered internal strength from the company of people who shared my views on coursing, a dark, stomach-churning fear of unknown challenges and the sickening prospect of unemployment tempered this feel-good factor. It permeated my thinking no matter how much I tried to push it to the back of my mind. I felt my life unravelling.

Partly to distract myself from such brooding and foreboding, I felt an urge to go inside the coursing venue, a racecourse that fans converted once a year into a blood-soaked coliseum.

I had no fear of being ejected, as this was a much hyped showpiece event of the season. Fans nationwide had been warned by the coursing top brass to be on their best behaviour.

That generally applied to National Meetings, but coursing people were even more conscious of their PR image on this occasion owing to the large media presence. I broke away from the picket.

Owing to the glare of publicity, I expected to see a less cruel round of hare baiting at this premier event than was common at the smaller meetings held at out of the way places around the country.

A surprise awaited me. No sooner had I reached the long wire fence separating the coursing track from the rest of the park than I heard that all too familiar sound.

First a choking cry...then a shrill child-like sobbing. The crowd was riveted. A hare had failed to reach the escape and the dogs were playing with it.

A few faces were averted in denial as sharp fangs sank into soft brown fur. They acted as though nothing were amiss. The spectacle they could avoid...but not the cry of pain and terror that pierced their guilty minds. The banshee wail was all-pervasive.

Other fans were far from squeamish; roaring their approval as the animal was racked and stretched.

Loud cheers rang out all around me. Many of those hollering had their attention fixed, not on the grizzly scene before them, but on some invisible point above the field...out in space...as if to invoke a blessing on this ritual of death.

Men ran onto the track, laughing and waving at the crowd. They wrestled with the hounds and dragged them away from their plaything. The hare was still shrieking.

"Stiff than fuckin' beast!" screamed a burly fellow with a screwed up face whose hands were buried deep in his mackintosh. Repeated karate chops to the back of its neck ended the hare's agony.

Minutes later, another hare came to grief. A dog tossed it into the air. Landing on its back, it quickly got to its feet and started running again.

But a second dog caught one of its hind legs and again flung it heavenward like a rag doll...the hare was in their power...completely at the mercy of these juggernauts.

Limping through the short grass, the terrified animal found became embedded in their jaws. Again, the sobbing and the shrieking. A deafening cheer went up. Blood dripped unto a carpet of emerald green.

More ripping and wrenching and sobbing. Applause grew louder as the dance of death continued.

Again, three jokers sprinted towards the tug of war... "Give 'er one for me Mick!" somebody shouted at a member of this amateur karate team.

That was enough for me. Shuffling through the crowd, I left behind the bloodlust and the live horror show.

I was relieved to be back among friends on the picket line. Away from that Lion's Den of cruelty. What I had seen confirmed my belief that the campaign was worth it...perhaps, I dared to think, even worth the loss of my Co-op job.



Constructive Dismissal

I arrived at the solicitor's office a week later. He listened with patience and concentration to my tale of woe, before shaking his head in perplexity.

"John, I'm afraid this is a rather typical example of constructive dismissal. Your ex-boss may not think of it that way. He may well detest the idea of sacking anyone, as he told you, but he has certainly, in my view, put you in a position where you can't be expected to turn up for work at the Co-op".

He explained the vagaries and complexities of constructive dismissal, the kind that involved a gradual build-up of pressure on an employee to quit.

"Given your obvious, sincerely held objection to hare coursing, he knows you couldn't possibly go back to work with that unreasonable proviso attaching to your conditions of employment. He has effectively dismissed you".

Rather than take the case to the Circuit Court, the solicitor recommended that I allow the Employment Appeals Tribunal to handle it. The problem with a Circuit Court hearing was that losing would mean a hefty legal bill, he explained. That was something I couldn't afford, as I had no income or savings- no financial resources to fall back on.

So I opted for the less risky alternative. He explained the workings of the Employment Appeals Tribunal, which heard cases of alleged sacking. A three-person panel would hear the case: A legally qualified independent Chairman and a member each drawn respectively from panels of Trade Union and Employers organization representatives.

I asked the solicitor if it was possible to pursue the milk suppliers and Co-op Committeemen, rather than the manager.

He was adamant: "No, the action would be for unfair dismissal and it's not those other people who dismissed you; however you may feel about their lobbying and arm-twisting of the manager".

At first I resisted the idea of placing the Co-op manager in the dock. It seemed unfair to make him take the flak for the shenanigans and skulduggery of coursing fans who had conspired vigorously to set my employer against me.

But the legal system didn't work that way, the solicitor rebuked. The coursing clubs wouldn't be facing the music. Nor would the committeemen. It was the manager who would have to answer for his enigmatic and non-committal handling of the situation.

However, the foreman, the Fixer, and fellow workers could be subpoenaed to appear at the hearing to give evidence and be questioned.

I agreed, reluctantly, that the necessary papers should be served on the Co-op. I would let the Tribunal decide if I had been fired from my job. The Co-op had ample opportunity to withdraw the condition that I cease letter writing. Having failed to drop that unfair proviso, it was, I believed, telling me that I was out of a job owing to my beliefs.

Six months later, the court date arrived. It was a sweltering hot July day. The streets of the City resembled stretches of sandy beach, with thousands of half naked sunbathers wearing dark glasses and lounging about, slowed down by an almost unbearable heat.

I met the solicitor in a City pub. He had news for me: The Co-op had made an eleventh hour settlement offer. It would pay me half a year's wages if I dropped the unfair dismissal challenge. A condition was that the Co-op would not be admitting liability in any form. It would be a hushed-up affair.

"Think about it. We have three hours or so before the hearing begins" the solicitor advised.

I mounted the steps leading up to the Courthouse. An imposing edifice, it was once a small castle occupied by elite members of a now defunct ruling class. It exuded a fearful dignity and a sense of unflinching historical importance.

Full of trepidation, I stepped through the tall wide entrance. I found myself standing inside a huge, bright, spacious building with a loud echo. The sound of every step repeated itself...and every whispered word lingered on the musty air of the place.

The solicitor and my brother flanked me. My legal adviser led me to a consultation room. He asked me if I had any second thoughts about going ahead. I hadn't. I wanted to get it over with.

The offer from the Co-op was not too generous, financially speaking, but that wasn't why I rejected it. The problem was that it involved in effect conceding that no dismissal had taken place. There would be no hearing if I settled and the perception would be that I was at fault...not the Co-op.

The whole episode of the intimidation by cursing elements and the undue pressure to quit my job could then be covered up. No matter what I said or claimed afterwards, people would naturally assume that the absence of a court or Tribunal hearing meant that I had no case and had simply walked out of the Co-op store in a sulk.

The solicitor was happy to proceed. "Right, we're on the road so" he chortled, rising to let his opposite number, the solicitor for the Co-op, know the case was to go ahead.

My brother cast me a fretful look in the solicitor's absence. "It'll be okay" he assured, turning aside to stare at a wall. He was obviously worried but didn't want me to notice.

Minutes later, the solicitor swaggered back into the room.

"They're not happy!" he confided, "They really believed you'd accept the settlement offer".

He also revealed that the Fixer and the foreman, and two of the three workers summoned to give evidence; had failed to appear:

"I've just been told they all phoned in sick this morning, and none of them will be in court. We'll just have to saunter along without them."

I asked him if this would weaken my case.

He shrugged: "Don't let it worry you too much. They wouldn't have been very co-operative anyway...and might well have denied everything. But it means you won't be able to raise the Fixer's behaviour as I planned to do. And you would be well advised not to mention him either. Any references to what he said can be rejected as hearsay".

Off we went, along a shining corridor, to where the hearing would be held. It was a large, modern room.

A golden harp, symbol of the Irish Republic, loomed proudly on the wall behind where the Tribunal would sit in judgement. Two rows of seats were divided by a considerable space. In the top left corner was a jury box, which of course would not be required for my case.

Upon entering the room, it was obvious we would have to sit on the left row. On the other side of the courtroom sat upwards of forty people, a mixture of coursing fans, milk suppliers, and Co-op committeemen. All were in their shirtsleeves, except one man who was stripped to the waist and appeared to be asleep.

A pair of bluebottles had taken a liking to his hairy chest. One of them was squatting on his bellybutton.

The hum of a bumblebee and the grotesque buzz of flies filled the stuffy air of the room. There was constant swatting to ward them off. Wasps crawled up and down the walls.

In the front pew on the right sat the manager, his secretary, and one of my fellow workers. In the same seat I spotted the menacing form of Masher Whelan, towering above the others.

This was the man whose bloodlust in the Church Field more than a decade earlier had awakened my interest in hare coursing. I could never forget him, with his mop of ginger hair, his prominent facial birthmark, and a seemingly perpetual look of hostility.

He turned to stare at me the moment I walked into the room.

Someone behind him had nudged. It felt like walking up the aisle of a chapel, except that the accustomed reverence was missing; in its place a highly charged atmosphere of loathing and hostility. I could feel the ice-cold seething hatred. It was focused on me through the eyes of men who had come to see me humiliated. There wasn't a single woman in the room.

As I drew parallel to the pew containing Masher, he rose to his feet and summoned up a generous helping of saliva that he gurgled in his mouth for a second or two. He then unleashed a well-propelled spit in my direction. It missed; attaching itself to the front of the oak panelled Jury box. It ebbed and flowed downwards to the floor in a miniature stream. The solicitor winced, putting his hand to his mouth in disgust.

A suppressed laughter rippled along the pews. Masher was a hard man, and his friends shared his sense of humour. To his left sat Arra-fuck, with arms folded and a silly grin on his face. To his right smirked Jee-sus Christ, who muttered, true to form "Jee-sus Christ" when Masher spat. A few rows behind them I spotted "Kill 'em all". He looked disgruntled and the sweat was pouring out of him.

We seated ourselves in the front row opposite Masher and his entourage. The entire row of seats on the left was empty apart from my solicitor, my brother, the poet Tom Hartley, two trade union observers, and me. If the outcome of the hearing had depended on weight of numbers, I would have been in serious trouble.

My solicitor, who obviously had no previous experience of the coursing fraternity, turned to me and whispered: "Do these people behave like that on a regular basis?"

I explained that they could be quite charming with people they approved of, and who shared their hobbies.

A few minutes later, three dignified men in suits entered. Without looking to the left or right, they walked up the centre between the two rows and seated themselves at the top of the courtroom, where the judge in a normal court case would have sat.

The Tribunal Chairman explained the modus operandi of the hearing that was to follow, the manner in which witnesses would give evidence, and how a decision would be reached on the disputed issue. Proceedings got underway.



“Inflammatory letters”

My solicitor argued that the manager’s behaviour and attitude towards me amounted to unfair dismissal. I took the stand, recalling the events leading up to my departure from the Co-op, the pressures imposed on me, and the assault and threats by coursing club members and supporters.

Instead of reprimanding the irate coursing man who had assaulted me, the Co-op management offered its sympathies to him, I recalled, and appeared more concerned about him closing his account with the Co-op than about the cuts and bruises he inflicted on me in the course of his frenzied attack. He had not been censured in any way.

I recounted what I understood to have transpired at a meeting of local milk suppliers and farmers...with delegates spewing out unadulterated hatred and calling for my dismissal.

I began to quote individual Co-op committeemen, but the Tribunal Chairman interjected, cautioning me that references to what may or may not have been said at the meeting was purely hearsay and could not be admitted in evidence.

I went on to describe the manager’s cryptic advice. I made it clear that I had no desire whatsoever to leave my job, but that the gradual, insidious build-up of pressure and intimidation left me with no option.

It was not, I explained, a case of getting out of the kitchen because I couldn’t stand the heat...the proverbial kitchen had become a hotbed of bullying, intolerance, and hostility that had pushed me to the limits of my endurance.

I told the Tribunal that I believed I had been fired from my job.

At the mention of misbehaviour by coursing fans, guffaws and sneering erupted from the row of seats to my right. "Mother a Jaysus, that’s pure shite," rasped Arra-fuck. The man who had been asleep and stripped to the waist was now awake and making threatening gestures with a clenched fist at me.

"T’was your own fault, you stupid bollix!" howled someone in the back row. Masher Whelan arose as if he were about to throw something at me, but two of his friends restrained him, clapping him on the back.

I spoke through the interruptions, though with an increasing nervousness. I expected some calamity to befall me before the day was over.

The Tribunal Chairman called for silence so that proceedings could continue with "all necessary decorum". Coursing fans were advising each other to keep quiet. "Put away those spuds," a concerned Co-op committeeman cautioned Masher. Masher passed two raw potatoes from one hand to the other before shoving them back into his pockets.

Solicitor for the Co-op rose to cross-examine me. A cheer went up, though not as loud as the ones I had heard at coursing meetings. In his mid thirties, he was a strongly built man with an air of polished dignity and gravitas about him. He exuded a cheery confidence, smiling broadly at all present.

"Now Mr. Fitzgerald" he began, "would I be correct in describing you as a passionate opponent of coursing?"

I conceded that this was not an unreasonable view, given my years of involvement in the campaign.

"And would I be correct in asserting that, to you, the anti-coursing campaign has taken precedence over every other priority in life...including your job with the Co-op?"

Beaming, he looked at the three men who sat in judgement, then at the spectators, then back at me.

I hesitated for a second. "No, it's certainly been a priority, but not one that would take precedence over everything else in life. I'm not a fanatic or anything. I just believe that hare coursing is cruel and that hares should not be subjected to unnecessary suffering".

He rejoined: "When you clearly understood how your efforts on behalf...of...ah ...hares...I believe (laughter and jeering from the audience) were adversely affecting your job as a store man, Mr. Fitzgerald, did it not occur to you that you were creating...or fostering... a situation whereby your employer would be obliged to advise you against going too far down that road?"

"I thought I could continue working as normal...and campaigning as well...I hoped the aggression displayed towards me, as in the assault and threats, was a temporary flare-up and that things would settle down after a while..."

He continued to pursue this line of questioning, asking me if realised the dreadful predicament I had placed the manager in by attracting unwelcome attention and bad publicity to the Co-op's hitherto peaceful day to day operations.

And did I not foresee the trouble that must surely follow in the wake of my writing inflammatory letters? Could I not have met the Co-op management halfway by suspending my anti-coursing activities for a while to ease the pressure on management?

I repeated my view that I had done nothing wrong. I didn't consider the letters I had written "inflammatory". Each letter was intended to remind the government that coursing was cruel, still legal, and a disgrace to Ireland.

I had not misbehaved in the workplace, I didn't have an absenteeism problem, and I had performed, without question, all the various duties assigned to me from the day I commenced working with the Co-op right up until my last day on the premises.

My anti-coursing activities were separate from what occurred in the workplace. The decision by certain people to approach me in the workplace to either threaten or assault me was entirely their responsibility.

They could have met me at any other venue of their choice, or phoned me, if they wished to discuss any aspect of the campaign that concerned them.

Loud booing erupted. Some one shouted: "You fucking deserved a hammering." The Chairman again called for silence.

I stated my belief that every citizen should be entitled to freedom of expression, and not be beaten up or thrown out of his or her job merely for having a particular point of view that happened to be controversial.

"You put in for what ya got, Fitz, ya fucker!" somebody hollered.

The Co-op solicitor then suggested to me that I was unhappy with my job and was hell-bent on fostering a conflict situation whereby the manager would ask me to leave.

This I denied flatly. I had been more than happy to work at the Co-op, I got along well with fellow workers and customers, and had no problems in the workplace apart from the ones created by thugs who eschewed the democratic process and believed they could bully a person because of his beliefs.

More catcalls and swearing from the coursing fans...and hostile glares from the committeemen...greeted these words. And a reprimand: "We're not the thugs...you and yer pals are...wasn't it ye that released those hares at Ballybrannigan last year and gave the night watchman a black eye"?

The Chairman stressed the importance of allowing proceedings to continue uninterrupted. "I appreciate that some of the issues that form the background to this case are controversial and liable to elicit strong reactions, but this Tribunal is not concerned with any of these issues. We are here to decide whether or not a man was unfairly dismissed from his job. Further interruptions will not be tolerated and I will have no option but to ask people to leave this room if that becomes necessary."

The Co-op solicitor resumed his cross-examination. He again tried to steer me into admitting that I deliberately engineered the dispute with my employer in a bid to provoke the Co-op into firing me. I again refuted this insinuation.

I hadn't done anything unlawful or mischievous or underhanded, I pleaded, in the weeks leading up to the day of my departure from the Co-op.

I had written letters to newspapers on the subject of hare coursing, as I had been doing for almost five years. None of the letters had contained any references to the Co-op, I told him, nor anything calculated to cause aggravation to the manager. The criticism contained in all the correspondence was aimed solely at a cruel and unnatural practice that I wished to see prohibited by law.

I had never expressed any dissatisfaction with my job. The reason I took the issue of my abrupt departure from the Co-op before the Tribunal was that I believed I had been pressurized and bullied out of my job. I had not breached any of the workplace rules, nor any of the legally binding conditions of employment.

Nor had I assaulted anyone, or threatened anybody with violence in the workplace. Yet people had entered the premises for the specific purpose of using those heavy-handed tactics against me.

The solicitor queried exactly when I decided I had been dismissed...Had I not consulted with my anti-blood sport colleagues, and had they not "advised" me to take the Co-op to court? Was not the entire dismissal claim a fabrication to blacken my archenemies in the coursing clubs?

I denied this point blank. He persisted in implying that I "invented" the whole notion of having been fired to boost the anti-coursing campaign.

I repeated the simple truth...that my departure from the Co-op was not voluntary. I emphasised the impossible condition attached by management to any resumption of work at the Co-op.

A moment or two of silence followed my assertions. Exasperated and clearly unhappy with the way his cross-examination was going, the solicitor eyed the Tribunal Chairman and announced "I have no further questions for the witness".

My own solicitor then rose and took me back over some points that he wished to clarify. Was I absolutely sure in my own mind that I had been dismissed from my job? Did I have any doubt whatsoever on that essential point? I again asserted that I believed I had been fired...no question about it.

I was excused. I wiped the sweat from my forehead. The boiling heat made concentration more difficult. It reminded me of punishing exam days in that sizzling June of 1977 when I had found it next to impossible to focus on the papers in front of me.

Yet I had kept my wits about me and hadn't been rattled or humiliated by the cross-examination.

As I rose from the chair behind the stand, I caught sight of the Co-op manager. He seemed lost in thought, and I felt sorry for him. Though I believed I had been wronged, it was equally clear to me that a band of ruthless coursing men, whose main objective was to discredit me in any way they could, had dragged him into the fray. I saw him as a victim of calculated bullying and skulduggery.

I resumed my seat in the front row opposite the committeemen, milk suppliers, and coursing fans. They were more subdued than earlier. I wondered if they had been swayed by anything they heard...or was it just a fear of being ejected from the courtroom?

A few glares met my eyes, and I noticed a lot of angry facial expressions. But there wasn't a word from any of them. Not even a whisper.



“A Co-op is Like a Church”

The Co-op manager was called to take the stand. The defence solicitor took him through the events leading up to what I held to have been dismissal and that the Co-op claimed was nothing of the kind.

Mr. Carmody had served as manager of the Co-op for more than three decades; he recounted, after arriving in the district from his native County Galway to fill the position.

He immediately denied sacking me. What happened, he claimed, was that my anti-coursing activities had made me a hugely controversial person in the locality, and that my status as a high profile campaigner had enraged blood sport fans who then decided to confront me in the workplace.

He said he had no objection either to my views on coursing or my right to express those views. But when my activities created a conflict situation in the workplace, resulting in fisticuffs and verbal slugging matches, it was obvious to him that things were getting out of hand.

He told the Tribunal that he had advised me, at first through intermediaries, and then personally man-to-man, to reconsider my letter writing in view of the absolute mayhem it was causing in the Co-op store and at committee meetings.

Members, he claimed, could not discuss the routine but essential affairs of the Co-op owing to interruptions pertaining to the bad publicity generated by the anti-coursing letters appearing in the local papers.

He expounded: "When we were supposed to be talking about milk quotas, feed prices, or profit margins, we found ourselves instead fighting over John Fitzgerald and what happens to hares at coursing meetings. No business could carry on like that..."

The Co-op solicitor smiled, gently motioning his client to pause for a moment. "And is it not true that you acted at all times in the best interests of both the Co-op and your workers, including...indeed... John Fitzgerald"?

The manager nodded assent: "Of course, there was no problem with John Fitzgerald apart from the coursing thing. Look...and I'm not trying to evade my responsibilities when I say this...but I had to think of the bigger picture. The town in which the Co-op does business is a small, close-knit community. Everyone knows everyone else. John Fitzgerald's letters were a major talking point. The problem was...I was seen to be harbouring this very controversial man".

Pausing for a moment, he breathed deeply, then continued:

"You need to understand that a Co-op is in some ways like a church...or a small community...that abides by certain rules of behaviour. There is an expectation of order and respect, of people coming together for the one purpose and of nobody causing any disruption to the procedures and rituals that are part of its tradition. That's how the Co-op had got along for years...decades...there had never been anything like the uproar we had over the letters.

"We had no peace for three or four months...with people who didn't like John Fitzgerald jumping around the place disturbing everyone. We were losing customers...there was a terrible atmosphere...with people afraid they'd get caught in the crossfire or drawn into a dispute that had nothing to do with them.

"A lot of people in the community perceived John Fitzgerald's letter-writing to be a bit off the wall and it was upsetting them. It wasn't conducive to harmony in the day-to-day affairs of the Co-op. Quite the opposite. Actually, I have a copy of one of those letters about coursing here (reaching to his waistcoat pocket) that was quite aggressive in its tone. I'd like to read it to you..."

The Tribunal Chairman interrupted: "Ah...I don't think we need to hear a letter about coursing being read out...it's not relevant to proceedings...unless perhaps it was written by the plaintiff during work hours or on Co-op stationary?"

The manager took his hand away from his pocket, commenting "no. It wasn't written during work time or on our stationary. But it was in the paper."

He resumed his evidence:

"I wouldn't dream of sacking anyone...but I was in a terrible dilemma, a Catch 22 situation...if I tolerated his letter-writing, the coursing people and committeemen would be after me, and if I came down hard on him, the anti-coursing side would be after me.

"What was I to do? I tried to resolve the problem in a way that would keep everyone happy. It didn't work out that way, but I can certainly say that I didn't fire him. There was no question of firing him. His anti-blood sport letters were a problem...apart from that, I found him an honest worker...kind...punctual...and honest."

"And let's be clear about this" queried the Co-op solicitor: "you never used the words sack, fire, or dismiss in any conversation with Mr. Fitzgerald...you never told him he was out of a job or that he should leave his job with the Co-op?"

"Never", the manager replied, "I just advised him that his letter-writing was causing endless trouble for us and asked him to consider ending it in the interests of harmony in the workplace".

"I think that's everything. Thank you Sir. Your witness", his legal rep intoned, turning to my solicitor.

Up he stood; a sheaf of notes in his hands and reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. A short stocky man, he looked the opposite of his "learned friend" as he called him, for the Co-op.

In place of the other man's smooth, suave, polished demeanour, this middle-aged lawyer had the look of a man who had been through the wars. The lines and creases of time had transformed his face into a picture of frank ruthlessness and determined solemnity.

Fixing the Manager with an icy glare, he began: "Ah...Mr. Carmody, you told the Tribunal that you were committed to the welfare of the Co-op's workforce as well as to its business interests?"

"Yes"

"And what was your reaction when you heard that my client had been viciously assaulted in the Co-op store as he attended customers?"

"Oh...I was surprised...shocked...to hear about that."

"And did you hear that the assault had left him with cuts and bruises to the head?"

"There was a reference to the effects of the incident on him, yes".

"Did you call to the Co-op store to see him...and to inquire as to how he was feeling after the assault?"

"Well...no....actually, but I was concerned that such a serious incident had occurred"

"Did you ever, at any time, ask Mr. Fitzgerald if he was okay...if he had fully recovered... after his experience of the assault and the threats made to him?"

"I didn't ask him personally. The incident was reported to me and I was very concerned about it".

"You were concerned about the incident, you say...Were you concerned that a worker had been attacked and injured...or just concerned at the effect this would have on the Co-op's public image and business interests?"

"Both, of course."

"But you didn't sympathize with my client, did you? Instead, did you not indicate to him that you considered his letter writing a problem...a stumbling block... that stood between him and his position as a store man?"

"I advised him as to which course of action would best serve both his own interests and those of the Co-op"

"Would you agree that, given your failure to offer him moral support after the assault and threats; Mr. Fitzgerald was entitled to believe you were indifferent to the unjust and violent treatment he had received?"

"I didn't think of that way...though I didn't sympathise with him personally, I was aware that the foreman, for instance, and the Co-op store office clerk...and others...had shown their concern, and I felt that was adequate..."

"Mr. Carmody, you told my learned friend for the defence that certain members of the close-knit community within which the Co-op does business perceived you to be harbouring my client. Would you not agree that John Fitzgerald was a reasonably good worker... that you employed him for that reason, and that this notion that you were-to use that word again-harbouring-him was both unfair and unreasonable?"

"Oh of course he was fine as a worker...but I had to take notice of how his letter-writing was affecting the way people perceived the Co-op. I wish it hadn't been a problem, but it was."

"And did you not realise, given my client's strongly-held views on hare coursing; that a condition obliging him to cease his campaigning activities would be unacceptable to him...and that attaching such an impossible proviso was tantamount to telling him that his job with the Co-op would not be there for him unless he accepted the condition?"

"No...I didn't think it unreasonable...John Fitzgerald was not dismissed...he dismissed himself by not turning up for work the day after I explained the situation to him."

"And, Mr. Carmody, did that explanation include a piece of friendly advice from you to look for a job elsewhere?"

"That was only a suggestion...made in the light of the unacceptable situation that had arisen due to his anti-coursing letters".

"Thank you Mr. Carmody".

Of the three fellow workers who were subpoenaed, only one had turned up. I looked around the courtroom. The foreman, who could have proved a useful witness, had still not appeared.

The young store worker was seated in the front row between the manager and the Co-op secretary. He was next to take the stand. I knew him to be decent and friendly person, but of nervous disposition. As he took the Bible in his hand, he was trembling like a leaf.

My solicitor asked him if he recalled the day I was assaulted in the Co-op. He replied that his memory had failed him...completely. He had no recollection of the incident, he said, though he vaguely remembered other workers talking about it afterwards.

He had not heard the conversation between the manager and myself. Nor had he heard or seen anything at any time to indicate that the manager had fired me, he swore.

There were no further questions, and the Co-op solicitor had none for him either. The Tribunal Chairman and his two colleagues rose to deliberate on the issues. They had to decide whether or not I had been unfairly dismissed from the Co-op. The break was welcome, though I dreaded the thought of what decision would be handed down from beneath that golden harp.

Masher Wheelan stepped out of his pew and eyeballed me. Sneering, he made a throat-cutting gesture. Somebody else clapped him on the back. The coursing fans began filing out of the room, grumbling, skitting, laughing, and swearing

Their presence in the courtroom had served to increase my anxiety and ratchet up the tension. How they would love to see me lose this case, I reflected. The result, if to their liking, would be splashed across the front page of the Sporting Press, official organ of Ireland's coursing fraternity.

My brother, the solicitor, and Tom Hartley huddled together in a small consultation room, ready at a moment's notice to rush back for the decision. Waiting began. Time seemed to slow down...as it invariably does when you are watching the clock and fretting.

The solicitor intoned softly: "you look worried...don't be...we've done well...you should be okay."

He was brimming with confidence. But what if the case went against me? I asked him. It would cost me a small fortune that I didn't have...and my reputation would be shredded.

"Relax," he advised, "your mind is playing tricks on you. Did you know that Christ's agony in the garden was said to be more tortuous than his crucifixion? There's no point in worrying. Whatever the Tribunal decides, you get on with your life. Remember what Scarlet O' Hara said in the film...Tomorrow is another day!"

To pass the time, he struck up a literary conversation with Tom about the relative merits and shortcomings of modern poetry and abstract art. My brother repeated the solicitor's assurances. It wouldn't be catastrophic if I lost, he soothed.

The intense heat added to the discomfort of waiting and brooding. The little room was like an oven that was cooking the four of us.

Then it came...that hearty knock on the door. It opened and a querulous court clerk peeped in: "The Tribunal has reached a decision, gentlemen".

A shudder went through me. The solicitor clapped me on the back. "You'll be fine" he assured. My brother whispered, "this is it", and the poet quipped: "into the valley of death rode the six hundred".

The coursing fans, milk suppliers, and Co-op committeemen were filing back into the room. The four of us shuffled meekly past them, resuming our place at the top of the row. The three adjudicators sat patiently under the harp, their wizened features showing the strain of intensive deliberation.

When everyone in the room was settled and attentive, the Chairman spoke. He called for complete silence. He would not tolerate interruptions of any kind. Blowing his nose, he declared solemnly: "this case has been very challenging indeed, and has presented us with some painful and difficult issues."

In tones that were stern but tempered with a kind of judicial compassion, he summarised the evidence presented by both sides.

At first I found it difficult to guess whose side he was on as he swayed seemingly from one side to the other...appearing to favour my position at certain junctures and then giving the impression that he might be about to opt for the defendant.

The Co-op manager and I were, I imagine, equally tense as we awaited judgement.

Eventually, after much to-ing and fro-ing, the Chairman's remarks made it obvious which party to the dispute the Tribunal was about to send home disappointed.

"The manager's belief that the plaintiff had abandoned his job was too restrictive", he announced. These words elicited a loud collective gasp from the audience.

He continued: "And the Tribunal is satisfied that the plaintiff had just cause to believe he was dismissed in view of preceding events. Having carefully evaluated the evidence, the Tribunal has no doubt but that John Fitzgerald's anti-blood sport activities were central to his dismissal".

Having decided that I had been unfairly dismissed from my job for campaigning against hare coursing, the Tribunal awarded me the equivalent of a year's wages.

I heaved a mighty sigh of relief. Handshakes from the solicitor and the poet followed. "You won," breathed my awe-stricken brother, who was equally relieved.

The three adjudicators rose and filed delicately out of the room. Disapproving glares sent them on their way.

The Co-op manager stared blankly, in silence. His secretary consoled him. There was disbelief and shock written across his face, which had paled.

There were no catcalls or insults hurled from the coursing contingent.

Instead, the fans and other observers shuffled out of the room with wagging heads huddled together, cursing softly. Some of them threw their arms up in exasperation. The outcome of the hearing had stunned them.

They looked confused and disorientated.

Unless my eyes deceived me, I could have sworn that Arra-fuck was sobbing. Head bowed, he mooched out of his pew with a tissue covering his face, and he was shaking all over.

Jees-us Christ was muttering the saviour's name to himself in staccato fashion, as if invoking a divine curse on the Tribunal, myself, or the world in general.

Even Masher Wheelan had a subdued air about him. He eyed me with a burning hatred as he stood up to leave. But he said nothing. And the potatoes that he had been aching to throw at me remained in his pockets.

Another man was tapping him gently on the shoulder, bidding him not to react, I assumed.

His colleague repeatedly clapped Masher on the back as the veteran hare-catcher edged his way towards the exit like a man who had suffered bereavement.



A Curious Sense of Elation

The outcome of the case was splashed across the front page of next day's Evening Press. Anti-coursing man wrongly Fired screamed the banner headline. The case was covered in excruciating detail by the local papers.

Some townspeople congratulated me. Others, who sympathised either with coursing or the plight of the Co-op, were hostile and scathing.

Anti-blood sports campaigners phoned and wrote to me with messages of support and congratulation. Many of them were people who, like me, were struggling to make themselves heard in rural districts where coursing was long established. A County Sligo woman wrote:

"I'm glad you won the case and I know how you feel. I find it difficult to take a stand against this cruelty. I wore a badge with the slogan: Save our Hares on it to a dance last year and my boyfriend ripped it from my blouse. He was livid. He went berserk at the sight of it. He said have nothing to do with that crowd. I didn't know his cousin was a greyhound trainer. You can't really say a word against coursing around here. Those people are far too powerful. They have connections in high and low places. They have a hold over the politicians."

The street-corner hissing contingent stepped up its weekend helpings of annoyance and harassment. The bullies looked despondent. There was a burning hatred, mingled I thought with frustration, in their eyes. The result of being thwarted.

"Ya bit the hand that fed ya, Fitz, after all the Co-op did for ya" hollered one seasoned commentator who seemed to hold the unofficial rank of chief spokesman among these daylight ghoul.

Though vindicated by the Tribunal, I was still out of a job. And I discovered that having sued your boss didn't exactly inspire confidence in potential new employers. My well publicised legal triumph worked against me, as one job application after another was politely rejected.

I got to know from tip-offs and anonymous phone calls that vengeful coursing folk had blacklisted me, quietly cautioning employers about my dodgy and subversive opinions. I would sue anyone I worked for, these doggie men warned, and I could never be trusted again after taking the Co-op to court.

My family was supportive despite these dark conspiracies, though my grandmother, who was a very wise and caring woman but suffered from nerves, saw things differently.

On her visits to our house from her rural cottage twenty miles away, she advised me about the perils of campaigning.

"Those hares are ruining your life" she opined one day, at the end of a family meal during which the nine of us present had made no mention of coursing or the Tribunal.

She worried about me. She said rosaries and lit candles in her local church, seeking divine protection for me against the forces of evil. She gave me a relic of Padre Pio, a priest who had, according to Catholic belief, the gift of being able to appear in two places at once. She asked me to swear never to lose it, promising it would keep me from harm. I still carry it everywhere, though not a fervent believer in miracles.

Another day, she predicted: “The hares will be the death of you, mind now...those coursing lads won’t stop till they have you in jail”.

I didn’t argue with her, mentally dismissing her words of warning as just nervous cogitation...a well meaning if uncalled for solicitude. A small melancholy woman with contemplative eyes, she always followed a cutting remark with a compliment to smooth over the reprimand.

Events were to prove that her insights and foreboding were far from groundless. The idea that anyone would want me jailed because of my views struck me at the time as being so foolish that I almost laughed whenever she repeated her warnings.

In fact, my grandmother was the first person who alerted me to a danger that would prove all too real. She was more tuned into the evolving situation than I was, or than any of the people, including anti-blood sports campaigners, whose advice I sought or listened to.

I wondered in later years if she might have been psychic.

Running out of job options, I walked disconsolately into the local Town Hall to inquire about a vacancy on a public works scheme. It wasn’t the most attractive position one could apply for. But it was marginally better than the dole and the hours were short.

The work involved digging ditches, cleaning up graveyards, slashing at weeds, amateur gardening for an order of friars, and building makeshift stonewalls in the countryside.

The hard-bitten, corpulent female interviewer asked me in a gruff tone if I realised what I would be doing. “I hope you’re handy with a shovel...and a spade...and an auld slash hook. You’ll be slashing your way through a forest of briars and brambles and nettles. Hot work it is in this weather.”

She knew about my previous job and of the Co-op’s humiliating defeat in the unfair dismissal case.

Leaning forward, she tapped a large forefinger on her table. “I and the scheme supervisor will have no favourites...you’ll be expected to punch in your time, boy, like anyone else. Do the job well and you’ll find me as sweet as honey. Mess around and you won’t know what hit you. I’m like a mother to the lads under me. I look after them. What you think of the hares and the hounds and the coursing doesn’t bother me in the least, so long as you pull your weight. Is that understood?”

I thanked her and promised she would have no trouble with me. Then I complimented her dedication to enhancing the local environment.

She blushed at this. “Be here...8.30 am...Monday morning.”

Before I knew it, I found myself in the midst of a church ruin, armed with a slash hook and in the company of eight other men. The corpulent lady sat on a high wall, giving orders and directing operations as we tackled the runaway shrubbery.

Music played on a radio perched beside her. She rapped on a biscuit tin to keep time to it. Though I was there by choice, I couldn’t help thinking of this as a chain gang type set-up. A fellow worker saw it as a benign form of outdoor concentration camp.

A bit harsh, that, but I could see his point. Nobody was smiling. And I was in this pickle thanks to my stand on the coursing issue.

It was certainly a comedown from serving customers at the Co-op store, but at least there was little prospect of being victimised by this employer over my anti-blood sports views. That thought consoled me. I felt a curious sense of elation and freedom most days.

I was happy and at peace with the world as I massacred weeds on the grounds of old buildings...or washed the grime from large Celtic crosses, a cloth in one hand and a bottle of caustic soda in the other.

In the middle of my twelfth week on the scheme, I saw a hare dash across a field adjoining the graveyard. Fellow workers gave me knowing looks. "Isn't it awful what they do to them?" one man remarked, resting his slash hook on a broken tombstone. A new coursing season was just days away.

Not having workplace troubles to distract me anymore, I threw myself with renewed vigour into the campaign. The pressures and worries that had made life so miserable for me in the Co-op were gone.

My anti-blood sports activities were of no interest to my new employer and I found my fellow workers largely supportive and sympathetic. Not that they made their views on hare coursing widely known, but then, precious few people did that. Nobody in my hometown was prepared to stick his or her neck out over something that "got the blood up".

I didn't blame them. After my own experience of bullying and unfair dismissal, I became self-conscious about even asking anyone to join a demo. There was a risk involved in taking a public stand on such a contentious issue.

Livelihoods could be lost. Parochialism was a powerful and practically irresistible force. Almost everyone was related to somebody with baiting connections. I had distant relatives who were partial to bloodletting, though these, to be fair, never bothered me. My own family was supportive through good times and bad.

I could see how family feuds or fallings-out could result from people in close-knit communities openly tackling a hot potato like coursing. It was asking a lot, maybe too much, of people in that situation to imperil their jobs and social standing for the sake of dumb animals. Coursing was anathema to many of them...they told me so, but the price to be paid for opposing it was too high for them also. I accepted that reality.

Still, at least now I was free to voice my own objections to it. There was no Fixer or cringing foreman around to put the brakes on my enthusiasm. And I didn't need to request leave from the public works scheme to join protests because coursing as a rule was held at weekends, my days off.

But dark challenges lay ahead. The continuing illegal attacks on coursing venues, with releasing of hares and the scattering of glass or steel tacks on fields, were driving the animal-baiters crazy. They blamed all antis for the actions of illusive saboteurs who were wrecking their hare compounds and depriving them of bait.

The late night telephone calls to my home increased in frequency and ferocity. Angry callers ranted about damage to land and farm property. I was threatened with dire punishment, though I had nothing to do with the raids.

This activism created a tense atmosphere that made life difficult for those of us who pursued a peaceful strategy of political lobbying, letter-writing, and silent protest. It wrong-footed us at every turn. People found it difficult to make a distinction between the mainstream campaign and the hare-raising nighttime capers.



“Ye’re Not Wanted in These Parts”

The season that commenced at the end of September 1985 and ran to the third week of February 1986, witnessed many a grim standoff between coursing fans and us.

I was treated to a sample of this nastiness in the opening months of the season.

On a dull grey Saturday morning, I travelled with a dozen other campaigners into the heart of Munster (the southern-most province of Ireland) to help organise a picket. The field was located near a quiet picturesque village.

Due to a traffic hold-up, local campaigners failed to arrive, so we had to make an on the spot decision as to whether to go ahead with the protest. I suggested we do a token picket, and my colleagues agreed.

As the day was young and the protest now mattered less, we decided to explore the locality and return later in the evening to mount the picket. We visited a nearby heritage site that was famous the world over: the Blarney Stone.

The entire group was anxious to see it. I had seen it during a school tour in my childhood and offered to serve as their tour guide. We entered the castle containing the revered relic.

Like the thousands, if not millions, of previous visitors to the site, my colleagues and I performed the ritual of kissing the stone, an act that according to legend confers the gift of eloquence.

Ironically, in view of what transpired about half an hour later, Blarney is defined in one dictionary as “the ability to influence and coax with fair words and soft speech without offence”.

Back at the coursing venue, we pulled our placards out of the minibus and began parading up and down on the public road. It was a silent picket. There was no provocation, apart from our actual presence and the placard slogans that read: “Protect the Hare”, “Ban Coursing”, and “End the Savagery”.

Less than ten minutes into the picket, a pair of rough looking fellows sporting cowboy hats, green combat jackets and muddy Wellingtons emerged from the gated field entrance

With hands on hips, they began taunting us. At first in a low hissing tone, they mocked the picket. “Ye’re a right shower of cunts... Jaysus, have ye nothing else to do? The dogs inside are having a ball... the hares are loving it... we’re loving it... Ye’re at nothing.”

In accordance with strict ICABS policy, we ignored the verbal abuse and carried on as if they weren’t there. This seemed to antagonise them. The voices rose to a higher pitch. “Get the fuck off that road... or we’ll bate ye off it, do ye hear that, ye fuckers?”

Danger loomed. I noticed my colleagues growing increasingly nervous. Then, we breathed a sigh of relief when the two cowboys stepped back inside the field.

We thought that was the end of it. They had made their point, and they would leave us alone. We joked quietly but nervously about their behaviour.

Our mirth died a quick death. The drone of raised voices re-focused our attention on the gateway. Dozens of coursing fans were approaching us from inside the venue. These too were attired in a quasi-military fashion, apart from the mud-caked Wellingtons, caps, and multicoloured cowboy hats. Their footwear squelched in the frosted muck and slush of the coursing field as they stepped onto the road.

Wielding sticks, they took up positions on both sides of the entrance. They leaned or squatted against the ditch that fronted the field. A palpable threat of violence hung in the air.

One of them strode to the top of the still moving picket line. He was a heavy set man with a few days growth of beard and a cigarette butt dangling from his mouth. His tartan cap had bits of grass and mud stuck to it.

Standing in the middle of the road, he placed his long blackthorn stick in the path of the protest.

The young woman in the lead stopped, clutching her placard awkwardly. She looked around at the rest of us for guidance or solidarity. We too had stopped walking. We held our placards face down, touching the ground.

The tartan-capped man broke into a wide sneering grin to reveal almost toothless gums. He started laughing, then prodded the female protester gently in the stomach with his stick, shouting: “tell your friends to get the fuck away from our coursing meeting...get back on yer fucking bus and go right back to where ye came from”.

Rapping the stick on the road in front of the woman for effect, he added: “Are ye listening? Ye’re not wanted in these parts. Ye’re not coming down here from fucking Dublin to tell us how to live, ye shower of fucking wasters”.

The woman uttered feebly: “We’re entitled to be here. We have the right to protest”.

He made no response to this. Waving the stick over his head, he re-joined his fellow fusiliers at the ditch. The picket line had disintegrated. We stood on the road in a semi-circle, facing them...a cluster of fear and tension.

The stick men were muttering insults, or cursing in a low suspicious monotone. Some of them looked angry, others scathing. They grasped their weapons tightly... possessively. A fusion of enmity and mistrust lit up their eyes. They waited for us to react.

We opted to pack it in. We were outnumbered at least five to one. It felt bad, giving in to blatant intimidation. But violence would have achieved nothing, apart from cuts and bruises or maybe worse.



Showdown in Tipperary

I witnessed a less restrained example of interaction between coursing fans and anti-blood sports protesters later in the season. The protest venue, in hindsight, was not the best place for an animal welfare activist to be on the day, given that two nearby coursing venues had been wrecked by night-time raiders a week earlier and the hares released.

People associated with the targeted fields and compounds would almost certainly be attending the event we planned to picket, and this would increase the risk of confrontation.

But as the picket had been planned many months before, and since we had nothing to do with the sabotage, we felt we ought to go ahead and register our democratic right to object to coursing, as we had done quite peacefully on previous occasions at other venues.

It was a mild autumn morning that we set out. Fallen leaves littered the roadsides. The weather was fine, if not much else.

Some of us had misgivings about the timing and location of the protest. But we all felt strongly that our constitutional right to protest should not be sacrificed just because people with no connection to our campaign had used unlawful tactics.

Again, the baiting venue was situated close to a major and indeed world-renowned heritage site: the fairytale Rock of Cashel.

A total of eighty-five people, a third of them from Dublin, the remainder from Cork, Waterford and Kilkenny, turned up to protest at the high profile event. I travelled with the Dublin group, the bus having picked me up en route.

My fellow passengers wanted to visit the famous Rock, a must-see for anyone passing through that part of Ireland for the first time.

The mammoth fortification presented an imposing sight, viewed from the bus window. The huge outcrop of limestone rose majestically out of the Golden Vale, a region of stunningly beautiful countryside that could have been a vision of Paradise.

Gasps of amazement and admiration from my colleagues greeted the ancient cluster of medieval monuments and buildings that make the Rock such a tourist draw and one of Ireland's greatest heritage assets.

The Rock had witnessed a millennia and a half of war and peace, power struggles and ecclesiastical skulduggery. It had been the proud seat of kings for centuries prior to the Norman invasion of Ireland.

In the 11th century King Brian Boru had reigned from this centre of Celtic magnificence. For a few precious minutes, we lost ourselves in a stony time capsule, with its 12th century Round Tower, commanding High Cross, Romanesque Chapel, 15th Century Castle, and 13th Century Gothic cathedral.

It was an almost spiritual experience...more so for my colleagues who had not visited the Rock before. In the midst of these treasures, we almost forgot our picket rendezvous. We mingled with American and Japanese tourists, who looked spellbound.

It would have been so pleasant, someone opined, if we could just hang about for a little longer, inspecting and idly contemplating the work of our ancestors. But duty called.

A worried young woman reminded us: “I wonder how many hares will come to a bad end today.”

With a mild reluctance, we left behind the great promontory to visit another, less edifying relic of our past.

The picket was already underway when we approached the coursing venue. Brightly painted placards called for a ban on coursing.

As the bus slowed down to stop, the driver, whose window was open, asked: “what the hell is that?”

“What’s what?” somebody queried.

“Listen...” he pleaded, rolling his window down further.

We all heard it...a sound like an ambulance or fire brigade siren in the distance. There was a rising and falling in the sinister yowl as a light wind conveyed the sound to us...a shrill whining that I had first heard as a youth in the Church Field.

The bus creaked to a halt. Standing behind the driver with a few others, I told him it was the death cry of a hare that was having its intestines ripped out.

A look of disgust lit up his face. He said nothing.

As we alighted from the bus, I heard the familiar crackle of a loudspeaker from inside the field. The hare’s screeching had ceased. A voice announced the winner of the course, coldly ignoring the fate of the animal that had just been pulled apart.

It named the next two participating greyhounds. There wasn’t a hint of awkwardness or abnormality or shame in the voice. The commentary could have referred to a basketball game or a funfair for kids.

The picket proceeded in a peaceful manner, with the buzz of gentle conversation distracting us from the cruelty inside. Our sole purpose was to protest for two and a half hours and then leave, having made our point.

But the mood changed after about twenty minutes of silent walking up and down the public road outside the venue.

A woman who was a member of our campaign group emerged uneasily from the field, flanked and followed by more than twenty coursing fans, who were roaring threats and obscenities at her. She had obviously been identified as an observer...a spy from the enemy camp.

The men in pursuit of her were raging. Slowed down by their Wellingtons, they still moved with considerable agility. An intense anger drove them. The cause of this became apparent when a burley fellow, his fists beating the air, shouted: “Ye’ll pay for what ye did at Ballyknock coursing field”, a reference to one of the venues sabotaged the previous week.

Many of them wielded axe handles or sticks, and a few were armed with makeshift batons...short lengths of hosepipe. They spilled out onto the busy Cork to Dublin road, blocking traffic from both directions. We had been walking close to the ditch along the road, allowing the cars and lorries to pass unimpeded.

They were hell-bent on confronting us. Despite pleas that we were there simply to protest peacefully, the fans began shouting at picketers and pushing them.

A woman in her late forties fell to the ground close to the gateway, having been poked and prodded forcefully with an axe handle. “You’re a bunch of ignorant thugs”, she screamed at them...an unwise but understandable retort.

As she rose to her feet, three men surrounded the woman, raining punches and kicks on her. Seeing this, half a dozen protesters ran to her rescue, throwing their placards behind them into the ditch on the side of the road opposite the field entrance.

As the protesters attempted to ward off her attackers, and extract her from the melee, other cursing fans threw themselves at them. All hell broke loose.

We were set upon by scores of frenzied men in green anoraks and Wellingtons. They lashed out savagely with fists, feet, hosepipe, and sticks.

These attackers were joined by reinforcements from inside the venue. They poured out through the gateway, screeching in demented, bloodcurdling accents about glass on coursing fields and hares that bolted.

I felt nervous, though not scared, as I believed no harm could come to me if I didn't retaliate or do anything to provoke these men. A naïve hope, since they regarded the picket itself as sufficient provocation.

I heard whispered prayers around me. "Hail Mary...full of grace..." "Sweet Jesus, protect us"...

"O God preserve us from harm", a fear-stricken eighty-three old implored, clinging tightly to her placard that read, somewhat ironically: "Coursing is the sport of Bullies".

There seemed to be hundreds of them, hurtling at us like an angry swarm of wasps. Placards were used in self-defence, not to strike the attackers, but to deflect the blows, punches, and kicks that came fast and furious.

Some protesters fought back, returning blow for blow. This was against ICABS policy, but in the heat of a fracas where one's physical well-being, maybe even one's life appears to be threatened, such considerations evaporate. Fear and hatred fed the violence like petrol tossed on a fire.

And the screaming, roaring, cursing, and moaning almost drowned out the sound of the loudspeaker inside that was heralding the next race.

In the midst of the one-sided marathon brawl, I saw a young woman being half dragged and half carried into the field. Protesters rushed to her defence, breaking through a thick phalanx of cursing fans and getting a fair few wallops along the way.

The men dropped the woman just inside the gate entrance and backed off, spitting down at her and then lashing out with axe handles at the rescue party.

I was fortunate not to sustain any serious injury, apart from a cut lip and bruises on both shoulders.

As I deflected blow after blow with a broken and frayed placard, I spotted a number of protesters who were bleeding or nursing more conspicuous injuries.

A man in his twenties was sitting against a ditch, both hands clasping his head, from which blood was streaming.

A terrified and clearly shaken elderly man was comforting a woman with a dazed expression and a nasty scratch on her face as the fierce exchange raged around the two of them.

Meanwhile, frustrated drivers were jumping out of their vehicles. This added to the chaos and swelled the numbers of people fighting, standing, sitting, squatting, lying, or crawling on the road, which was now totally congested.

The running battle prevented any movement of traffic. A driver who was apparently mistaken for a protester was punched in the stomach and hit over the head with a length of hosepipe. Three of his passengers ran to his aid, gesticulating frantically and reprimanding everyone in sight, including myself, for the assault.

A powerfully built man; stripped to the waist and brandishing a bloodied axe handle, extended his hand in apology to the driver, saying, “Sorry about that, we thought ya were an anti”.

Many more coursing fans lined the roadside as jeering spectators. They cheered on their compatriots. Roars of encouragement ratcheted up the tension and fed the fury of the attackers.

After about fifteen minutes of fighting, two uniformed guards, wheezing and gasping for breath, emerged from inside the coursing field.

One of them stood in the middle of the road and roared: “For God’s sake stop it...stop it. Ye’re holding up the traffic for miles. Come on now lads, back into the field to the coursing...throw away those ash plants or whatever ye have and get off the road.”

Reluctantly, the still raging fans dropped their weapons one by one under the watchful eyes of the policemen. They made no arrests, the priority, I supposed, being to restore order and avoid serious injury.

In a collective state of shock and bewilderment, we boarded the bus and returned to our homes, feeling lucky to be alive after our brush with the downside of human nature.

This, and other less violent encounters on the picket lines, gave ICABS and other groups campaigning for wildlife protection food for thought. The aim of picketing was to achieve media coverage for our cause...and thus, hopefully, increase pressure on the politicians to outlaw hare coursing.

The problem was that a handful of activists who believed peaceful protest was a waste of time were engaging in an underground campaign of disruption and sabotage. And the coursing people were blaming us.

Concerned for the safety of its members, and to help avert unnecessary violence or brawling, ICABS decided to scale down the number of protests at coursing events. It would avoid picketing fixtures in remote areas, or ones lacking proper police supervision.

Despite this precautionary measure, the following weeks and months witnessed further ugly incidents involving the ejection of observers from coursing venues. Once identified, any man or woman discovered to be spying for the anti-blood sport organisation was immediately asked to leave.

The fans, whose fear of adverse publicity often bordered on paranoia, displayed varying degrees of aggression or violence. The observer might be escorted from the field...or given a severe beating and then thrown out the way a bouncer expels a troublemaker from a pub or nightclub.

To get around this drawback, ICABS sent in people to observe who had a macho “coursing look” about them or who could pass themselves off as “good old boy” red neck types. These could blend in better among the fans.

But the illegal nighttime raids on coursing compounds were making campaigners jittery. What if someone got hurt during a raid? What if an armed night watchman shot an activist?

We were aware, from newspaper reports that appeared sporadically between late 1985 and the weeks leading up to the coursing season that commenced in Autumn of 1986, that the Guards had been called in to investigate the countrywide spate of attacks.

What mainstream campaigners like myself failed to realise or anticipate was that we, as known opponents of hare coursing, would be on the list of police suspects.

This applied especially to those of us perceived by the coursing fraternity to be the strongest or highest profile advocates. We failed to recognise the danger signs.

I was naïve in thinking that these developments didn't concern me. I continued writing to the newspapers. I spoke on local radio whenever I got the chance, in defence of the humble hare. Each weekend during the 1985/86 Season, I travelled north, south, east, or west to picket a coursing event.

I discussed the subject freely and openly with my workmates on the restoration scheme. There was nothing to fear, I believed. Having an opinion and expressing it was no crime. The unfair dismissal case had proven that for me. I would not be silenced.

I persisted in my efforts against coursing...blissfully unaware of the storm that was about to break over my little corner of the Universe.



24

Sabotage

I first became aware of the sabotage attack on Rathcarney coursing field when a Cork-based anti-blood sports campaigner phoned me early one October morning to reveal that the Cork Examiner newspaper had carried a big report on the incident.

"It's all over the friggen paper," blurted the excitable and nervous voice on the other end.

"What on earth are you talking about?" I queried. "Didn't you hear?" she asked incredulously, "a coursing field up your way has been covered with a half ton of broken glass and carpet tacks!"

It was the Rathcarney venue, she informed me. This premier coursing field was situated barely six miles from my home. I asked her to read the article to me.

Some individual or group purporting to be the Animal Liberation Front, or "ALF", had issued a statement to the paper claiming that the coursing field had been strewn with a large quantity of broken glass and steel tacks. The statement claimed that the "attack" was part of an all-out war on hare coursing.

The report quoted a coursing club official as confirming that extensive damage was caused to the grounds. He was further quoted as threatening that shotguns would be produced if the culprits ever returned to the area.

Though having little sympathy for the coursing club involved, I found this news both alarming and depressing. Broken glass and tacks could be picked up and ingested by livestock, and if that happened, the results would be horrendous, causing immense pain or injury to the animals.

Damaging the property of a coursing club might have seemed justifiable to radical opponents of cruelty. But it seemed counter-productive and contradictory to put the lives and welfare of farm animals at risk as part of an effort to end the abuse of the hare population.

To add to the embarrassment for animal welfare people, it was revealed on local radio that a homemade cake and buns Open Day was to have been organised on the coursing venue by members of the ICA- the Irish Countrywomen's Association, that weekend.

This had to be cancelled due to the state of the field, so these civic-minded ladies found themselves making common cause with the coursing men and baying for the blood of anyone in the locality remotely associated with the raiders who had damaged the venue.

My friend in Cork had no idea as to who might have been behind the sabotage. She agreed with me that the attack had the potential to hurt the anti-coursing campaign and that it made no sense from an animal-welfare point of view.

We even discussed the dark possibility that coursing fans might have staged the incident to blacken our own cause.

Certainly, anyone wishing to play havoc with the campaign, and arouse sympathy for the coursing clubs, could hardly have conceived of a more lethal or effective means of achieving that aim.

I felt embarrassed and deflated by the glass and tacks stunt at Rathcarney. I had difficulty persuading locals who mentioned it to me that I totally disapproved of it, and that I had no knowledge whatsoever of the group allegedly behind it.

"So ye're feeding glass to cows and horses now, and ye supposed to be caring for animals?" shrieked a late-night night phone-caller, who went on to promise "serious consequences" for me and anyone else in the district who dared ever open his mouth again about coursing. Other callers delivered similar messages.

There were angry calls to radio stations too, with people demanding to know why animal lovers had perpetrated such a crazy act. Within a few days, however, the furore appeared to have abated somewhat, though I feared the impact the incident might have on the campaign nationally.

Unknown to me, plans were being laid in the capital of coursing country to make me well and truly pay for what happened at Rathcarney.

The fact that I had nothing to do with the affair, and would not even contemplate supporting such head-the-ball-tactics, counted for little in the minds of people who were determined to draw blood and wreak vengeance.



Don't Wake the Cat

A week to the day after the glass and tacks raid, the wrath of the hare coursing fraternity descended on my home. I remember the morning well. As clearly as I recall Punch-bag Day in the Co-op store.

I was fast asleep, in the middle of what is often referred to as a “flying dream”...the type you don't want to wake up from.

I was flying over mountains, lush green valleys, gurgling country streams, lakes fringed by “hosts of Golden Daffodils” like in the poem, and all the other attractions of a dream landscape that psychics call the “Summerland”.

My flight of imagination was accompanied by the kind of peace... tranquillity...and feelings of wellbeing that you find only in dreams or near death experiences.

But a sudden loud rapping interrupted my carefree glide through Paradise. I heard claps of thunder amid the scenic wonderland...then the rapping started inside my head.

Scenes of ineffable beauty began to fade all around me.

The sky turned black. I started to fall, hurtling to earth with a frightening rapidity as the rapping, both inside and outside my head continued.

The heavenly terrain disappeared with a sound like the popping of a bubble. I rubbed my eyelids, slowly opening them.

I still heard the noise I thought had been part of the dream. It came from downstairs. Somebody was banging vehemently on the front door. I heard the frenzied, turbulent humming of the doorbell.

As I had been up late the previous night, I was sleepy-eyed and took my time walking downstairs from the top of the three-storey house to answer.

The rapping grew louder, and the bell ringing more persistent. It was as if someone was trying to break the door down. I moved faster...I was sure that something terrible had happened. Perhaps a family member had been involved in an accident, or maybe somebody needed help urgently.

I opened the door.

Standing on the footpath outside were five tall men in suits. “What's the problem?” I asked, startled by this early morning apparition. They looked like men dressed up for a wedding.

One of them immediately pushed me aside and entered, followed by three of his colleagues. As they strode frantically through the hallway to the sitting room, leaving me standing at the entrance, the fifth man pulled out a folded sheaf of papers from his waistcoat pocket. He waved these in front of me, and laughed out loud.

He was about middle-aged, and appeared to be the man in charge of the intruders. A head of straight well-oiled steel-grey hair topped his red face with its piercing blue eyes and sensuous womanly mouth. His neck was even redder than his head, and reminded me of a turkey cock.

Glaring down at me, he crowed: "You know what this is, Fitzgerald, it's a fucking search warrant. We're here to search this kip. I'm Detective Sergeant Michael McEvoy of Garda Special Branch.

"We know you were behind that Rathcarney thing and by Jesus Christ you'll regret the day you ever set foot on that field. Tell me now...where's your office or wherever you do all the writing?"

Dazed by the abruptness of the incursion, I offered to show them around any part of the house they wished to see, as I had nothing to hide.

"I asked you...where's your fucking office?" he repeated, raising his voice.

My mother, who slept downstairs, had taken longer to get dressed after being awoken by the racket at the front door. As pale as a sheet, she joined me in the hallway just inside the entrance.

Anxious and alarmed, she asked: "what's up?"

Expanding his chest and rising on his heels, McEvoy motioned with his hand at her to stay out of his way.

"Nothing to concern yourself with, just stand aside. Make a pot of tea for us Missus while we search this house. I hope you know the trouble your son is in. He's up shit creek without a paddle. Did you hear he vandalised a coursing field?"

"No way did he damage any field...what are you on about?" she retorted.

"Just show the lads and myself where this fellow does his writing and typing" he demanded, addressing her but staring at me.

She accompanied McEvoy and his four colleagues to a room at the back of the house, part of which had been converted for use as a makeshift office.

Two of the men started to browse through reams of papers and documents that lay stacked in untidy heaps along a sideboard. Two others set to work at a bookcase, pulling out books and scattering them on the floor. I asked them what they were searching for.

The four detectives engaged in the search ignored me. McEvoy, who stood beside me with arms folded, answered: "The bastards who did the Rathcarney job sent a letter to the field owner a week before the crime, threatening to wreck the place...you wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

He tapped his foot on the ground as he awaited a reply.

I responded forcefully "Look, I know nothing about the Rathcarney thing. I would never throw glass on land grazed by cattle, and I know nothing either about any letters written to a landowner".

One of the detectives standing in front of the bookcase turned his attention to a large sofa in the room that had stacks of paper piled on it. Also on the sofa was my black and white cat, Bonzo. He was fast asleep, rolled up, and lying on top of a three-foot high pile of folders crammed with documents.

As the detective moved towards the sofa, I whispered aloud: "the cat is asleep. Could you please try not to wake him?"

The detective grinned broadly, and looked to his Sergeant for guidance. McEvoy pulled at his chin thoughtfully, gave my mother a look of incredulity, and ordered: "Examine every scrap of paper on that sofa...but don't wake the cat. I don't want this spacer complaining that his pussycat needs counselling...or writing to the papers about it".

This posed a dilemma for the elite team of sleuths, as it would be difficult to remove the pile of folders from under the cat without waking him.

McEvoy directed two of his men to raise the folder on which the cat slept "very carefully" and take the cat into another room to avoid disturbing it. Both of them looked as if they were holding back an outburst of laughter. They each took an end of the folder, raising it and the sleeping bundle of fur off the sofa.

They reminded me of pallbearers at a funeral. Slowly, they tiptoed out of the room with the cat, through the kitchen, and into the sitting room, where they laid him down in front of the fireplace. They allowed the folder to remain under him.

"Happy now?" McEvoy asked me, sarcasm written all over his face.

The search continued. The detectives leafed through reams of hand-written notes, printed anti-coursing leaflets, and correspondence from various pressure groups and individuals.

They replaced most of these where they found them, but put others aside in a pile on the floor that was growing ever higher. Any scrap of paper with my handwriting on it seemed to interest them, and incoming correspondence. All my diaries were confiscated.

After twenty minutes or so of this rummaging, the relative silence that prevailed during the search was broken by a loud wolf whistle. It came from a detective who was waving a single-page circular in the air, and motioning McEvoy to examine it.

Taking it from the other man, McEvoy chortled, "Hip hip, lads, we've nailed the fucker!"

He held a copy of a letter that had been sent to animal welfare groups in Ireland from a British-based extremist organisation, the Animal Liberation Front, or ALF. It had arrived by post two days previously. The letter urged support for the kind of illegal and occasionally violent activities that a minority of UK groups engaged in.

I had received a number of such circulars from Britain, and had made a point of tossing them in the fire. I had never replied to, or even acknowledged such correspondence. Unfortunately, I had neglected to dispose of this one A-4 sized communication from the ALF.

McEvoy held it close to my eyes, smiling. His hand shook as he gripped it tightly, creasing it. "See that, Fitzgerald, that's your ticket to Mountjoy. Your crank days are over. You can forget about your hares and harassing those sportsmen with your poisonous writing. It's a prison cell for you. God, what a fool...to be carrying on like that. Threatening coursing men in those crazy anonymous letters... and throwing glass on their fields. You'll do at least five years for this".

I tried to deny any knowledge of the glass and tacks escapade at Rathcarney, and the anonymous threats to coursing people. He wasn't listening. He directed his colleagues to place the pile of notes and correspondence they had collected into a large empty box that lay close by.

Then, turning to me, he pulled out a document from an inside pocket. He smiled again and whistled softly.

Taking a deep breath, he declared: "John Fitzgerald, I'm arresting you under Section 30 of the Offences Against the State Act 1939 on suspicion of having caused malicious damage to Rathcarney coursing field, of having participated in the unlawful releasing of seventeen jack hares, five does and three leverets from Tubbercarry coursing compound, and of sending, or causing to be received, letters threatening to cause damage to seventy eight coursing fields within the Republic of Ireland."

I was flabbergasted. Almost speechless. I developed a kind of momentary stammer as I hastened to deny the slightest involvement in any of these actions.

"Take him out!" McEvoy snapped.

We passed the sleeping cat in the sitting room on the way out of the house. The search team had not opened the folder, crammed with documents, upon which Bonzo slept.

This puzzled me. They seemed more anxious to avoid waking the cat than with examining the potentially vital evidence that the folder might contain. Or it may have been an oversight.

My mother protested as I was led to the front door, into the street, and bundled into an unmarked Special Branch car. I waved at her through the rear window. She looked distraught...standing on the pavement outside the house.

Another car cruised behind as I was driven to a Garda Station in a neighbouring county. A detective sat beside me in the back seat. McEvoy was in front with the driver.



Duress

"You're in the big league now John. These are serious crimes and your only hope is to admit everything. Get it off your chest", the detective beside me droned self-importantly.

In a friendly tone, he added: "Just do everything you're told when you get to the station...answer every question, and we'll go easier on you in court. Otherwise, we'll have to go the whole hog and you can say goodbye to your mother and that cat for five or six years. Your future is in our hands now. You understand that, don't you?"

I shook my head, not indicating a yes or no. Just shock, confusion, and disorientation. "Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"Over the hills and far away" McEvoy boomed. The man beside me chuckled and the driver roared laughing.

"You'll know when you get there", McEvoy muttered sarcastically

After a half-hour drive, the car entered a small town in a neighbouring county. It drove down the main street, turned left, cruised along a narrow road and pulled up close to the front of a rundown, shabby building that stood next to a decommissioned petrol pump.

Were it not for a sign reading "Garda" over the entrance to it, I would have taken it to be a semi-derelict or severely neglected dwelling.

The other car stopped behind the one I was in.

McEvoy looked unhappy. Getting out of the car, he approached the station and I noted the cause of his discomposure: A squad car was blocking the approach to the station yard. Its half-open boot had two large bales of hay protruding from it. McEvoy rang the doorbell on the station and out stepped a hearty uniformed Garda.

"Ah Jaysus Mick, how are ya?" the guard chivvied. McEvoy shook hands with him and pointed to the obstructing vehicle.

After a brief exchange, the guard strode quickly to the squad car and drove it away from in front of the yard entrance. A part time farmer, he conveyed hay to cattle a few miles outside the town when off duty.

I was ushered out of the car. In the company of the five detectives, I passed under the blue Garda sign and entered the station. Inside the entrance, a hatch slid back on a glass partition and an elderly guard inquired what the matter was.

McEvoy put him in the picture: "You were notified this morning. We have an arrested suspect here...he's one of those anti-coursing trouble-makers...We need to question him about serious crimes."

"Oh right, could you step in here and we'll make the arrangements" the Garda responded curtly.

I was told to sit down for a few minutes on a wooden seat that ran along a wall of the reception area. A detective sat on either side of me, with arms folded. The hatch slid shut and I couldn't hear what the men were discussing behind the glass, though I knew they had to be talking about me.

About ten minutes later, McEvoy emerged with the elderly Garda. "We're going upstairs...take that clown up" he barked to his subordinates.

Nervously, I asked McEvoy if I could phone my mother to let her know where I was. She'd be worried sick, I explained.

In an agitated tone, he retorted, "You can phone her when we've finished interviewing you...when you've admitted your crimes."

With two men in front of me and three behind, I was rushed up three flights of stairs, and along a short corridor.

McEvoy opened a door. I found myself in a large room that seemed to have been stripped of furniture...apart from an ancient-looking teak desk with two wooden chairs behind it, and one tall barstool in front of it that I reckoned could have seen service in the oldest pub in Ireland.

The walls, painted a dirty off-white, had no pictures, pin-ups, or even a calendar. And no windows. The ceiling was equally dull and monotonous, apart from a single bulb that dangled from the centre without a shade.

McEvoy motioned three of his colleagues to leave the room. The one who remained was the detective who had offered "friendly" advice to me in the car. I was shown the barstool and told to sit down. They seated themselves behind the desk, a pile of folders and documents stacked before them.

I had my back to the door as I faced the grim-faced duo. McEvoy turned to his colleague.

"Shall we kick off?" he jibed.

The other man nodded.

"As I've told you, I'm Detective Sergeant Mick McEvoy and this man is Detective Garda Pat Collier. Our job is to get you to tell the truth and to admit your crimes. It's looking bad...very bad for you, but if you play ball with us; we'll do what we can for you. If you mess around, it's your own funeral.

"You were arrested under the Offences against the State Act. That means we can detain you for up to forty-eight hours. It's a law that was brought in to tackle the lowest scum of society...like the IRA and the INLA paramilitaries. We only use this Act when we're dealing with dangerous criminals and people who pose a serious risk to the safety and wellbeing of the community.

"The thugs and idiots who've been interfering with coursing fields and trying to frighten the bejaysus out of sportsmen are no better than the bombers that kill people in the North. The lad who breaks into a coursing compound or spreads glass on a field is in the same league as the likes of Dominick McGlinchy and the Border Fox and other desperados".

He paused, as if waiting for my reaction. I said nothing. I was transfixed by his deeply absorbing spiff, but hadn't yet heard how any of this concerned me.

The contrast in appearance and demeanour between the two men was striking. McEvoy looked and sounded angry and impatient. He exuded a seething hostility. His flushed red face and neck, and his piercing blue eyes, I found menacing.

Collier was the opposite. He had a benign smile, unthreatening sleepy brown eyes, and a seemingly friendly disposition. He was polite and respectful at all times.

McEvoy arose, walked away from the desk, and stood behind me. I strained to look around at him.

"I'm going to get straight to the point", he began, adopting a superior air, "We know you are guilty of terrible crimes. Number one...you have written dozens of anonymous letters to landowners who allow

coursing on their property...number two, we know you were with the gang that wrecked a coursing compound in County Offaly and turned the hares loose...number three, we know you were the leader of the gang that spread glass and carpet tacks over the Rathcarney field..."

I interrupted... "I'm sorry, but look; I did none of those things. I know nothing about anonymous letters, attacks on fields, or the releasing of hares in Offaly. I had nothing, good, bad, or indifferent to do with any of that. I just write letters to the papers..."

"John", he continued, "your friends have ratted on you. We pulled in a man last week and he has given us a full statement, admitting his own involvement in the crimes, and implicating you. I can't name him to you or go into details right now...but his statement has you hung, drawn, and quartered. His evidence could have you put away no bother."

I expressed amazement at this, pointing out that since I knew nothing about the incidents referred to, I couldn't understand how someone could have implicated me in these alleged crimes.

I asked who this person was and if I could see the statement he or she had made.

"No, you can't. You'll see it soon enough if you don't co-operate" McEvoy snapped behind me.

He returned to his desk and nodded to his colleague. Collier opened up a thick folder and spilled its contents across the desk. They were Photostat copies of hand-written letters.

"Pick up one of those John and read it aloud"! McEvoy ordered.

I plucked a letter from the pile, scanning its contents quickly. It was a copy of a foolscap page on which was written, in crude block lettering, a vile and insulting message, threatening retaliation against a landowner unless he withdrew his field from a coursing club. It contained the foulest of language.

"Read it out!" repeated McEvoy, as I continued to study the letter.

I refused to read it aloud, throwing it back onto the desk.

"This has nothing to with me. I've never seen it before" I protested.

McEvoy stood up, glaring at me. He pointed an accusing finger and hissed: "You bloody well wrote the damned thing...and every one of these letters!"

I repeated my denial. Angrily, McEvoy grabbed another letter, held it up like a scroll, and began circling me as he read slowly and with great deliberation.

"Dear Bollix Fuck Head, if you allow those shitbag fuckers and morons from the coursing club to hold another session on your land, we'll come around some night and dump a shitload of glass and nails on your field. We'll torch your hay barn. We'll steal your chickens. We'll haul you out of the house when we've finished and cut off your balls with a wire snips and feed them to your greyhound. Will he enjoy the feed? We'll post one of your balls to the coursing club boss and then we can all have a ball. Yours Faithfully, Animal Liberation Front"

Garda Collier had been eyeing me carefully while his superior read the offensive communiqué. He leaned pensively on the desk, a blank expression on his face. One hand propped up his chin and the other gently brushed across the heap of letters. He seemed to be studying my reaction.

Shaking his head in disbelief, McEvoy folded the letter and struck me on the back of the neck with it. Still standing behind me, he asked: "How in the name of all that's wonderful could a normal human being write something like that?"

"I agree that it's pretty bad" I replied "...but you see, Sergeant, I only write letters to the newspapers, and I type them. I'd never write that kind of rubbish. You're talking to the wrong person".

Ignoring my response, he instructed his colleague to take a handwriting sample. Collier handed me a sheet of paper and asked me to copy out one of the anonymous letters...he said they wished to determine if my handwriting was similar to that of whoever wrote the "unsigned correspondence".

I agreed to do this, believing it would convince them they were on the wrong track and that I was not the author of the "ALF" threats.

After completing this task, I gave him back the page. He examined it, shrugged, and passed it to McEvoy.

McEvoy stared at it, looked angrily at me, and said: "You're a devious bastard Fitzgerald. Anyone can disguise his handwriting. Tell me this...do you think we're stupid? This doesn't look like the other stuff, but don't worry. We have an expert who'll be analysing every scrap we got in your house...all the pages from your diaries...all your notes and scribbles...and if he finds a scintilla of evidence to show that you wrote those things, we'll be down on you like a ton of fucking bricks."

He motioned me to say nothing when I began to respond. Seating himself again at the desk, he reached for another page from the pile of documents. It was the ALF circular that he had found in my house.

Holding it up he crooned: "When did you join this gang? Who are its other members? We want names and addresses."

I explained how I came to have the circular...that it had arrived unsolicited from people who, I presumed, had sent copies to various animal welfare groups in Ireland.

Rising from his desk he hissed: "Do you know something Fitzgerald, I don't believe you. I believe you're up to your neck in this!"

He took the entire bundle of "ALF" letters, reading extracts from each of them slowly, as he walked around the room.

He emphasised swear words and offensive terms, interrupting his recital with whispered remarks such as "Jesus, you'll swing for this", "What mother would rear a baby that would grow into a mad bastard that would say things like that about coursing men?"..."Mountjoy won't ever have seen a spacer like this snot rag. He'll rot in jail and never be heard of again".

For close to an hour, he continued to read from the abusive letters, getting more annoyed and frustrated as he progressed, and making his incisive commentary throughout the reading.

As McEvoy read, Collier gazed at me pityingly, muttering comments like "May God forgive you John", "Aw, God that's terrible to the world", "can we save you at all John, sure God maybe you'll admit your crimes and we can all go home".

At intervals of two to three minutes, he laid his head face down on the desk with his hands over his ears as if to block out the sound of McEvoy's voice.

Ending his recital, McEvoy returned to his desk and pushed all the letters into a large folder. "We'll come back to those later...we have all the time in the world...Pat, have you those photos?"

Collier produced from another folder a selection of colour photos. McEvoy took these and handed them to me. "I want you to have a good look at these," he intoned.

They were pictures of a field, showing bits of broken glass on it. A close-up revealed blades of grass through the neck of a bottle. There was a shot of men on their hands and knees picking up the glass... and one of a cow gazing worriedly at a broken bottle.

Another shot had the same cow facing the camera as if acknowledging the presence of the glass fragment and its significance in the overall scheme of things. And there was a picture of a man holding up what looked like a thumbtack for the camera.

"That's what you did to Rathcarney coursing field", accused McEvoy, in solemn and condemnatory tones.

"I was nowhere near the field. That was a crazy stunt. I'd never do anything like that" I objected. I handed back the photos.

Ignoring my response, McEvoy turned to Collier and asked for "those other photos". His colleague pulled out a batch of pictures from a folder, reaching across the desk to me with them.

"Have a good hard look at what you did to your furry bunny pals at Tubbercarry", crowed McEvoy.

Again, colour pictures. The first one I saw was of a coursing compound, with hares sitting around eating carrots or washing their whiskers. The second was a close-up of a seemingly happy hare. A coursing man stood in the background, grasping what looked like a head of lettuce. The rest of the pictures showed dead hares.

A uniformed Garda with a sad expression on his face held a hare carcass by its back legs for the camera. And there was a shot of the compound, with a gaping hole in the wire mesh, presumably the opening through which the hares had escaped.

I asked the detectives why they were showing me these. McEvoy expounded: "You see how contented and well cared for those hares were in the compound...delighted with themselves. But that was before you and your crack followers damaged the property of the coursing club and turned the hares loose.

"A third of the hares that escaped were re-captured by the club and the Gardai. But cars, lorries, and tractors knocked down those animals you see there as they ran away. The search is still on for survivors so that the coursing club can attend to their injuries. Now, do you see the harm you did? And you call yourselves animal lovers. You condemned those hares to die on the roads, and some of the drivers could have been endangered as a result when they swerved to avoid them".

Taking the photos from me, McEvoy sat down behind his desk, putting his hands behind his neck, and smiled broadly. "So that's what the jury will see when the great anti-coursing hero stands in the dock. They'll see that he does more harm to his beloved fucking hares than the people he's ranting about, the coursing men that feed and water those animals as if they were their own children. You'll be seen for the chancer and the vandal and the trouble-maker that you are".

"Since I had no hand, act, or part in the releasing of the hares," I replied, "I don't expect to answer to any court. You can't accuse me of something I didn't do."

Leaning forward, McEvoy raised his voice and shook a finger at me. "Oh but John we know you were behind the vandalising of the compound, the scattering of glass at Rathcarney, and all those scurrilous letters to the coursing clubs. You are not leaving this fucking station until we get the truth...we want to know everything. Who was with you at Rathcarney and Tubbercarry...who, if anyone, worked with you on the threatening letter campaign...who the fuck is trying to organise an ALF gang in these parts?"

Pausing for breath, he continued. "I'm leaving this room now Fitzgerald. I'll be back in here in fifteen minutes. I expect no further nonsense or denials. I want a full confession from you or I promise you'll go down for seven years in the toughest section of the worst prison in Ireland".

He stormed out of the room. When the door slammed behind him, Collier shook his head sadly. "John", he grumbled, "That's an angry man out there. I've never seen him so annoyed about anything."

Changing the subject, I asked him if I could make a phone call, as my mother would at this stage be really concerned. I also mentioned that my father, who had suffered a stroke some years earlier, was away from the

house receiving physiotherapy. He was due to return home later that day. If I was still being detained when he got back, the shock might be harmful to him.

Collier shook his head dramatically: "John, I'm afraid there can be no phone calls to anyone until we've sorted this thing out. I didn't know your father was ill. Do you think your being arrested could affect his condition?"

"I'm not sure", I replied, "but I know this will come as a nasty shock to him. My mother at this moment will be up the wall worrying, but he could take it very badly".

Fixing his eyes firmly on me, he rejoined "So your father might get another stroke if we don't get this business wrapped up, eh? I see, well, we'll just have to hurry things along then...won't we?"

"Do you think you could co-operate just a little? Look, you tell me what you know about these crimes...and what your involvement was...and I'll take a statement from you. If we make a start before Sergeant Mick comes back, he might go easier on you...it's your only chance. Could you tell me first about yourself...why you got into this anti-blood sports caper".

He had a sheet of paper in front of him and a pen in his hand. I had no problem recounting how I became involved in the campaign.

I explained that from the outset, I had acted totally within the law, picketing some coursing events, observing others, and writing to the papers to draw attention to the cruelty.

"You sent letters out in all directions about coursing, right?"

"Yes, I've written quite a few over the past five and half years" I confirmed. He made a note of this...or I presumed he was writing down what I had said.

"So you have written lots of letters to and about coursing people?"

"No!" I protested, "I never correspond with them...there would be no point..."

"But John you wrote to landowners and threatened them...as part of your anti-blood sports effort", Collier burred.

"No. I had nothing to do with that...and I don't know of anyone who's written such letters. I'm against bullying, and that's a form of bullying."

"Right, you send out letters about coursing. For the moment, I'm leaving a blank space here. John, if you decide to admit writing the anonymous ones, I can add a word or two later."

"I won't be admitting to that. I didn't do it. Will you please listen to me? I had nothing to do with that".

I then drew attention to a vital factor that I felt certain would transform the entire situation...I could account for my whereabouts on the night of the Rathcarney attack, and also on the evening of the Tubbercarry incident.

There were witnesses in my own town who could vouch for having seen me at particular times locally close to the supposed times at which these illegal activities occurred. I offered to fill him in on these alibis so that he would know I hadn't been at either venue on the relevant occasions.

Collier put down the pen, frowned, and gave me a worried look. "John, even if you weren't present when the glass was scattered or the hares were released, you are a prime mover in the anti-blood sports movement. The IRA leaders don't dirty their hands, but they are as guilty as the young fellows who pull the triggers or plant the bombs. Likewise, you send out misguided people to damage the property of coursing clubs. This all has to stop".

I quickly denied ever encouraging people to damage property, or to do anything illegal. He closed his eyes and shook his head, before continuing:

"John, I'm trying to help you here", he coaxed, "let me just explain your situation to you. If you admit to sending those ALF letters, and sign a statement to that effect, we're prepared to let the matter slide. We won't take it any further. We just want to clear up this thing and put it to bed...to keep the peace. That's what Garda Siochana means in English, Guardian of the Peace.

"Nobody will even know you admitted the crime, apart from Sergeant Mick and myself and the guards in your own town. That's my promise. The coursing people aren't after your blood, or anything like that. They just wish to live in peace and not be threatened and interfered with.

"But if you don't give us that statement admitting your guilt...then I'm afraid we're going to have to take you from this station today to what's known as a special sitting of the District Court, and you'll be charged with all these crimes...

"...Threatening to burn haybarns and inflict grievous bodily harm...messing up that coursing compound...illegal releasing of hares...scattering of glass on a field where cattle could have picked it up..."

"John, think hard...you have a choice. You can sign, and go home right now...or you'll be disgraced. Your name will be mud in the town where you live. What will your family think? What will the papers say if we charge you?"

I felt my stomach churning as I contemplated the implication of his words. What on earth was I to do? I had no experience of the legal system. I had no idea if he was being truthful about what the Gardai could do to me. I recoiled at the very idea of signing what would be a bogus, fabricated statement admitting to involvement in illegal activities.

And yet I feared the horrendous prospect of being charged with these offences and having my alleged guilt splashed across the daily papers.

What a choice...admit guilt when I was completely innocent, and go free...or tell the truth, refuse to accept their lies, and I get charged with the offences anyway!

My reflections were interrupted by the sound of the room door opening. I looked around. McEvoy was back, and beside him stood the elderly guard I had seen inside the entrance to the station.

The guard called me by name. I stood up and faced him. "John Fitzgerald, the lads are taking a hour-long break for lunch. During this period you'll be placed in a cell where you'll be given tea and sandwiches". He asked me to accompany him out of the room.

"We'll resume the interview after lunch John", Collier declared. McEvoy gave me a look of contempt; then turned away, boasting: "I hope he's willing to confess. They're ready down at the court to hear him charged. And then he'll be held on remand in prison until a date is set for his case. He'll be locked up with drug-dealers and rapists while he waits for the trial...He can play ball with us today, or he can face the music."



Capitulation

The elderly guard led me to the station cell. I felt real fear when he jangled a set of keys and the thick ugly door creaked open. I associated confinement in a cell with all the worst notions and images of prison and criminality. It slammed shut behind me, the noise generating a despairing, condemnatory echo.

There was not much space in the cell. It was dimly lit. The metallic-greyish walls were covered from the bottom to half way up with graffiti. There were no windows. A bed stood on one side of the cell and a foul smelling urinal was located in a corner on the opposite side. I sat down on the bed, completely stunned and overawed by the entire situation I found myself in.

Not being aware of my legal rights and entitlements, I felt at the mercy of these men... the scathing, intimidating sergeant who mocked my anti-blood sport views, and the smooth-tongued, ingratiating charmer who never raised his voice but was equally committed to getting a signed confession from me.

I felt a profound sense of isolation, of being completely cut off from the outside world. These feelings had taken over in the first hour of questioning, but here, in the cell, they grew stronger and more pronounced. There was a deathly silence. No sound to distract me. Just the four ugly walls with the graffiti.

I reflected again on the choice Collier had offered me: Confess to the alleged offences and walk free, or face charges at a special court hearing later in the day that would bring about my social obliteration. Privately admit to something, and have it hushed up...or be charged, whether guilty or not, with the offences.

I still refused to contemplate signing a false confession. What if they were bluffing? Perhaps there would be no charges if I refused to sign. Then again, maybe they would charge me anyway even if I did sign. Or then again, was it possible that they could only charge me if I DID sign the confession?

I tried to get my head around their claim that somebody I knew, or who knew me, had already implicated me in the underground activities. I felt almost certain they were lying. But I had a nagging worry that, just possibly, one of the people behind the sabotage, or perhaps someone wrongly suspected of involvement, might have been arrested and compelled to name another person or persons as accomplices.

If this person had signed a statement under duress pointing the finger at me, I reasoned; the detectives would have a viable case against me if I then signed a statement implicating myself, confirming that other person's admission. Would this not make it more difficult for me to avoid court proceedings by later withdrawing a statement?

I agonised over whether anyone had named me in the manner alleged. Extremely unlikely, I thought. But I feared that a suspect might, in response to promises, threats, and cajoling, have agreed to "play ball", as McEvoy called implicating oneself.

There was nobody around to answer those questions, and I had no contact with the outside world.

My attention wandered to the hundreds of slogans, cartoons, and messages that had been scrawled on the walls. I marvelled at how people in the cell could have got their hands on the crayons, pens, pencils, and markers used to execute the graffiti.

"All pigs are cops," said one message, a reversal, intended or otherwise, of a nasty street slogan. One I had never concurred with, believing it to be unfair to the majority of Gardai who just did their duty and upheld the law. "Maggie needs a fuck worse than Lucy, signed Basher" was another message that stood out.

There were scores of slogans cheering on various football or hurling teams, and hideous comments on named sportsmen.

A thought occurred to me. There was nothing, insulting or otherwise, about cursing on any of the walls. Or at least I couldn't find anything when I inspected the work of those previous inmates.

As I mulled over this, I caught sight for the first time of a colouring pencil that dangled from the end of the bed by a string.

This fascinated me. Was it put there to facilitate graffiti writers? I handled it for a second or two; just to be sure it really was a pencil. I held it as if about to write something. I wondered if the Gardai in this station actually encouraged inmates of the cell to exercise their creative urges by using the walls as sketchpads or notebooks.

I even toyed for more than a minute with the idea of adding a message of my own to the many others. Then I shuddered at the absurdity of this thought. The pencil could, just conceivably, have been placed there for the specific purpose of tempting me to use it...perhaps to daub anti-cursing slogans in the cell.

Given the bizarre nature of the interview with the two detectives, and the absurdity of the accusations they had levelled at me, I reckoned anything was possible. I became convinced that the pencil was put there to entrap me in some ridiculous way. I dropped it as if it were a poisonous snake about to bite.

It swung to and fro; making a swishing sound that broke the silence. I thought I heard another sound from behind me...It came from the door. A peephole had opened and I could just make out an eye pressed close to it.

When I moved towards the door to have a closer look, a cover slid across the hole and the eye disappeared. Someone was watching, though for how long I had no idea. Was it to see if I was going to scribble something with the pencil?

I sat on the bed again. Closing my eyes, I prayed for deliverance from this seemingly hopeless predicament. I began to brood on two words that took shape in my mind...PENAL SERVITUDE.

I had heard them uttered only in films where frowning judges passed grim sentences. The defendants always stood quivering before them, begging for mercy.

There was a terrible shame and stigma attaching to those words...a dreary, nauseating heaviness associated with them. I dreaded hearing them pronounced upon me in a courtroom packed with shocked and judgmental observers, including members of my family.

Because of my high profile involvement in the anti-cursing campaign, couldn't a Prosecution lawyer easily persuade people that I was a leading culprit in the attacks on the two cursing venues?

Because I was known throughout the length and breadth of Ireland for my letter-writing to the papers about cursing, would a jury be all the more open to believing that I also wrote the unsigned letters to cursing clubs threatening to wreak havoc?

Memories of the Employment Appeals Tribunal came flooding back. There was tension and anxiety in the weeks leading up to that event too. Worries about the possible outcome, about how I would withstand cross-examination by the solicitor for the Co-op.

And on the morning of the day itself, my nerves had been on edge as the clock ticked towards the opening of proceedings.

But that hearing was different from a case in which I might stand accused of criminal offences. Whatever the outcome of the Tribunal hearing, nobody would have suffered terribly...winning or losing didn't carry with it the dire consequences of being found guilty in a criminal trial. That much I knew.

Apart from a relatively minor financial loss, failure at the Tribunal would not have deprived me of liberty or the right to a good name.

What I considered to be the very real, frightening possibility of a wrongful conviction, arising from a set of bogus but persuasive and believable charges relating to alleged intimidation and malicious damage, concentrated my mind in a way that the unfair dismissal case could never have done.

It created a spectre of utter hopelessness and desolation...something akin, I imagined, to a prognosis of terminal disease by a doctor you have no reason to doubt or disbelieve.

I visualised a phalanx of long faces and pointing fingers in a lacklustre shadowy space...all passing their own judgement on me in the wake of a judge's passing of sentence. I had a sense of being banished to outer darkness, like in those medieval visions of Hell where a ferryman conveys a damned soul across the River Styx to the waiting Inferno.

Such desolate fears and presentiments occupied my thoughts as I tried to work out some plan of action to address the challenge that confronted me. If I signed the bogus statement, I asked myself, could I not then withdraw it next day or later...once I was safely away from these men and their all-powerful Offences against the State Act?

Could I not go along with them... as a ploy...and then contact a solicitor and explain everything?

This option began to take on an appeal that grew stronger with each minute of frenzied reasoning. I could be out of this God-forsaken place and back home within an hour if I just signed that sheet of paper awaiting me back in the interrogation room.

It would all be exposed as a cooked-up fabrication afterwards, and then my troubles would be over. So I reasoned.

Come to think of it, the statement would be worthless in any event as I could easily refute the parts relating to the Rathcarney and Tubercarry incidents. My alibis for both occasions were cast-iron, as the Americans would say.

Simply comparing my handwriting to the writing in the abusive correspondence could disprove my alleged authorship of the letters. The statement would then be worthless. No threat to me whatsoever.

Yes. This was the only way out of it, I decided. To risk being charged was now unthinkable.

Apart from the long term devastating consequences for my own life, I feared for the health and wellbeing of my father. The effect on him of hearing that I had been arrested, let alone the impact of criminal charges, could prove a major shock to him and might, I feared, lead to another stroke. I couldn't allow that to happen. Not when I could avoid it.

A sudden noise startled me. The cell door creaked open and in stepped in the elderly guard with a mug of tea and a plate of sandwiches. I took these and thanked him.

Then, on an impulse, I asked him a question: "Excuse me, Garda, but can you tell me something...Am I going to be charged today? I mean...I've done nothing wrong. How can I be charged with offences if I didn't commit them?"

He looked at me with a puzzled expression. "I haven't a clue what's happening, John boy, all I know is you're here today to be questioned about vandalism at coursing fields and letters threatening to cause more

damage. I suppose you'll be let go soon. It's up to the lads. I have no say at all. I can't imagine you'll be charged unless they have evidence to back up the charges. Don't worry yourself."

I thanked him, and he locked the cell door behind him. As I drank the tea and ate the sandwiches, I resolved to sign their damned statement. But not until I had first tested their own resolve to follow through on their threat to have me charged if I refused.

I felt there was still a chance that they were bluffing. I would try to satisfy myself that this was no hollow threat. Perhaps they would back down if I persisted in my refusal to make a false confession.

After spending about an hour in the cell, I heard the jangling of keys again. The door opened. The elderly guard motioned me to come with him. The interrogation was to resume.

McEvoy and Collier were seated behind their desk. I sat on the barstool. McEvoy informed me that they now wished to take my fingerprints "as part of this criminal investigation".

He asked me to approach the desk. Opening a flat metal box, he instructed me to give him my hand, so that he could press each finger in turn into the black substance.

I paused for a moment, wondering if the stains would be difficult to remove. Misreading my hesitancy, McEvoy spat: "Come on...your hand...I can break every one of your fingers if you don't co-operate. Your fingerprints have to be taken".

"I have no objection," I rejoined, taken aback by his renewed antagonism. "I've done nothing wrong. Maybe this will help to clear things up.

One by one, he pushed each finger into the box; then pressed it on a sheet of paper. Impressions of my palms were also taken. Having completed this task, he handed me a cloth to remove the stains and ordered me to sit down.

"Well, have you considered your position?" McEvoy queried.

"I have".

"I'm glad to hear that. Garda Collier has some good news for you. Tell him".

Collier beamed. He threw his hands up in a half-hearted show of relief. "John!" he teased, in his soft soothing voice, "this is your lucky day. The Super has been on to us. Without even checking your claim that you were elsewhere when those blackguards messed up Tubbercarry and Rathcarney, he's of the opinion that we shouldn't get you to admit to either of those crimes."

Taken by surprise, I affirmed that this was a relief, as I was nowhere near either venue. Neither, I re-asserted, had I directed or egged anyone else on to cause damage.

Collier's smile disappeared. His face assumed a dour, unhappy expression. He looked uncomfortable. McEvoy was rapping a pencil on the desk, impatiently.

"There's a condition, of course" Collier continued, "John, we're now willing to drop all mention of the vandalism at the coursing grounds from the statement you'll be making...but only if you admit in the statement to sending those anonymous letters. What we said before lunch still applies...no charges will follow if you sign the statement.

"But John, and I want you to understand this and be in no doubt about your position, if you don't sign that statement we're taking you down to the courthouse within the next hour. You'll be charged with ALL the crimes...not just the anonymous letter writing.

"After being charged, you'll be clapped in handcuffs and lodged in Limerick Prison on remand. We'll oppose bail. We have a press release ready for the papers to let them know you're on your way to jail, and that the anti-coursing group's top man will be up on charges that carry a long prison stretch."

I felt sick. A weakness took hold of me and I believed I was about to faint. But I pulled myself together. I had to think fast. I took a deep breath. They didn't appear to be bluffing. Yet they had more or less conceded that there was no evidence to support their accusations of vandalism at the coursing venues. Perhaps if I held out a little longer they would give up the whole charade and release me.

Nervously, I replied "This interrogation is a rotten joke, and both of you know it. There's nothing you can do to me because I've done nothing wrong".

"John...John...this is getting us nowhere..." Collier sighed.

McEvoy rose to his feet in a fury. He rushed towards me, shouting and raising a fist as if about to strike me. "Stop messing with us, are you listening, or I'll lay you flat out on that floor!" he roared.

Shaken by this outburst, I opened my mouth to protest. Before I could say anything, he spoke again, lowering his voice and wiping beads of sweat from his forehead with a sleeve of his impeccably pressed suit. He adjusted his tie, which had become ruffled.

"You told Garda Collier here when I was out that your father might be worried...You can bet your sweet life he'll be worried. I'm going down this minute to the dayroom. I can pick up the phone and have your father taken here to the station. He'll be questioned about your anti-coursing carry-on. We'll roll him into this room here in his wheelchair. You were given every chance and you blew it."

He stormed to the door, opened it, and slammed it behind him. I turned to Collier. "For God's sake, what do you wish me to sign?" I asked, feeling sick to the stomach at the thought of what I was saying.

Collier immediately rose, saying: "I'll go after him...I hope he hasn't phoned yet, or your poor father will be arrested". Opening the door, he called out "Sergeant Mick...come back. I think he's prepared to co-operate!"

McEvoy re-entered the room, his red face even more flushed than usual. Seating himself at the desk, he opened a folder from which he pulled a set of white pages with handwriting on them.

He handed these to Collier, who placed them on the desk in front of him and began to read to me: "Statement of John Fitzgerald..."

The statement, obviously prepared and written earlier, began by claiming that I had been "cautioned". It claimed that prior to the commencement of the interrogation by Collier and McEvoy, I had been informed that I had a right to silence...that I didn't have to say anything but anything I did say would be taken down and given in evidence.

No such words had in fact been uttered at any point in the interrogation. Pausing, Collier looked at me and said, "That's just something that goes at the beginning of all statements".

The statement went on to give details such as my date of birth, my address, when I joined the anti-coursing campaign...nothing wrong with those.

But then Collier read to me what purported to be an admission to having written all the threatening letters to the coursing clubs "in furtherance of my aim to rid Ireland of hare coursing".

This was utter nonsense. But I remained silent as he continued reading. The statement went on to say that I was "sorry for the trouble I caused to the coursing clubs" and that I had made my mind up not to re-offend.

The appalling document ended with the words: "this statement has been read back to me by Det/Gda Collier and it is correct".

McEvoy took the statement from Collier and handed the third of the three pages to me. Both men stood up and walked around to me. Collier gave me a pen. "Just sign there...at the bottom...John...and you can go home. There won't be any problem."

My mind a complete blank, I added my signature to the page.

"Excellent!" chirped Collier. McEvoy looked at the signed statement. "Okay, you're out of here...you can phone somebody to take you home" he intoned grudgingly.



Learning About Section 30

Feeling diminished and humiliated, I left the room, this time walking ahead of them downstairs. A young guard in the dayroom showed me the phone. I rang home. I told my mother, who sounded at her wits' end, where I had been taken to, and that I was going home again...that everything was okay now.

I asked if my father had returned yet from his physiotherapy session. He hadn't. That was a relief. I might well be home before him and he wouldn't know anything about the arrest. At least that worry was out of the way. A neighbour was to drive to the station to take me home.

I underplayed the gravity of the ordeal when I spoke about the house search, arrest, and interrogation to my family. I didn't wish to upset them, and especially not my father. My brother was alarmed to hear that evening that I had signed the bogus statement.

He looked at me as if I had two heads when I recounted what had transpired in the Garda station...and my reasons for adding my signature to a document that could land me in serious trouble. He was incredulous at the idea that I could be so gulled by anyone.

Better to have been charged with anything, no matter how shocking or revolting, than admit to something you hadn't done, he chided. False charges would later be either dropped or discredited, he reminded me...but the statement could be used to potentially devastating effect against me at any time.

Of course he was right. In the safety and pressure-free atmosphere of the house, I could see how incredibly stupid it was to have even considered capitulating to the threats and wheedling to which the two sleuths had subjected me.

My brother's intense and heated criticism abated somewhat at the mention of our father's health and how the arrest might affect him. It still didn't justify signing the statement, he emphasised, but he could see how my concern would influence me to facilitate the frame-up.

But he was even angrier when I told him that the detectives actually used the man's severe illness as a lever to extract the false admission, and had threatened to arrest him.

I felt confused...thinking that in some strange way a different person had signed the statement. It all seemed to have occurred to someone else...and in a different world from the one I knew...or thought I knew.

Just hours after leaving the station, I was so far removed from the state of mind that prevailed when I faced those interrogators that I wondered if I had been temporally dispossessed of my reason. As evening turned to night, I began to panic and break into a cold sweat. The implication and significance of what I had done began to sink in.

I repeated like a mantra to my family that withdrawing the statement would clear up the whole sorry business. But I didn't believe it. I feared that it couldn't possibly be that simple. The guys at the station must surely have allowed for the likelihood that I would renege on the statement...especially since I knew it to be a fabrication.

They must realise I would not allow it to stand as a true account of my actions. Yet they seemed perfectly happy to have obtained it. What were they up to? I was naive. I didn't understand the complex mechanisms and machinations that made the legal system tick.

Next morning, I called to the office of Mary Thompson, a Kilkenny-based solicitor. I had no appointment with her, but she agreed to meet me when I stressed the urgency of the situation I faced.

Apprehensively, I knocked on the door of this woman I had never met before, but whose reputation was impeccable and much admired, according to a friend who recommended her.

A legal secretary opened the door. I introduced myself. She asked me into the office and offered me a seat. She pressed a buzzer, and seconds later, the solicitor entered from an adjoining room.

Ms. Thompson was a tall thin black haired woman, with sharp well-chiselled features. Her sea green, reflective eyes scrutinised mine. Her face broke into a friendly though formal smile. Then her expression changed instantly to what I took to be a look of gentle compassion.

"Come this way Mr. Fitzgerald" she invited softly. We entered her consultation room.

The moment we were both seated, she chivvied: "So! You've had some bother from the Special Branch. Tell me what happened...from the beginning".

I recounted the entire episode...from the answering of the house doorbell the previous morning, to the search, the arrest, the lengthy interrogation, and the statement I had signed.

She took notes as I spoke, occasionally asking me to slow down as I was talking too fast. I repeated myself a lot. I felt a kind of panic rising in me as I relived the disturbing events.

When I had finished my account, she put down her pen and sighed. "Mr. Fitzgerald, signing that statement was very, very foolish. We've got to have it withdrawn immediately. Though I'm afraid that might not be the end of the matter.

"I'll get on to the Gardai and ask what their intentions are...they may not be forthcoming...but we have to let them see we're taking this seriously. They may be preparing a file for the DPP on you. You say you've done nothing illegal, Mr. Fitzgerald, but the statement is a real problem."

I was amazed to learn from her that the detectives had "broken almost every rule in the book" in their interrogation of me. I should have been cautioned at the outset that I was not obliged to say anything.

This right to silence, enshrined in the Irish Constitution, was not mentioned until close to the end of the interrogation when the statement was pushed in front of me.

I was entitled to make a phone call to a solicitor from the moment I entered the Garda Station. This right was also withheld. The threats to have me charged if I refused to sign the statement were illegal and outrageous, Ms. Thompson stressed, as was the threat to have my invalid father arrested and taken to the station for questioning.

I asked her about the use of the Offences Against the State Act. I had a vague idea that this piece of legislation was more or less intended to deal with paramilitary violence and people the media dubbed "subversives".

"That was the intention when the law was enacted back in 1939", she clarified, "but the OASA does allow Gardai to arrest anyone they reasonably suspect of having caused malicious damage. That includes breaking and entering.

"So the incidents at the two coursing venues would have provided detectives with ample excuse or justification to obtain a warrant to search the premises of someone they reasonably suspected of involvement in either of those incidents. Being a well-known anti-coursing campaigner, you probably struck them as a likely candidate".

“But whatever they thought or suspected” I objected, “they had no evidence of any kind to back up their suspicion.”

“John...I should explain...Section 30 gives the Gardai widespread and sweeping powers of arrest and detention. It is certainly one of the most draconian pieces of legislation ever enacted in this state. They don't need evidence of any kind before deciding to have you pulled in for questioning. The only legal requirement is that a senior Garda officer has a reasonable suspicion that you may have committed the crime.

“There's no way of establishing whether a Garda is telling the truth or otherwise when he says he has a suspicion. What is referred to as a suspicion may in fact be nothing more than a whimsical hunch...or maybe just a grudge against a person.

“Section 30 allows Gardai to arrest anyone and confine him or her in a cell for 24 hours. To extend that period of detention to 48 hours, a Garda Chief Superintendent needs to give his signed permission, and of course he gives that almost as a matter of routine.

“You tell me that those attacks on coursing fields have occurred around the country...that there's been a fairly broad geographical spread of incidents...well, then it's a fair bet that other people like yourself, who have openly opposed hare coursing, will be pulled in too.”

This thought hadn't occurred to me. I resolved to phone as many of my colleagues in the anti-blood sports group as I could when I got home, before they faced a similar ordeal as I was stumbling through.

She informed me that the whole conduct of my interrogation was at variance with legally binding rules governing the treatment of people in Garda custody.

“Unfortunately” she added ruefully, “they will probably deny all that if there's a court case. It'll be your word against theirs...and the statement will be presented as a comprehensive, freely given admission of guilt from you. They'll simply deny that any pressure was applied.”

She then offered me an insight into certain aspects of the criminal justice system and policing that, she opined, were not understood by the vast majority of people.

She cited an internal Garda report of 1981, which revealed that around 80% of crimes were solved by getting suspects to confess...as distinct from straightforward detective or forensic work.

The danger of such an approach to crime fighting was, she explained, that people sometimes confessed to crimes they didn't commit. Most people failed to realise how and why suspects could be conned or coerced into implicating themselves, because most people had no experience of arrest or interrogation.

Certain techniques were employed to break down a suspect in custody, she revealed.

“Would I be correct in saying that the room where you were questioned had no furnishings?”

I confirmed this, recalling that there was not so much as a calendar on the wall and no furniture apart from the desk, two chairs and the bar stool.

“Bar stool?” she queried. She found this interesting, and it prompted another observation from her on the art of grilling suspects. “John...can I call you John? The whole idea once they take you into that room is to break you down...part of the softening up process, if I might call it that, is to make you feel as uncomfortable, fearful, and ill at ease as possible.

“To make you feel isolated, both physically and psychologically, while getting you to think of them as invincible. They have to dominate and totally control the drama that unfolds around the interrogation. The reason you were given a barstool to sit on was to make you uncomfortable...you can't rest your arms on a barstool, or lean back to relax. That's all part of the game plan.”

She believed the bizarre action in removing the cat from the sitting room of my house during the search was motivated by a desire to demonstrate at a later stage, in the event of a court case, that the detectives acted with sensitivity in their dealings with me.

They had to be careful and circumspect when in my mother's presence, as she could later testify to any obvious wrongdoing or misconduct in the house.

Ms. Thompson assumed a bewildered expression. "I know this sounds wacky John" "but they used your cat in a very clever way. The aim was to wrong-foot a suspect and give themselves a positive benign image."

She appeared shocked by the threat to arrest my father...but added, sadly, that this was another typical ploy to persuade a reluctant detainee to confess. As was the lengthy, unrelenting dogged questioning...the mind-numbing repetition...the artificially created atmosphere of stress and high tension in the room...the humiliating remarks and insults...even having my back to the door had a purpose...all part of the wearing down process and the effort to dominate and overwhelm a suspect.

"John, they'll say anything they believe will bring them closer to solving the case...or to getting you to confess...they'll pretend to have a far greater knowledge of your actions or supposed actions than they actually have. They'll give an impression of supreme confidence...of being invincible... to make you feel small, helpless, and vulnerable.

"They'll claim to be your friends...encourage you to get it all off your chest...yes, and claim that someone else has implicated you. Of course someone may well have given your name. That's something we'll discover if a prosecution arises from this."

Mention of the word prosecution sent a chill up my spine.

I asked her about the apparent friendliness of one detective as opposed to the aggressive attitude of the other. "That's another tried and tested trick of the trade...It's called the Mutt and Jeff...or good cop bad cop technique...The tough guy applies intense pressure, acts the bully, threatens and fulminates...and then his compatriot appears to come across as a reasonable, moderate person.

"After a long drawn-out sickening dose of antagonism and anger and commotion, it's natural to want to deal with a calm, unthreatening personality. That's why a suspect, whether guilty or innocent of a crime, very often confesses to the nice guy."

Adopting a slightly worried look, Ms. Thompson continued: "John, there have been cases where people who signed confessions were convicted...wrongly convicted...in court. The juries in those cases believed the police. On appeal, most of these wrongful convictions were overturned, but the victims of these miscarriages of justice still had to endure months and even years in prison. We've got to work hard to ensure this doesn't happen to you."

I asked her about these other cases where innocent people had been framed.

She paused for reflection, and continued: "well, there was that famous...or I should say infamous Kerry Babies saga. You must have heard of it from the TV and press coverage? In May 1984, a young woman, Joanne Hayes, confessed to the murder of a baby whose body had been discovered in Cahirciveen, County Kerry.

"Joanne afterwards claimed that her incriminating statement was extracted under duress. Scientific and forensic evidence later proved that the baby was not hers. Members of her family were also arrested, as Gardai were convinced they had aided and abetted the crime they believed she had committed.

"The other family members claimed that their statements, which in many important details contradicted each other, had also been given unwillingly...in response to threats of physical violence. The case against Joanne was withdrawn and a Tribunal set up to establish the facts of the whole unsavoury case.

“One of the really memorable comments of the Tribunal chairman was that sometimes Gardai allow what is nothing more than a hunch resulting from wishful thinking to grow into a serious and possibly unfounded suspicion...the suspicion is then elevated to the status of hard fact in the minds of some detectives...so they set out to elicit a confession to fit their suspicions”.

But at least that case was dropped and never went before a jury; I interjected.

“True, Joanne Hayes and her family were spared the nastiness of a criminal trial. But a few years earlier, in 1976, there was that awful train robbery case. When a mail train was robbed in County Kildare, Gardai arrested many people whose political views corresponded to those of a paramilitary group presumed to have carried out the robbery.

“Three of those arrested confessed after more than twenty hours of interrogation to having robbed the train. But the convictions were later quashed on appeal. The men claimed to have been assaulted by their interrogators. One of them, Nicky Kelly, spent years protesting his innocence before being vindicated.

“So John, this type of thing...pressurising a suspect into admitting a crime is quite common, though officially it doesn't happen, and is seldom admitted by Gardai because their careers are at stake. If you ever find yourself in a position of being questioned again in a police station, will you for heaven's sake remember not to sign anything unless it is a true statement you've given and that you totally agree with and have no objection to signing?”

I nodded assent. I was emotionally drained and utterly demoralised. “Not if my life depended on it would I ever fall for such a mean trick again”, I assured her.

She produced a writing pad and suggested that I draft a letter immediately, withdrawing the statement I had signed.

I made it straight and to the point, renouncing the entire contents of the statement on the grounds that it was false and given in response to threats and unlawful inducements. The solicitor seemed happy with the letter. “We'll get this off to the Gardai pronto” she affirmed.



The Bigger Picture

I left Ms. Thompson's office feeling even worse than I had when leaving the Garda Station. I had been in denial of a sort the previous day, but now I began to grasp the full and potentially far-reaching implications of the crushing blow the two interrogators had dealt me, and maybe the entire anti-coursing cause.

Though I kept in regular contact with other members of the anti-blood sport group on the various issues and developments affecting the campaign, I had neglected to phone any of them after my release from custody.

I was so downcast and disheartened that I just couldn't be bothered to pick up the phone and tell them about the arrest and interrogation.

I also had a strong aversion to letting them know that I had signed a bogus statement that could really hurt the campaign, apart from its possible consequences for me.

When I got home after seeing the solicitor, I found that people had been ringing all morning looking for me. There were eighteen messages from fellow members of the anti-blood sports group...each requiring an urgent return call.

My brother had taken the messages...he informed me that detectives had swooped on the houses of anti-coursing people all over Ireland the previous day. Some of these arrests had occurred at almost exactly the same time as my own...others later in the day or at night.

I began returning the calls. One by one, I listened to tales of woe from my colleagues in Cork, Dublin, Kerry, Tipperary, Clare, Wicklow and Waterford. Twenty-three people had been arrested, all under the OASA. I confirmed that I too, had been arrested but didn't mention the statement.

In County Cork, squads of detectives had arrested two leading campaigners, and ransacked the home of a third.

One of the campaigners, an insurance broker, was "lifted" as he prepared to leave his house to attend early morning mass in his hometown.

A well-known opponent of hare coursing in the Munster region, he was questioned for more than thirty hours (with breaks for sleep and eating) about the releasing of hares and sabotage at coursing venues.

He was, he told me, subjected to almost unbearable pressure to sign an incriminating statement. But he held firm and refused.

He was told others had already confessed. One of these, his tormenters claimed, had "fingered" him for the releasing of ten leverets (baby hares) at Clonakilty...and the dramatic "springing" of an unknown number of jack hares from a compound in the Dingle Peninsula.

The Branchmen questioned him about alleged ALF actions in Munster. They seemed anxious to know if there was a connection between the group and militant anti-coursing incidents. He was released without charge.

The other Cork member arrested was the owner of an animal shelter. She had answered her doorbell at 7.30 AM to find four smirking detectives and a uniformed female Garda on her doorstep.

After searching her house in an abrupt and reckless manner- household items and personal mementos were scattered around the floors- she was detained for more than twenty hours. Sabotage and releasing of hares were again the topics at issue.

Among other things, she was told she had been “seen by an alert coursing night watch man cutting through the wire of a hare-holding compound”.

When she challenged the interrogators to bring in this vigilant coursing man to the station to confront her, they changed the subject and never mentioned him again. They also swore that a fellow campaigner had implicated her in a statement, but refused to elaborate on this claim or show her the incriminating document.

Towards the end of her interrogation, when she had shown no sign of admitting to any of the crimes, she was questioned about her private life.

“They asked me which way I had voted in the divorce and abortion referendums and if I believed in the Blessed Sacraments”, she told me.

They mocked her liberal views on social and political issues, and promised they would be watching her in future. She too refused to sign anything and was released without charge.

The owner of a footwear shop was alarmed when three plainclothes detectives and two uniformed Gardai called to his premises. The officer in charge demanded to know, in the presence of customers, what the man knew about “the spreading of glass on fields and illegal hare-snatching by gurrriers”.

When he replied that he knew nothing about such activities and asked them to leave, two of the visitors began knocking shoes off the shelves, and opening boxes to let their contents spill onto the floor. Another man kicked the items of footwear around the floor, sniggering as he scattered shoes, boots, and sandals about.

Shocked and embarrassed customers walked out of the shop as the seemingly pointless and unprofessional “search” continued. The men didn’t enter any other part of the building and no search warrant was produced.

Having turned the shop into an untidy and chaotic shambles, the law enforcers left...but not before the senior officer cautioned the shop owner that he was a “major criminal suspect” and likely to be arrested if he didn’t sever his links with “that anti-coursing crowd”.

The footwear vendor resigned from the anti-blood sports group after this visit and also suffered a nervous breakdown that he attributed to the harassment.

In a County Tipperary town, a man who played a very small role in the campaign was arrested and detectives tried to persuade him that not only had he participated in sabotage activities...they claimed to have witnesses who saw him leaving a hardware store with a large box of steel tacks and a bag of empty bottles.

He denied even visiting the store in question, and challenged his accusers to check with the store staff, and examine receipt books for any evidence of his having purchased the items alluded to. He was told that other “antis” had confessed to acts of vandalism and to ALF membership, and had named him as a “persistent vandal who couldn’t resist interfering with the property of coursing clubs”.

Though severely pressurised to sign a damning statement, he refused and was also released without charge. This man was so troubled and shaken by his ordeal that he too resigned from the anti-blood sports group.

The other people arrested had similar experiences...with varying degrees of pressure having been applied on them to extract confessions and a mind-boggling assortment of tricks employed to cloud their judgement.

But all of these situations differed from mine in one crucial respect: None of the others had signed the concocted statements that were pushed in front of them.

A week after the arrest, I attended a special meeting of the anti-blood sport organisation convened to discuss the embarrassing activities of underground activists and the harrowing effects of the country-wide spate of arrests and "visits".

Members from all over Ireland attended the gathering, including some of those who had been taken in for questioning. I listened to numerous accounts that beggared belief...of police threatening the most outlandish punishments in an effort to extract confessions or information...of intimidating, aggressive, and frightening behaviour...of vicious name-calling, liberal use of foul and offensive language, and derisive references to the anti-coursing cause.

Anger was also directed at the mysterious, unknown individuals who had acted outside the law, creating a situation where almost anyone who as much as criticised coursing was now apparently deemed a suspect whenever hares were freed or fields sabotaged.

Most delegates were sceptical of the theory that the British Animal Liberation Front had set up in Ireland and that Irish supporters of the group were behind the upsurge of militancy. There were rumours of an "imported" ALF connection, but no evidence to back this suspicion.

Though understanding why some people might feel the need to adopt such drastic measures, we believed that legislation was the only way to address the cruelty issue.

Illegal acts, while they might appear to give solace and liberation to a few hares and throw the coursing clubs into disarray, would not end the abuse of our wildlife heritage. And of course these activities also alienated large sections of the public.

There was surprise and bewilderment when I revealed that I had signed a bogus statement...and withdrawn it the following day in my solicitor's office.

Yet, captivatingly, almost everyone present told me they might well have done likewise if the arrest of a seriously ill relative was in prospect. The threat to have my father arrested, when I raised it at the meeting, evoked shock and revulsion.

People reacted in different ways to their experience of harassment. Some had been emotionally shattered by the ordeal and expressed doubts about their future involvement in the campaign.

"Are we going to get blamed...and arrested...whenever those other guys...ALF or whoever they are...hit the coursing fields or release hares?" one asked, echoing a concern felt by many other members who feared they would be scapegoated.

Others were defiant, believing that the whole purpose of the crackdown was to obliterate the anti-coursing campaign...and was not really aimed at the militants at all. "That glass on the field stuff is just an excuse," a County Clare delegate suggested.

He went on to theorise that pro-coursing elements within the Gardai may have been working in cahoots with the coursing clubs in an effort to undermine a campaign that had been gaining ground since 1984. To emphasise that this was no conspiracy theory, he reminded the meeting that many guards owned greyhounds or had other connections with coursing.

Delegates were divided on the question as to whether we should publicise the mass arrests and detentions...On the one hand, we could expose the crackdown as an oppressive and heavy-handed effort to

silence our campaign...as a cynical and quite dangerous misuse of the Offences Against the State Act. There was a huge civil liberties issue at stake, apart altogether from our concern at the implications for our own cause.

If Gardai who lacked a shred of evidence against any of our members could pull them in just on vague suspicions...then nobody was safe...and Ireland was becoming a police state.

On the other hand, a few delegates argued, going to the media about the harassment could prove a double-edged sword. No matter what we said in press statements or interviews, Gardai and the coursing clubs could present the whole sordid episode as part of an ongoing investigation into serious crimes, and then blacken the reputations of those arrested simply by referring to them as “suspects”.

Jill and Joe Public were all too prone to assuming that there was never smoke without fire. And in whose interest was it to portray the anti-coursing group as being the subject of a Garda investigation? Our enemies would misrepresent the arrests and do their damndest to exploit them in an all-out effort to criminalize the entire campaign.

Despite the strong views held by all delegates, and the anger at how we had been treated, we agreed at the meeting not to go public...at least not for the time being.

But that if any further harassment of our members occurred, we would stage a protest outside the Department of Justice and shout from the rooftops about what we believed was an attempt to gag opposition to hare coursing.



Freed Hares, Glassed Fields, and Burning Haybarns...

After the meeting, we all returned to our homes and our different lives. The following five weeks seemed to vindicate our wait and see attitude to the Big Swoop, as one campaigner had dubbed the day the forces of law and order had descended like the Wrath of God on our members and supporters.

I dared to hope that the statement I had signed had now been safely consigned to the scrap heap. I checked with my solicitor. The Gardai had acknowledged the letter withdrawing the statement, and a senior Garda she spoke to indicated that no plans were afoot to bring charges against me. She advised me not to keep anything in my house that would give a search team an excuse to arrest me again.

But then, all hell broke loose on the anti-coursing front. In weekend attacks, seven venues in the Munster region were strewn with glass and tacks. Two of the venues were so damaged that they could never be used again, according to club officials.

The most high profile and sensational attack was on the plush 400-acre estate of the Knight of Glin in County Limerick. Coursing fans spent days on their knees picking up the shards of glass and steel tacks on the estate, in the shadow of historic Glin castle. A phone caller to a Cork newspaper claimed that the ALF was responsible for the sabotage.

Pictures of glass fragments and other debris found on the targeted sites accompanied newspaper reports on the sabotage. The initials ALF were scrawled with red paint on a gatepost close to one of the fields.

In addition, five holding compounds- two in County Cork, and one each in counties Kilkenny, Roscommon, and Westmeath- were raided and a total of four hundred hares released.

This increasing resort to militancy sparked a reaction verging on panic among law-abiding campaigners. We dreaded another hamfisted attempt by the State to tackle this threat to coursing by harassing the mainstream animal welfare community, as this would have the effect of frightening off potential support for a perfectly upfront and legitimate campaign.

Another weekend witnessed a similar bout of destruction and hare-escapes. It seemed that whoever was behind these late night escapades had not been remotely hindered or deterred by the extensive Garda search and arrest operation...confirming our suspicions that the activists were acting independently of “respectable” animal welfare groups.

Unfortunately, it was the rest of us who got the blame, because we were “the public face” of opposition to coursing. The raiders melted into the darkness after each attack, leaving well-known campaigners to bear the brunt of any security backlash.

Worrying though this activity was, it was nothing compared to what followed. Throughout October, a series of hay barn fires in counties Cork and Limerick were attributed to anti-blood sport fanatics. One man lost 2000 bales of hay and valuable farm machinery. Another lost his entire consignment of animal feed as well as 1000 bales when the blaze spread from his barn to engulf nearby outhouses.

The barns were the property of people involved, directly or indirectly, in coursing, and after each fire slogans critical of coursing had been daubed on the walls of nearby buildings.

Provincial newspapers in Munster received unsigned letters claiming the barns were burned in retaliation for the savaging of hares at coursing events. Some of the farmers or landowners concerned were targeted, according to the phantom letter-writer, because they allowed hares to be caught on their lands. The letters threatened the property of anyone in town or countryside who backed coursing in any way whatsoever.

There were also telephone threats to both the landowners affected and others who would, the callers warned, “face the same treatment” unless they withdrew all support from coursing. Bogus calls were made to fire brigades to add to the tensions and the terror created by these outrages.

A Cork Examiner report revealed that following the destruction of one hay barn, the owner was sent an anonymous letter apologising for the blaze. The writer of this letter explained that the barn had been “hit” by mistake, the intended target being another barn down the road.

These disturbing and potentially life-threatening incidents were strongly denounced by animal welfare groups. Even opponents of coursing who were slightly ambivalent about the illegal releasing of hares and sabotaging of fields had to concede that barn burning was an act of terrorism, pure and simple.

But there was something about the sheer nastiness and self-defeating nature of this alleged “anti-coursing” activity that didn’t add up. Apart from the sheer insanity and recklessness of setting fire to hay barns, it puzzled many people that some of the property targeted belonged to non-coursing people who had no links to the game.

Tempers reached fever pitch when the walls of Holy Cross Chapel in Charleville in County Cork were daubed with the slogan: “Guards Can’t catch the firebug...Fire Versus Blood”.

Another factor added to the drama. In the autumn of 1986, the rumoured ALF presence on Irish soil proved a disturbing reality. The underground movement that originated in Britain in 1976 had indeed exported its policies and tactics to Ireland.

Newspapers and magazines carried scary articles about alleged “ALF” activity, mainly in Dublin and other urban areas.

According to one report, a meat lorry was firebombed on Dublin’s North Strand and a pavilion in the Phoenix Park set alight. And there were alleged attempts to vandalise furrier shops.

Given that the people who were targeting fields and other property of coursing clubs frequently used the ALF tag, a widespread perception arose that the group had become active in rural Ireland and had coursing in its sights.

There may have been some truth in this, but it still seemed more likely to many of us campaigners that “freelance” operators were behind much of the militant anti-coursing activity.

Releasing of hares and other captive wild creatures was a classic “liberationist” tactic. In Britain, the ALF had started its campaign in the 1970s by freeing beagles, rabbits and other animals from vivisection laboratories. So similar raids on coursing compounds would conform neatly to the group’s modus operandi.

But the use of broken glass and tacks didn’t make sense from an animal welfare point of view. And the hay barn fires seemed pointless, designed more to terrorise than to ease the suffering of animals.

Campaigners even raised the possibility that some of these over the top acts might have been the result of infighting among rival coursing gangs. Clubs under pressure to net enough hares for meetings often came to blows due to the scarcity of the animals in parts of Ireland.

Territorial disputes were common between clubs, with members or supporters of one club damaging the property of another if the latter was perceived to be encroaching on its carefully nurtured hare stocks.

These bitter rivalries were especially rife in Munster, and there were dark mutterings in the pubs of County Cork concerning a possible coursing involvement in the barn fires.

But the national and provincial media, and the PR men for the coursing clubs, trumpeted the view that opponents of coursing had turned in desperation to barn burning.

Whoever was responsible, the frightening newspaper images of barns and farm machinery going up in flames elicited widespread shock and revulsion.

Given the ferocity of these events, I and other anti-coursing campaigners braced ourselves for further attention from men in suits. And the fact that the ALF had rather unhelpfully sent one its circulars to my address gave me cause for worry...especially since the Branchmen had conveniently turned up to confiscate it just two days after it had arrived by post.

But because the arson attacks were confined to counties Cork and Limerick, I hoped that at least I wouldn't be hassled this time, whatever about campaigners in the Munster region.

The Rathcarney incident had occurred just six miles from my home...but these latest madcap stunts were happening eighty or ninety miles from where I lived. And the police would surely realise that serious animal welfare people wouldn't be so crazy or irresponsible as to go around burning hay barns.

That's the way I saw it...but certain members of An Garda Siochana took a different view. They concurred, as I later discovered, with the expressed opinion of a leading coursing club official on the subject of who was lighting up the night skies down south.

It was the "antis"! he howled, through the microphones of half a dozen Munster radio stations. And he wanted the culprits locked up and the key thrown away. He revealed in interviews that the Gardai had assured him they were "following a definite line of inquiry".

That's a relief, I thought, maybe now the truth will come out and everybody will see that it wasn't us.

Listening to him, I failed to realise that this "line of inquiry" would lead to my own doorstep.





Protest at a coursing event in Gorey, County Wexford, 1968



Picket at a coursing meeting in Sevenhouses, County Kilkenny (1983)



Protest at a hare coursing event in Waterford (1987)





Protesters outside the Irish Consulate in New York (August 1991)





An anti-hare coursing protest at the St Patrick's Day Parade in New York (1992)



An anti-hare coursing banner is removed at the St Patrick's Day Parade in New York after an objection from a visiting Irish Government official (1994)



Irish Coursing Club members and fans react to an anti-coursing protest



Photo: Philip Kiernan

Hares in captivity in a coursing field in County Offaly prior to a coursing meeting (2010)





Protester at the "National Coursing Event" (2008)



Richard Power and Margaret Hayes, veteran anti-coursing campaigners at a protest in Clonmel



Protest at Edenderry, County Offaly hare coursing event (2010)



Wildlife and death: A pair of hares relaxing in a meadow and, below, a dead hare next to the boundary of a coursing enclosure - one of the many victims of the blood sport

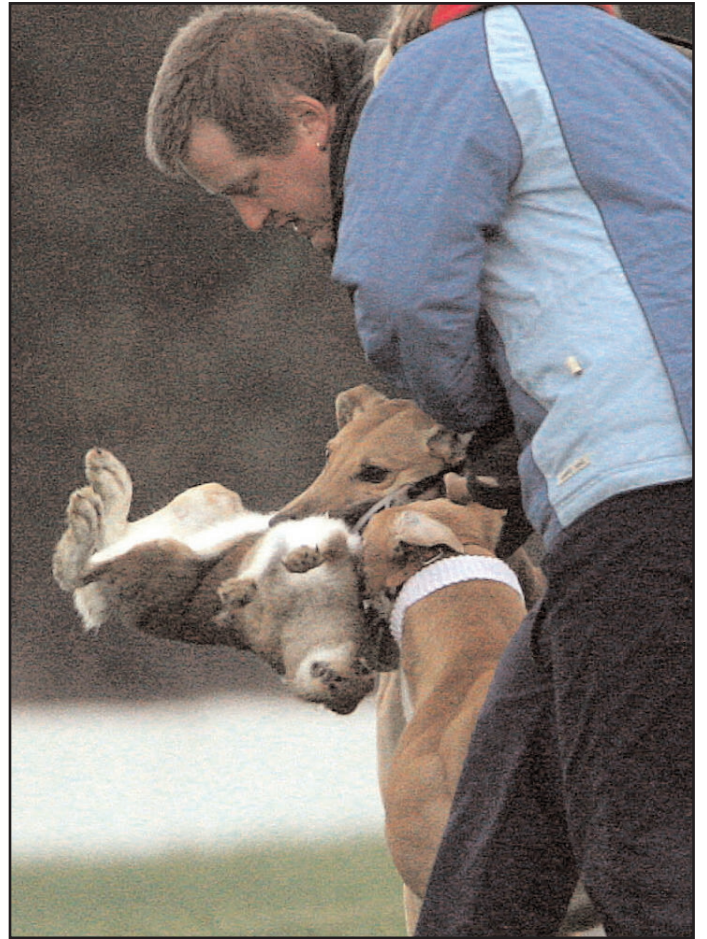




A hare tumbles while desperately trying to escape from a pair of greyhounds



Hares captured for coursing crammed into boxes (picture courtesy of ICABS)





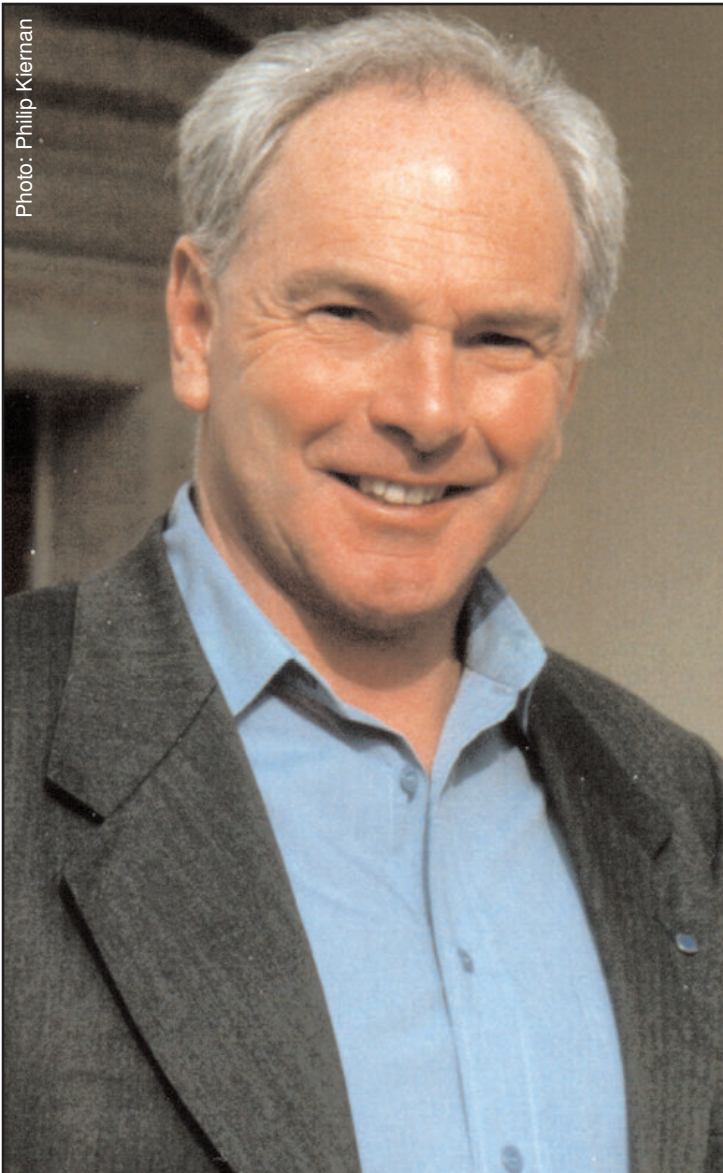


Picketing a major hare coursing event in Clonmel, County Tipperary (2008)



Part of a large protest outside a hare coursing event in Edenderry, County Offaly (2010)

Photo: Philip Kiernan



Tony Gregory, TD: the Cool Clean Hero of Irish politics who tried in 1993 to secure a ban on hare coursing and continued campaigning for a ban until his death in 2010

Photo: Philip Kiernan



Irish Council Against Blood Sports Vice-President, Noel Gregory, (brother of the late Tony Gregory) at a 2011 protest at the national coursing finals in Clonmel



Another bad hare day: The campaign against coursing will continue until the day hares are protected from this cruelty

Second Visit

Despite the seeming absurdity of another visit by the Branchmen, I had an uneasy feeling that they wouldn't let the spate of anti-coursing arson attacks pass by without at least a courtesy call...perhaps a caution from a local guard, though surely nothing more than that, I reasoned.

I was up early that December morning. I expected a letter to appear in the local newspaper and was anxious to see if it had been published. A quick shuffle through the pages revealed that it had.

There was a heavy fog about; giving an eerie and depressing feel to the town. It was so thick and all enveloping that traffic had slowed down to a crawl. Headlights shone through the melancholy vapours.

Returning from the newsagent's, I had a premonition of extreme hostility or malevolence awaiting me. Macbeth came to mind: "...By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes..."

The last time I had felt this way was on the morning of the day I was assaulted in the Co-op store. That same shudder of apprehension. I felt it somewhere in my stomach but I also felt a bit light-headed and a mild sensation of panic. Something wasn't right.

I shrugged off this feeling, putting it down to a silly paranoia.

Back home, I sat by the fire to read the rest of the paper. I was alone in the house. Two of my sisters who still lived at home were at work and my mother was away at a hospital with my father who was having physiotherapy.

I had barely opened the paper when the front doorbell rang...three times. There was impatience in the buzzing, which was accompanied by loud rapping of fists on the door.

I dropped the newspaper and went to see who it was. No sooner had I opened the door two or three inches than somebody pushed it in with great force, almost knocking me to the ground.

A tall suited man entered the house, brushing past me. I was startled. Behind him a further five men muscled their way in, through the hall, and into the sitting room. I asked them what they were doing. Nobody answered.

The last man to enter pulled a document from his waistcoat pocket, crowing: "I'm Detective Sergeant Podge Flood and I have here a warrant authorising us to search this premises...for evidence of materials likely to be used in the unlawful burning of hay barns and other acts of vandalism".

He was a lean dark-brown haired man in his late fifties or early sixties. He had angry bulging black eyes that seemed about to explode. His light grey suit and tie to match set him apart from the other men, who all sported dark blue suits and red ties.

"I have nothing to do with anything like that," I protested.

"Yeah, and my granny was a fucking astronaut" he retorted. His voice was shrill and intimidating.

Reading from the document, he continued: "traces or evidence of the following materials, objects, substances and liquids will be sought: timing devices, paraffin, petrol, diesel, inflammable spray canisters, nail polish, cigarette lighter fuel, wire-cutters, and super-glue."

Putting the warrant back in his pocket, Flood explained: "We know you and your pals were behind the burning of barns in County Cork and County Limerick and God help you if we find any of that stuff I've just mentioned in this house or in your garden shed."

I repeated my denial of any involvement in barn burning and asked him what superglue had to do with the arson incidents.

"The glue was used in other crimes. Your people glued the locks on toilets at the finest coursing park in Ireland, as you well know, and the fire brigade had to free the occupants of those toilets. I suppose you thought that funny, Fitzgerald...all those coursing men locked in with their own shit and frightened out of their wits. Oh, I'm sure ye all had a big laugh. But I'll tell you this...before the day is over, you're the one who'll be shitting himself and that's a promise. You're only a feckin gurrier."

I stepped into the sitting room with him. There was shouting and frenzied movement all around me. "Where do you store chemicals and fuels in this fucking place?" a Branchman demanded, a fanatical look in his eyes as he threw his hands out, palms facing me, like Jesus in the Sacred Heart picture. Another was shouting something about writing pads and incendiaries.

Flood motioned them to be quiet. Addressing two of them, he ordered: "Go outside and search any outhouses".

Looking out a window at the garden, he instructed "That shed...go through everything in it". The men immediately exited the house by the back door and entered the garden.

"Do you mind if I see what those men are doing in the shed?" I queried.

Flood seemed agitated: "Go on...we're searching every nook and cranny of this house."

I followed the two Branchmen to the shed. I knew there was none of the fuels or substances in the building that they were looking for. A wooden shelf in the shed contained a line of jam jars and empty whiskey bottles. The men, who had put on transparent plastic gloves, examined these, sniffing each of them in turn.

"There's a smell off this jam jar that could be petrol", one detective hinted darkly.

"Show it here" his colleague retorted.

The second man sniffed, shook his head and pronounced: "that's not petrol. I don't know what it is...but it's not petrol".

His corrected colleague grumbled: "How the fuck are we to know for certain what's been in this place...they could have given us a sniffer dog for fuck's sake..."

Drawing a blank with the glass containers, they rummaged about among bags of coal to see if the bags concealed anything of interest. Nothing there either. Next they opened a large crate that was full of odds and ends. They raised it off the ground and heaved its contents onto the floor.

Out spilled old photographs, picture-frames, a hundred or more copies of the Beano comic, a broken electric kettle, a rusted frying pan, dusty mugs...and five broken alarm clocks.

The two men, who had been silently and grumpily going about their business of searching for evidence, suddenly sprung to life at the sight of the banjaxed alarm clocks. They took them from the heap.

One of the men held up a clock, fixed me an icy stare and remarked: "these could have been intended for use in home made firebug devices...you're in the shit Fitz".

The other man agreed: "Nothing fucking surer". He produced a transparent sack into which he dropped the five clocks.

"Back to the house...the Sarge will love these," he crooned. The entire search of the shed had lasted less than fifteen minutes.

Re-entering the house, I found the other four men moving furniture, scattering notebooks in all directions, leafing through books, pulling up floor covering, and generally taking apart the sitting room, kitchen, and the room where I did my typing. The entire bottom storey of the house was a complete shambles.

One of the detectives who had searched the shed swung his bag of alarm clocks in front of his colleagues in the house, a broad smirk on his face.

Holding a corner of a length of linoleum in one hand, DS Flood glared at me. "Those clocks will be your ticket to at least seven years of slopping out, Fitz. It'll save you and us a lot of trouble if you tell us where you've hidden the other tools of the trade".

"What do you mean?" I queried.

"The petrol or oil or whatever you and your pals used to burn those hay barns..."

"You're wasting your time Sergeant; I have no knowledge of hay barn fires. That stuff has nothing to do with me...or with the anti-coursing cause...it's just madness".

Dropping the linoleum, Flood turned to his colleagues and jibed: "Jesus, isn't he priceless, lads? And he torching the barns of hard-working farmers with those thugs who call themselves animal lovers...did they think of the poor farmer losing his hay...or the cattle starving for the want of it? Oh no."

"It was an act of pure madness, I agree, but I had nothing to do with it" I repeated.

"You'll be humming a different tune by tomorrow morning, or maybe sooner, don't worry. Upstairs, lads. You... come with us"

The old timber staircase creaked under the strain of six powerfully built men with Flood in the lead pounding up its steps as if they were running away from something. I followed behind.

Stopping on the first landing, Flood directed two men into a bedroom and one to search the bathroom. He and the two remaining Branchmen ascended the second stairs to the top storey, again with me following on.

There were two bedrooms at the top. Flood sent a man into my brother's bedroom (he wasn't living at home at the time), as he opened the door into my own room. Once inside, he immediately went down on his knees and began ripping up the floor covering, tearing it in shreds as he did- it was old and badly in need of replacement.

His colleague pulled the blankets and sheets off my bed and threw them out on to the landing outside. He then pulled off the mattress, dragged it out of the room, and pushed it downstairs.

"What a fucking kip" he joked as he kicked the mattress away from him.

Flood removed every scrap of floor covering and in fact destroyed the fragile material by ripping it away piece by piece from the floor. On his hands and knees, he reminded me of a ravenous terrier devouring an extra large lump of meat.

I was stunned by this wave of destruction. These men seemed driven by an insensate urge to wreak havoc. A tangled heap of broken linoleum scraps and fragments lay against a wall of my room close to a window that looked onto the garden.

"Nothing in his bed or under the lino" rasped Flood, what about that locker there?"

The other man opened the locker, removed all the pages and old newspaper clippings from it, and threw these on the now bare timber floorboards.

"Nothing in it, only the usual shite about hares and coursing" the sleuth affirmed.

Pulling back the curtains on the window, Flood surveyed the garden uneasily. The fog still lingered, casting a pall of gloom over the scene. As if this day wasn't gloomy and disturbing enough, I reflected.

Flood then turned to me and asked haughtily: "Fitzgerald, tell me the truth now...did you bury anything in that garden lately that you wouldn't wish us to know about?"

"Of course not" I replied; baffled and shocked at the scene of mayhem these two had created in a matter of minutes.

"Well by the Lord Jesus Christ, Fitzgerald, I hope you're telling me the truth...because I'm getting on the phone this evening... I'm calling in the men with the shovels and the spades and the sniffer dogs. That garden will be like a ploughed field when they're finished, and we'll have your father and mother standing out there to see whatever is dug up.

"I'm asking you again...tell me honestly...is there anything buried in the garden? We can remove it now, or we can bring the lads in. Tell us where the stuff is hidden and your sick father won't have to witness all that digging".

I was adamant: "There's nothing buried in the garden...apart from a cat that died ten years ago...there's a marker to show the spot..."

Flood was silent for a moment. He looked at his colleague, who was staring at me with a quizzical expression. Both of them started laughing...louder and louder. Flood lost his breath and began coughing. But he recovered quickly and the laughter resumed.

The man who had been searching my brother's bedroom ran into my room, almost tripping over a heap of blankets and empty cardboard boxes at the entrance.

"Is everything okay, Sarge?" he rasped, wide-eyed and anxious.

Flood stopped laughing. "And why wouldn't it be?" he replied tersely, "Did you find anything in that other room"?

The detective held up three rolls of insulating tape.

"Ah...now we're getting somewhere" Flood carolled.

Facing me, he made a throat-cutting gesture, adding: "five alarm clocks...and rolls of insulating tape...components for makeshift firebug devices. It's all over bar the shouting, boyo. You'll be wearing a dirty prison uniform in no time. You're fucked, Fitz!"

I wanted to tell him that the clocks had been in the garden shed for years and that the insulation tape belonged to my brother, who was an electrician and had used the tape for legitimate purposes. But the frenzied atmosphere in the house wasn't conducive to such calm and reasonable explanations.

Flood instructed me to follow him downstairs. His two colleagues followed. On the second landing, the other three Branchmen were standing empty-handed, chatting and smoking.

"Anything in either of those rooms?" Flood asked.

"Not a dickey bird", one of them confirmed.

"And did you look in the cistern in that bathroom?" Flood queried.

"Yeah, there was nothing in it Sarge."

Flood looked satisfied: "right so, that's about it".

Turning to me, he put a hand on my left shoulder as he stood facing the open bathroom door and recited: "John Fitzgerald, I'm arresting you under Section 30 of the Offences Against the State Act on suspicion of involvement in the burning of hay barns in Counties Cork and Limerick, of damaging a compound in County Kerry that held a consignment of buck hares, and of causing men who were relieving themselves in the toilets of the national coursing park to be locked in by means of gluing the locks on the toilet doors...your suspected involvement in all the said offences being contrary to the Malicious Damage Act 1861".

A Branchman laughed.

Flood turned scarlet. "This is no laughing matter. This...idiot here...has been up to some nasty work...he has decent people worried out of their wits."

In silence, apart from the heavy footfalls on the stairs, the six Branchmen and myself returned to the sitting room, and to the piles of folders and papers that littered the entire bottom floor.

"We're leaving...and you're coming with us", he growled at me.

I retorted: "Do you mind if I clean the place up a bit...my parents will be very upset if they come back and find it like this...they don't even know you've been here or that you're taking me somewhere."

"No time for that", he snapped, "This is urgent business. We haven't a minute to lose. Where would we be if one of those barn fires was to spread and someone got burnt to death? You're going to talk my young bucko before this day is out...and name all the members of the arson gang".



The Topsy Branchman

I was the last to leave the house, behind Flood. There were three cars parked close to my house, illegally as it happened. They were obstructing the flow of traffic along the narrow street.

Each car was dark blue and unmarked. I was directed to the nearest one. Three Branchmen, including Flood, sat in. He was in the front passenger seat. One of them took the wheel. Another shuffled into the backseat beside me. As the engine started, Flood began whistling the "The Boys of Fair Hill". This, along with his distinctive Cork accent, led me to believe he was from that part of the country.

The detective in the backseat hummed along with him, and sang a few of the words of the song..."the smell on Patrick's Bridge is wicked...how does Father Matthew stick it? Here's up 'em all..."

As the three-car convoy wheeled out of my native town, Flood stopped his whistling and asked the other man to be quiet for a moment. He half turned to me. "Fitzgerald, this is not going to be like a friendly chat with your local guards. We expect your full co-operation or you'll be banged up in the Joy, understand?"

Coolly, I responded: "I'll answer any questions you put to me, but I won't be signing any bogus statements or admitting to crimes I know nothing about. Is that okay with you?"

Flood was silent for a moment. Then he hollered: "Don't you fucking give me cheek...you're in very serious trouble...you'll talk all right, you smart alec piece of shit."

"Where I am I being taken to?" I asked.

"Shut it!" was the prompt reply from Flood, who reinforced his warning with a pointed finger that protruded from a quivering clenched fist.

None of the men said anything for the next twenty minutes or so, until Flood instructed the driver: "turn left down that side-road ahead. Ned was expecting us half an hour ago. He'll think we're fucking lost..."

The car pulled into a moss-encrusted road that was little more than a boreen, strewn with stones that flew past or ricocheted off the sides of the vehicle. The car halted beside the gateway to an open farmyard.

Clucking hens and quacking ducks strutted about on the uneven grassy stretch of ground.

A pair of mangy looking sheep dogs was barking at the car. Dominating the old fashioned rustic scene was a quaint red and white cottage. Smoke puffed from its blackened chimney.

A man wearing an unseasonable straw hat squatted in front of an enormous dung heap, eating a sandwich. Alongside him was a large sprong stuck in the earth. He arose slowly, waved at the car, and shouted at someone in the house.

A door opened and out stepped an elegant woman, who put her head back inside and called to someone else. A tall suited man with wavy brown hair and huge jowls emerged from the house and strode towards the car.

"Come on Ned, we're behind time" Flood intoned, as the man from the cottage opened the rear door of the car. He sat in beside me, and I found myself squeezed between him and the Branchman. I caught a strong whiff of alcohol when he coughed wheezily.

Flood introduced him to me. "This is Detective Garda Ned Bannon. He's the owner of three of the best greyhounds in the country. He knows more about your lot than anyone else does. Ned has seen the destruction you've caused...the fields covered with glass and tacks. He's seen the blazing hay barns, haven't you Ned? And he's talked to the innocent farmers whose livelihoods went up in smoke."

Bannon grunted beside me. "We'll get to the bottom of all this before long. They'll be clearing out new cells above in Mountjoy. Isn't it gas that we have snivelling little curs like this lad here...headbangers...interfering with our customs and traditions? They'll never get anywhere though. Coursing has been around since Adam was a chap and you know something...I'm damned if a handful of assholes are going to take it away from us."

His voice was slurred. I could see why. He raised a small silver flask to his mouth and took a swig of what smelt like whiskey. The others appeared slightly ill at ease or embarrassed.

"Fucking right you are, Ned!" Flood quipped, reaching back a hand to toss Bannon's hair playfully.

I thought it prudent not to respond to Bannon's remarks. This man, like myself, was clearly biased on the subject of hare coursing.

At the next junction, the car veered in the opposite direction from the one that I expected would have taken me to the Garda Station where I had been questioned two months earlier.

What had they in mind for me this time? I wondered. What tricks and devious lies would be utilised by these people in an effort to get the results they sought?

The destination on the signpost was ominous. It was a town whose name was synonymous throughout Ireland with animal baiting. I shuddered as the realisation dawned that I was being driven into the heart of a major coursing stronghold.

Passing through a stretch of breathtakingly beautiful countryside, the car approached a town that coursing opponents had dubbed the Cruelty Capital of Ireland.

It was a historic and picturesque town, but also as bleak and depressing as any other unemployment blackspot of the mid-nineteen eighties. It wasn't the people who lived there that we had in mind when we so christened it, but rather its grim association with the coursing game.

Its notoriety among animal welfare campaigners derived from the presence of a purpose built park on its outskirts to which hares were taken from the four provinces to be hounded and killed.

Many townspeople abhorred the abuse that tainted their good names, and the majority of participants in the coursing cum bloodletting sessions arrived from other parts of the country or from European nations where hare baiting was a crime.

Its coursing connection had forever shamed the town, though a local newspaper had sought to glorify the horrors inflicted on defenceless animals in the park.

But this was not our destination. Passing through that accursed place, the car veered away in the direction of a smaller nearby town. We entered this other town within fifteen minutes of leaving the Cruelty Capital.

Crawling along a traffic-congested street, we came within sight of the Garda Station. A garishly painted building, its ugliness assailed my eyes. Not that I cared about its appearance. The gaudy bright yellow

reminded me of a traveller's caravan, except that the colour looked better and more appealing on that conveyance.

The whole station was architecturally grotesque; like something a large gang of kids had cobbled together from Lego bricks. Repair work was in progress on part of the building, and painters were applying fresh coats of "vomit" on a piece of wall that had gaping cracks in it.

The car pulled up in the spacious barracks yard. The other two unmarked cars were already parked.

"Hurry it" Flood barked.

Ned Bannon heaved himself out with some difficulty. I thought he was about to collapse. He closed his eyes after alighting from his seat and swayed from side to side.

Flood seemed worried. "Mind yourself there, Ned" he snorted, "we have a long day ahead of us"

The doors of the main entrance swung open, two uniformed guards standing to attention as I was ushered towards the station, Flood striding beside me and the others behind or in front.

"Everything's ready Sergeant", one of the guards, a young pimple faced man crowed.

"Right so...this way" Flood instructed me.

A group of uniformed officers stood gaping inside the entrance as I was led and nudged past the glass panelled reception area.

"The hares will be having an emergency meeting tonight lads!" One of them rasped. The others laughed. But Flood ignored them and didn't react.

"This way" he spat.

I followed him along a short corridor. He pushed a door open... "In there, sit down."

He pointed to a chair in the sparsely furnished room. The walls were dazzlingly white, and, like those in the previous Garda Station I had been taken to, had no pin-ups or pictures of any kind. It had one small window giving a view of the barracks car park.

The room had a sanitised look and feel about it, reminding me of a small hospital ward...without the beds and medical equipment.

Flood ordered another detective, one of the men who had searched the house, to stay with me in the room while he had a word with someone outside.

The Branchman sat down behind the desk in front of me, opened a magazine, and put his feet up to read it. It was, I noticed, a copy of the Garda Review. The cover had a picture of a passing out parade, with guards marching past a saluting senior officer.

The Branchman remained silent; avoided looking at me, and seemed to be immersed in what he was reading.

Since the raid on my house commenced, this was the first opportunity I had to reflect on my situation.

I knew I had done nothing wrong. I was not remotely associated with the burning of hay barns in any part of Ireland, or indeed with the releasing of hares, the writing of anonymous letters, or the gluing of locks on toilet doors at a coursing park.

I knew also that I was about to be questioned at considerable length and that the Branchmen were under severe pressure to nab somebody for the string of arson attacks.

I wondered if they really believed I was involved.

Or had they decided, after a painstaking but fruitless investigation, that a "head" had to be delivered on a platter to their superiors. Or indeed to the coursing clubs that were screaming for the arrest and conviction of whoever was behind the arson and sabotage.

But one thought was uppermost in my mind...a determination not, under any circumstances, to sign an incriminating statement.

No matter how nasty, ferocious, prolonged, or compelling the interrogation might prove to be, I would not give in this time.

It wasn't just a fear of what such a bogus admission might entail...I felt deeply ashamed and humiliated by what had happened last time.

Breaking down, and signing that tissue of lies that McEvoy and Collier had concocted, had shattered my self-confidence and left me with a feeling of absolute worthlessness.

I felt I had somehow failed to meet a challenge...one of those hurdles that life throws up to test us.

But not a second time...it would never happen again...not if they produced guns and threatened to shoot me...not if the sky fell in.

No power on earth would break me down again. There would no signing along the dotted line. The weak spot in my psyche had been cemented up and strengthened.

I looked at my watch. It said 10.30 a.m. They had certainly started early. The search of the house and shed, though destructive, had been relatively short and reckless.

Much of the printed and hand-written material handled by the Branchmen was barely glanced at before being tossed on the floors. When folders were opened, the sleuths seemed to merely flick through a few pages or documents and then throw them aside. They could, in theory, have been missing quite crucial evidence if indeed such evidence had been present in the house. I knew it wasn't.

But it seemed strange to me that these men, who were supposedly looking for evidence of serious crimes, were so casual and careless in their search for it.

The tearing apart of the floor covering in my bedroom struck me as more an act designed to intimidate than as part of a search for hidden documents or "firebug" materials.

I concluded, from what I had heard and seen thus far, that they were on a fishing expedition and hoped to land a really big fish that the coursing clubs could get their teeth into: myself.

The fact that one of the Branchmen- the inebriated man they had picked up at the cottage- was a coursing fan and the owner of three greyhounds reinforced this belief.

Well, I said to myself, I won't be biting today. These guys would have to return empty handed to HQ.

A clatter of activity at the door roused me from my ruminations. Two men entered the room. One was a swarthy black haired fellow with a strong hint of impatience and annoyance. The other, a red head with emerald green eyes and a nasty rash on his neck, was equally tall but a lot heavier.

He had a friendly air about him and threw an amiable glance in my direction. The solicitor's warning resonated: Beware the Mutt and Jeff approach. It was clear to me from the moment they appeared that the blacked haired Branchman would be the tough guy.

He had a bulky plastic bag with him. He laid it on the desk. I could see it contained the broken alarm clocks and rolls of insulating tape seized in my house. The two of them sat down behind the desk.

Another “Little Statement”

Glaring at me, the swarthy one introduced himself: "I'm Detective Sergeant Larry McDonagh. This here is Detective Garda Dennis Farrelly. John, I'm not going to beat around the bush here. You are up to your tonsils in trouble. Over the past two months, seventeen hay barns have been burnt, deliberately, in the southern counties.

"All but one of these belonged to families that had some connection with coursing. Before the spate of arson attacks kicked off, anonymous letters were sent to more than ninety coursing clubs around the country. These letters threatened to burn hay barns of people who supported coursing.

"Most of the letters were signed ALF, the initials of the Animal Liberation Front, a dangerous gang of thugs and arsonists who've been causing havoc in Britain for years and have now started up in this country".

He stopped talking, and pursed his lips. With a sigh, he continued:

"So, I'm sure you'll agree John, that we're not being unreasonable when we say that it looks very much to us that the people who threatened to commit these crimes went ahead and carried out the threats."

Determinedly, I replied: "I don't know anything about the ALF, apart from what I've read in newspaper articles. I've never met anyone either from that group. And I don't know who was responsible for the fires...whoever it was did no favours to the animal welfare cause".

McDonagh grinned. "Ah John...I think you know a great deal about the fires...you see John, when you were questioned about other offences a few weeks back, you signed a statement admitting to having sent anonymous letters to coursing clubs. Yes, I know you retracted it...but you did sign the statement.

"In the first search of your house in October, a copy of an ALF statement was found. It was posted from somewhere in England...okay...but why would they be writing to you? Now John, I have something here that I'd like to ask you about".

From a folder he pulled out a copy of a hand-written letter. "This, John, is a letter that was received by the Vale Star newspaper in Charleville, County Cork, claiming responsibility for the hay barn fires. The letter makes it clear that opposition to coursing motivated the arson attacks. Here, have a look". He handed the item to me.

I read through it. It was a very long letter, around a dozen pages, rambling on about aspects of the anti-coursing campaign and threatening further attacks. The handwriting was large and scrawly.

"And here", continued McDonagh, "is another letter, one that was sent to a coursing club in County Westmeath threatening to cause malicious damage to hay barns. Does anything strike you about it?"

Immediately, I saw that the handwriting in both letters was similar, indicating that the same person had written the two of them. I mentioned this similarity, but emphasised that I had not written either of them. Clutching a large bundle of Photostats from another folder, he added "and all of these letters are written in exactly the same handwriting".

I was about to protest again that I had not written any of the letters when McDonagh motioned me to be silent:

"John" he drawled, "the statement you signed says you did write anonymous threatening letters.

"The letters you owned up to writing were all scribbled by the same person...our handwriting expert hasn't a doubt in the world about that. And he's certain too that the letter to the Vale Star was written by the same hand...though you wouldn't need to be an expert to know that...you've seen the similarities yourself.

"John, we're not going to be too hard on you if you meet us half way on this. Since you've admitted in a statement that you threatened to cause damage, that ties you one way or another to those barn fires. So the position is this, we'd like a statement from you admitting that you and other anti-coursing activists burned those hay barns.

"We want names of your accomplices and an account of how you carried out the arson attacks. There will be no charges if you give us what we want. We just want to get this thing out of the way. But I'm afraid that we'll have to bring criminal charges if you don't put your hands up and take responsibility."

I was dumbfounded. My head reeled at the implication of his suggestion. That accursed statement was being used against me, as my solicitor warned it could be. But I remained firm.

"The statement you refer to that I signed, admitting to writing to those crazy letters was one hundred percent false.

"I signed it only because I was pressurised and told that if I didn't sign it I would be charged with something. I withdrew the statement afterwards and I can tell you, with the greatest respect, that I'll not be signing anything for you today. Nothing whatsoever."

McDonagh lost a little of his confidence and composure. "John, the statement is there, whether you like it or not. It ties you directly to threats to burn hay barns...and those threats were carried out."

Turning to the bag of confiscated items, he removed a clock and placed it on the desk in front of him. "John...would you like to tell me why you had so many alarm clocks in your house?"

I explained that I had a habit of breaking clocks and so had to buy new ones rather often.

"Not very convincing John...three of the barn fires in Cork were caused by improvised incendiary devises. Each of them included alarm clocks made in Hong Kong, like your ones. But you'd like us to believe that you have a load of clocks around the house because you break them all the time?"

"Exactly, it happens to be the truth", I confirmed.

Shaking his head in disbelief, he threw a roll of insulating tape on the desk. "I suppose it's a coincidence too that each of the three devises that ignited those fires had insulating tape rapped around it...yellow tape...the same colour as all the rolls discovered in your house?"

"My brother owns the tape. He's an electrician. Look, this stuff has nothing to do with fires in Cork or anywhere else. You're wasting your time. Can I go now?"

His colleague, Det. Garda Farrelly, answered me: "John, you're in a hopeless bind. There's a statement that has you hung, drawn, and quartered. It links you to the fires. Will you tell us like a good man who travelled with you to Cork and Limerick to burn those hay barns, and give us the names of the people who helped you? That's all we ask, and you can walk out that door as free as a bird".

"Thank you Dennis" McDonagh muttered, "ah...I'm now going to take a statement from you John. Can we begin at the beginning? Date of birth..."

"I've just told you...I'm not giving a statement."

McDonagh turned purple. "For fuck's sake give me your fucking date of birth...I'm taking a statement from you..."

He began shouting abusive words at me... "Stupid fucker"... "Shithead"... "Smart alec bollocks"... He banged a clenched fist repeatedly on his desk, and swept the bag of alarm clocks on to the floor with a wild gesture.

Jumping up, he leapt towards me and roared: "you'll give that statement you pathetic scumbag fucking cunt...are you listening? Or by Jesus you'll be taken out of here in a plastic bag like those fucking alarm clocks...Do you understand?"

His colleague made a show of restraining his superior.

Patting him on the back and pulling an arm, he soothed "Ah Larry, Larry, don't beat the shit out of him yet...sure we're only starting...he'll see sense before the day is over. We have the day to question him. And if doesn't talk to us, he might talk to the other lads later. Steady on there Larry..."

A shiver of apprehension and fright overcame me. But not a desire to co-operate in the slightest degree with these men.

Without waiting for an answer, McDonagh regained his composure, resumed his seat, settled his tossed tufts of greasy black hair, and began reading from a crumpled bundle of pages.

The pages shook in his hands as he read haltingly: "You are not obliged to say anything...but anything you do say may be taken down and given in evidence against you..."

I interrupted again: "Sergeant...that sounds like the beginning of a statement from me...please understand that I am not giving a statement...and that I won't be signing anything...not a scrap of paper...in this Garda Station."

McDonagh's eyes had a sizzling anger in them as he fixed me with an icy hostile glare.

Farrelly grasped him by an arm: "Let him...Larry...let's just carry on...ignore him and follow it through".

McDonagh continued: "Statement of John Fitzgerald..."

I protested vigorously: "What statement? You're not getting me to sign any more lying statements that you've concocted...pure lies"

He ignored me and proceeded to recite a chilling "confession".

It stated that I had been a member of a gang of arsonists affiliated to the British-based ALF who had burned a total of seventeen hay barns in Counties Cork and Limerick.

According to this farrago of invention and lies, I was supposed to have joined the ALF "sometime during the summer" after meeting a shady band of marijuana-smoking English hippies and dropouts in Cork City.

The statement alleged that I received tuition in bomb-making techniques from the gang of seven men and three women, all of whom were "doped out of their minds and wired to the moon".

I then supposedly conspired with these unknown individuals (no names were mentioned) to mount attacks on coursing-related targets across the country.

The statement alleged that I travelled to the various districts where the crimes were committed and aided the firebugs in their pre-meditated attacks on the property of farmers.

Reference was made in this prepared statement to the insulating tape and alarm clocks found in my house.

It gave the impression that I had admitted to using similar clocks and tape in the making of incendiaries and that the "materials" seized from me were to be used in further firebug incidents.

The statement included admissions to having used superglue to sabotage the locks on the toilet doors at a coursing park and the illegal releasing of hares from seven coursing compounds in various parts of Ireland.

I was supposed to have "leapt for joy" when the hares ran to freedom and "whooped like a Red Indian" when fire engulfed the hay barns.

The statement ended with a promise from me not to repeat these offences and to "turn over a new leaf".

I listened with shock and incredulity to this fabricated confession. It amazed me that these people had put it together in less than half an hour, for that was the length of time that had elapsed between my arrival in the room and the commencement of the interrogation.

Of course they may have been working on parts of it earlier.

Before I could say anything, a newly confident McDonagh crowed: "Now John, all that's missing from your statement are the names of your accomplices and the names of your contacts in the ALF...We'll get back to that. I hope you know where you're headed if you don't sign this statement. As I've told you already, your signature on the previous statement admitting to sending those letters to coursing clubs ties you in completely with the barn burning, so let's cut out the nonsense.

"We could charge you this minute with causing those fires. Any jury would send you down. But that's not what we wish to do. We've decided that if you sign this admission, you can go free...no charges will follow. We'll have put this whole nasty business to bed. We'll be happy. The coursing clubs will be happy, and you'll be back home without a stain on your character. If you don't sign, you're going down like a fucking lead balloon. It'll be all over for you."

Farrelly concurred. "John, think about what the Sergeant is telling you. It's for your own good."

I felt a deep anger rising within me. I desperately wanted to tell them exactly what to do with their weasel words of menace and blackmail. But I somehow managed to restrain myself.

"Do you have a toilet in this station?" I asked.

Farrelly answered: "Of course John. Do you wish to use it?"

"No" I replied, almost in a whisper, "but I suggest you take that...statement...there and flush it down the toilet because that's how much respect I have for it and for whoever dreamed up all those lies".

Farrelly clicked his tongue. "Ah now John that attitude is not going to help you".



Holding Out

McDonagh adjusted his hair and took a deep breath: "Can you tell me something about your anti-blood sports organisation. I'd especially like to know who's who in the south of the country. Names?"

I responded cautiously: "The names of campaigners are no secret, and their positions in the organisation can easily be verified, but I don't believe any of them are involved in those arson attacks."

He listed the names of members in counties Cork and Limerick and I confirmed that these were all involved at some level in the organisation. He fell silent for a moment and began writing something.

He showed what he had written to Farrelly, who smiled and proclaimed "Sarge, that's fucking brilliant".

Then, to my surprise and alarm, McDonagh commenced to read the contrived statement again.

This time with added paragraphs listing some of the names I had just mentioned. The statement now also alleged that all of the members named were "accomplices" in the barn burning, supergluing of toilet doors, and springing of hares from captivity.

This was so ludicrous that I didn't bother to respond. I could see that these two were hell-bent on "getting results" at any cost.

A knock on the room door interrupted the interview. "Dinner, lads" a uniformed guard announced. He instructed me to accompany him to the station cell. The interrogation would resume after lunch.

The cell wasn't as filthy as the previous one, and the walls had no graffiti. But it was dark and depressing, in keeping with how I felt about being in the custody of these aggressive public servants.

I looked at my watch. It was one-thirty. I had endured two and a half hours of this carrot and stick attempt to coerce me into signing an even worse statement than the one that McEvoy had persuaded me to sign in the other station. I felt nervous and frightened half to death, but was utterly resolved not to acquiesce.

I gathered my thoughts together. I recalled how I had miscalculated so badly last time I sat in a cell brooding over my predicament. I had opted to walk headlong into a trap, for the sake of peace and quiet, and the jaws had snapped shut around me.

I had learned a lesson from that experience that I would thankfully not forget. So far, I had held out, despite cajoling and threats and bullying. And I would, I believed, persist in resisting the efforts of the Branchmen to frame me for the hay barn fires.

The customary cup of tea and plate of sandwiches were handed in to me. The uniformed guard who brought my lunch smiled and seemed apologetic as he closed the door behind him.

The minutes ticked away as I steeled myself for whatever lay ahead. Then, after about an hour, the keys jangled outside and the door swung open again. The same guard spoke sharply: "Come on...they're waiting for you in the interview room".

To my surprise, two different Branchmen sat at the desk.

One was fierce looking, heavily built, and grim-faced. His fair hair was closely cropped and I thought he had the air of an amateur boxer about him. His small smooth face, long nose, and thin lips were slightly out of harmony with his bulky frame.

He seemed brimming with energy and impatience as he fidgeted amid a pile of folders on the desk, his hands darting to and fro. He made no remark when I sat down, pretending not to notice my presence.

The other man had a less menacing demeanour and an obvious speech impediment.

"How are you J...J...J...John?" he stuttered.

He had a prominent but somewhat twisted smile, unkempt ginger hair, and unreflecting black eyes. To describe him as thin or underweight would be an understatement.

His body was emaciated, reminding me of a concentration camp inmate after liberation.

I thought he looked ill, but it was probably just the way he was built. His smile widening, he introduced his colleague as Detective G...G...G...Garda Dermot Rhat...Rhat...Rhatigan.

"And I'm D...D...D...Detective Garda Tim C...C...Carroll" he added politely.

The tough guy- Rhatigan- raised his eyes to face me.

"What's this I hear about you not playing ball with us John?" he asked mockingly.

I failed to respond; remaining silent while I awaited a question I could consider answering.

Bang!

His fist slammed down on the desk.

"I asked you...what's this fucking bullshit about you not cooperating with this investigation? Are you dumb too as well as a fucking crank?"

Though shocked by his attitude, I decided to say nothing until he asked a reasonable question.

Snatching a page from the pile in front of him, he intoned: "I want to know everything about the fires...when you planned them...who helped you with the fucking arson...I want names. I have better things to be doing than coming up from Kerry to give the third degree to a pup like you...so no more bullshit.

"You've already given the names of all your accomplices to Detective Sergeant McDonagh...I'm going through the list now and I want you to tell me everything you know about each of these fuckers."

"Pardon me" I responded, "I have not given the names of any accomplices. I had nothing to do with hay barn fires, gluing locks, or releasing hares, so I couldn't have accomplices. The people I mentioned earlier were people who've been campaigning peacefully for a ban on hare coursing. I've never heard of any them doing anything illegal."

"You're not listening...you've given the names of your accomplices...(holding up the page)...all of these shitheads were in on this with you."

Ignoring the question, I retorted: "I shouldn't be here in this Garda station. I have done absolutely nothing wrong. Can I leave now?"

"For fuck sake!" roared Rhatigan, banging a fist again on the desk, "Have you any fucking idea what I'm going to do to you if you don't tell me what those gobshite bastards have been up to? You'll go to prison. Do you know what's it like in there? You'll fucking find out"

Without waiting for an answer, he threw down a pen he was holding, arose from his chair, and stormed out of the room.

I had a sense of devalue. McEvoy had thrown a similar tantrum- or what looked like one- three months earlier.

And yes, Rhatigan's colleague immediately frowned, shook his head, and began to advise me "for my own good".

His speech impediment made listening to him a minor ordeal. "John...please...t...t...t...tell him what he w...w...w...wants to know or you'll be f...f...f...fucked entirely. I understand how you f...f...f...feel about the c...c...c...coursing but if you d...d...d...don't confess like a g...g...g...man, we'll have to ch...ch...ch...charge you, do yo...yo...yo...you under st...st...stand?"

"I think I do", I replied, feeling sorry for him despite my predicament, "but what can I be charged with when I haven't done anything?"

As if to prevent him from answering, Rhatigan returned, slamming the room door dramatically.

His head was dripping wet, like he had held it under a tap.

Resuming his seat, he muttered: "I think we may have got off on the wrong foot...Look, if you admit your part in the arson, we'll let the whole case die a death...no publicity...and no criminal charges. Can you tell us something about your anti-coursing campaign?"

I recited the tale of my long association with the campaign.

As I spoke, Rhatigan listened and appeared impressed, while his colleague made notes, occasionally interrupting to ask me to repeat something.

I found these interruptions aggravating, as Detective Carroll couldn't utter a single sentence without stuttering.

I wondered what they wished to hear about the campaign, as it had no real bearing on the crimes they were supposedly investigating.

Or at least I saw no connection.

I hoped that what I told them would remove any suspicion they harboured regarding my views of the ALF and illegal off the wall antics such as barn burning and the strewing of broken glass on fields.

I must have spent an hour dredging up recollections. When I concluded my account, Rhatigan looked at his watch and whispered something to Carroll.

"I'll t...t...t...tell him to c...c...c... come in right away."

Rhatigan seemed relaxed. "I'm afraid we have a long way to go John", he moaned, "you've given us nothing...and we can't leave this station without getting to the truth. You're stonewalling. You don't understand your position. You see... all those people you've named can be picked up this evening...or tomorrow...and we can tell those pals of yours that you fingered them as barnburners and ALF sympathisers.

"We don't want to have to do that. If you give us the low down on them, we'll be able to go after them without bringing your name into it. Your best bet is to shop the bastards."

"I haven't fingered anyone for anything...I'll phone everyone of them when I get out of here and alert them to what you've just said".

Rhatigan laughed and clicked his tongue.

A brief knock on the door signalled the return of Carroll. With him was Detective Garda Ned Bannon, the greyhound owner that Flood and his men had picked up en route to the station. Bannon had a flask and a box of sandwiches with him.

"This is D...D...D...Detective S...S...S..." Carroll began, in an effort to introduce him to me.

Rhatigan stopped him "It's okay, he's met him already...you can leave us now Tim, I'll see you later."

Carroll left the room after wishing his colleagues the best of luck: "Don't w...w...w...worry, lads, he'll c...c...c...confess".

Bannon turned to Rhatigan and snorted "Jesus Christ, that man has one bad case of the fucking stutters".

Indicating my presence, Rhatigan motioned Bannon not to comment further on the man's speech impediment.

Rhatigan assumed a more serious expression as Bannon slumped into the chair beside him.

"John...so far this interview has been plain sailing from your angle...that's because we've felt sorry for you. We've gone easy on you. We like to be patient and give a fella like you a decent chance. But the day is pushing on. Ned here has some questions for you."



Losing my Seat

Bannon coughed and wheezed, before addressing me: "Fitzgerald, I know what you've been up to, so let's cut the crap. Who's into this vandalism with you? I want to know who's been fucking up coursing fields and setting fire to hay barns. Is it that ALF crowd?"

The man looked and sounded very drunk. His eyes were glazed and bloodshot and his voice was slurred, as it had been in the car a few hours earlier.

"Ah...I've explained to the other gentlemen that I don't know anything about those crazy stunts...and that I won't be making any statements. I'm sorry I can't help with your inquiries"

"Well you fucking...miserable... cheeky fucking lump of horse shit..." He pulled out a set of photographs from a folder on the desk.

"Look at those...you poxy prick...look at what your friends did to farms all over Cork and Limerick".

The pictures showed blazing hay and burnt out hay sheds. Bannon stood up and pushed another picture close to my face.

"Look at that!" he roared, froth spewing from his mouth. I caught a dash of it on my pullover.

I took the photo from him, feeling queasy at the thought of the whiskey-soaked phlegm he had deposited on me.

It reeked, apart from the stomach-churning appearance of it. I tactfully removed it with a tissue, an act of mild impertinence he noticed with disdain.

I examined the photo. It was of a tractor and trailer burning in a farmyard, with the sky in the background blackened by smoke.

"The man who owned that tractor is in a lunatic asylum on the strength of what ye did to him. He's gone out of business...and out of his fucking mind!"

He produced another photo and held it for me to look at.

"You see that farmer sitting on the bucket with the smoke and the ashes all around him...he's a broken man...all his hay is gone, and that's your doing, you fucking sly bastard!"

Becoming increasingly nervous, I politely repeated my denial of responsibility for the fires.

Rhatigan handed me a page that had the names of anti-coursing people from various parts of Ireland...including some of the ones I had mentioned earlier as being prominent campaigners in the Munster region.

The names were typed...and beside each name were five possible assessments of the person's level of dedication to the cause: "faint-hearted...very committed...fanatical...sympathetic towards ALF...violent." And at the end of the page was my name...also typed.

"John" he chided, "This is what you'd call a compulsory set of questions...a bit like Irish in the school exams. You must tick off the correct answers, so we'll know your opinion of these people...here's a pen. Take your time."

Bannon eyed me sarcastically as I took the pen and scanned the list.

I had to think quickly. I couldn't accord such ratings, as I didn't know any of the campaigners named well enough. I had met them at meetings, and noticed the occasional letter in a newspaper from some of them, but who was I to judge if they were "very committed"...or fanatical...or violent?

On what basis could I form such a judgement?

I was unsure as to whether there really were "compulsory" questions that I was obliged to answer. The solicitor hadn't mentioned these...though she had stressed that I didn't need to answer any question...that there was a constitutional right to silence that no Branchman could take away from me.

"Sorry, I can't tick off these...I told you...I'm signing nothing."

"But John, this isn't a statement...and you don't have a choice...you have to fill this up."

I stood and dropped the page back onto the desk.

Bannon fumed: "Oh yes you will...you'll fill in that fucking thing..."

He went to stand up...but swayed to one side and toppled to the floor. Rhatigan helped him back onto the chair.

"There...you're okay Ned. Jesus, this is your fault, Fitzgerald"

He grabbed the page I had just returned to him and walked around the desk to confront me. "Are you going to tick off those answers...are you?" he hollered.

When I again declined, he kicked a leg of my chair. It went straight from under me. I lost my balance and collapsed in a heap on the floor, with the chair upside down beside me.

A sharp pain shot through my head. I tasted dust and bits of cobweb on my lips from the floor. I pressed a hand against the spot that hurt, groaning. I felt slightly dazed, though not as much as I had after the assault in the Co-op store.

"What are you doing to me for God's sake"? I asked, worriedly, hesitatingly, rising from the floor into a squatting position. I clasped my head in both hands.

"Pick up that chair...Sit down!" Rhatigan roared.

I did as instructed, shaken by this outburst. I held a hand to the side of my skull that had taken the knock. It had hit the floor with considerable impact. I felt a dull throbbing sensation in my head. It wasn't an intense or agonising pain...more a persistent ache. I felt a bit dizzy.

Bannon was breathing heavily and blowing froth in all directions. I thought he was having a seizure of some kind. Rhatigan was furious.

He yelled at me: "It's not enough that you go out and vandalise property and burn down farm buildings...you nearly gave that man a heart attack with your carry-on!"

Having recovered his wits, if not his sobriety, Bannon resumed his questioning. His large bulky frame was quivering with anger.

"How would you feel Fitzgerald... if I caught you by the scruff of the neck... and shoved your head through that fucking window over there?"

"I suppose I wouldn't feel too happy about it" I replied matter-of-factly.

My head pounded. I listened to him with growing discomfort.

"Well if you don't admit your involvement...in messing up the lives...and the property...of good courting men...I'll fucking make your head look like a broken pot of strawberry jam...isn't that right Dermot?"

He slapped his colleague twice on the back, slowing withdrawing his large hand.

Rhatigan ignored the remark, looking mildly embarrassed. He put his head in his hands on the desk.

Without facing me, he gasped: "This is a total mess...Jesus Christ...what the fuck are we to do with this complete fucking spacer? He doesn't realise he's totally fucked if he doesn't admit his crimes".

Bannon opened his box of sandwiches and began munching one. He held another out to Rhatigan.

"Want one?" he offered.

"No thanks Ned...God... I'm so sick of that bastard there I've lost my appetite".

Bannon poured tea from his flask into a plastic mug, adding a generous helping of whiskey to it.

Tasting the fortified tea, he murmured "Prison does terrible things to a man...and this fellow has it all ahead of him".

I didn't know whether this behaviour on their part was an act to discommode me, or if I had actually rattled them by not falling for their tricks and deceit.

Most likely a combination of both, I guessed. Either way, it was an unpleasant and unnerving spectacle.

I marvelled at how Bannon could get away with being drunk on duty.

His colleagues couldn't have overlooked his condition, and I thought it a bit rich of him to have made that wisecrack about the stuttering Branchman, given his own unsightly dose of the heebie-jeebies.

Rhatigan looked exasperated. He needed my name at the end of a statement admitting to some level of involvement in the arson attacks. He wasn't getting anywhere.

"I hope you realise this is nothing personal John", he resumed. "We have to protect the public and your people are a menace to public safety. So we've got to solve this case. We know you're behind the barn burning...you've confessed in a statement to threatening to burn barns...the barns were burned...even a nut house inmate could see that you had the motive to set fire to those barns."

I protested at this, but he continued: "The bad news for you is that we've decided to charge you with a string of offences if you don't confess to the barn jobs".

Turning to Bannon, he said: "I've changed my mind Ned, I'll have a sandwich...the fish if you don't mind."

As he ate the sandwich, he reminded me of my precarious position, as he saw it. "Arrangements have been made down at the courthouse to have you charged with serious crimes...that will be tomorrow...because we have a fair few hours to go yet. There's only one way to avoid being charged, and that's to own up and confess to having at least participated in the arson attacks"

"You can bluff all you like" I responded tersely.

Once I started, I felt impelled to go on reprimanding him "I've told you where I stand and what you're doing here is an absolute disgrace. You have no right to kick a chair from under me and pressurise me into signing a bogus statement. I have some rights...whatever you say and..."

He stopped me in mid-sentence. He was staring at me; with eyes bulging and mouth open wide.

He roared at me, his hair standing on end: "You little shit...you...who the fuck?...Jesus Christ."

He mashed the remainder of the fish sandwich in his hand and flung it at me. I ducked to avoid it and the crumpled mess struck the wall behind me, adhering to it. Bits of tuna seeped to the floor.

Bannon sighed. "Don't worry yourself Dermot...this lad will be cleaning out his chamber pot...so he will... in an overcrowded prison...and the whole country will be laughing at him when we bring charges. Oh, his card is well marked...don't you worry. He's for the high jump"

A sharp knock on the door distracted me.

Another two Branchmen...was this ever going to end?

"Okay lads, have a break, we'll take over for a while".

It was Detective Sergeant Podge Flood and one of the men who had searched the house.

"Well, any progress...has he seen sense yet?" Flood asked; standing in the open doorway with hands on his hips.

Rhatigan, rising lazily from his chair, moaned. "He's stonewalling. Fooling around. He's given us nothing but cheek and smart Alec remarks since we came in. He wouldn't even tick off the list of his fellow cranks. He's a fucking eejit, but he'll find out soon enough where that attitude will get him."

As the two men in the room passed their replacements on the way out, Flood asked Bannon: "What's that on the wall over there?"

The greyhound owning Branchman shrugged. "Oh that's just a tuna sandwich...Dermot wasn't hungry".



An Appalling Vista

Flood moved ceremoniously to the chair behind the desk. His colleague, a fair complexioned man with a broken nose, sat beside him.

"Ah John, John..." Flood began, a look of immense and profound concern pursing his face. "If you only knew what's waiting for you in the bad world inside this Garda Station. If you only knew. Tell me, did you ever read anything about prison life? Or hear about what goes on in prison?"

"I know very little...apart from the fact that being locked away and losing one's freedom is a terrible blow to any man or woman".

He whistled softly. "Oh it's a blow alright...and yes...it takes away your freedom...but there's a lot more to it than that...The Super has asked me to spell it out for you...so you'll know what it's like to go to jail for a few years...yes, years John. Because in your case you'll be looking at anything from five to eight years...for threatening to burn hay barns and then carrying out those threats.

"At the very least, you'll go down for the threats...you've confessed to writing those threatening letters to coursing clubs. I have a copy of your statement here from Detective Sergeant McEvoy...nothing could be clearer...and the handwriting in the letters you've confessed to writing is exactly the same as the writing in dozens of letters received by other coursing club personnel and hay barn owners across the country..."

I interrupted to again protest that I signed the statement for McEvoy under extreme duress. I told him that I signed it partly out of concern for my father, who was a stroke victim and might react badly if I had not returned home.

Flood wasn't impressed: He raised his eyebrows in modified scorn. "John, I've heard about your denials from Detective Sergeant McDonagh. I won't put a tooth in it, John. I know, and we all know, that you're one of the barnburners, if not the ringleader of the whole rotten gang. You have some degree of involvement with the ALF, or they wouldn't have contacted you. You're what's known as a pyromaniac, someone who gets a kick from watching buildings catch fire and being burned to a cinder.

"So here's the deal...I have a little statement drafted here...just a few words...concerning a barn that was only partly burnt. On the night ye started the fire, a heavy rain fell in the county that quenched the blaze. It was a damp squib. It wasn't even reported in the papers and the coursing clubs aren't worried about it.

"Now, John, if you'll agree to sign this statement...admitting to this minor and totally failed arson attempt on behalf of the ALF, I swear to God that we'll bring no charges...Cross my heart. You'll be admitting only a minor offence...not the deliberate burning of all those other barns that did go up in smoke.

"But John...if you don't give us this small crumb, I'm afraid you'll be facing a different scenario...a whole different ball game...we'll be taking you down to the court and charging you with the most terrible crimes. That will mean prison."

He assumed a dark and melancholy expression. "I'm leaving this little statement on the desk here John...you have until tomorrow to consider my offer.

"Now, as I said, the Super asked me to explain to you, for your own good, what prison involves, so that you'll understand what's waiting for you if you don't sign this admission... to a very minor offence."

"Prison is worse than the lowest pit of Hell," his colleague intoned direfully.

Flood nodded in agreement. "It's worse than anything you can imagine...here's what will happen to you John...though only if you don't sign this statement..."

He leaned back in his chair and appeared to be gazing into the distance as he commenced his description of what he claimed was a typical prison experience in Ireland.

"Once they have you inside, you're taken to a room to be stripped of your clothes. You have to stand there in front of prison officers...male and female...all having a good laugh...as every screed is taken off you. They leave you standing there...bollick naked...for as long as they wish. Your clothes are put aside and you won't see them again for years. They're gathered around making a complete fucking skit of you.

"Then this fellow with a surgical glove asks you to stand with legs apart...he pushes his hand up your arse to see if you're hiding anything there. And all the time the lads are laughing themselves silly. And, Jesus, the laughs out of them when the glove comes back down covered in shit. When the strip search is over, they give you a prison uniform to identify you as a despised convicted criminal.

"That uniform sets you apart from the rest of society...from normal people who don't go around burning hay barns and interfering with hare compounds or gluing locks. Your dignity is not worth much after that strip search...but that's just the beginning. You'll spend the next few years locked up for most of the time. On your own for hours, with only the four walls closing in on you...that's what makes fellows go stone piano mad.

"Ah but that's not the worst...You know what they say about cleanliness being next to godliness. Well, you'll be taking showers with the other scum in there...rapists...murderers...drug addicts...perverts from every corner of the land. And they'll all be watching you like hawks as you wash.

"It's in the showers that you get destroyed for life. Every prisoner gets his turn at being gang raped. That's an experience you'll never forget. They'll pin you to the slippery floor. You'll be howling for mercy, but the prison officers won't be bothered with you. They'll be videotaping the whole thing to show their girlfriends or the lads in the club.

"You'll have a sore arse for weeks...and you'll be rubbing on the Vaseline to ease the pain. You'll be like that fucking eejit in the song...walking like an Egyptian.

" 'Tis no fucking joke. You could be gang raped several times a week. Some fellows get the treatment whenever they go into the showers. And you can't report it. Open your mouth about another prisoner and you get your throat slashed or your eyes gouged out or your balls cut off. If you're lucky, you might be beaten to death. There's no escaping justice behind prison walls. You said something about a loss of freedom. That'll be the least of your worries, John.

"If you survive prison, you'll wish you hadn't. It'll scar you for life and leave you a total fucking mess. It's not to be reformed that you go in there...it's to be destroyed body and soul. You won't be a human being when you come out...if you do come out in one piece. You'll be a living, breathing heap of trash, only fit to be dumped and forgotten about. You're name will be dirt and no decent man or woman will ever give you a job again".

Heaving a large sigh, Flood concluded: "that's prison life John...that's what you'll be opting for if you don't sign this statement I have here for you. We have the charges prepared...It'll be down to the courthouse tomorrow if you don't sign.

"Once we bring the charges, the rest will be academic...any jury would convict when we show them the statement you signed for Detective Sergeant McEvoy. It's a rope around your neck. There's no way out of it. Why not be sensible (he handed me the statement he had drafted) and sign this and you can leave the station."

My hands shook as I took the statement from him. "Take your time John. It's in your best interests to sign it".

I was so shaken by the vision of Hell he had described that I couldn't think clearly. Since I had done nothing wrong, why should I fear going to prison? But if I didn't sign Flood's concocted statement, he could use the one I had signed...three months earlier...to make the case that I had at least threatened to burn hay barns.

That statement had also been fabricated. I had signed it in response to a repeated threat to charge me with something if I didn't sign it. Now, of course, I realised that if I hadn't signed it, Flood wouldn't be in a position to wave it in triumph and flaunt it as his trump card.

My head ached and throbbed. The hideous choice he presented, and his graphic depiction of the horrors that lay in store for me in prison turned my stomach.

Though prison was only a possibility, I reasoned, if a jury believed the lies in the statement that McEvoy had compelled me to sign in that other Garda Station.

Would signing a second bogus statement ease my situation, as Flood promised it would...or add to my problems? The advice of my solicitor came back to me, like a far-off voice in the wilderness: Sign nothing...no matter what cock and bull story they tell you...stay calm...don't give in. Remember...you have rights that no one can relinquish unless you allow them to...

She seemed a million miles away...or on another planet...as I sat there gazing blankly at the sheet of paper that Flood so desperately wanted me to sign.

This was a different world... where people abided by their own rules...regardless of the statutory ones that supposedly governed and regulated their conduct of interrogations.

Isolated from the world outside the station, it was difficult to keep everything in perspective.

It was a kind of alternative reality. The almost non-stop mix of questioning and coaxing and intimidation had a distorting and psychologically debilitating effect.

Tiredness combined with it to produce a yearning just to be rid of the constant badgering.

But I had fallen for this deception and bullying before. I had yielded to the temptation to capitulate just to be free of those State-appointed tormenters. And I had spent almost three months regretting that weakness on my part.

The advice from the solicitor...that calm, resolute admonition to hold firm though the sky might fall... came back to me. Not very forcefully, but her message reasserted itself.

A thought flashed through my mind...If the worst happened and I was wrongly convicted, I would never go to prison...I could always commit suicide!

There was, I believed, a better world or level of existence somewhere out there...I could cut my soul loose...break free from this madness.

This thought consoled me. Yes, I would resist the machinations of this cunning and devilishly persuasive man with his special powers of arrest and detention. I would sign nothing.

But I didn't tell him that. Since I had until next day to decide, I opted to wait until the last possible minute...just before they released me. Then I would announce I wouldn't be signing his statement.

Handing it back to Flood, I promised to consider everything he had said and to let him know of my decision "some time tomorrow".

He seemed content with this. "I'm sure you'll do the decent thing John...to be honest, you don't have a choice."

Flood glanced at his colleague. "Will we leave it there for the time being?"

The other man, his arms folded smugly, agreed.

"Yeah, give him a chance to think it over. His life is at stake. Ah he'll surely sign it. Jesus, he has to...for his own sake."

Flood looked confident. "Okay, John, come with us...you can have a rest...Detective Sergeant McDonagh wants to have a word with you again later."

It was six thirty p.m. Outside the interrogation room, a guard asked me to accompany him to the station cell. I had an opportunity to reflect on my situation.



Drinking on Duty

The events of the previous four hours had left me shattered...having the chair kicked from under me and banging my head off the floor...the persistent threats to set me up on charges of burning hay barns if I didn't "confess" to burning them.

And then Flood's chilling account of prison and his nerve tingling, sickening assurance that the horrors of life behind bars awaited me if I failed to sign his concocted statement.

But I was happy that I hadn't given in.

At this stage of the interrogation three months before, I had signed the very statement that was now being used against me as a lever to persuade me to sign another statement. My retraction of that false admission had not prevented it being dredged up to serve as a grotesque bargaining chip this time around.

But I wouldn't aggravate my position by adding my signature to further lies.

They had threatened to charge me if I didn't sign. That was a silly bluff, I believed, a clear sign of desperation on their part. I would stick it out and they would have to release me once the forty-eight hour period of detention permitted under the Offences against the State Act had expired.

For some reason, the aching in my head had intensified.

I sat on the cell bed, leaned against the wall and closed my eyes.

I fell into a troubled sleep.

I was sitting on the crest of a hill; with swirling dark grey clouds hovering above me...so close I could reach up and touch them...feel their black malevolence.

From a few feet in front of me all the way to the distant horizon men in suits, standing in pairs, appeared.

A disembodied voice declared that each man had questions to ask and deals to offer and threats to make.

They had sadistic devilish features.

The line of grim-faced Branchmen seemed to stretch to infinity. They were chatting among themselves and pointing with mocking gestures at me.

This dragon made up of human parts began chanting CONFESS...CONFESS...in a sickening drumbeat incantation ...swaying from side to side as it passed through me like a vast meandering ghost.

Other voices chided "It's all over...they'll get you in the showers...you're a fucking crank...Prison is hell...look at those burning hay barns, your work...we know you did it and you're going down...we want the names of your accomplices...the strip search is only the beginning...they'll destroy you in there..."

A saintly bearded man appeared, complete with golden halo and flowing white robe. He spoke aloud.

Pointing a long bony finger at me, his voiced creaked: "You're f...f...fucked, F...F...Fitz!"

I awoke sweating, my heart palpitating. I thought I was about to die...no such luck.

The effects of the nightmare wore off; giving way to the real world that wasn't much better.

I had slept for more than two hours. My head still ached. I wondered what McDonagh proposed to question me about.

The jangling of keys again. "Yer wanted laddo" drawled the guard.

McDonagh sat at the desk in the interrogation room, adjusting his thick black hair.

Beside him, in an advanced state of inebriation, was Bannon, who looked blithesome and gruff at the same time.

He was smirking and scowling, and though he faced in my direction, his eyes seemed to be focused on something in the air above me.

The alarm clocks and rolls of tape were back, along with a pile of Photostats.

McDonagh eyed me gravely. "DS Flood has been telling me about you...I hope you sign that statement tomorrow. Right now, I have some questions I have to put to you.

"Damn right you have Larry" Bannon gasped.

Wagging a finger at me, Bannon mumbled "You don't have to say anything you prick, but anything you...do fucking say...may be taken down...and used in evidence...against you...you bollix. You're cautioned Fitzgerald. Never let it be said we didn't give you a chance, Huh!"

Wearing plastic gloves, McDonagh held up an alarm clock and asked: "Is this your clock?"

I nodded assent. He noted my answer.

He then produced the other four broken clocks and I confirmed that each of these was also mine.

But I grew suspicious when he reached for a charred piece of metal that looked like the remnants of a burnt clock and showed it to Bannon.

With deliberation, he intoned: "This, John, was found at the scene of one of the barn fires. We believe it was part of a device used to start the fire. We'd appreciate if you'd tell us who supplied the clock and which member of your gang planted it. Was it your clock?"

"No, it wasn't mine...and I have no idea where it came from because, as I've told you already, I had nothing to do with hay barn fires."

Coldly, he turned to Bannon and asked: "Did you hear what he said Ned...he's admitted it was his...and that the other clocks in his house were being held in readiness for further attacks".

Bannon shrugged: "He's as guilty as fuck Larry. We all know it"

As I protested strongly that I had not made any such admission, McDonagh was writing on a page and mumbling "I admit to being the owner of the clock found at the fire scene, says the prisoner".

Producing the rolls of tape, he asked to me to confirm that these were mine. I explained that they were my brother's, and that they were in the house purely for use in his electrical work. McDonagh looked straight through me.

Writing again, he chortled: "The rolls of insulating tape were being held in readiness for the making of firebug devices by the ALF that would see service in the destruction of hay barns and other property of coursing clubs...admitted the prisoner".

I could see that protestations were futile. He would write anything he wished to write. Calmly I stated "You can say what you like...I'll be making it very clear that the remarks and admissions you're attributing to me are pure lies and rubbish".

Bannon fumed: "Are you calling us liars? I'll fucking paste you to the wall you miserable fucking bunny-hugger".

"Easy there Ned" urged McDonagh, "there's a prison cell waiting for him if he doesn't give us the information we seek. No need to duff him...his mates in the Joy will do that when they get their claws on him. He'll be crying out for our protection when he's in there, but it'll be too late. Then he'll realise that we were here for his own good."

Adopting a friendly air, McDonagh continued: "John, we want the names of your ALF contacts and the people who burned those barns...if you don't give us the names, you get done for the lot...and we want to know who released hares from those compounds...and who glued the locks on the toilet doors at the coursing park...You tell us who did it or you take the blame...that's the way it works..."

I denied any knowledge of the activists who burned the barns, released the hares, or glued the door locks. "This is a charade...a sick joke as far I'm concerned...I've done nothing wrong..."

McDonagh dropped his pen on the desk and sat back in his chair, his arms around the back of his neck. He was smiling at me derisively.

Bannon, his eyes glazed, was getting angrier by the minute. "I'm off to a coursing meeting next week", he boasted, "and when the meeting is over I'll be inspecting a few nice hares...and do you know what I'm going to do with them?"

When I made no response, he revealed his supposed intentions: "I'm going to break the fucking back of every one of those cunts...that's after I make them roar and squeal...and each time I whack one I'll be thinking of you...and the fuckers you sent out to burn those barns."

Pointing a shaky finger at me, he scolded: "Fitzgerald, you'll be responsible for what I do with those bunnies. If you had given us the names of your pals who did the damage... I wouldn't have thought of bumping off the hares...but you...you smart Alec fucker...you're making me do it".

"I think you might be in breach of the Wildlife Act or the Cruelty to Animals laws if you really inflict such pain and suffering" I retorted, knowing well how pointless it was to remonstrate with him.

Bannon winced. "Jesus, will you listen to him...he's on his way to the Joy...he's as good as dead fucking meat...and he's still bullshitting about his hares...well, there's going to be some fair squealing when I get my hands on his furry friends...after that meeting..."

McDonagh produced an empty superglue tube. "I suppose you'll tell me you haven't seen this before either".

I confirmed that I hadn't. He seemed to make a note of my reply.

He elaborated: "A man answering your description was seen in a shop not far from the park where the locks were glued. Three men on their way to work swear they saw a sneaky looking fucker walking down towards the park holding a tube. 'Twas on the morning the poor fellows got locked in. These witnesses said the lad they saw was low-sized, with black hair, and a stupid sneaky grin on his puss as if he was about to do mischief..."

I was tempted to laugh. It was so ridiculous. I insisted the witnesses had not seen me close to the park with a tube of glue, because I had been nowhere near the place. McDonagh seemed indifferent to my reply, and made a note.

Bannon hiccupped and spat on the floor. With eyes half closed, he lectured me: "That was the cowardliest thing I ever heard of...to trap those men in the toilets. How was that going to help your fucking hares? I'm telling you now, those bunnies next week will still be alive after I've broken their backs. I'll kick the living crap... out of them...and I'll be thinking of you...and that smug turnip head of yours... when I make shit of them.

"Jesus, to think it's over hares that you did all that damage...well...the ones you and your pals cut loose are fucking dead...did you know that? All in heaps around the country. In dykes and ditches...rolled over by cars or caught by gangs of knackers. They'd have got a nicer death if ye had left them for the dogs...and what has burning barns got to do with saving hares anyway?"

I agreed with his last remark: "Of course it has nothing to do with saving hares...or with the anti-coursing campaign. So you're wasting your time accusing me of burning barns...or of pulling off those other silly stunts. I only write letters to the papers to highlight the cruelty of hare coursing. That's what I've been saying since you brought me in here..."

Bannon guffawed: "Oh you write letters alright...with no name signed...threatening to burn hay barns and frightening decent coursing men that never harmed anybody. That's a nice carry-on. Scaring the shit out of men who love the clean air of the country and keep down the vermin. Well, you know something Fitzgerald...our job is to control vermin too. And you're the sly fucker that we have by the balls. Let me tell you this: There won't be any hares or bunny fucking rabbits where you're going"

A knock on the door. In sauntered a young uniformed guard carrying a large box that rattled.

"Over here...yes...just leave it. That'll be fine," McDonagh said curtly. The guard laid the crate beside the desk. When the man had exited the room, McDonagh rubbed his hands together.

"Well John, will you join us for an auld bottle"?

"Pardon?"

Bannon rose from his chair and opened the box and took out three bottles...I saw they contained Guinness Stout. He also took a bottle opener from the box. He pulled the caps off two bottles, handing one to McDonagh and placing another on the desk in front of him. He offered the third to me, saying: "Here, you don't deserve it...but you might as well have a drink while the night is young."

I declined the offer, astonished at the unfolding farce. "Ah go on, for God's sake...you're permitted a few bottles once you're not driving anywhere or misbehaving in the barracks...here...try it..." I again politely declined.

The two of them began slugging from their bottles, slurping and sighing with over-stated pleasure.

"Good stuff" McDonagh grunted.

"Not too bad" Bannon opined, leering at me and adding: "You do...have the odd drink...have you something against us that you won't have one here tonight?"

I couldn't resist a sharp rejoinder: "I understood that Gardai weren't supposed to drink on duty. Is there some form of exemption under this Offences against the State Act that allows you to drink alcohol?"

McDonagh laughed. "There's no alcohol in this room...and we're not drinking anything...you're hallucinating or fantasising...have another bottle Ned."

I shuddered at the thought of how I might have coped with the effects of alcohol on my mind in these distressing and coercive circumstances. Did they seriously expect me to drink stout in the interrogation room?

At that time, I rarely drank, even on social occasions. If I had been crazy enough to drink alcohol whilst in custody, I might have become more suggestible and prone to incriminating myself.

I was stunned at their audacity in producing the bottles and baffled as to how they could get away with what I presumed was an illegal act.

But then, so much of their behaviour, and that of the other Branchmen, towards me, had been far outside the scope of what I understood to be normal police procedure.

These people had pushed the boat out already with their draconian fear-inducing tactics. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised by this further descent into the realms of the bizarre and apparently unorthodox.

Half way into his second bottle, McDonagh asked me if I was prepared to sign the statement that Flood intended to present me with again the following day.

"I haven't decided yet," I bluffed.

The two of them continued drinking and chatting as if I weren't present, occasionally glancing at their watches. After about twenty minutes of this two-way exchange, McDonagh took notice of me again.

He began to make small talk, chatting about hurling teams, the weather, how nice the beer tasted, and how he loved being a detective. Bannon appeared to be asleep and was snoring lightly.

At 11.30 p.m., McDonagh gave a sigh of relief: "That's it for tonight" he groaned. Nudging Bannon to wake up, he asked me to accompany him to the dayroom.

I went with them, and found myself surrounded by a half-a-dozen uniformed Gardai, who were all seated looking at television.

McDonagh requested one of them to take me to the cell where I would stay overnight.

The young guard chosen told me he was missing the "best part" of a film he was watching on account of me. After the cell door closed, I heard him prancing along the corridor to get back to his film.



Tricks and Threats

I felt relieved. The day was over and I had not yielded to any of their tricks or threats. I would stand firm until they released me. Then I would be fine.

I felt a surge of confidence. They had failed to railroad me into a false confession that could have led directly to an equally wrongful conviction. I was content and relaxed as I lay down and closed my eyes. I fell into a dreamless sleep.

The opening of the cell door awakened me. It was nine a.m. The guard handed me a mug of tea and a plate containing a boiled egg and two slices of burnt toast. I still felt good, but this feeling began to fade as I cracked the top off the egg and began to eat the breakfast.

These people had put a lot of time and energy into their efforts to extract a confession from me. They were hardly going to give up without a fight. I guessed that every coursing club in Ireland was on tenterhooks awaiting the outcome of the interrogation. I had no doubt but that they knew of my arrest and were on their knees praying for a PR victory.

Destroying the public image and reputation of a leading anti-coursing campaigner would give them a huge morale boost. It would divert attention from their own animal baiting activities and confer victim status on them.

They could claim to be a persecuted minority, at the mercy of vandals and hooligans who burned hay barns and threw broken glass on their fields.

Instead of focusing on the cruelty of hare coursing, the media might then; understandably, switch to exposing the activities of fanatical crackpots who were making a mockery of what formerly had been a worthy and increasingly popular cause.

There was a deathly silence in the cell. Was this, I wondered, a deceptive calm before the storm? At the very least, I still had to face Flood and his "little statement", the one that would have me admitting to an unsuccessful attempt to burn a hay barn.

The fire had been quenched before it could take hold so, Flood had promised, admitting to having started it wouldn't be any big deal.

Did he really think I was so stupid as to fall for that? If I admitted involvement in that one incident, I would automatically be linked to the other arson attacks.

Then again, they knew I had signed the statement for McEvoy. They probably assumed that I would do the same for them if they persisted and applied enough pressure. What they failed to understand was that I had learned a bitter lesson from that previous Section 30 arrest. One I was unlikely ever to forget.

I had barely finished my burnt toast when the keys jangled again. I was required in the interrogation room...pronto!

Passing along a corridor, I overheard a piece of chatter concerning me... "The chap must be mad...no man in his right mind would put himself out over bloody hares for Christ's sake"... "He's seriously fucked, I know that" another voice opined.

Flood was seated at the desk in the interrogation room. McDonagh stood to his right. A third man, one I had not seen before, sat beside Flood.

I sat in my chair, facing them as usual.

McDonagh moved away from the desk, grim-faced, and began pacing slowly and menacingly around the room, his hands pressed behind his back.

In grave and fearful tones, the new man introduced himself as Detective Superintendent Harry O' Neill, adding "I'm here to see if I can talk sense to you John and keep you out of jail."

He was in his fifties, blonde and blue-eyed; reminding me of those Master Race types I had seen in over the top war films. His dark blue suit and red tie looked immaculate. He spoke softly but with great emphasis and deliberation.

He nodded to Flood, saying, "I'll explain the situation to him".

Sighing deeply, he leant across the desk and eyed me with extreme concern. "I'm afraid, John, that we have decided to charge you. Preparations have been made. It would be very hard to reverse the process that has been set in motion. What I mean is...I would have to move heaven and earth to persuade the powers that be not to proceed against you.

"You see, John, a lot of people out there are baying for your blood. They don't want to see the ALF gain a foothold in this country. In Britain, those people have burned down meat factories; petrol bombed lorries carrying sheep and cattle, burgled their way into laboratories and burned furrier shops. It's gone way beyond a joke over there. Now, they're starting here. We can't allow that.

"How many more young fools will be lured into this animal gang? And where will it all end...will people get killed or injured. We have to crush this thing in its infancy...in its shell...before it hatches out. Jesus Christ, we have enough trouble with the IRA and the Loyalists and the drug dealers and the knackers without this ALF craic.

"I'm a reasonable man...I don't want you to go to prison. This decent man beside me here has already explained to you what prison is like. When I look at you John I know in my heart that you don't want to go there. But I know something else too...that you wouldn't last a week in that terrible place. They'll eat you alive. You'll be lucky to survive for a few days. You'll end up pretty soon in a coffin, or, if you live, in the madhouse."

He paused, seemingly to test my reaction. I obliged. "What do you want from me? I've told your colleagues the truth. I had nothing to do with arson attacks, or the other stunts...or with the ALF...nothing whatsoever."

He filled his mouth with air and blew it out, shaking his head ominously. Flood handed him a sheet of paper.

The Superintendent held it up for me with emphasis. "John, this is your ticket home without a stain on your character. It's the only way you can avoid being charged today...your only hope...your last chance bar none, do you understand?"

"DS Flood has told me about it" I confirmed.

"Right, so you know the score."

Laying the statement on the desk, he announced: "I'm leaving you in the custody of Detective Sergeants Flood and McDonagh, John. I'm going away now. I'll be down at the courthouse. The next time you see me will be about two hours from now, if and when you are taken there to the special sitting that has been provisionally arranged for you. My advice John is simple. Sign that statement like a good man. It's all that stands between you and prison. I'll say no more."

Rising abruptly and adjusting his tie, he mumbled to his underlings: "do your best for the poor bastard" and strode out of the room.

McDonagh took the empty seat beside Flood. "There it is John...you've had the night to think it over...you heard what the Super said. The lads below at the courthouse are waiting for you. Here, for the love of Christ...take it and sign it. You'll only be admitting to starting a fire for the ALF that caused no damage...and I swear by all the saints and the angels that if you sign it, we'll let you walk through that door a free man with a clear conscience".

I didn't believe a word of their threat to have me charged. This, I was convinced, was more of their pathetic bluffing and trickery.

With a lump in my throat and my heart pounding, I trotted out the assertion I had rehearsed for them earlier in the cell:

"With the greatest respect to both of you, and to your esteemed colleagues who interviewed me yesterday, I regret that I won't be signing the statement. The reason I won't be signing it is quite simply because its contents are untrue.

"I didn't ignite any hay barn fire, or attempt to start any fires. I have never been a member of the ALF or been remotely associated with its activities. I will not sign that statement under any circumstances. I realise that you may detain me until tomorrow morning...to complete the forty-eight hour detention period allowed, but I'd appreciate if you would permit me to leave immediately. I have done nothing wrong...and you are wasting your own time and mine by detaining me for a second longer".

The two Branchmen stared at me open-mouthed. McDonagh spoke first, in a low voice. His tone was cynical and disbelieving: "Jesus...what a cheeky fucking ponce...can you believe the bastard? We're trying to keep him out of jail and he won't even listen..."

Flood's eyes seemed about to pop out of his head. A terrible rage engulfed him. He brought his fist down with a resounding bang on the desk. "Holy mother of Jesus Christ!" he rasped. He emitted a roar that I thought for a moment might blow the roof off the Garda Station: "You conniving fucking scumbag...we know you did it...oh we'll have you sunshine...we'll have you...you rotten skite...!"

Shaking his other fist at me, with a quivering finger protruding, he shouted "You had your chance...Hell's bells, but I've put my career on the line for you. That's it. I've had it with you!"

The two of them seemed possessed by demons. They took turns at calling me names and making further threats to deliver me into the hands of prisoners in Mountjoy who would, they warned, see to it that the roughest form of rough justice was done to me.

I remained silent throughout this noisy and passionate outpouring of anger. I had said my piece, and I believed there was nothing I could have usefully added.

"Up...back to the cell...now!" Flood hollered. Outside the room, I was passed to a uniformed guard who took me to the cell.

Sitting on the bed, my stomach heaved. I thought I was going to be sick. I felt dizzy.

This was more than I could deal with, but surely my release was just hours if not minutes away. I had withstood the wheedling honeyed words, the lying inducements, and the vile threats. They had exhausted their arsenal of tactics and now they would have to let me go.

Half an hour passed.

The tension became unbearable. The jangling of keys again. This time four Branchmen flanked the uniformed guard: Flood, McDonagh, Bannon, and Rhatigan.

Bannon had a broad smirk. The other three looked deadly serious. Flood had a sheet of paper in his hands.

"Fitzgerald, you had your chance," he said gravely.

Without looking at me, he read from the page. I was stunned. I was being charged on five counts of threatening to burn hay barns, contrary to the relevant section of the Malicious Damages Act 1861.

Each charge related to a threat to the property of a named individual. The names jogged my memory. I recalled that the letters he referred to were the ones mentioned in the statement I had signed for McEvoy three months earlier. So now it had come back to haunt me.

"You're coming with us... to the court. The judge is waiting." Flood sounded impatient.

"But I've done nothing..." I pleaded, "Can I call my solicitor?"

"You can't...the phone here isn't working...come on now..."

The four Branchmen escorted me to the dayroom. A seated uniformed guard looked up at me: "Any complaints about your treatment in the station?"

"Well yes, actually".

He reached for a pen, indicated a chair and asked me what the problem was. I sat at a table, the guard facing me.

With the four Branchmen towering over the guard and myself, I pointed out that I had been threatened with violence. That a chair was kicked from under me...that I was asked to sign a prepared statement concocted by the Branchmen and threatened that I would be charged if I didn't sign this...that I had been offered bottles of beer...

The guard whistled softly as he noted my comments. At the mention of beer, he looked incredulous. "Are you sure it was beer?"

"Certain" I confirmed.

He gave the Branchmen a worried look, shrugged, and resumed his writing. "That everything?"

"Ah...no. I'd like to add that these people wrecked my bedroom by ripping the lino off the floor and kicked the mattress from my bed down the stairs".

"Kicked the...mattress...down...the stairs. That everything?"

"Yes, apart from the fact that these men are charging me with offences in which I had no involvement"

"Oh I'm afraid that doesn't come within the ambit of a complaint regarding treatment in custody. That's a matter for the courts..."

"Come on...it's time to go..." I felt a hand pressing on my shoulder. It was Flood. I couldn't believe what was happening.

We were out of sight of the conventional Gardai, approaching the main entrance to the station, when I remembered that I hadn't shaved or even combed my hair.

I asked if I could clean up my appearance if I was to be taken to a courthouse. Flood guffawed, and Bannon tossed my hair vigorously. "You may as well look the part...a fucking gurrer," he crooned.

I exited the station ahead of the four Branchmen. They were sniggering behind me. Flood headed towards a car, opened the rear door and bid me get in. Bannon shuffled in beside me. He was sober this time.

McDonagh took the wheel and Flood occupied the front passenger seat. Rhatigan stood sniggering on the pavement. He slapped the roof of the unmarked car as the engine started. "Enjoy your special sitting John...next stop Mountjoy for you" he mocked. The three in the car laughed.



False Charges

My watch said 1.30 p.m. The day was dark and overcast, with light drizzle. As the car pulled away from the station I felt shabby and dejected. I looked it too. I had seen my reflection in the car mirror. I felt helpless, completely at the mercy of these people. I felt a crushing sense of injustice. I was being put through a sickening ordeal despite not having committed any crime.

Passing by houses, shops, and pedestrians, I was struck by the normality of life on the streets and wider world outside. I was on my way to court while all those lucky people were freewheeling through another day...working, taking a stroll, shopping, collecting or spending their dole money, or messing about... like the youngsters I saw playfully miming tough guys at a street corner.

When the car halted in traffic lights, two men in brown shop coats stared at me through the window, obviously aware that the other three were Branchmen: "That poor fucker is in trouble" one of them quipped cynically to his companion.

The courthouse came into view. It was a grey, downbeat, and inauspicious building. The national flag fluttered in a light breeze in front of it. With the car parked, I was ushered up the long stone steps to the entrance. My escort made a show of sprinting athletically alongside me towards the open doorway.

The Branchmen, who had been chatting and skitting like immature teenagers in the car, suddenly changed their demeanours once inside the courthouse. They whispered daintily to each other...or remained silent with stiff upper lips and reverend airs.

They reminded me of the way unruly school children assumed angelic appearances the second their teacher returned to the classroom. A uniformed guard guided them and myself to the room where the judge was waiting.

The courtroom was empty apart from the judge, a court clerk, and the guard. Being a "special sitting", there were no spectators. Bannon and McDonagh stood at the back of the courtroom with hands joined like worshippers in a church. Flood motioned me forward, striding along beside me.

He begged the judge's permission to explain the reason for having interrupted his day off. Charges had to be proffered against a suspect in a major crime investigation, he informed the elderly District Justice.

"Is this the man?" the judge asked, in a cranky but sombre tone.

"That's him, your Lordship" Flood replied reverentially.

He then read out the five charges.

I felt light-headed. Waves of disgust and horror swept over me as the charade played itself out before the judge. I had to listen to a litany of false and fabricated allegations dressed up as "charges" that the Branchmen and I knew were groundless.

Flood said he would not oppose bail, and I was given a form to sign that the clerk explained was a personal bail bond. The judge asked me if understood the nature of the proceedings.

I replied that I understood I was being charged with having threatened to burn hay barns, and that I would be contesting these charges when the opportunity arose.

He then announced a date for the next mention of the case. I would have to turn up for this also, he said. I would be notified once a date was set for the case to be heard.

That was it. Flood cast me an icy glance: "You can go now".



A Bird Man or a Hare Man?

I walked alone out of the courthouse... and straight to a phone booth. One of my sisters took the call when I phoned home.

My family had been worried sick about me, she revealed, knowing nothing of my whereabouts for almost a full day apart from the fact that I was missing and that half the house had been wrecked before I left it.

They had eventually learned that morning, after phoning several Garda Stations, that I was in the custody of plainclothes Gardai investigating anti-coursing activities.

I replaced the receiver in the booth. My heart sank. I felt tired, deflated, and demoralised. If there was such a thing as a living nightmare, then this was it. The world was a bitter, fearful, and dangerous place. Images of small rooms and tall men in suits crowded my mind.

At least I was free of those men for now. Whatever the future might hold.

I waited under a drizzly menacing sky for a bus that would take me home. I felt it was the worst day of my life.

A distraught reception awaited me at home.

My parents, brother, and four sisters were devastated by the news. But none of them engaged in recriminations or displayed even a hint of hostility. They had partly expected the worst after the previous arrest when I told them I had signed the bogus statement.

Though the passage of almost three months since that arrest had assuaged their concern and anxiety, as it had mine. They felt that the Gardai would have the good sense not to proceed with a case that the Branchmen knew in their hearts had been fabricated.

I recounted the events of the previous thirty-six hours. My mother was more affected than the rest of the family, but I managed to reassure her. The truth would come out, I promised. My grandmother had said rosaries for me. She was relieved to hear that I had her Padre Pio relic with me during the interrogation. He would look after me, she insisted.

Thankfully, my father, about whom I was seriously worried because of his condition, proved the most sympathetic.

The stroke had taken away his speech, and he used an alphabet at that time to communicate. Slowly, he spelled out the words "no surrender" and smiled at me. The others appeared moved.

This gesture I found especially uplifting. He had never held any strong views on the subject of hare coursing...but he did feel strongly that nobody should be bullied or pushed around just for expressing opinions.

I spared him the unsavoury details of the interrogation, as I had no idea how such a true life horror story might have affected him.

It is a natural instinct to wish to protect one's own family in times of challenge and crisis. Seeing that he was held back so cruelly by his condition, I dreaded how he would react to hearing that his infirmity had been used as a lever by the Branchmen in their efforts to extract information and false admissions from me.

I had forewarned my family about the next morning's newspapers. So the impact of the gut-wrenching headlines wasn't as severe as it otherwise might have been. The Branchmen had obviously issued a press statement putting their spin on my predicament.

The four papers gave my full name and address in their reports and a detailed description of the charges.

"Gardai make dramatic breakthrough in animal rights terror case" screamed one headline. The article revealed that detectives had arrested a prominent anti-coursing campaigner in connection with arson attacks and had charged me with threatening to burn hay barns.

"Leading anti blood sports activist charged with arson terror threats" was the heading over another report. This also referred to a "breakthrough" in efforts to counteract ALF activities; and in particular the burning of hay barns.

The other two newspapers carried similar reports. The overall impression given by the coverage of the arrest and charges was that I was as good as convicted of the alleged crimes.

That was certainly the perception among my neighbours and townsfolk...not to mention the thousands of people nationwide who had read the newspapers.

I didn't hold this misconception against my neighbours and friends. I had often reacted in exactly the same blinkered fashion whenever I read, or saw on TV, that someone had been charged with an offence. There is a tendency to assume that a person has to be "at least a little bit guilty" if the guards arrest or charge them.

My solicitor was out of the country on holidays. It would be a fortnight before I could see her.

In the weeks and months that followed, people I knew avoided the subject of the charges when I spoke to them. But I knew my situation was the subject of lively gossip and speculation.

I overheard a chat in a supermarket that was clearly about me. Two men and a woman were huddled together, conversing in agitated whispers: "God almighty, what was he thinking of...setting fire to hay barns?"

"Jesus, isn't he a woeful fucker to be carrying on like that?"

"Oh, he's a fucker alright. I'd say he'll do time. He's ruined anyway, I'll tell ye that much."

The jokers at the Town Cross had new themes to exploit when I walked past them that weekend. "We're off to burn a barn...in the green, in the green," one of them sang, in a parody of a 1960s rebel song.

Younger fellows mimicked the death cries of coursing hares.

"Will he be a bird man or a hare man when they lock him up?" roared another wit, eliciting an outburst of giggling from a pair of young women who had joined in the chorus of taunting.



Arra Sees the Light

I got support too of course. Apart from my family, a few neighbours, and other anti-blood sports campaigners, I received a major boost from a totally unexpected quarter: Arra-fuck.

A fortnight after the arrest and much publicised charges, I was walking along a street in my hometown... immersed in contemplation and not paying much attention to passers-by when somebody called me. There was pain in the voice, I thought.

I looked around. I barely recognised the hunched figure that stood on the pavement in the doorway of a shop: He had a bandage around his head, one leg in a plaster, and was leaning on two crutches. It was Arra-fuck, who had many a time hissed and catcalled at me from the street corners.

What on earth had happened to him? And what could he possibly wish to speak to me about? He was the first person I would have expected to be dishing out the insults in response to what I assumed would be a propaganda godsend to a fervent lifelong coursing fan like him.

He had been identified with the game for thirty-eight years, and he was now in his mid-forties.

“John” he gasped, seemingly in pain, “I heard what happened to you. Those SB bastards. They set you up. Listen, I’m sorry about...you know...annoying you and the name-calling and all that.”

Taken aback, I thanked him: “It’s very good of you to say that...but what happened to yourself? Were you in an accident?”

“You could say that” he replied, his face furrowed with anguish as he adjusted his standing position with the crutches. He told me what befell him.

He had been helping a local farmer to cut ditches a fortnight earlier. During a lull in the ditch cutting, he had wandered into a neighbouring field with a bucket to pick mushrooms. There was a jeep parked in the middle of the field belonging to a friend.

Not finding anyone in the jeep, he had gone down on hands and knees to collect the prized food items, starting near the vehicle where he spotted a few juicy ones. As the bucket began to fill, he became aware of a snorting sound. He thought it came from the jeep.

He rose to his feet. He heard the sound again. Then he began to circle the jeep, thinking there was something, maybe a cow or a sheep in the field. He heard the sound again, though much louder...from behind him. He turned quickly...and what he saw filled him with dread.

A large bull stood facing him, snorting and frothing at the mouth. Its fierce eyes were terrifying and unafraid. Two razor sharp horns reinforced its intimidating posture.

Arra-fuck was rooted to the spot. He began to move backwards, alongside the jeep, hoping to calmly make his way out of the field without disturbing or provoking the enraged animal.

But it was too late. The bovine juggernaut had already been provoked by his mere presence. Arra’s heart was beating at a ferocious rate and the sweat trickled down his forehead, chest, and legs.

As he moved, the bull moved also. It started digging its feet into the ground, and tossing dirt in the air. Arra knew what this meant. He had to think fast. Judging that he was close enough to the open gate into the field to make good his escape, he opted to make a run for it.

I was riveted as he described what happened next: “I ran as fast as my two auld legs would carry me. I’m not very athletic, and boy, did I pay for my lack of exercise that day. As I struggled and panted, I could hear the mad fucker closing on me...the snorting out of him was something unreal. I knew my life was on the line.

“That fucker, I knew, would offer me the joys of the next life if he caught me. With the gate just yards away...Jesus...just yards...I stumbled and down I went. Like a log. My face hit the ground. My forehead had struck a rock. But that was nothing. As I rushed to get up, I was pinned to the ground by what I soon realised was a powerful hoof.

“I heard a roaring in my ears. Then I felt a searing pain...God...it was the worse pain I’ve ever known...The bastard had pierced my left hip with one of his horns...he wrenched it out again and Jesus...the agony...I can’t describe it. He gored my leg then. It was gushing blood.

“I roared with the pain. I was sure I going to die. I fucking cried. And I rattled off the fastest prayer I’ve ever said...not that I pray too often. Luckily for me, three fellows came to my rescue.

“The bull withdrew as somebody fired shots in the air. I was pulled out of the field and rushed to hospital. I had lost a lot of blood. The doctor told me it was a miracle I wasn’t killed.”

I commiserated with Arra. It was a truly terrifying experience he had undergone. I told him a little of what I had been through and he promised never again to dismiss the anti-coursing viewpoint.

He elaborated on the reasons for this change of heart. “When I was in hospital for those few days, I got thinking on what you’ve been saying about the hares...how they must be so full of fear and terror when the greyhounds close in on them...and what they go through if the dogs pull them asunder.

“I never really saw coursing from that angle. It was the contest that mattered...I mean between the dogs. But what that fucker of a bull did to me I’ll never forget to my dying day. Jesus, I was never as frightened. I suppose that’s how a soldier feels in the battlefield when he gets wounded but narrowly avoids death.

“All I know for certain is this... I’ll never have anything more to do with that coursing craic.”

Extending a hand of friendship to him, I wisecracked: “From this day forward you shall be known as Paul”.

“What?” he gasped, my Biblical allusion having failed to register.

I reminded him of the famous passage in the Gospel where Saul, who has been persecuting the Christians, is struck down by lightning on the road to Damascus. He hears God reprimanding him and resolves to amend his evil ways...and Saul changes his name to Paul.

“So you think I might be walking the road to Damascus?”

“Well, in a sense” I opined.

“Maybe,” he groaned, as he prepared to board a bus that would take him home.

Watching him hobble onto the bus with his crutches, I felt a surge of elation that this man who had been a coursing fan since childhood had resolved to turn his back on cruelty.

His experience proved that people can and do change if the right impetus or opportunity presents itself. I wondered if I might be a dedicated coursing fan like Arra-fuck if my upbringing and family background had been similar to his.

Kafkaesque

My solicitor reacted with shock but not too much surprise when I told her what happened. She outlined how the State would proceed through the various stages of the legal process that the Branchmen had set in motion by arresting and charging me.

She had obtained a copy of the charge sheet from the State Solicitor's office. Assuming a bleak expression, she indicated the sheet of paper and said, haltingly and almost in a whisper: "Yes...John...I have to tell you...because the letters threatened to burn dwelling places as well as hay barns, each charge carries a maximum penalty of ten years imprisonment under the Malicious Damage Act."

I swallowed hard, gasping. "That's pretty stiff...especially when I haven't even done what I'm accused of doing".

"Not to worry John, she soothed, "it will be my job and that of the counsel...your barrister...to fight these charges. Anything the Prosecution throws at you will be contested...vigorously. We'll do everything humanly possible to win your case."

"So what happens next?" I inquired.

She informed me that a Book of Evidence would have to be prepared by the State... assuming that the charges were not dropped in the meantime. This compilation of evidence would, she asserted, almost definitely contain the incriminating statement I had signed during the first interrogation.

There was also a danger; she hinted darkly, that the Book of Evidence might include alleged verbal admissions by me.

A handwriting expert might be employed by the Prosecution to highlight any similarities between my handwriting and that contained in the anonymous "ALF" letters. To counteract this, my defence team could engage the services of an equally qualified handwriting expert to refute any such claims.

"We'll just have to wait and see what they come up with, John. We'll have a clear picture if and when we see a Book of Evidence. From what you've told me, it seems they haven't got much of a case...but they're working hard to trump it up and make it look convincing. They're under a lot of pressure to crack down on this animal liberation thing.

"If they haven't got reliable information as to who is behind the hay barn fires, there may be a temptation to fit somebody up...to start with an assumption that X or Y committed the crime and then work backwards from that assumption to produce a neat, plausible resolution...one that confirms their hunch or pet theory.

"As I mentioned to you last time, something like this occurred a decade ago following a high profile mail train robbery. Innocent men went to prison after having confessions beaten out of them. It's awful, but it's sadly a factor we may be up against in your case.

"I'm afraid that's the world we live in. They possibly see you as their best bet... I mean for getting a conviction...because of that unfortunate statement they bullied you into signing.

“The coursing clubs must be giving them hell...demanding results...but I’m sure the Gardai are concerned too about the wider problem posed by the type of animal rights activity that has been giving the British police headaches for years.

“It’s not just coursing as you know that the ALF in Britain has been targeting. It’s anything associated with meat, fur, battery farming, exporting of livestock, experimenting on animals, and so on.

“The guards...and the politicians of course...don’t fancy having to divert resources into investigating new security threats. They have their hands full as it is. I’m afraid it does appear they wish to make an example of you.”

With an encouraging smile, she tried to soften the effect of this observation. She explained that I would have to make another brief court appearance a month hence...probably the first of many, she added...when the State might produce the Book of Evidence and fix a date for the case.

It could be many months before the case was heard, she emphasised. If it did go ahead, a jury in the Circuit Court would try it.

Though charges had already been proffered, the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) would be making a decision, on the basis of a file sent to him by the Gardai, on whether to proceed with these charges. The Gardai would accept his direction on whether to prosecute or not.

I shuddered to think of what the DPP would make of the incriminating statement if it were sent to him as part of a file on me. He might see it as a valid confession on my part...backed presumably by Branchman allegations that I had also made verbal admissions of guilt.

Added to all this, as Ms. Thompson had warned, might be an attempt to show similarities between my handwriting and that of the anonymous poison pen writer. With that seemingly convincing set of “guilt indicators” on his desk, who could blame the DPP if he decided that I had a case to answer?

I saw how the whole devious jigsaw was coming together for the Branchmen. But it was ultimately a jury that would decide who was telling the truth...that would examine fairly (I hoped) the evidence presented in court...if the case went ahead.

Christmas 1986 was joyless for me. It had a dreamlike quality. I felt I had been cut adrift from the world of normal human beings...banished to a kind of earthly Limbo by the Branchmen.

They had not yet made any public attempt to back up their allegations of wrongdoing against me. But they had manipulated the media into publishing well chosen words that as good as condemned me as a deranged terrorist.

They had the advantage of being able to legally defame me without having to answer for their fraudulence, dishonesty, and corruption. I would have to wait for the trial to refute their fabricated smears. In the meantime I must endure the misapprehensions and prejudices of the people among whom I lived.

Throughout that winter I tried hard to conceal my foreboding and increasingly depressed state of mind. I felt I had no right to spoil the enjoyment of family members and others. Why should they suffer because of my misadventures...however justified I felt I was in pursuing my objectives?

I had been wronged...horribly so... but to draw them into the complex web of intrigue and subterfuge entangling me would compound the injustice.

Amid the end of year festivities, I contemplated my situation. I walked the streets of my hometown and the City with a black murky cloud of suspicion hovering over me. There was no escaping it. Wherever I went, I felt the judgemental glare of mistrust and malice.

Possibly, I imagined hostility where there was none. It was difficult to tell what a person was thinking when he or she bid you good day or made eye contact. I believed the worst. I just assumed that everyone I met had read or heard about the charges and had decided I was guilty of terrorising law-abiding people.

Phantom accusers inhabited my mind, giving me no rest from this perceived public excoriation.

I began to wish that the daunting legal process was over, one way or another. Even prison, I thought, would be better than the agony of waiting and worrying and the hideous fear of the unknown that fuelled it.

A neighbour who sympathised with my plight told me it reminded him of a book he had read: *The Trial*, by Franz Kafka. I had heard of it but hadn't read it. I picked it up at the local library.

The very first sentence leapt off the page. It is one of the most famous opening lines in the history of literature:

“Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K; for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning...”

I read on, and soon found myself identifying with the main character. He cannot get anyone to answer the question: why am I accused when I have not offended?

By the end of the novel, we begin to realise that Joseph K. is “guilty” of being what and who he is rather than of any wrongdoing. And that ultimately condemns him.

This set me thinking. The Branchmen were utterly biased against all anti-blood sports campaigners because of the actions of unknown elements within or outside the animal welfare movement.

I had been twice arrested, and then falsely charged, not because of anything I had done wrong, but to ease the pressure that the coursing clubs had brought to bear on the police force. Being an opponent of hare coursing made me guilty in their eyes.

Kafka's novel was certainly a timeless masterpiece. I supposed that the dark side of human nature he depicted so terrifyingly had always found expression and always would. No nation on earth- nor any police force or legal system- was immune from it or ever would be...human nature being what it was.

Though a compelling read, the book left me feeling even more demoralised, especially its epilogue. I wondered if I too would come to a nasty end, if not the kind Joseph K. suffered.

I finished reading the novel on New Year's Eve. There was the noise of celebrations on the street outside as revellers spilled out of pubs, singing and hollering. I didn't join them. I had nothing to celebrate.

Maybe the year just beginning would be happier. It certainly couldn't be any worse than the nightmare that was 1986, I hoped.

Looking out at the sparkling Christmas lights, it occurred to me that I had found a fitting word to describe the nature of my experience: Kafkaesque.

Looking back, I realise it was the “in-thing” among the so-called chattering classes in the 1980s to liken just about any bizarre or conspiratorial situation or dilemma to “something out of Kafka”, but I felt I had a stronger claim than most on the comparison!



The Book of (Fabricated) Evidence

A month later, I attended the City District Court. There would be at least a brief reference to the charges, Mary Thompson had told me. I noticed that none of the Branchmen who had interrogated me was present.

After sitting through dozens of cases of drunken behaviour, underage drinking, petty theft, and road traffic violations, the moment of truth for me arrived. The State solicitor cast a furtive glance at me.

I was sitting in the back row of the Courtroom. Beads of sweat broke out on my forehead.

Mary nudged me. “Come along”. I accompanied her to the front row of seats, where we stood facing the judge. The State solicitor rose with a dramatic flourish.

Indicating a sheaf of documents on the long oak table in front of him, he informed His Lordship that the State had arrived at a decision in relation to my situation.

The District Justice looked at me quizzically, and nodded to the lawyer, who looked as proud as a peacock and was grinning smugly.

He told the judge that a Book of Evidence would be ready “in a matter of weeks” as the DPP had indeed decided that a prosecution should proceed in the case. The eyes of all present focused on me.

My heart sank.

Mary Thompson soothed: “Not to worry...at least now we know there will be a case to answer. We can prepare our defence once we see what they’ve got”.

On the way out of the courthouse, a guard with a young handcuffed prisoner in denims passed me. I had heard the man’s case earlier. He had been caught smoking cannabis on a City street.

The sight of him being ushered into the prison van, his head bowed despondently, did little to boost my self-confidence.

Three guards stood near the van, listening to a burley prison officer. An elderly woman sobbed and shouted insults at the guards. Beside her a young woman with tears flowing down her cheek held an infant. The baby gawped incomprehendingly as the van door slid shut.

Though I had no sympathy for drug dealers, my heart went out to these people who were affected by the course of justice.

Five court appearances and seven months later, the Book of Evidence was complete. I was presented with the weighty volume one summer morning on the steps of the courthouse...just minutes before what I assumed would be yet another one of that exhaustive series of “mentions” and adjournments.

Mary explained that the District Justice would have to study the Book of Evidence to decide if it warranted a trial. In the likely event that he did, he would then set a date for the hearing.

The judge adjourned the case again, promising to make his decision within a few weeks.

With Mary’s guidance, I began reading the heavy tome in her office. It seemed as large as War and Peace.

Though I had been expecting it, my stomach heaved at the thought of what this magnum opus, which ran into hundreds of pages, might contain.

I tried hard to retain my composure as the words of accusation and condemnation paraded before me. Vile and untrue allegations were set down in neatly typed paragraphs. Each page was headed “DPP Versus John Fitzgerald”.

Sworn statements from McEvoy and Collier claimed I had freely admitted to having written the ALF letters and given a detailed statement to that effect.

The bogus statement I had signed was reproduced. A surge of revulsion washed over me as I read its cleverly conceived words of self-incrimination. How on earth had I fallen for such a cruel stunt?

I could find no reference on any page to my having withdrawn the fictitious declaration of guilt. The evidence of the Branchmen involved in the second arrest and interrogation occupied most of the volume.

This section, to my amazement, had two further incriminating statements that the Branchmen alleged I had given willingly. The lack of my signature on these was attributed to a stubborn refusal on my part to sign the confessions of guilt I had made “quite freely and without the slightest pressure”.

The first of these phoney statements was the one that had me “confessing” to having joined the ALF after teaming up with doped and spaced-out English hippies in Cork and then aiding these shadowy figures in their burning of hay barns and releasing of hares.

It referred to “materials intended to be used in the making of incendiaries”...the broken alarm clocks and rolls of insulation tape.

It was so utterly false and over the top that I felt a sudden urge to laugh. But the joke was on me. This was a damning statement that the Prosecution would be offering as proof that I was a tin-pot terrorist.

The second, shorter statement was the one Flood had tried so hard, though in vain, to persuade me to sign. It sounded more plausible and therefore, I supposed, more dangerous in that people might be less likely to dismiss it as a cock-and-bull story.

It linked me by a supposed admission of guilt to a failed attempt to burn a barn, thus potentially putting me in the frame for other arson attacks that resulted in extensive damage to property.

There were statements from coursing club officials in almost every county in Ireland, each asserting that he had received a letter signed “ALF” threatening to burn hay barns or houses.

Statements from Gardai stationed in the relevant hare baiting districts confirmed the receipt of complaints from coursing officials who were threatened.

Then there was the evidence of a Garda handwriting expert. He declared he had examined samples of my handwriting and compared these to the scribbled block lettering in the anonymous letters.

He expressed the “professional opinion” that I could, in theory, have written the ALF letters, having found similarities between the two sets of handwriting.

Mary Thompson dropped her copy of the Book of Evidence loudly on her desk, distracting me from my avid reading of the State’s case against me.

“John” she said, plaintively, “This is very serious...it’s awful...we have a tough task ahead of us, I’m afraid. Would you take that home and contact me after you’ve had more time to read through it.”

She looked worried...and this bothered me, as she normally exuded a cheery optimism.

Downheartedly, she added: "I'll be setting up a meeting with the barrister who'll be fighting your case. That's assuming that the Book of Evidence persuades the District Justice that you have a case to answer. From what I see here, it's a virtual certainty that he'll be fixing a trial date when we appear next month."

"Keep the old chin up John" she reassured, with counterfeited jollity and a forced smile.

Pretending not to notice her discomposure, I thanked her. She seemed to have taken on a share of the nauseous mental torment that afflicted me.

I left her office with that hefty work of crime fiction under my arm. I decided not to show or even mention it to other family members for the time being, as I feared it would upset them. It was enough that I had to brood over its contents, I reasoned, without subjecting them to unnecessary fretting and anxiety.

Revealing it to them would have served no purpose apart from adding to their ill-deserved worries.

As expected, the judge at the next District Court appearance announced that after studying the Book of Evidence he was satisfied that I had a case to answer. It was a decision I dreaded to hear, but at least I was well prepared for it and now I knew there would be a trial.

I knew where I stood, and I knew exactly what the Prosecution would be throwing at me because it was all laid out neatly in the Book of Evidence.

The judge set the trial for a date in December...three months away. A judge and jury in the City Circuit Court would try the case.

A week later, my solicitor and I met the barrister appointed to defend me. He was in the city on other business and had agreed to "fit me in" as he had a spare half hour on the day. We would meet him at one of the consultation rooms in the courthouse.

En route to the venue, Mary enlightened me on an aspect of the legal system I had failed to grasp. She explained that it would be a breach of a time-honoured tradition in the profession for a defendant to meet his or her barrister alone, or to make direct contact with counsel.

The solicitor must also be present at such meetings. "In other words", she elaborated, "the barrister is...I suppose...God...if you like...and the solicitor is, so to speak, the Blessed Virgin...through whom one intercedes to beg a favour of the Almighty".

I thought she was joking. She wasn't. I was learning something new every day about how the legal system worked.

Trevor Cruise Mulligan was seated in the consultation room, wearing an ordinary suit...no wig and gown as had I rather foolishly expected. He was a plump, ginger-haired jovial man in his early forties. His face was chubby, but not overtly so.

He was not so much overweight as endowed with additional flesh that added a certain stateliness to his demeanour. He reminded me of an artist's impression of the Biblical King Solomon that featured in one of my childhood schoolbooks.

The beginnings of a beard gave him a vaguely Christ-like appearance. This amused me, recalling the solicitor's likening of a barrister to God.

And his countenance radiated wisdom. Lines from a poem called *The deserted Village* popped into my mind... "And still they gazed...and still the wonder grew...that one small head...could carry all he knew..."

I was in awe of the man before he uttered a word. I felt slightly intimidated. As if this was another Branch-style interrogation about to commence.

His piercing blue eyes reminded me of McEvoy, but his pallid complexion was the opposite of the Branchman's turkey cock neck and cheeks.

He was poring over a copy of the Book of Evidence. Looking up, he rose and extended his hand to greet me. "Ah, Mr. Fitzgerald...I've been reading about you...Take a seat".

Mary sat next to the barrister, a seating arrangement that irked me because it put me in mind of the Branchmen. Each of us had a copy of the Book of Evidence.

The barrister took a deep breath and sighed: "From what I've seen Mr. Fitzgerald, we are faced with an uphill task in securing an acquittal in your case. You handed the investigating Gardai a trump card by signing that unfortunate statement.

"The two unsigned statements lend weight to the signed one, and these charmers are claiming throughout that you were virtually falling over yourself admitting to burning hay barns and sending threatening letters. Their hand writing expert is saying he believes you wrote the stuff."

"Do you think I have a reasonable chance of beating this?" I asked tentatively.

"There's no guarantee that you'll be cleared of these charges" he replied, eyeing me with regret.

"On the positive side" he continued, "you did withdraw the statement...and of course you refused to sign the other two statements. The evidence of the hand writing expert is purely an opinion...hand writing analysis is not an exact science, and in your case I am confident that we can drive a coach and four through the Prosecution's reliance on such doubtful evidence.

"If you are determined to plead not guilty to the charges, we'll have our own expert, a person whose qualifications in his field are on a par with that of the gentleman retained by the Gardai."

Taken aback by his use of the word IF, I quickly interjected "I will definitely be pleading not guilty, Mr. Mulligan, since I didn't commit any of these offences".

"I was coming to that...Mr. Fitzgerald...of course I accept what you say regarding your innocence. But it's the evidence that the Prosecution puts before the court that will play a very large part in deciding the issue.

"We have to assume that the jury will be swayed profoundly by the visual and psychological impact of one detective after another testifying under oath that you confessed. It will be the word of all those people against yours.

"Because...make no mistake...they will back each other up...on everything. The jury might well conclude that you withdrew the incriminating statement afterwards when you realised you'd be in trouble."

"But do you think the case can be won then?" I asked, a hint of despair creeping into my voice.

"It can be...but I have to be frank with you, Mr. Fitzgerald...the consequences of a conviction would be quite serious for you. Almost certainly a prison sentence of maybe three or four years..."

"But we'll be fighting to ensure that doesn't happen?" I queried.

"Ahem...yes...if that is your instruction...of course Mary and I will fight for an acquittal...however..."

He paused, joining his hands in front of his face as if about to recite a prayer.

"There is a way of avoiding a prison sentence...Mr. Fitzgerald, I would very strongly suggest that you consider a guilty plea...yes...I know you didn't do it...but consider, the chances are the jury will indeed believe those detectives...and find you guilty.

“The way it works is this. If you are found guilty after a trial lasting three or four days, the judge may throw the book at you. However, if you plead guilty, I believe that he will, in all probability, let you off with a suspended sentence. You’ll have saved the court’s valuable time by avoiding a full trial...and avoided putting the victims of the threatening letters through the ordeal of cross-examination. You’ll get brownie points for that.

“Of course you’d have a criminal conviction, which wouldn’t do you any good, but at least you’ll have been spared what I can only describe as the...unspeakable horrors...of prison.”

I understood his thinking, and could see the logic of his advice. There was a grave danger, given the fact that it would be my word against that of eight Branchmen, that the jury might reject my version of events.

Still, I was adamant that I would not plead guilty to something I hadn’t done, whatever the possible or even probable consequences.

“Mr. Mulligan, I very much appreciate your advice...but I wish you and Ms. Thompson to fight my case. If I lose, I expect you to appeal to a higher court, if that’s the procedure. I won’t be changing my mind about this. I say we fight. That is my clear instruction to both of you”.

The two of them looked at each other, then at me.

“That’s fine, Mr. Fitzgerald...and as you know Ms. Thompson and I are bound by your instructions.”

The barrister rose, extending his hand to me. “We’ll meet again soon Mr. Fitzgerald...a little closer to the court date.”

Turning to the solicitor, he counselled: “That handwriting expert you told me about...you might get in touch with him...send him all the relevant details?”

She nodded assent. I bid good day to them. I left the consultation room, a bit shaken by the barrister’s gloomy depiction of my prospects. But I believed I was right not to even contemplate pleading guilty as a damage limitation tactic.

I remembered a quote from a book I had read at some stage, possibly by Charles Dickens: “Let justice be done though the sky may fall.”



Making a Hare of Justice

The Trial date arrived...a crisp winter morning. After a sleepless night, I travelled to the City in the company of my brother and seven anti-coursing campaigners.

My head ached. I had, on the barrister's advice, downed a glass of hot whiskey before my fruitless effort to sleep.

How could I sleep...with the hideous prospect of jail...or complete social annihilation... hanging over me?

I felt a spine-tingling sensation as we walked towards the converted former castle where twelve citizens of the county would decide my fate. A creeping nausea seized me, and a mild sense of panic.

For a moment or two, I contemplated not turning up. I was tempted to stop in my tracks...to amble down one of the ancient narrow laneways that dotted the City...and escape. But I knew that would be pointless. Where would I go?

There was no escape from the legal process that had been set in motion. It was unstoppable and irresistible. The challenge had to be met. The Branchmen would find me if I bolted.

Then they would say that I must be guilty because otherwise I wouldn't have run away from a fair trial.

The courthouse loomed ahead of me...gaunt and menacing.

I felt queasy at the sight of it. The last time I had endured a nerve-racking wait for justice inside that forbidding place was on the day of the unfair dismissal case.

That felt like a distant memory...a trivial occasion compared to the one that now weighed against me.

I met Mary Thompson at the bottom of the steps leading up to the courthouse. Dozens of people were gathered around her, or loitering nearby on the pavement. Important looking stern faced men held bulging folders under their arms.

"Mr. Fitzgerald, over here!" somebody shouted. I looked around. A television camera faced me. "Just a shot of you on the way up" the cameraman quipped.

Reporters from four national newspapers and the local media were there too. None of them asked me for a comment. They were assigned to report on the trial. There could be no interviews with the accused person until the case had concluded.

I ascended the stone flight of steps. Before I was half way up I heard loud guffaws behind me. My brother and I looked around. My anti-blood sport colleagues, who were trailing by three or four steps, had to nimbly stand aside for five tall smirking Branchmen who were taking two steps at a time and swinging their long arms in military fashion. I recognised them as the men who had conducted the second house search.

As they brushed past me, one of them glanced backwards and gave me a two finger sign from a fist that clenched a newspaper. The six Agents of the State pranced in single file into the courthouse in a manner recalling schooldays drilling for the Christian Brothers... "Step together, boldly tread. Firm each foot, erect each head".

More than a hundred people thronged the walled outer portico in front of the building. I had to shuffle through them to reach the entrance. My stomach heaved.

Uniformed guards and plainclothes Branchmen mingled with coursing fans on the portico. Some of them were leaning against the wall overlooking the street. I caught sight of Branchmen who had interrogated me. One of them smirked in my direction.

Fully robed barristers paced about, hands clasped behind their backs, immersed in thought. My solicitor explained that most of these were here in connection with other cases. Though mine was the only trial to be heard, a number of minor legal loose ends had to be tied up before the main event kicked off.

Little groups of men were chatting and joking. Loud laughter and uproarious banter swept along the portico.

There was a slightly festive air, though none of it was rubbing off on me. It reminded me of childhood visits to the circus, except that now I felt like the clown. I was the centre of attention for the wrong reasons... at the butt end of this enormous joke that was unfolding in the heart of the City.

I recognised some of the coursing men, though most of them were strangers to me. I knew they had arrived from almost every county in Ireland for the trial. Just about every club official or landowner who had received an ALF letter was expected to appear, some to testify to having been threatened...others just to observe the case.

And all the guards who were handed the offensive letters had to be present to confirm receiving complaints about them.

True to form, the towering figure of Masher Wheelan materialised. He emerged from inside the courthouse onto the portico, flanked by his retinue of cringing admirers. Arra-fuck wasn't with him, I noticed. The guy really had quit coursing over his encounter with the bull.

Masher pointed me out to a pair of sleazy looking fellows who screwed up their faces with disgust. They shook their heads and resumed their cheery conclave.

A man who was clearly "under the weather" burst into a verse of Master McGrath, a song eulogising the exploits of a nineteenth century Irish greyhound that won the British Waterloo Cup coursing event.

"Ah sure fuck the begrudgers, says Master McGrath" he wailed, swaying from side to side.

"They're not the words at all, ya fucking eejit," another man scolded.

The radiant, upbeat State solicitor, in a spanking new Armani suit, was huddled in a corner with the prosecuting barrister and three Branchmen.

The Prosecutor, Maurice Buckley-O' Rourke, was a lean, low-sized, lively man with steel grey eyes and a quaint Anglo-Irish accent. Utterly refined, he moved elegantly amongst the babbling throng.

He stood out from the others...in a smoothly superior way. He was, I had been told, a keen foxhunter and a devoted connoisseur of the arts. In his majestic black gown and eighteenth century wig, he presented an imposing if anachronistic figure in such blustering company.

The other barristers swanning about on the portico had their wigs less delicately positioned on their heads. Some were tilted too much to one side or the other, or carelessly donned in the manner of caps or helmets.

But his was impeccable...flawlessly centred. It reminded me of the way Mozart wore his wig in a famous portrait...or was that the composer's real hair?

Like those around him, the Prosecutor was in obvious high spirits. I presumed he deemed the case an open and shut affair. He was puffing stylishly on a cigar.

Watching the smoke waft over the wall and form little clouds above the street, I felt dwarfed by the enormity of unfolding events. How on earth could I triumph against such odds?

All these people, apart from my own solicitor, barrister, and less than a dozen supporters were here either to help destroy my life, or to savour the probable moment of destruction.

In blood sports lingo, a “coursing trial” was a ghastly dry run that preceded each official hare-baiting event. Such outings could be bloodier and more abhorrent than the ones open to the public.

In addition to being coursed, the hares could be tossed with their backs broken to the dogs. Or forced to run with hind legs tied together. No mercy was shown. The old adage about skin and hair flying applied quite literally to these sessions...or trials.

The spectators who had assembled at the courthouse on this day were looking forward to a different kind of “coursing trial”.

I was to be the hare in what had all the appearances of an uneven contest. The dice was stacked against me. The Prosecution was clear favourite to win the game. I had heard that some coursing fans were betting on the outcome.

They would savour the moment that my good name was torn to shreds.

They believed I hadn't a snowball's chance in hell of reaching the escape hatch that only a not guilty verdict could make possible. They were, I thought, probably day dreaming of celebrations to follow their big win.

If they got the result they wanted, the drink would flow freely and songs would be sung in the coursing heartlands. I visualised rapturous cheering outside the courthouse and me being led away handcuffed to a paddy wagon to be conveyed to the overcrowded jail that the Branchmen had threatened me with.

The solicitor roused me from my brooding. We entered the courthouse. It was packed to capacity. There was scarcely standing room. More barristers shuffling about...and more coursing fans than you would see at the National Meeting.

The loud hum of conversation echoed throughout the building. My name was being called again. There was urgency in the voice that made it heard above the clamour.

From somewhere to my left it came, followed by an apparition of an enormous black and white bird of prey, flapping towards me in great haste. It was my barrister Mulligan. His face was fretful and his slightly oversized gown swished around him.

“Mr. Fitzgerald, Ms. Thompson...Come with me, please. Time is pressing. We have another problem...”

He led us into a consultation room, seated himself curtly and indicated chairs to us. He cut to the chase. “Mr. Fitzgerald...on top of all the other drawbacks that beset this case I'm afraid we have a last minute hitch...one that dramatically increases the likelihood of a conviction.

“The judge we had every reason to believe would be presiding in this case has been called away on urgent family business and his replacement is...well...a man who gives short shrift to people who make allegations of impropriety against the police. In the event of a conviction, he'll throw the book at you. Big Time. I feel certain that he will impose a lengthier prison sentence than I had feared might be the outcome of this trial. I urge you, Mr. Fitzgerald, to reconsider your commitment to fighting this case.”

Though taken aback, I was in no mood to plead guilty to something I hadn't done, whatever the pressing reasons offered for such a move. I reaffirmed my intention to contest the charge, come what may.

“I understand how you feel Mr. Fitzgerald, but given the damning nature of the statement you signed, the various other unsigned statements attributed to you, and the heavyweight line-up of police witnesses who will swear blind that you confessed, I’m afraid I see the jury returning a guilty verdict.

“Now, if you plead guilty, I can assure you that there is every chance he’ll hand down a suspended sentence. Or maybe just apply the Probation Act...which would be akin to a rap on the knuckles.”

Turning to the solicitor, his hands made a motion of despair: “The odds are stacked against us!”

Mary Thompson echoed his advice, though with little enthusiasm. “John, there’s still time to change your plea. It’s a very dangerous situation you face. You can certainly avoid prison by pleading guilty. It’s your choice”.

I felt faint, nauseated by this dilemma that offered only two unpalatable options, and with less than ten minutes to go before proceedings commenced.

But I had long since decided that no power on earth would persuade me to accept a false guilt simply to escape an equally unjust and unwarranted punishment. That would be like signing that bogus statement all over again.

The barrister was rendering the same advice as the Branchmen who interrogated me, though his motives were different.

They, and the coursing clubs, wanted me convicted to discredit the anti-coursing cause, or so I believed, whereas Mulligan saw a guilty plea as a way of keeping me out of jail. It seemed a conviction was very much on the cards. Both sides expected me to leave the court in handcuffs if I contested the charge.

I remained silent for about half a minute. Not to reflect on the advice and the stark warning of what might lie ahead, but in a gloomy self-absorption brought on by this eleventh hour attempt to take me down a different road to the one I had psyched myself up for over the previous eleven months.

I stood, pushed the chair away, and said plaintively: “I’m pleading not guilty. Let’s go in. I appreciate your advice and thank you for it”.

The solicitor stood, smiled nervously at me and quipped: “We’d better get going then”. Mulligan made an effort at suppressing his obvious displeasure and concern. He had the look of a funeral home manager as he reached for his folders on the desk. They were bulging with documentation.

Outside the consultation room, two uniformed guards approached me. One of them told me I would have to sit with him during the trial. My solicitor confirmed that this was a routine procedure.

They accompanied me to the courtroom. I was ushered into a long seat that directly faced the jury box on the opposite side of the room.

The two guards sat beside me, to my left, and were joined by others. At right angles to me, close to the top of the room, was the judge’s bench. To the right of this was the stand from behind which witnesses would give evidence and be cross-examined. The witness stand was located between the jury box and the judge’s position.

The seats in the courtroom filled quickly. A sinister and somewhat funereal atmosphere pervaded the place. I had never in my life been the focus of such intense observation and scrutiny. I felt the eyes of a multitude bearing down on me. And a creeping though restrained antagonism.



Opening Shots...

A malfunctioning buzzer sounded, startling me. I was on edge. It resembled the noise of a chainsaw engine starting up.

Judge Gerald Christopher Bambrick entered through a doorway at the top of the courtroom, slowly and with great pomp.

The clerk crooned “Be upstanding for His Lordship”. We all rose to our feet as the senior lawman stepped towards his appointed position underneath the golden harp of Ireland.

He must have been at least in his late sixties, I surmised. He was grey-haired, grey-eyed, detached, and expressionless. But there was no hint of menace in his demeanour. Not that this put my mind at rest.

A jury would decide in the end, and this eminent gentleman, for all his majesty and wisdom, would have to accept its verdict. My barrister had reminded me of that sobering detail.

In the silence that accompanied his brief walk to the bench, the shuffling of his gown was amplified via microphone and to my ears had a sinister echo to it. But then I was jittery. This whole piece of deadly theatre was to revolve around me.

His greyish wig fitted him perfectly, and almost seemed a natural growth like a head of normal human hair. Unlike many of the other wigs on display that ill-suited the heads they covered.

A female barrister had a cringe-inducing wig that was far too small for her large cranium.

Even in that moment of impending crisis, I allowed myself the luxury of being repelled by the ridiculous sight of this lady, whose runaway tresses could have adorned three small heads, wearing a wig designed for eighteenth century English gentlemen.

Anarchic tufts of ginger hair protruded from all sides of it like the tentacles of a dead octopus.

What a perverse and silly anachronism, I reflected...this imported aristocratic male hairpiece on an Irishwoman’s Free State skull. It distracted me at regular intervals throughout the trial...that wig.

The judge, I thought, had an aura of dignity and gravitas about him that, apart from his obvious high status, separated him completely from the robed and suited figures that lined the front pews behind a long table facing him at which sat, to the left, my own barrister and solicitor, and, to the right the Prosecution team of barrister and State solicitor.

The clerk formally kicked off the trial, announcing that the case of DPP versus me was about to commence.

A deferential silence descended over the room. The stage was set. The clerk called on me to approach the judge’s bench. The judge eyed me gravely as the clerk read out the charge relating to the threatening letter and asked: “How do you plead... guilty or not guilty”?

“Not Guilty” I replied emphatically.

The Prosecutor rose to his feet and mumbled something about jury selection. I knew what this meant. Because I had pleaded not guilty, a jury had to be sworn in to try the case.

Jurors had to be chosen from a pool of more than a hundred people who had been summoned for possible service.

The clerk began calling names. Defence and Prosecution teams scrutinised their lists. As each name was called, there was a moment or two's silence to allow for a challenge from one or other of the legal teams.

The first three names went unchallenged. The fourth met with instant disapproval from my barrister. He was a farmer who lived in a pro-coursing district.

The Prosecution challenged the next two. One was a woman in her early twenties whose green and yellow hair and anti-establishment badges on her black leather jacket marked her out as a possible "radical".

The second was a young man sporting hippie-style hair and a badge with a slogan advocating world revolution. Both were stopped in their tracks as they approached the jury box.

The next two went unchallenged, but the following name elicited a prompt Defence rejection. She was a middle-aged lady whose neck scarf had a colourful hunting scene woven into its pattern. The Defence likewise challenged the following three, unfairly I thought, on the grounds that they were farmers. I knew from experience that many farmers were anti-coursing. Still, better to play safe.

The Prosecution then challenged a member of a prominent left wing party- who seemed offended at being turned down.

After several further rejections, the required twelve adjudicators were seated in the oak-panelled jury box. Each of them in turn was sworn in, pledging to try the case honestly on the evidence presented. I noticed some of the jurors looked uncomfortable taking the oath. No wonder. Theirs was a daunting responsibility. They would have to live for the rest of their lives with the verdict.

The Judge welcomed everybody to his court. I felt a bit left out because he seemed to direct his benevolent gaze at everyone except me. I felt excluded from those warm words of acknowledgement and salutation. An oversight that unnerved me, since I was the *raison d'être* of this finely choreographed occasion. It was my destiny that was about to be shaped by the jury and himself.

And yet his all-embracing formal friendliness seemed to overlook my presence. I interpreted this as a deliberate effort on his part to avoid becoming in any way unduly sympathetic towards me or influenced by my demeanour.

He gave the jury an in-depth crash-course on how a criminal trial worked.

He outlined the different functions of the Prosecution and Defence, and how a jury was expected to reach a fair verdict based on the evidence presented in the trial. They must, he advised; put aside any prejudice or unwarranted sympathies they might have in relation to the blood sports issue that formed the background to the case.

Only the actual evidence was to be considered by them. There was to be no place in their deliberations for hearsay, pre-conceptions about the accused person...or personal chauvinism.

They must not have an argument about hare coursing, he warned. Their duty was to decide simply whether the accused person was guilty or not guilty. He stressed that a defendant had to be found guilty "beyond a reasonable doubt"...or otherwise be given the benefit of that doubt and acquitted.

He explained the nature of a reasonable doubt. It must not be a mere manufactured doubt created in the mind simply to avoid convicting due to unwarranted loyalty towards, or pity for, the defendant.

Rather, he emphasised, it was the kind of doubt that might cause someone not to proceed with an important business deal...or to call off a venture, or to cancel a planned purchase of shares on the stock exchange.

He then asked the twelve jurors to retire to the jury room to elect a foreman. Ten minutes later, they re-emerged and the appointed one daintily put up his hand to indicate his selection. He was a small stout man with a head of curly auburn hair and a pleasant baby face. He seemed delighted to have been elected foreman, and his colleagues cast approving looks at him.

The judge elaborated on a few more essential points, again cautioning against arriving at a verdict on any basis other than that of the evidence presented.

After His Lordship's enlightening spiff to the jury, it was over to the Prosecution to mount its long-awaited onslaught. Maurice Buckley-O Rourke rose to his feet. A deathly silence preceded his opening address.



“Che Guevara” Takes the Stand

With a delicate cough, O’ Rourke began to outline the Prosecution’s case against me, summarising what he promised would be a “convincing wealth of irrefutable evidence” pointing to my guilt.

Coursing men all over Ireland, he proclaimed, had been threatened with arson and grievous bodily harm just because they enjoyed a little harmless fun with greyhounds and hares. Anonymous letters had been sent to them warning of blood-curdling consequences if they persisted in their chosen form of recreation.

As vandals claiming to be animal lovers had indeed damaged many coursing fields and burned hay barns, he argued, the recipients of these letters had every reason to fear that the threats might be carried out.

The Prosecution would show, he promised, that the defendant had admitted to detectives that he wrote a number of the threatening letters, which were signed ALF, standing for Animal Liberation Front. And he asserted that a handwriting expert was of the opinion that I had “probably” written the offensive letters.

Then he alluded to the letter mentioned in the sample charge against me. “We will prove to you beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant John Fitzgerald was the author of this shocking anonymous letter that is signed ALF.”

With a dramatic swagger, he held aloft the letter I was accused of writing and posting and that purported to have been sent on behalf of the ALF to a well-known coursing official.

Approaching the jury box, he waved the letter in front of each member. “By the conclusion of this trial, you will have not the slightest doubt but that the defendant committed the crime he stands accused of”.

He slowly stepped backwards from the transfixed jurors. I thought he would fall over something, but he obviously knew every inch of the courtroom.

He resumed his position behind the long table. Following a pregnant pause, he spoke again...in a weightier tone and with a puckered brow: “This dreadful missive, ladies and gentlemen, was received by a man who was shaken to the core of his being and traumatised by its contents...Brace yourselves as I read it for you...”

In his refined Anglo-Irish accent, he began to read the letter: “Dear Bollix shit head cunt of a fucker...” He halted abruptly.

There was giggling from the jury box. Its source was a young woman, one hand covering her face. The middle-aged male juror beside her was smiling broadly and appeared on the verge of laughing. The woman seemed to be trying hard to control herself.

Then she started to shake with silent laughter, her face contorted with the pain of suppressed jollity. The judge was glaring at her. Noticing him, she blushed and regained her composure. The Prosecutor cast her a disdainful look and re-focused on the page he was holding.

“Where was I...ah yes...cunt of a fucker...we know you allow coursing on your land...”

Laughter and giggling again from the jury box...louder this time.

I heard a rumble of laughter from the back of the courtroom also. Looking towards its apparent source, I beheld a line of uniformed guards with arms folded, grinning impishly.

Civilian spectators- or potential witnesses, I wasn't sure which- were sniggering and elbowing people standing or sitting near them.

The coursing fans and officials, by contrast, were fuming. Some of them caught me glancing in their direction and glowered at me. And the Branchmen didn't look happy either.

I turned away nervously, concentrating on the jury box opposite. All eyes in the room fixed on the jury. Three jurors, including the woman who had giggled first, were smirking. And the foreman was scratching his curly head, one half of his face smiling and the other half moulded into a frown.

I could understand this inapt reaction. The Prosecutor's Old World landed gentry accent combined with the over the top abusive language of the letter to lend an unintended hilarity to the proceedings.

The judge intervened. "Ah...the lady in the pink blouse with the silver broach...yes...you...ahem...I would remind you Madam...and the other members of the jury too of what I said earlier...this is a very serious matter...Justice is taking its course here today...there is no room in my court for misplaced gaiety or gratuitous chuckling. If there is any further interruption of this kind I may have to dismiss the jury. Do you understand?"

Though other jurors had also laughed or giggled, the judge clearly identified her as the one who was infecting the others.

"Yes, your lordship" she replied, a smile forming that she seemed desperate to repel before it could take hold.

"Good...Continue Mr. Buckley-O' Rourke".

A hint of exasperation in his voice, the Prosecutor resumed: "Thank you Ma Lud.... Ah...I had read that sentence...yes...Would you like to see tacks and broken glass scattered on your fields? Or your house and your farm sheds burned to the ground? Do you wish to see your gates opened at night and cattle turned out into other fields? Would you like to be without your balls after we have cut them off?"

"If not, tell those prick fuckers and shitheads in Coolbawntaggart Coursing Club you'll not be giving them your field for their blood junkie sessions again. Otherwise, you'll be getting the same treatment as those gobshites in Ballymistletoe, Killnamuck and Lisnascutty coursing clubs.

"They won't admit it, but there's ten of them that have no balls anymore and their wives have turned to other men for satisfaction..."

Laughter from the back of the room again and a controlled but palpable smirking had now become rampant in the jury box. The judge heaved a sigh but said nothing.

Shrugging off the distraction, Buckley O' Rourke managed to conclude his perusal of the letter. "Your farm will be gutted, your sheep and cattle will be kidnapped. We will steal your chickens, ducks, and the gander. That's the price you'll pay for hanging out with coursers. You'll lose your balls and your farm. Is it worth it?"

Remember. No more coursing or else. Signed ALF."

The Prosecution then called its first witness. Malachy Connor, Chairman of Coolbawntaggart Coursing Club, took the stand. The bible was placed in his right hand and he swore to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

I thought I knew him. Yet I had never met him...or even heard of him before the charges were brought.

Then it clicked, and I felt a complete fool. Che Guevara! He was the spitting image of the heroic socialist revolutionary. The absurd likeness fascinated me.

This man had the same dishevelled beard, slightly long hair, and dark complexion as Che...and, to cap it all, he assumed a similar heroic pose in the witness box. All he was missing was the famous black beret with a little red star in the centre of it.

The idol of rebels and left-leaning folk everywhere...and here he was...whisked away from his Communistic heaven...torn off the iconic tee-shirt...and brought back to life in the heart of rural Ireland... to testify against me.

But then he spoke, and Malachy Connor's pronounced West of Ireland accent spoiled a perfect illusion. Che Guevara was no more. It was as if a large Fairy Liquid bubble had burst in the air above the witness box.

He recalled the morning he received the ALF letter. "Yer honour, I was out in a field near my house injecting hares for liverfluke when Betty, that's the wife, called me. She was hysterical. Come in quick Malachy, she said, there's a letter for you and 'tis only disgusting. Tis threatening to wreck the place and burn down the house and the barn and do quare things to yerself. I'll never forget the look she gave me when I went in and took that letter from her."

He paused. The Prosecutor soothed him. "Now Mr. Connor, I realise this is difficult for you, but I must ask you...is this a copy of the letter you received?"

He handed the page to him. "Yes, I'll never forget it. I'd know it anywhere."

With deliberation and pathos, the Prosecutor proceeded to read out the threatening letter for the second time.

Again, smirks and giggling from the jury box and suppressed laughter from the back of the courtroom.

Irritated by this, the Prosecutor bit his lower lip and scowled at the jury. This added to the misplaced mirth. The woman with the pink blouse appeared to be having a seizure, though everyone seemed to understand the true nature and cause of her conduct. The judge frowned but made no intervention.

"And how did you feel upon perusing this dreadful piece of vitriol?" the Prosecutor asked the coursing official.

"Ah Jaysus I was fuckin'...I mean I was gutted, yer honour. My hands shook like jelly, I started to faint...but Betty grabbed me and slapped me on both cheeks. Pull yerself together man, she said. I had a double whiskey and calmed down. Then I ran out to the field and showed the letter to the other men. They were shocked too when they read it. Some of them went weak, yer honour. We had to get help from another coursing club to inject the rest of the hares after the fright we got. We just couldn't get over it."

"Would it be correct to say, Mr. Connor, that you were fearful for your life, and for the safety of your farm and livestock?"

"I was rigid with fright yer honour. I went as white as a ghost. I got the shakes and I haven't recovered since from the fright I got that day."

"And of course you presented that obscene, violent, insulting, and terrifying piece of filth to the Gardai?"

"Oh I did. And I hope that the fucker...I mean the criminal... who tried to frighten me and disrupt our annual coursing day-out will get what's coming to him".

I sympathised with the man, as no one deserved to be intimidated in that way, regardless of support for coursing or anything else. But this feeling of commiseration was blunted by his uncanny and ill-timed resemblance to Che Guevara.

As I listened to him recount his ordeal, I still couldn't stop thinking that he was a dead ringer for the man whose face launched a billion tee shirts.

"No further questions for this witness" droned the Prosecutor.

Trevor Cruise Mulligan rose to his feet. Adjusting his wig, he placed his right hand on his hip, looked down at a page of notepaper on the table in front of him, and then faced Malachy Connor.

"Ah, Mr. Connor...you have been active in a coursing club for...what...eighteen years...is it?"

"Yes, yer honour...going on nineteen. I used to help out as a young lad...catching the hares and that, but I didn't get really into it until about nineteen years ago."

"And would it be correct to say, Mr. Connor, that a fair amount of robust, and dare I say it...foul and offensive language...would be par for the course among the people who pursue this rural pastime"?

"I'm not sure what you mean, yer honour".

"Would it not be a common experience for you to hear swear words that begin with the letters F, S, and B bandied about with almost tedious regularity when you and your coursing associates meet to discuss tactics, to organise your hare and hound outings, or whatever?"

"Well...of course...yes...there might be some choice language, a bit of effing and blinding...just like you'd hear in a pub or anywhere."

"And would you not have resorted to such foul language yourself from time to time, Mr. Connor?"

"Not very often...I might let an odd swear out of me..."

"Like you did when answering my learned friend's questions a few minutes ago?"

"Oh that just slipped out, yer honour".

"Mr. Connor, you say you were terrified by the letter you received that was signed ALF. How terrified were you?"

"I was in bits, yer honour. I was never as frightened or as shocked by anything before in my life."

"You were terrified; I take it, that the threats contained in the letter would be carried out?"

"Ah...yes...of course."

"And you were shocked by the foul language in the letter?"

"Oh...totally disgusted...it was sick."

"And you have told the court that your esteemed colleagues who were...what was it...injecting rabbits or whatever...were equally appalled by the contents of the threatening letter?"

"It was hares, yer honour, not rabbits. And yes, the lads were gutted by the abuse in that letter".

"Even though you and your friends have had, according to your testimony, recourse to similar foul language?"

"I didn't say it was the same kind of language."

"Ah...I see...perhaps you might tell the court how it differed from the application of rude words in the offensive letter. Mr. Connor, could you enlighten me as to which of the following words would not have

formed part of the robust swearword vocabulary of the sportsmen and women with whom you have close and frequent dealings: Bollix...fucking...Cunt...bastards...shit head”

Malachy Connor looked away from the barrister...and blinked worriedly at the judge.

I counted five jurors who were smirking. The lady in pink was shaking her head, rolling her eyes, and nudging the male juror beside her, who had his head drooping out of sight, holding it in his hands and shaking...whether with silent laughter or sobbing (which I thought unlikely) I wasn't sure.

The other jurors looked bemused, apart from one, a refined lady, who grimaced at the recitation of the foul words that echoed around the courtroom.

The Prosecutor was on his feet, objecting to what he argued was an unfair, cruel, unreasonable, and unnecessary line of questioning.

The judge agreed: “Mr. Connor, you need not answer the last question. Mr. Mulligan, you will please refrain from, shall we say...coursing that particular hare.”

“Yes, your Lordship”

Mulligan resumed his cross-examination. “The letter-writer, as we know, threatened to raid your farm, to cause damage to property and to attack you personally unless you refused permission to the club to hold its annual coursing event on your land. Tell me, Mr. Connor, did you allow that coursing event to be held on your land after receiving the threat?”

“The coursing went ahead...yes...but I believed I was taking my life in my hands by allowing it. The threat hung over me. For weeks after the fixture I had nightmares about the Animal Liberation Front. I believed they were coming to get me. Shadows frightened me. Every sound had me jumping or looking over my shoulder.”

“And did you take any special security measures to guard against the expected attack?”

“Ah...well...I had told the guards about the letter and given it to them...and the club organised a few lads to watch the hare paddock day and night to make sure the antis didn't try to release them” ”

“What I meant, Mr. Connor, was...did you beef up security at your home...and on the farm?”

“No, not really”.

“So your response to the threatening letter was that, apart from reporting it to the guards, you made sure that the hares being held in captivity for the coursing were well guarded?”

“Yes...well...we knew the antis would head first for the hare paddock if they did show up.”

“Mr. Connor, if you were as frightened as you say you were by the letter you received, why did you not attend first and foremost to the safety and security of your home?”

“I wasn't thinking straight, yer honour. I know I should have installed an alarm or got a few rothweilers or something. But I just couldn't get my thoughts together. I believed that whoever sent me the letter would do terrible things to me...like they threatened. I hit the bottle for days. It was the shock that drove me to it.”

“One last question, Mr. Connor. You are aware that disputes and divisions have arisen over the years between rival coursing clubs, and that these have in certain instances resulted in bitter exchanges and recriminations and also in members of some clubs damaging the property of other clubs. Would you not agree that it is entirely possible that the anonymous letter you received might have been sent to you by a supporter of another coursing club...somebody with a grudge?”

“I don’t know who sent me the letter. It could have been written by anyone, but I’m pretty convinced the antis were behind it. They’ve been causing problems for a lot of coursing clubs, and the letter was signed ALF. Those initials stand for a gang that hates coursing”.

“But you agree that coursing supporters with a grudge could have sent you the letter?”

“Well...I don’t know for certain...who was behind it.”

“No further questions, Mr. Connor”.

The Prosecutor was back on his feet.

“Mr. Connor, regarding the reference to swearwords and cursing by my learned friend for the Defence, would you not draw a clear distinction between the use of such words in everyday discourse and their sinister conniving misuse in a threatening letter designed to terrorise a law-abiding person like yourself?”

“Oh there’s no comparison, yer honour...the lads and myself might curse a bit...but we’d mean no harm. T’was different to see those words down on paper, with those threats to burn the house and the farm and cut off parts of my anatomy. T’would knock the good out of any man to get a letter like that”.

“Thank you, Mr. Connor. That will be all.”



Sevenhouses Coursing Club, Pray For Us!

Six other coursing officials took the stand to say they also got letters purporting to have come from the ALF. My barrister opted not to cross-examine any of these, as nobody was disputing their claims to have received the correspondence.

Nor was the court dealing with charges relating to any of these letters, the Prosecution tactic being to sneakily imply that I probably wrote those ones as well as the “sample charge letter”.

The intention was to shock the jury with notions of a wider, countrywide campaign of intimidation and terror...to conjure in their minds stark images of the fear, trauma, and foreboding that confronted the victimised coursing fraternity.

The testimony didn't appear to be having that effect on the jury.

All but one of the coursing officials gave their evidence in a sombre tedious monotone, reminiscent of the cattle and sheep price bulletins broadcast on farm radio programmes. There were yawns from the jury box, and the room filled with bored facial expressions. Even the judge looked fed up and sleepy-eyed.

A senior coursing club secretary dragged out his testimony for almost half an hour, though his presentation consisted merely of reciting the names of all the coursing clubs in Ireland whose officials had received threatening or offensive letters.

With an air of solemnity and drama that recalled Lincoln giving the Gettysburg Address, this well groomed silver-haired witness with distinguished bushy eyebrows intoned the title of each coursing club...emphasising it resoundingly and rolling the words around in his mouth.

The witness paused for a few second after each name...casting a sombre peek over his half moon reading glasses at the gathering.

It sounded a bit like the way the names of our Patriot Dead at Easter...or of immortal heroes enshrined in some eternal Roll of Honour, would come thundering over a public address system or from a radio set...accompanied by martial music and undulating drums.

There were close to a hundred clubs to be mentioned. After each name was pronounced gravely, a gasp of recognition would issue forth from the packed courtroom. Comments like: “Jaysus, that's us Billy” or “the fuckers will pay for that”.

About a third of the way through the solemn intonations, I began to feel drowsy and closed my eyes. The speaker was having an almost hypnotic effect on me.

It reminded me of something; I thought...that rhythmic chanting...that relentless invocation of names and places.

The Rosary! The repetitive drone from the witness box brought me back to my childhood. My father, mother, and grandmother knelt with us children and we prayed with eyes closed as each of us in turn recited the sacred words or phrases and the others answered: Pray for us.

Tower of Ivory...Pray for us. House of Gold...Pray for us. Star of the Sea...Pray for us.

Without thinking, I began to whisper a meek response to each word that thundered forth from the witness box. Rathcarney coursing club...Pray for us. Westmeath United coursing club...pray for us. Ballyscutter Memorial coursing club...pray for us. Clonmickaleen coursing club...pray for us.

A tap on the shoulder jolted me. I had been on the brink of nodding off and the stern-faced Garda beside me had noticed this. "There'll be time enough for sleeping above in Mountjoy," he murmured in my ear.

Eventually, the witness concluded his recitation and stepped down, to a measurable sigh of relief from all but the most ardent coursing fans in the room.

The one coursing witness who made an impression did so for the wrong reasons. I recognised him as the man who had earlier sung a verse of Master McGrath outside on the portico and who appeared to be heavily intoxicated.

He arose with difficulty from his seat at the back of the courtroom. "Go on there, boy, sock it to 'im", somebody rasped.

The tall, rakish man, in a suit that was a few sizes too large for him, politely muscled his way through the tightly packed ranks of onlookers, sightseers, and legal observers. "Excuse Me," he repeated several times, hiccupping.

Slowly, he cleared the obstacle of the human throng that impeded his path to the witness box. He meandered towards it.

The court held its collective breath as he lightly collided with the wooden podium, swayed to one side, but quickly regained his balance and stood upright. Resting one hand on the edge of the witness stand, he again swayed gently as he took the bible in his hand and sat down.

Haltingly, he took the oath, casting a confused gawk at the jury, the judge, the assembled legal entourage, the packed seats, and myself. The Prosecutor eyed him worriedly, as did a few of his coursing colleagues, one of whom mumbled out loud: "I hope he doesn't start fucking singing".

"Ah, Mr Griffin could you please put a little distance between yourself and the microphone...ah yes...that will suffice...Now, Mr. Griffin, can you recall for the court that dreadful morning in September of last year upon which you received a grossly offensive and threatening letter?"

"Letter...yer honour...what letter?"

"Ahem...Mr. Griffin...the letter of which I here produce a copy...containing threats to damage your coursing field and inflict grievous bodily harm on your good self."

"Oh yeah...I got some fuckin...I got a letter...it was from that shower of wasters that don't like coursing. Yeah, it was a woeful letter."

"Mr. Griffin, can you tell us how you reacted to the contents of this scurrilous and alarming missive that dropped through your letterbox that morning?"

"Oh yeah...I said to the missus...throw that fucking thing in the fire...forgive the language yer honour but that's the way I said it. She threw it in the grate but I changed my mind before it caught fire and took it out again."

"And did you not then, being the civic-minded person that you are, Mr. Griffin, deliver that atrocious piece of vitriol to your local Gardai?"

The witness smiled broadly. He had a nostalgic faraway look in his eyes. He shook his head fondly and blew his well-sculpted aquiline nose into a large handkerchief.

“Oh sure I did, yer honour...the sergeant was great...I showed him the letter and we had an auld chat about greyhounds. I got talking to him about Bootleg Butterscotch, that won the derby back in the sixties. A brilliant dog...he turned that hare something beautiful and won the course no problem. I had another dog, Lilly Marlene, the best bitch that ever ran down a coursing stretch. She won the Oaks at the national one year...what year was that? Jaysus, I can't remember. And then there was Contrite Magdalene, another great bitch. She won the Sheep Dipper's Memorial Cup. Father Mac trained her. I'd say that's why the antis sent me that letter...t'was jealous they were over my dogs being the finest in Ireland”.

All twelve jurors were smiling. The lady in pink was staring open-mouthed at the witness; disbelief imprinted on her flushed rosy cheeks. The barristers, solicitors, and civilian onlookers were attempting to hold back tears of mirth for fear of being found in contempt.

Even the judge couldn't resist a brief smile, followed by a hint of mild exasperation.

The uniformed guards were laughing discreetly, but the Branchmen looked disconsolate. Arms folded, they glared at the tipsy witness with embarrassment.

Some coursing fans were amused. Others were furious. “That fucker is making a skit of the whole fucking show”, one of them sitting close to me whispered to a colleague.

I wasn't in the humour to be amused by anything.

The Prosecutor's patience was straining. “Now Mr. Griffin...the court's time is precious...can we leave aside your undoubtedly fascinating but... I regret to add...totally irrelevant...adventures on the coursing field and get back to the matter in hand? You were, I take it, terrified by that letter you received?”

“What letter was that, yer honour?”

“The letter signed ALF that threatened to wreak havoc on your farm and coursing field and to do you an unspeakable injury, Mr. Griffin”.

“Ah... that letter was crap, yer honour. I'd say a lunatic wrote it. All them antis are mad. They think they're living in Disneyland and that it's Bugs Bunny the dogs are after at the coursing. They haven't a clue, yer honour.”

The witness had his eyes closed and seemed on the verge of nodding off. The Prosecutor winced. “That will be all, Mr. Griffin. Thank you”.

“I have no questions for this witness” my barrister quipped sardonically.

“Mr. Griffin, you may now step down, as you have completed your testimony.”

It was the calm but stern voice of the judge. The coursing official opened his eyes languidly and exited the witness box.

A mix of disbelief and mirth had gripped the courtroom during his presentation. There was relief among the Branchmen and some coursing fans when he stepped down, but many in the room would, it seemed, have liked to hear more of his golden reminiscing.



Legalistic Ping-Pong

Next to be called was the Garda Superintendent who had granted a search warrant to DS McEvoy authorising him to enter my home. A tough looking though self-effacing and bashful man, he told the Prosecutor that he had the best of reasons for granting the warrant.

He claimed he had been aware of my reputation as a “controversialist” and writer of letters about coursing. When informed by the detectives who sought his signature on a search warrant that Rathcarney coursing field had been vandalised, he agreed with them that I was a “plausible suspect in the circumstances”.

Mulligan challenged his granting of the warrant. “Superintendent, before granting a search warrant, you are required to have a reasonable suspicion that evidence of a crime will be found in the home or on the property of the suspect. Could you enlighten us as to what the grounds for that required reasonable suspicion were concerning my client?”

“Oh...sure...I mean...I knew this man was into anti-blood sports. I had seen letters from him in newspapers, all extremely critical of people who went coursing. These were inflammatory letters...very insulting...making little of the coursing people and calling them names. He had nothing good to say about coursing at all. I formed the opinion that this man, in view of his attitude to coursing, might well have been in some way responsible for the damage to Rathcarney coursing field. I should mention that the field is less than six miles from his home.”

“Superintendent, are you telling the court that you considered my client to be a suspect simply because of his strongly-held views on the subject of cruelty to animals?”

“No...I mean...well partly yes. I was aware of other people who were hostile towards greyhound coursing, and who uttered unfavourable remarks about it in the pubs or on the streets, but this man’s proximity to the scene of the crime convinced me that it was reasonable to harbour a suspicion that he might have had some degree of complicity in the crime. So I agreed to the request from DS McEvoy for the granting of a search warrant under the Offences Against the State Act.”

“So you believe that being opposed to hare coursing makes any member of the public a suspect whenever the property of a coursing club is damaged or vandalised?”

“I’m not saying that...it would depend on that person’s level of hostility towards coursing and if I considered him or her capable of making the quantum leap from just saying nasty things about coursing to committing crimes or misdemeanours...or to engaging in breaches of the peace...in the pursuit of that prejudice or grudge against the sport”.

“You are a supporter of hare coursing yourself, I take it?”

“Not a big fan...I like to have the odd flutter on a dog.” He smiled, and the guards standing at the back of the courtroom were beaming too. The jury looked confused.

“You see nothing wrong with coursing”? asked Mulligan.

“Ah no...but I respect everyone’s opinions and I want to make it very clear to this court that I put any sympathies I might have for the sport completely out of my mind when considering the application for a search warrant. If I had hated coursing I would still have granted the warrant.”

“No further questions Superintendent”.

Shuffling papers on the table, Mulligan then informed the judge that he had a legal submission to make in the absence of the jury. The judge accordingly instructed the jurors to retire to their jury room for the duration of what he told them could be a “protracted process”.

Mary Thompson strode over to me, clicking high heels breaking the hushed silence, and explained what was happening. Mulligan would attempt to have the granting of the warrants to search my home on two occasions declared unjustified and in breach of my constitutional rights.

If the judge agreed to do this, any evidence gleaned from either search or in the course of the subsequent interrogations would be rendered inadmissible. That would include the bogus statement I signed for McEvoy. Without that evidence, the Prosecution case would collapse, she predicted.

What were the chances of Mulligan succeeding with this tactic, I asked her. Very slim, she lisped, but it was worth a try.

For the next few hours, legal arguments from Mulligan, Prosecution rebuttals, and the judge’s (to me) unfathomable reactions to both sets of arguments held everybody in thrall.

The Gardai were riveted, if a little baffled, by the cumbersome vocalisations. The observing lawyers clung to every word, their body language occasionally indicating inward assent or disapproval.

My family and the anti-blood sports people looked worried. Some members of the coursing contingent fell prey to boredom and bouts of yawning. This was gobbledegook to them, I presumed. Masher Whelan and a group of his admirers had left the courtroom.

A man sitting just yards from me, a cap half covering his face, awoke from a nap half an hour into the deliberations. He turned to the fellow beside him and whispered: “Is it over yet...is he going to jail?”

I stared at the empty jury box as the learned gentlemen sparred eloquently and deliberated on numerous weighty points of law. Whatever about the legal intricacies, I did grasp the significance and urgency of Mulligan’s objective. He wanted to short-circuit the trial...to have the case thrown out before it could be put to the jury for a verdict.

He argued forcefully, and with great passion, that the Garda Superintendents who granted the warrants had no reasonable grounds for suspecting that evidence of any illegal activity would be found in my house.

He told the judge that the granting of the second search warrant three months after the first search and arrest was even more unacceptable and unjustified since the detectives who conducted the first search found no evidence of involvement in attacks on the property of coursing clubs.

None of the documents unearthed in the search pointed to any such criminal activity on my part, he insisted. The ALF circular could have been found in the home of any animal welfare campaigner who had innocently received a copy of it by post, as I had.

But the Prosecution emphasised that my anti-coursing activities alone made me a suspect in the investigation and justified the house search. The arguments went back and forth, with each lawyer fighting his corner zealously. Tension built up as both sides vied for accomplishment.

Mulligan paused for a moment. From inside his gown he pulled out a large handkerchief to mop the sweat from his wrinkled brow. He was utterly committed to winning.

His antagonist was like a man possessed...fire in his eyes and his entire body quivering as though an electric current had passed through him.

The two barristers quoted from hefty law books in support of their conflicting positions on the search warrant issue. I tried to keep abreast of the verbal gymnastics, but this was a foreign language to me. I felt increasingly lost in the fog of words.

After many a prolonged and tiresome round of legalistic ping-pong, the judge said he had heard enough. He would adjourn proceedings for the day and would make known his decision on the Defence application next morning.

I closed my eyes. I felt my head pounding after all that weighty legal argument. “You’re still in there”, a soothing voice assured. My solicitor stood before me. She looked and sounded hopeful.

I went home feeling less tense, though not overly optimistic. I was determined to keep my nerve whatever transpired in the following days. With family and friends, I speculated into the early hours about whose side the judge would take on the search warrants issue.

Both the solicitor and barrister had cautioned that the judge was unlikely to exclude evidence on the basis that the search warrants ought not to have been granted. My grandmother, who was in the house on a morale-boosting mission, prayed for a successful outcome: “Be sure to have your Padre Pio medal tomorrow,” she advised.



The Prosecution Takes a Hit

Back in court next morning, I waited for the judge to appear. Time seemed to slow down for the few minutes that elapsed before he emerged from chambers. When he did, his demeanour gave me no cause for joy. He looked surly and ill at ease. He announced he had arrived at two difficult decisions in relation to the contested search warrants.

Though conscious of the right of anyone to engage in peaceful protest, he said he believed the Gardai were entitled to suspect that evidence of illegal anti-coursing activity might be located in my house, given my passionate espousal of that particular cause. So he would not exclude the statement I had signed for McEvoy.

But he took the opposite view of the second house search and arrest. He accepted Mulligan's contention that the failure to unearth evidence linking me to alleged vandalism at coursing venues during the first search meant that the granting of a second warrant to search the house three months later was unjustified...and in breach of my constitutional rights.

He was therefore excluding all the evidence of Bannon, Flood, Rhatigan, McDonagh, Farrelly and the other Branchmen who had participated in the second search or arrest.

This was a breakthrough of sorts. The statements concocted on the second occasion to implicate me in arson and sabotage, though I had not signed these, could have added serious weight to the statement McEvoy coerced me into signing. Now, none of these fabrications would go before the jury as bone fide "admissions" of guilt.

The Prosecution had taken a hit. Mulligan was content, and winked across at me. My solicitor high heeled over to me and whispered: "they've lost that nasty stuff about you conspiring with English hippies to launch ALF terror attacks...and the supposed admissions that the broken alarm clocks in your house were components for firebug devices.

"All that nonsense has been thrown out, and none of the detectives who interviewed you after the second arrest can take the stand. They're no longer in the equation. We're not out of the woods yet, but your prospects are better now"

I was relieved, yet I felt a bit cheated too, as this meant that Bannon couldn't be questioned about his drunken antics in the Garda Station, or Rhatigan about kicking the chair from under me, or Flood about his virtual wrecking of the house during the search, or both Bannon and McDonagh about their late night drinking session in the station, which they had laughingly invited me to join.

These guys were getting away scot-free with the most incredible abuse of their powers and authority as members of the police force.

Then again, they would, I presumed, have denied all wrongdoing if they had taken the stand. It was fitting that their conniving twisted version of events would not be given an airing.

The jury was called back and the trial resumed.

Next to take the stand was the man the Prosecution deemed a star witness: Detective Sergeant Mick McEvoy. I felt queasy at the mention of his name.

He had conned me into signing that bogus statement...an act of folly on my part without which, in all probability, there would be no case against me and no Circuit Court Trial.

Without that signed statement, the team led by DS Flood would have had no foundation upon which to build their own edifice of lies and fabrication, though thankfully their efforts had been cancelled out, the judge having disallowed their evidence.

A tingle of apprehension raced up my spine. My heart pounded as he approached the witness box...lightly brushing his tie. I felt the same loathing I had experienced in the weeks after he arrested me.

It wasn't the man himself that I hated, but myself for giving him this fearsome stick to beat me with. He had presumably applied similar pressure on other people he interrogated, but they, I supposed, were tougher than I was and hadn't yielded, whether guilty of a crime or otherwise.

But I had given him what he wanted. I had potentially signed away my life to ease a temporary condition...to make the shouting and the aggression stop, and to avoid what I believed would be the far more grievous consequences of not signing.

For an instant, he made eye contact with me as took the bible from the clerk. Though he oozed confidence, I thought I caught a faint sign of nervousness...a chink in his armour.

I was kidding myself. This man could decide my future.

I scrutinised him as he settled himself in the witness box. He looked exactly as he did the morning I opened the front door of the house to him and his underlings. The same suit...the unforgettable turkey cock neck, steel-grey hair, bright red cheeks, and penetrating blue eyes.

I would never forget this man who had entered my life like a devil out of hell. The Prosecutor was beaming. Flushed with enthusiasm, he asked the witness to recount the events that transpired in my house and at the Garda Station where I was interrogated following my arrest.

In a harsh, throaty voice, he described how he and three other detectives called to my home on foot of a warrant granted under emergency anti-terrorist legislation, namely the Offences Against the State Act (1939). He wished to establish if any evidence relating to the "terror attack" on Rathcarney coursing field might be present in my house.

He said he believed there was "a fair chance" that something would turn up, because I was well known as a writer of anti-coursing letters to newspapers. He recalled finding and confiscating notebooks and various documents in the house that he believed might be relevant to the investigation into terrorist activities locally and nationally directed against people involved in coursing.

The Prosecutor grinned. "And isn't it true, Detective Sergeant, that among the considerable sheaf of documentation seized in the accused man's home was a quite alarming piece of correspondence from that notorious criminal terrorist gang, the Animal Liberation Front"?

"Yes indeed Your Lordship. We found a circular purporting to have been sent by that organisation or gang."

"And can you tell the court what this circular contained"?

"Yes, Your Lordship. It boasted of numerous terror attacks in England. It said something about stealing a goat and three monkeys from a laboratory in Yorkshire and releasing white rabbits from a cage. There was a photo of Harry the Gorilla and a tiger cub called Mango and a cartoon showing a doctor being operated on by a monkey in a white coat..."

The lady in pink was laughing again. The judge, his attention fixed on McEvoy, ignored her. McEvoy, momentarily distracted, stopped in mid-sentence, then continued... "...And a cartoon showing a doctor being operated on by a monkey in a white coat..."

Titters from the jury box, and loud laughter from the back of the room. The judge said nothing, but his harsh disapproving glare had the desired effect. Silence returned. McEvoy continued, his face a few shades redder. He looked slightly embarrassed.

“I noted, Your Lordship; that the circular referred in uncomplimentary language to scientists who experiment on livestock. And there was a reference to fox hunting and the shooting of grouse on the Glorious Twelfth, using swear words. It was very distasteful, Your Lordship”.

“And tell me, Detective Sergeant, what conclusion did you draw from the tone and content of that scurrilous...defamatory item...that piece of moronic drivel?”

“Oh it definitely confirmed my suspicion regarding the suspect, Your Lordship...The circular had all the hallmarks of a document that originated with a terrorist organisation...And I felt it was reasonable in the circumstances to believe that the suspect could well have been either a member or supporter of the Animal Liberation Front, and that he might have been complicit in the vandalism at Rathcarney coursing field.”

“In your search of the house, you and your colleagues did, of course, at all times act with great sensitivity and with the utmost regard for the constitutional rights of the accused man and his mother”.

“Oh yes Your Lordship. Actually, when he mentioned that his cat was asleep on a couch, we took the greatest care not to wake the animal...I got the lads to raise the cat without waking him and transfer him to another room. It was a difficult and demanding task, Your Lordship, but we were anxious not to wake the cat”.

“And you then arrested the accused”?

“Yes, that circular from the terrorist group furnished me with adequate justification for taking him into custody for questioning.”

“Turning to the interview you conducted with John Fitzgerald, can you tell the court how it proceeded?”

“Yes, Your Lordship...the accused at first refused to cooperate...he stonewalled and prevaricated...he was very stubborn. He denied everything. But eventually, he had a change of heart. He freely admitted to having written threatening letters to coursing officials. He broke down, Your Lordship, and blurted out: I did it, I did it...oh God forgive me...and bowed his head. He offered to give us a full statement confessing to having written those dreadful letters to the coursing people.”

“And of course there was no pressure applied by you at any time in the course of the interview?”

“Oh none at all Your Lordship. He was anxious to confess everything. So Garda Collier and I comforted him, gave him a glass of water, asked him to calm down and just tell us in his own good time about what he got up to. After we took the statement, we thanked him for his cooperation. He was then released from custody.”

“Your witness, Mr. Mulligan”.

My barrister was really up against it with McEvoy.

He calmly, shrewdly and consistently denied all accusations of wrongdoing. When asked why I was not allowed to make a phone call from the station, he claimed that I didn't wish to phone anybody.

He denied warning me that my handicapped father would be arrested.

He laughed when questioned about concocting the statement that I signed- he would not even contemplate such a dishonest deed- and swore he never promised that there would be no charges levelled against me if I signed the confession.

The entire interrogation was above board, he insisted, and any claim that he resorted to undue pressure or intimidation to elicit admissions of guilt was “utter nonsense”. McEvoy had his story well rehearsed and he stuck rigidly to it. Nothing could shake him.

He did concede, however, that the ALF circular found in my home could have been sent to me without any request on my part for such correspondence, that its contents related to alleged extremist activities in the U.K.- not Ireland- and that it made no reference to hare coursing or illegal acts of sabotage at Irish coursing venues.

“That will be all, Detective Sergeant”, Mulligan rasped.

Calmly, McEvoy rose, acknowledging with a wry smile the gestures of support he was getting from his fellow Branchmen. One of them gave a thumbs-up...others mimed hand-clapping.

Detective Garda Collier took the stand. In a soft, understated tone, he insisted that every word spoken by his superior was the Gospel Truth. McEvoy, he claimed, never as much as raised his voice to me, and was courteous at all times during the interrogation. He recited a version of events that accorded in every detail with that of the previous witness.

Switching his attention momentarily from the Prosecutor to McEvoy, who was eyeing him intently, he declared: “DS McEvoy gave the accused man every chance to confess to his crimes...to get things off his chest...there was no wrongdoing or monkey business, Your Lordship. John Fitzgerald was treated better than most of the suspects we’ve had to interview. His conscience got to him. He just cracked. He admitted threatening to torch hay barns and the homes of coursing folk and asked God to forgive him.”

Mulligan tried to pierce the defensive barrier that he knew was shielding a well-rehearsed frame-up strategy. To no avail. Collier stuck to his story.

One of the Branchmen who had assisted McEvoy in searching my home described the operation in glowing terms, emphasising that it was legally above board. Such was the level of sensitivity shown, he affirmed, that care was taken not to wake the accused man’s cat Bonzo, in deference both to the cat himself and his owner’s well-known beliefs about not upsetting animals.

He paid tribute to McEvoy’s detecting abilities and hallowed status as a policeman, swearing that the whole search had “gone like a dream” thanks to his superior’s tactful handling of a most demanding assignment.

Mulligan didn’t bother cross-examining this witness.

The Garda handwriting expert, Lawrence O’ Toole, took the stand, claiming he had found a surprising number of similarities between my handwriting and the letter written to Malachy Connor.

“The defendant’s Gs, Ks, and Os are very distinctive,” he declared. He added, despondently, that handwriting analysis was not an exact science like fingerprinting, but still, everyone’s writing had individual characteristics.

He said he had little doubt but that I had written the letter to the coursing official.

Mulligan pointed out to him that my handwriting style was a very common one and that a degree of similarity between anything I had written and other sets of handwriting was inevitable.

O’ Toole was adamant that I was the culprit, though he conceded that to be absolutely certain of someone’s handwriting, all the letters, and not just the Gs, Ks, and Qs would have to correspond.

My barrister cast a sideward glance at the jury, and faced the witness again: “And you told my learned friend a few moments ago that handwriting analysis is NOT an exact science?”

“Why yes...but...”

“No further questions, Mr. O’ Toole.”

The judge adjourned proceedings until next morning.



Perchance to Dream...

With two days of the legal process behind me, I felt relieved that its end was in sight, though what that end would be was something I tried hard to blot out of my mind. Mulligan opined that I would be taking the stand the following day, and advised me to be prepared for “the mother and father of grillings” from O’Rourke.

Having failed to make a serious impression on the evidential front, he warned, the Prosecution would be throwing the proverbial kitchen sink at me in an effort to discredit my account of what transpired in the Garda Station.

When I got home, I felt drained of energy and a tiredness I had never experienced before. One of my sisters told me it was probably “nervous exhaustion”, a condition I wasn’t familiar with.

Fearful of what the near future might hold, and anxious to have a clear mind, I went to bed early, my head full of the day’s events.

Though fatigued, sleep proved a mixed blessing. The risk of failure, and a lengthy prison term, weighed heavily. Dark and terrifying images added to my anxiety.

Masher Whelan appeared from the depths of a hellish black swirling fog. He had grown to monstrous proportions and was howling like a demon. The hare-catcher was mounted on a white horse, a long sharp lance in one hand.

Horse and man became a single entity that was about to charge at me.

This mirage gave way to one of a frowning judge slowly and sombrely placing a black cloth on his head. In past times, this gesture indicated the passing of a death sentence. His lips moved, but I couldn’t hear any words. Someone out of sight muttered: “He’s finished”.

As heavy-set, callous men led me away, I had a vision of crowds dancing at a crossroads. Blood sport fans celebrated, roaring and laughing and singing. Champagne corks popped. Caps were tossed in the air as Special Branch men danced jigs with coursing officials around a large bonfire.

Greyhounds in evening dress with dickey-bows were standing on their hind legs and conversing in eloquent tones about the outcome of the trial. “Frankly, gentlemen, I think the hares are fucked” one of them quipped.

Then, in a dimly lit prison cell, I glanced at the morning papers, positioned carefully in front of me by a satisfied warder. The blood red headlines screamed: “Mad as a March Hare...Fitz goes down for Animal Rights Terrorism”...“Anti-coursing Activist caged for Farm Terror Campaign”... “The Chase is Over: Hare Man gets life on Spike Island”.

I heard Flood again...a disembodied voice...Prison is Hell...your troubles are only starting. Devils in uniform encircled me.

Friends howled with laughter a decade later when I described this nightmare.

It wasn't very funny on the night, and my relief upon waking from it was short-lived. The verdict might be delivered later that day. I prayed that these phantasmagoria were the products of a stressed out and over anxious mind.

Dreams could sometimes foretell, or warn of, disaster ahead. I must hold my nerve.



“Daddy, Mammy and Uncle Tom”

Next morning, the Defence case opened, and I was asked to take the stand. The only witness to be called on my behalf would be a handwriting expert to refute the evidence of the Prosecution’s own analyst.

Mulligan prompted a detailed recollection of what had befallen me from the moment McEvoy and his men had entered the house up to my release from custody. It was not difficult to recall the experience, as I had thought of little else in the months preceding the trial.

Derision and hostility from the cursing fans and officials and the police greeted my account of McEvoy’s behaviour and my repeated claims of innocence. I could feel the blast of hatred from them as I spoke.

Then came O’ Rourke’s turn to cross-examine. I braced myself. Deep breath.

“Mr. Fitzgerald”, he began, with an expression of affected bewilderment, “you say that are a man of peace...that you abhor violence in all its forms...that you could never countenance the use of illegal actions in the pursuance of your anti-cursing campaign?”

“Yes, that’s right”.

Holding aloft a tattered blue diary confiscated from my house, he asked me if it were mine. I confirmed that it was one of several old diaries taken during the search.

“And are all the entries by you and in your handwriting?”

“Of course” I asserted.

“I should now like to read a few words from your diary. These appear at the top of an undated page just inside the front cover...Daddy and Mammy and Uncle Tom...went to London with a bomb...the bomb burst...Mammy cursed...and Daddy got to Heaven first...”

Pausing to allow the words register with the jury, at which he smiled briefly, he adopted a critical tone: “Mr. Fitzgerald, did you make that entry in your diary?”

“Yes I did”.

Raising his voice, he shook the diary at me and accused “I put it to you that you inscribed this violent message because you condone and support the use of violence, however much you may now seek to conceal your true feelings on the matter...and that you have drawn inspiration from subversive literature.

“I further put it to you that you wrote that vile and disgusting letter to Mr. Connor of Coolbawntaggart Cursing Club in which you demonstrated a similar though more pronounced inclination towards the use of violence, and the threat of violence...to terrorise an inoffensive man because of his interest in greyhound sport!”

I hastened to clarify: “No...if I might explain. The words you read out were part of a rhyme that schoolgirls chanted in my native town when I was aged about six or seven. They sang or hummed it as they skipped in the school playground. That would have been about 1966, when there was a revival of nationalism in the

country to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising. I jotted the rhyme down fifteen years after leaving school...for its curiosity value”.

O’ Rourke was gobsmacked. He dropped the diary on the table. Recovering quickly from the rebuff, he continued: “Isn't it true, Mr. Fitzgerald, that the detectives who searched your house took exceptional care not to disturb your cat Bonzo? Indeed, would I not be correct in saying they went to great pains, above and beyond the call of duty, to ensure that the cat was not awoken during the house search?”

I confirmed that Bonzo had been conveyed, while still asleep on a folder, to another room by two detectives.

“Mr. Fitzgerald, you expect the court to believe that men who went out of their way to respect the well-being of your cat...your cat, Mr. Fitzgerald... would then be capable of outrageous, intimidatory behaviour in the Garda Station”?

“I am not sure why they behaved in such contradictory ways.”

“And did the other detectives involved in the operation not also display affection towards your cat?”

“Ah...yes...I think that the three men with DS McEvoy may have rubbed the cat at various stages during the search.”

The judge interjected that the cat had been mentioned far too many times by both Defence and Prosecution and he didn’t wish to hear any further references to the creature, as it had no relevance to the proceedings.

A collective smirk from the gathering greeted these remarks. The jury looked perplexed.

O’Rourke smarted, but quickly shrugged off the snub and continued: “Mr. Fitzgerald, would it be fair to describe you as a man of strong convictions...a man with a profound commitment to a cause who is not easily swayed from his purpose...a man with a strong will, as evidenced by your persistent association with a very demanding public campaign?”

“I suppose...yes...I do have strong views and am not easily swayed from treading the path I believe is the correct one”.

“Hah! You are, you agree, not easily swayed...now, Mr. Fitzgerald, that being the calibre of person you assert yourself to be...how can you possibly expect the Court to accept that your strong will was so effortlessly broken down in that Garda Station by one police officer?”

“Can I please explain”, I interrupted, but he hadn’t finishing asking his lengthy question. His eyes were bulging. I thought his hair would be standing on end if I could see underneath his wig.

“You expect us to believe that a man of such obvious will power and determination as yourself could be overcome by a Garda making what would have been, were we to credit your testimony, among the most idiotic threats ever attributed to a member of an interrogating police team in this jurisdiction.”

He paused, inhaling deeply. His eyes pierced mine. They were full of confidence and righteous rancour. There was a rumble of tittering from the coursing fans and the Branchmen were beaming. The jury was riveted to his performance.

Before I could again proceed to answer, he resumed, raising his voice sharply: “Is it not the case, Mr. Fitzgerald, that you willingly, and without the slightest degree of coercion or cajoling from them, gave that statement to DS McEvoy and Detective Garda Collier, admitting your role in terrorist crimes and your association with a sinister coterie of die-hard fanatical extremists...Is it not a fact that you then, in a contrite mood brought on by the insufferable and unbearable shame of your crime, agreed to sign the statement that you willingly...yes willingly...gave to the two members of An Garda Siochana who, I again put it to you, behaved impeccably throughout the interrogation and applied no pressure whatsoever on you to confess to anything?”

He halted; gazed at the jury, and raised a hand to indicate that he wasn't finished yet.

Shaking his head gently with affected disbelief, he averted his eyes from me and bowed his head.

Lowering his voice, he proclaimed, in a soft, condemnatory pitch, "Is it not true, Mr. Fitzgerald, that you have sought to mislead this court with a web of devious and wicked lies...slandering honest police officers with hideous and cleverly conceived denigration...in order to evade justice?"

He fell silent, staring at me. "Can I answer that?" I asked, unsure as to whether he had concluded his exceptionally long question...or series of questions. The judge affirmed that I could answer.

"I have not wronged any police officer with lies or misrepresentations in this court", I pleaded, "I have described exactly what occurred to me in that Garda Station. I am not anti-police. But I know what I heard and saw that day."

As calmly as I could, I recounted the effect on me of McEvoy's interrogation tactic. He had presented my situation to me in terms that made any course other than signing the bogus statement seem extremely dangerous and unwise. Not signing, I was told, would result in me being charged with serious crimes.

Though I suspected he might have been bluffing, it was a risk I believed I couldn't take. Signing the statement, though its contents were false, seemed the lesser of two evils, the greater being a shocking public indictment that would be far more detrimental to my life, apart altogether from its likely impact on my family.

But even if I were prepared to call McEvoy's bluff on that score, I couldn't gamble on his appalling threat to have my father arrested. I became emotional as I recalled this cruel ploy.

I found it difficult to speak, but continued, haltingly. "The Detective Sergeant threatened to have my father arrested...taken from the house in his wheelchair...and interrogated if I didn't sign that statement...Yes...it's true that I'm not easily swayed and that I normally wouldn't dream of going along with something I didn't agree with...but this was not a normal situation.

"Prior to that day, the police had never questioned me. I didn't ever have a brush with the law. The police were people one looked up to. I didn't realise, in my innocence... or ignorance...that some of them could resort to such outrageous and dishonourable tactics to get results."

A woman who had been sitting beside the court clerk handed me a glass of water, though I hadn't requested it. I thanked her and resumed: "My father is a stroke victim. I have helped to care for him since the night he was afflicted by that condition a decade ago.

"He suffers from high blood pressure. His speech was so badly impaired by the stroke that he uses a cardboard alphabet to spell out words...he needs a lot of help and care...I knew that any distressful experience might cause him to have another stroke. I worried in the station about how my arrest would affect him.

"Just hearing that I had been in a police station in connection with a criminal investigation would upset him grievously. That alone, I feared, might have lethal consequences. But the very idea...of a squad of Branchmen banging on the front door...to arrest him...as DS McEvoy led me to believe was going to happen...the idea of him being removed from the house in his wheelchair...to be questioned...that was too horrible to contemplate. I couldn't allow that to happen"

I paused to take a drink of water. At a glance, I saw that the jury's mood seemed to be changing. Most jurors now regarded me with what looked like sympathy, but had they believed me?

I felt a little more at ease. I explained that the atmosphere in the interrogation room couldn't be imagined by anyone who hadn't undergone a similar test.

In a hostile environment, I had allowed my mind to be clouded over by a mixture of threats, manipulation, and false promises. It was a stupid decision on my part to sign the statement, but I acted under duress.

I stopped, waiting for the next question. O' Rourke looked uncomfortable and annoyed, I thought. I expected him to probe further my handling of the police interrogation in an effort to punch holes in my testimony. But he didn't. His cross-examination seemed to have floundered.

His attempt to rattle me had left him rattled. I felt drained of energy, but relieved. I had been permitted to recall, in its entire shameful deviancy, a policeman's threat to arrest and interrogate my invalid father.

In a more muted tone, O' Rourke proceeded: "Mr. Fitzgerald, you have...for some years... been campaigning publicly and fervently for a ban on hare coursing, isn't that correct?"

"Of course, I have made no secret of that fact".

"But you do hold strong views on other field sports, do you not? And you would equally like to see those recreations prohibited by law?"

"Well, yes, certainly fox hunting and stag hunting..."

"And fishing, Mr. Fitzgerald, and the shooting of game for the pot...and the catching of butterflies with hand-held nets for scientific research or evaluation?"

"I haven't touched upon the subject of fishing at all...and certainly not the question of butterflies...and my main concern in relation to shooting would be situations where a bird or animal is wounded, and not killed outright, and therefore left to die of its wounds. Many people who engage in game shooting would share that concern, I imagine.

"I'm not involved in any campaign against shooting but yes, of course, I would be as concerned as most right thinking people about the potential for unacceptable pain and suffering when gun men go out to shoot wildlife. I certainly dislike carted stag hunting. I have seen a hunted stag. A pack of hounds had cornered it. The animal was exhausted, terrified. It was panting and wheezing, covered in blood and muck, with its tongue hanging out...and..."

O' Rourke was motioning me to stop. "Mr. Fitzgerald, I just wished to clarify that your anti-greyhound coursing bias was part of a much larger, more ambitious project or agenda; that you believe the age-old tradition of hunting the fox in the winter season should also be outlawed and that country folk should be denied their longstanding pastime of riding to hounds in rural Ireland; that you would like to see sportspeople go to jail; that you also wish to criminalize those who enjoy stag hunting and indeed the custom of hunting otters with hounds..."

Mulligan was on his feet. "Your Lordship, I have to object to this line of questioning. My client's views on controversial sporting or recreational practises unrelated to hare coursing are irrelevant to this case except insofar as they augment the Prosecution's case that he caused a threatening letter to be received by Malachy Connor.

"They clearly have no relevance to this case. His opinions on these issues are shared by many people in Ireland...and rejected by many others...but this badgering of the witness about his legitimately held views on blood sports other than hare coursing is both unnecessary and unjustified."

The judge agreed and asked O' Rourke to drop his references to fishing, shooting, and butterfly catching.

I later learned that the Prosecution wanted to sway the jury by mentioning pastimes that it hoped one or more members, or perhaps their close relatives or friends, might be involved in. By portraying me as an all-round spoilsport, it might capture the hearts and minds of enough jurors to secure a conviction.

I braced myself for the next salvo. None came. O' Rourke muttered: "No further questions".

I resumed my position beside the guard, whose attitude had softened. His stern expression was gone, and in its place one of studied empathy. He was blushing slightly. He whispered: "You did well. You'll be okay". A small blessing, but one I appreciated.



Closing Speeches

Next witness was the Defence handwriting analyst, who cast doubt on the testimony of the Garda expert in that field. He refuted the Prosecution's claim that the evidence indicated I had written the anonymous letter to Malachy Connor, highlighting major differences between my handwriting and the script in the ALF correspondence.

Cross-examined by O' Rourke, he was adamant that the differences he found were significant and worrying. The Prosecution's view that the handwriting evidence pointed to me as the culprit was unjustified and unsupported by the facts, he insisted.

It was at best, he emphasised, an opinion, however sincerely held, and not close to being in the same league as, for example, fingerprints... or any form of reliable forensic or eyewitness testimony.

With all the evidence heard from Defence and Prosecution, the judge called on both sides to make their closing addresses to the jury.

Each was well prepared for this final bid to win over the twelve adjudicators to a guilty or not guilty verdict.

O' Rourke painted a grim, frightening picture of a devious and dangerous terrorist...a demented individual who had sat down sneakily in his home to write cowardly, anonymous, intimidating letters to sportspeople...letters designed and cleverly crafted to frighten those unfortunate men out of their wits.

One such letter had, as the Court had heard, pushed one coursing man to the brink of despair...giving him the shakes and, added the Prosecutor, "propelling him willy-nilly towards the lamentable habit of excessive alcohol consumption".

This was not a legitimate resort to peaceful protest, he asserted, but a calculated act of terror on a par with the mind-numbing and shameful outrages being perpetrated by paramilitaries on another part of this island.

Indeed, he railed, the accused man had shown a clear predilection in his private scribbling, as evident from his diaries; to expressing sentiments normally associated with groupings of the subversive kind...He read again the nursery rhyme I had inscribed in a diary many years before, brushing aside my earlier explanation of its origin and innocuous nature.

Mulligan asked the jury to bear in mind that I had never voiced support for terrorism in any form and that the scribbles O' Rourke referred to were immature teenage commentaries on world events that any youngster might be expected to enter in a diary or school copybook.

To quote from such material, he opined, was indicative of the Prosecution's weak and hopelessly flawed case. Given the nature of the campaign I was involved in, he argued, it couldn't be in my interest to go down the road of violence or crude intimidation, since such tactics would set back the cause of getting hare coursing banned and give the coursing clubs a propaganda victory.

O'Rourke blasted my accusations of impropriety against the Special Branch. Parading in front of the jury box, he eyed each juror separately with a hypnotic glare.

“Ladies and gentlemen...you are, I take it, familiar with the gallant sacrifices that members of An Garda Siochana, our splendid police force, are called upon to make every day of the week...365 days of every year so that we, you and I, the general public, are protected from the ravages of criminals and blackguards.

“You are aware, I am sure, that brave Gardai have lost their very lives in the line of duty. And you will be conscious, as all law-abiding people are, that the guards are all that stand between us and lawless anarchy and chaos”.

Swirling around, his gown flapping ostentatiously, he pointed at me, his eyes quickly re-focusing on the jurors as he pointed. “This man would have you believe that a member of our excellent police force would stoop to the level of the corner boy and the thug...that a member of An Garda Siochana would behave like a common ruffian or street hooligan.

“He alleges that a man whose record as a police officer is without blemish...or the smallest trace of a blemish or breach of discipline...would make ugly and unethical threats in a Garda Station for the purpose of extracting information or a false confession.

“Come now...Ladies and gentlemen...who will you believe? A man who harbours a self-confessed obsessional grudge against traditional country sports and had a clear motive to commit the crime he stands accused of...or a police officer of unimpeachable integrity who has given many years of unswervingly loyal service to the law-abiding people of Ireland who reside within his Garda district?”

Mulligan asked the jury to look at me. “Is this a terrorist?” he asked, throwing his hands up in a gesture of disbelief, “this man who is moved to compassion by the spectacle of a hare being torn to pieces between two turbo-charged greyhounds...by the thought of what those timid creatures go through when they are snatched so violently from their humble little abodes in the picturesque Irish countryside?

“Or by the sight, which he witnessed in his childhood, of a grown man, a follower of coursing, smashing a hare’s brains out against a wall for sport?

“This, I would argue, is a man who decries the infliction of unnecessary suffering, and therefore, is it not fair to suggest that he would rather shrink in horror from the tactics of the alleged animal-lovers who intimidate or throw glass on fields or burn hay barns...than condone or support such unlawful activities?

“The evidence you have heard from the Prosecution is flawed, fatally flawed, and not worthy of belief. It relies on a statement that John Fitzgerald withdrew...that he claims was given under extreme duress. The evidence of the Prosecution handwriting expert is worse than weak. It is pathetic...derisory.

“You have two hand writing experts...both equally qualified...each rendering different and contradictory opinions on the question as to whether my client wrote the letter to Malachy Connor. One highlights similarities...the other, dissimilarities.

“By cherry-picking one’s way through any two sets of handwriting, one could find similarities of one kind or another. That proves or disproves nothing. It merely illustrates the difficulty of ascertaining the author of a document in the absence of reliable evidence.

“When confronted with a choice of this nature, and the inevitable doubt it raises, I suggest that your duty is to give the accused man the benefit of that doubt. I would draw your attention to the one point on which both experts agree: that handwriting analysis is not an exact science. It is not like fingerprinting. Anyone could have written the letter sent to Malachy Connor. I suggest to you that whoever was responsible for that offence, it was not John Fitzgerald.”

O’ Rourke made much of the ALF circular that was confiscated from my house. Waving it in front of the jury, he chided “This dreadful document reveals the horrible truth about the group styling itself the Animal Liberation Front...a group that sees nothing wrong with terrorising people in their homes and damaging property...with setting fire to hay barns and threatening to deprive men of their private parts.

“And this document was unearthed in the home of the accused...of the man who admitted in a statement to having written letters terrorising those men whose only fault was to have a fondness for greyhound sport...”

Mulligan appealed to the jury not to punish a man for holding strong views on hare coursing. Many Irish people, he declared; a majority, according to marketing surveys...considered the sport to be a disgusting and unacceptable abuse of animals. Just because a person disapproved of it didn't mean that he or she was capable of terrorising its supporters across the land...or that he or she approved of somebody littering farmland with glass and tacks...or setting fire to hay barns.

He argued that the ALF circular that the Prosecution had put forward as evidence of my supposedly violent inclinations, could have been delivered to just about any animal welfare campaigner in Ireland...or to any campaigners included on mailing lists that were passed from one organisation to another.

O'Rourke reminded jurors that McEvoy's colleague, Detective Garda Collier, had backed his version of what transpired in the station. “Are we to accept then, ladies and gentlemen, that a second officer also lied...under oath...as the accused man has implied in his evidence? And what of both men's superiors within the force? Are they all in on this alleged conspiracy too?”

Chortling, he projected an air of hissing incredulity. “It is preposterous to expect any reasonable person to go along with, or give credence to, such an improbable and extraordinary scenario...one that, quite frankly, belongs in the realm of purest fantasy and asinine fiction...”

Mulligan asked the jury to reflect carefully on the version of the police interrogation I had offered to the court.

“This man” he appealed, indicating me with a hand gesture, “has cared for his father since the man was struck down more than a decade ago by a brain haemorrhage...a stroke that left him in a state of fulltime dependence on other family members.

“His family is the traditional kind...the calibre of people who prefer to care for their nearest and dearest in the home...as distinct from carting them off to some dismal institution to get them out of sight and out of mind.

“John Fitzgerald, when not labouring on the public works scheme, looked after his incapacitated father. He helped to serve his meals. To overcome a loss of speech, his father communicated by an alphabet on a sheet of cardboard. A stroke can take a pretty heavy toll...It's certainly no bed of roses for the victim...or for the carer or carers.”

Addressing each juror face to face, he adopted an emotional but still restrained pitch.

“Consider, then, how my client must have felt when a man of power and status...a man wielding the authority of a police officer...decides to use his father's plight as a lever in a cynical ploy to get him to sign a statement that my client knows is false and incriminating.

“How is he to deal with that? How is he to react to a threat that, if he doesn't sign that prepared statement, his father, about whom he cares so deeply and about whom he is seriously worried due to the arrest and detention, will also be arrested and interrogated...perhaps for hours on end...How is he to react to a threat that this completely innocent, invalided man, his father, will be wheeled into the station and questioned by trained ruthless interrogators...unless my client agrees to sign that damnable statement?”

Pausing for a few seconds, he looked searchingly at each juror. “Would any one of you, ladies and gentleman, be not just a little bit tempted to sign along the dotted line if the alternative to acquiescing were that one of your nearest and nearest...and worst than that...one who happened to suffer from a grievous physical infirmity, would be subjected to an appalling ordeal of badgering and psychological grilling if you failed to co-operate and do as requested?”

“What an appalling choice to have to make...confess to a crime you didn’t commit or your invalided father will be put in danger of another stroke. No human being ought to have to choose between two such cruel options. But that, ladies and gentlemen, was the choice that John Fitzgerald was presented with.

“Did he make the wrong choice? Did he...really? He elected to sign that statement in the belief that his father’s health and wellbeing would be endangered if he refused to sign it. Was that really such a bad decision? Was it not at least understandable...in the peculiar, and, for him, unprecedented circumstances that pertained in that interview room?

“And then, on top of that dreadful choice, he was presented with another dilemma: He was told, he says, that not confessing to the alleged crime or crimes would result in his being immediately charged with those crimes anyway!”

O’Rourke appealed to the jury to put aside any emotions they might find welling up within themselves as they contemplated the alleged cruelty of hare coursing. “Do not be swayed by a misguided sympathy for this man’s beliefs regarding aspects of our nation’s greyhound industry.

“Rather, consider the evidence we have laid before you of his guilt...his unmistakable culpability in this matter...the evidence that shows he caused a heinous and terrifying letter to be received by Malachy Connor... threatening life and limb and to wreak untold destruction on a peaceful home into which such foul correspondence had never before been delivered...not until that crazed missive signed ALF, that evil message of fear and gross vulgarity, dropped through the letterbox. Oh and then, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, Mr. Connor grasped it in his trembling hands. Consider too that his good wife took that wicked communication in her hands...in her turn to be revolted and terrorised...think of the crime...of the overwhelming evidence pointing to the accused man’s guilt.

“Consider the victims of the crime...not...and I cannot emphasise this strongly enough...NOT the alleged inhumanity of hare coursing as trumpeted by the accused man and others of his ilk. Country sports are not on trial here...John Fitzgerald is. If you go into that jury room and have an argument about hare coursing, you will be failing in your sworn duty to try this case in accordance with the evidence.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I urge you to reject with the utter contempt it deserves the allegation that the police fabricated a statement and coerced the accused man into signing it. I urge you to reject in its entirety one of the most elaborate cock and bull yarns ever spun in an Irish court of law...I urge you to find this man, John Fitzgerald, guilty as charged!”



Waiting

With the two opposing barristers seated, having completed their spiffs, the judge summarised all the evidence presented. He stressed again the importance of jurors focusing purely on the evidence heard and not being influenced or prejudiced in any way by the intense national debate on the rights and wrongs of hare coursing.

Having offered summations of the Defence and Prosecution cases, he reminded the jury that to return a guilty verdict it must be certain beyond a reasonable doubt that the accused person committed the offence.

The twelve citizens who would decide my fate arose, each of them bowing to the judge. The foreman stretched himself and yawned. The lady in pink was smiling again. One by one, they shuffled out of the jury box and walked in single file towards the room to the right of the judge's bench where they would deliberate.

As the last juror entered the room, the closing of the door behind her broke the silence. It sounded like the crack of an air rifle. In my heightened state of nervousness and tension, it had a condemnatory echo to it.

People began leaving the courtroom, knowing that a verdict could take many hours. I had to remain in the dock, seated beside bored looking guards who were chatting to each other or falling asleep.

The agony of waiting began. Though I had some grounds for optimism, the dread of what I might hear when the jury re-emerged dominated my thoughts.

The Prosecutor's final address had been hard-hitting and cleverly worded. I despaired of how the jury might have been swayed by it.

He had appealed to their sense of civic responsibility, ridiculing the very idea that members of our brave and honest police force would behave in the manner I had described.

That bothered me. If I had never been arrested and interrogated...if I had not personally experienced the dark side of policing, I might very well be reluctant to believe for a moment the kind of allegations the court had heard from me.

My mother, brother, and the campaigners approached the dock intermittently. We had brief exchanges that helped to punch in the time. They had calming words of friendship, moral support, and encouragement, but I noticed that none of them was explicitly anticipating a Not Guilty verdict.

The manner in which consolation was offered reminded me of a wake. Except that the corpse was able to acknowledge with gratitude the expressions of sympathy.

Mary Thompson strode over at one point to re-assure me that an appeal was always an option if I "went down".

The waiting dragged on for three hours and was about to enter a fourth when the buzzer startled me out of my brooding.

I felt panicky, as if my nerves were shot to pieces. The judge re-appeared. The courtroom began to fill up again, and the jurors were filing back into their box opposite me.

The judge remained poker-faced for a minute or two as the large audience settled itself in readiness for a verdict. Then the clerk called for silence.

The judge asked the jury if it had reached a decision. The foreman rose to announce that he and his colleagues were unable to reach a verdict due to intense division and disagreement on many aspects of the evidence they had heard.

His Lordship told him he would accept a majority verdict of guilty or not guilty by ten of the twelve jurors.

More waiting. But I was still in the game. I speculated quietly but frantically about which way the tide was turning...towards the Prosecution or me? Were they closer to a conviction or an acquittal? I wished somebody could tell me. But only the jury knew.

The guard sitting to my left handed me a copy of the Irish Times. I forced myself to read it, my attention never properly focusing on the mass of small print.

Reaching for a pen, I became partly engrossed in a crossword puzzle. My hand trembled as I filled in the little empty squares, slowly working my way through the sixty or so clues.

I was on the verge of writing in the word Bodkin when a sudden sharp noise pierced my skull.

The malfunctioning buzzer again. I almost jumped out of my seat. It sounded more raucous this time, and full of menace.

The jury had decided. The judge was back on his bench, and the courtroom rapidly filling up. Defence and Prosecution teams were seated. I handed the Irish Times back to the guard.

Silent waves of terror washed over me. My heart raced. A cold sweat seeped from every pore in my body. I felt nauseous.

The guard beside me arose and in his place sat a heavy-set moustached prison officer. He gave me a fleeting glance and then stared impassively at the jury box with arms folded. Bright shining handcuffs jingled on his belt. My life flashed in front of me. I feared the worst.

The first juror to emerge from the open doorway of the jury room looked dismal, as did the second and third. One by one the rest of them followed, and these also had a pall of gloom over them.

Even the lady in pink had changed her demeanour. Her sunny disposition had given way to one of anguish. Most of the jurors walked with heads bowed, and not one of the twelve made eye contact with me.

I swallowed hard. This meant trouble, I was sure. I had read or heard somewhere that this kind of body language from a jury spelt disaster for the accused. It usually meant a conviction.

The Branchmen were clearly reading the same signals and had arrived at the same conclusion...that a conviction was imminent. Bannon was laughing silently, his mighty frame quivering.

A wry smile had broken out on McEvoy's face, which was a lighter shade of red than usual. Masher Whelan was a picture of pure mischief and delight, a wicked grin swelling his mouth to clown-like proportions. The entire coursing contingent was aglow in anticipation of a guilty verdict.

Mulligan adjusted his wig. He was leaning on the table with both arms folded, his head craned sideways in the direction of the jury. He was rapping a pen impatiently on the table.

The Prosecution team seemed happy. O' Rourke whispered something to the State solicitor that caused both men to smile.

My mother had turned pale. She was at her wits end with worry, and my brother too looked despondent. The anti-blood sports campaigners were close to abandoning hope. I could tell by their appearances. The general feeling that a conviction was all but inevitable had obviously dashed their spirits.

An expectant hush swept the courtroom. All eyes were on the foreman as he rose to speak. The benevolent smile had deserted his baby face, there were beads of perspiration on his forehead, and his head of auburn curls were slightly tossed. He cast a grave look around him. The other jurors were either gaping at him or still had their heads bowed.

My solicitor was beside me, whispering in my ear: "Don't worry John. We'll lodge an appeal if it goes against you". The prison officer sniggered at this.

A deathly silence preceded the foreman's utterance. Then came the question that I was dreading throughout the trial. The judge, with a frown that I thought could have stopped a clock, turned to face the foreman and asked: "Have you reached a majority verdict?"

I closed my eyes. I couldn't bear to hear the answer. I heard the foreman clearing his throat.



Deadlock

“No, your Lordship, we have not”.

My eyelids flashed open again. I was incredulous. What on earth was happening?

“And would it help you, ladies and gentlemen, if I were to give you more time to deliberate?”

“No your Lordship. We’re hopelessly divided, and are not even close to reaching a verdict.”

He went on to insist, very politely, that the nature of the deadlock was such that days or even weeks of deliberation could not break it.

“Very well” the judge sighed.

He thanked the jury and announced that the trial was over. He adjourned the case to another Circuit Court hearing due to be held the following week. On that day, I would learn whether the Prosecution had opted for a re-trial or if the entire case had been dropped.

I felt an overwhelming sense of relief, as if an enormous ugly weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I felt lighter and at peace with the world.

My solicitor cautioned me that I would have to make another court appearance, but added blithely that the State was unlikely to ask for a re-trial. Still seated, I looked around me. Almost everybody was standing, chatting. Some were leaving the room.

My mother and brother were walking towards me, smiling, as were the poet, the seven campaigners and the trade union activists.

Mulligan reached me before them to offer his congratulations. The Prosecuting barrister, still seated, had removed his wig and was scratching his head. A vacant expression had replaced his haughty self-assurance as he and the State solicitor conversed in low troubled tones.

Disbelief had stamped itself on the faces of the coursing fans and club officials. They were fuming. The official who had solemnly intoned the names of every coursing club in the country was engaged in a heated exchange with somebody I couldn’t see at first.

Then I noticed he was the man who had sung a verse of Master McGrath three days earlier outside the building. The same fellow had provided some light relief when he took the stand.

Bannon was sitting back, his hands hanging loose by his sides, and his mouth wide open. For a moment I thought he had died.

Masher Whelan stood behind Bannon. He was shaking with anger. I noticed for the first time that parts of his mop of ginger hair had turned slightly grey. His eyes blazed. The side of his face that bore the purplish birthmark was twitching.

I wondered if he had anything on hand to throw at me, as he had at the Tribunal hearing. A potato, or; given the weightier nature of these proceedings, maybe a turnip or a cucumber.

But he didn't throw anything. He just stared at me for a few seconds, wagging a pointed finger in my direction...before turning on his heels and leaving the courtroom.

The Branchmen, subdued and deflated, filed out of the room, one of them seemingly offering Bannon, who appeared to be in shock, a little on the spot counselling.

I waited until most of the assembly had left the room before exiting with my family, friends, and supporters.

Darkness had begun to fall outside and the streetlights dazzled me. But the cool fresh air of the small, unpolluted city was a gift from Heaven.

The portico was thronged with people...coursing fans, uniformed guards, jurors, Branchmen, sightseers, and a few newspaper reporters.

Flanked by my own team, I moved decisively to make my way to the stone stairway that would take me away from that dismal place.

As the crowd divided like the Red Sea for Moses, allowing me to pass through, a juror rushed over to shake my hand. Just minutes earlier, I had seen him with his head bowed in the jury box. He had been chatting to the lady in pink, who was leaning against the wall of the portico and was now smiling again, this time at me.

"That coursing is a terrible thing" he confided.

I was about to thank him and ask him how close the jury had come to delivering either a guilty or not guilty verdict. But he was gone in a flash, perhaps thinking better of being seen talking to me so soon after the trial.

Approaching the stairway to the street, I heard taunting behind me. "We'll get you yet Fitzgerald"... "Go on ya fucking spacer"... "There won't be a fucking hare left by tomorrow night between here and Donegal, do ya hear that, Fitz?"

Other warnings were uttered that I couldn't properly hear. Not that I wanted to. Taunting didn't bother me anymore. Certainly not the way it used to in the streets of Callan. The jibes, threats and catcalls bounced off me like shotgun pellets off a Tiger Tank. I was so grateful to be free that nothing else mattered.

On the car journey home, I savoured every little fragment of a darkening winter landscape. Rabbits played in a field. A man standing atop a ladder in front of his roadside bungalow was hammering nails. Something stirred in a tree...a bird or a squirrel.

Four young track-suited women with reflective armbands jogged merrily in single file. The noise of passing traffic was music to my ears. A cheery farmer raised his cap and waved from his topless blood red Massy Ferguson.

Anything that wasn't the dock in a courtroom or the inside of a Garda Station was okay in those moments of de-escalating tension.

Even the sight of a congested shadowy graveyard cheered me. The hundreds of white or grey crosses were as bright and breezy as Christmas decorations. Normality wore many gowns.

Each heartbeat took me further away in space from the legal showdown. Each second put some distance in time between the courthouse and myself. Already, it was receding into the past.

Life wasn't so bad after all. I felt a deep sense of gratitude to whatever deity or cosmic force or invisible presence it was that influenced human affairs. God was good.

I found it difficult to hear, or concentrate on, what my brother, much-relieved mother and two neighbours in the car were saying to each other and to me. I got the gist, but missed the substance. My euphoria was all-encompassing and allowed of no intrusion to detract from feelings of reprieve and respite.

Except, that is, when the car passed by Rathcarney coursing field. A tiny shiver of apprehension ran through me. I wondered again who had sabotaged the coursing venue, and what the real motive might have been for a bizarre destructive act that resulted in my arrest and the trumped-up charges.

Bonzo the cat was the first to greet me back at the house. He leapt off a table into my arms. I wondered if he knew, by some animal instinct or sixth sense; that his name had been bandied about by guards, barristers, and a judge.

My father was in high spirits, news of the trial having boosted him. Reaching for his alphabet card, he spelt out an encouraging message and joked: “A police man’s lot is not a happy one”- a quote from Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic opera.

I avoided mentioning to him, as did other family members, that his stroke had been referred to in the cross-examinations, let alone that the Branchmen had sought to exploit it to elicit a confession from me. I was relieved that the legal machinations hadn’t upset him too much.

Also in the house to welcome me home was my grandmother, who had warned me so often and so vigorously about the dangers of taking on the coursing clubs. She saw the outcome of the trial as evidence of a blessed intervention by Padre Pio, whose saintly relic I had safely tucked away in my suit. “He looked after you”, she assured me, “and didn’t I tell you he would?”

A week later, the charges were formally withdrawn in the City Circuit Court. The entire process, from the moment the Prosecutor informed the judge to His Lordship’s “striking out” motion with his pen, took less than a minute.



Aftershocks

My troubles were not over. The trial proved to have been merely the opening shot in a long-drawn out and sinister effort by supporters of hare coursing and their Heavy Gang sympathisers within the police force. They were determined to get my head firmly unto the chopping block.

Three months after the jury's failure to reach a decision in the first case and the dropping of the charges, lawmen came knocking on my front door with a different set of charges alleging intimidation and terrorism. Again, they alleged I had sent offensive anonymous letters to coursing club members and supporters.

In the course of the following two years, I was tried four times in the City Circuit Court on charges of threatening coursing officials in various parts of Ireland.

The first of these trials collapsed on a technicality before the jury could deliberate. The outcome would in any event, I believe, have been favourable to me as the Prosecution had even less evidence to offer than in the previous case, with the State hand writing expert floundering badly in his valiant, dedicated, but pointless attempt to link me to letters I had neither written nor prompted anyone else to write.

A re-trial was ordered, and the jury couldn't agree on a verdict. The State withdrew the case.

A few months later, I was charged with sending another batch of letters. The ensuing trial collapsed after a uniformed guard, during a break in the proceedings, spotted the foreman of the jury chatting to a leading coursing official who also happened to be a key Prosecution witness. Fearful of a miscarriage of justice, the judge declared a mistrial and set a date for a new hearing.

The Circuit Court re-trial brought closure to a phase of my life that still visits me in nightmares. The judge directed the jury to completely ignore the Prosecution hand writing evidence on the basis that it was unreliable, a fact that should have been painfully obvious to anyone with the gift of vision who had examined the "ALF" script and compared it to mine.

There was no need for a defence handwriting expert to give evidence...so unambiguous was the judge's direction to the jury. He also instructed the jury that there was no evidence whatsoever that I had either written or posted any of the "ALF" correspondence.

The jury took a mere forty-five minutes to return a unanimous verdict of Not Guilty.

Needless to say, the coursing fans were dumbfounded. Though I had suffered at the hands of certain Branchmen, I was happy to accept a Garda escort from the court that day...the day of my fifth and last trial on charges that were one hundred percent false and that, in my opinion, made a complete mockery of the justice system in Ireland and the right to free speech.

Hundreds of coursing fans had converged on the City for the trial. Amid a frenzy of hatred and dire threats of vengeance, I made my way out of the court building after the verdict and, flanked by guards, family, friends, and fellow campaigners, managed to reach a waiting car without getting walloped, or struck by flying objects.

I learned next day that Masher Whelan and at least half dozen of his hare-catching compatriots had thrown tomatoes, eggs, and potatoes at me, but none of these had found its mark, all of them landing harmlessly on the street outside the courthouse.

Not having dared to look behind me as I quick-stepped away from the scene of my legal triumph, I missed this part of the unofficial spontaneous reaction of Ireland's coursing fraternity to the acquittal. I also missed a cluster of reporters, including one from national TV, who were waiting outside to interview me.

Portions of a medium-sized potato were still impaled on a courthouse railing the following morning, and there were traces of crushed tomato at the bottom of the stone stairway leading up to the building.

It was November 1989, which I will always remember as a happy month of a fortuitous year because it witnessed the final chapter of a botched campaign of vilification against me.

But the two and a half year period that encompassed my five Circuit Court outings also included the trial of another man...a case that caused huge embarrassment to the coursing clubs and to every hare-baiting fan in Ireland.

In March 1988, a twenty-five year old man pleaded "guilty but insane" in Dublin Circuit Criminal Court to having burned four hay barns in County Cork. The twenty-five year old butcher's assistant, a native of Charleville, County Cork, admitted setting fire to the barns, causing £175,000 worth of damage, between October and December 1986.

He also admitted sending a letter to the Vale Star newspaper in Charleville, threatening to burn hay barns and houses, all of these the property of coursing club officials.

The man's doctor told the court that the arsonist had no connection to the anti-blood sports cause and had no ethical objection to hare coursing. Quite the opposite in fact: He was directly involved in the sport and a former employee of a County Cork based coursing club.

The doctor explained that the man had endeavoured to draw suspicion away from himself by making it seem that anti-coursing people had burned the hay barns.

The judge ordered the man to continue receiving psychiatric treatment, reside at home with his parents, and he prohibited him from trespassing on lands or premises not his own.

My eyes almost popped out of my head when I read the reports on this case in the Irish Times and Cork Examiner newspapers. The barn burnings referred to in the trial occurred within the same time period as the ones I was questioned about when arrested on the second occasion.

The Branchmen had tried every trick and mind game in their well-stocked arsenal in their bid to persuade me to admit to either burning some of the barns or aiding and abetting the culprits.

Apart from my own innocence of these crimes, I was pretty confident at the time that no animal welfare campaigner in the country would dream of setting fire to farm buildings. Now here was somebody admitting to at least some of the arson attacks that a squad of zealous and bullying detectives said they "knew" I had carried out or participated in.

And more than that. The unfortunate man who had burned the four barns admitted in court to having written an unsigned letter to the Vale Star newspaper in the last week of November 1986, threatening to burn houses and hay barns!

This really perplexed me...because DS McDonagh had shown me an anonymous letter in the station that he claimed had been received at the same newspaper office in the same week...also threatening to burn the property of coursing club officials.

And McDonagh had claimed that the other letters addressed to coursing clubs all over Ireland piled on his desk were in the same handwriting!

I couldn't but admire his remarkably vivid and fertile imagination. He had conjured up a riveting crime scenario, full of cloak and dagger shenanigans worthy of a Hollywood scriptwriter...with his account of marijuana-smoking English dropouts conspiring with me to burn hay barns in County Cork.

How inconvenient it must have been for him to discover that an avid young coursing fan had pleaded guilty to four of the arson attacks.

The Detective Sergeant, it seemed to me, owed an apology to all the "English dropouts" and "marijuana-smokers" of this world for having tainted their good names!

The Cork man's trial gave anti-coursing campaigners much food for thought. It provoked conspiracy theories and feverish speculation about who might be responsible for the supposed activities of animal rights extremists.

While sympathising with the plight of the arsonist, since he was clearly not of sound mind as his doctor explained, I felt there was a fair chance that some, if not all, of the other hay barn fires in County Cork about which I was questioned might also have been caused, not by opponents of hare coursing, but by supporters of the practise.

The case reinforced the belief within animal welfare circles that in-fighting or rivalry among coursing clubs or supporters was behind much of the "glass and tacks" vandalism and abusive letter-writing, though we knew there had to be some degree of ALF complicity in illegal anti-coursing actions such as the releasing of hares from captivity.

Throughout this book, I have used fictitious names where necessary, or avoided naming people. I apply the same rule to the arsonist whose errant behaviour brought so much grief not only to the hay barn owners, but also to myself and other campaigners who were falsely accused and persecuted.

I do so because, in fairness, it was not he who arrested or interrogated me. It was not he who sought to fit me up on fabricated evidence. And it was not he who put me through five stressful and traumatic helpings of public humiliation.

The Branchmen must take the full credit for that.

They played a form of Russian roulette with my life, hoping, perhaps, that sooner or later they would get the right jury...one that would believe them and find me guilty.

That didn't happen, thanks to the skill of my Defence team, my ability to hold my nerve in a high-pressure courtroom situation (I had learned from my capitulation under pressure to McEvoy), and the clear-headed common sense perception of the juries.

But winning wasn't everything. I would have to live with the psychological effects of the ordeal for many years afterwards. Though almost two decades have passed since I finally walked free from the Circuit Court, I still dread the sound of the house doorbell ringing, or of anybody knocking on the front door...especially in the mornings.

Seven years after the last trial, a doctor told me I could be suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. He mentioned a few symptoms that he believed made this seem likely: Flashbacks, nightmares, emotional detachment, anxiety, insomnia, irritability, and hyper vigilance.

Counselling would be advisable, he said, but I ignored his advice, believing that time heals all wounds.

In nightmares and flashbacks, I have re-lived the arrests and interrogations and the court hearings... and the fear that psychologists tell us may lurk deep within our minds after a frightening or traumatic experience.

On the positive side, I have always been able to emphasise, when coursing fans attempt to rake up past allegations, that I have never in my life been convicted of an offence in a law court. When I applied for a

visa to travel to the USA, Garda HQ in Dublin sent me, at my request, a Certificate of Character attesting to this fact. The guards in my hometown have not troubled me at any time.

The police involved in all the arrests and interrogations were based in; or operating from, well-known coursing strongholds.

Another great plus throughout the harassment was the unwavering support of my family and of fellow anti-blood sport campaigners. This backup was Heaven-sent. Without it, I believe, I would surely have suffered a nervous breakdown, or worse.

Friends and neighbours urged me to “Sue the State” for damages. “You could take them to the cleaners”, they enthused. My solicitor advised against this, as a jury, she reminded me, would have to choose between my version of events and what the Branchmen would swear to under oath.

There had been no videotaping or tape-recording of my interrogations (a procedure later introduced in Garda Stations) and therefore it would be a straightforward case of my word versus theirs. And they would be entitled to the benefit of the doubt just as I had been as a defendant.

Instead of suing the State for Malicious Prosecution or harassment, I penned a lengthy letter to the Minister for Justice, Ray Burke; setting out the wrongs I had suffered at the hands of the police. I recounted my direful saga from start to finish, concluding with a demand for a full no holds-barred investigation into the whole sorry episode.

I was quite happy with the wording of this carefully drafted seventeen-page communiqué. I had left nothing out. “That’ll show em”, I thought, in a glow of naïve self-indulgence.

I received a one-line acknowledgement from the Minister’s office...on lovely Dail stationery with a golden harp in the top right hand corner...and heard nothing more about it.

I bear no personal grudge against individual Gardai, or the force in general. I see them as people who were swept along by events, in much the same way that Gardai in the first three quarters of the Twentieth Century played a crucial role in propping up institutional abuse.

Acting under political and religious pressure, they found themselves lending a hand to the people who ran the now infamous industrial schools and Magdalene Laundries.

When terrified young boys ran away from those grim places, it was our police force that tracked down the “fugitives” and re-captured them.

And it was Gardai that pursued young women who tried to escape from the network of religious concentration camps.

When caught, the women or girls were subjected to savage beatings back at the “Laundries” to which they had been sent to atone for giving birth outside marriage.

The guards who helped implement the State’s mad plan to uphold a quasi- religious ethos had little choice in the matter. Politicians and bishops pulled the strings, and each guard was answerable to a superior officer.

It was the State, and not the individual Gardai who carried out those hateful duties, that set up the oppressive institutions.

Similarly, it was the Irish State, by legalising coursing clubs and pandering to their vote-getting clout; that encouraged rogue elements within the police force to harass people like myself.

I think of the guards who came rapping on my door as dutiful- if not well behaved - Servants of the State...like the ones who chased freedom-loving urchins and single mothers across fields, up mountains, and down shadowy laneways.

They were, one might say, following orders.

And yet I have laughed out loud at the wacky and stranger than fiction nature of what happened to me.

The farcical elements stand out: The Branchmen drinking bottles of stout and offering me one...Masher Whelan throwing potatoes at me...the tipsy witness recalling his glory days on the coursing field...the two detectives carrying my cat like a sleeping prince in the house.

I often think that the Monty Python comedy team couldn't have dreamt up a crazier or more over the top script for one of their madcap episodes.

There was a lighter side even to the long-term psychological impact of the affair. One afternoon recently, I answered the front doorbell and almost suffered a heart attack. Two tall men in suits were standing outside on the footpath. I felt sick at heart. "Here we go again", I thought.

One of them smiled and asked: "Do you mind if we step inside for a moment?" Immediately on the defensive, I blurted out: "Have you got a search warrant? Show me the warrant!"

The man standing beside the one who had spoken held aloft a large red covered volume that certainly didn't look like a search warrant. "I'm sorry if we've upset you" he mumbled, "We're Jehovah's Witnesses".



A Political Legend Joins the Battle Against Hare Coursing

With my bad hare days behind me- at least the ones occasioned by interrogations and court appearances, I was able to concentrate again on the campaign, in between slashing weeds and selling charcoal sketches of old buildings and Irish country scenes.

There was excitement in the anti-coursing camp in 1991 when independent Dail Deputy (member of the Irish parliament), Tony Gregory told campaigners he planned to introduce a Private Members Bill in the not too distant future to ban the blood sport.

The number of Dail Deputies opposed to hare coursing had grown considerably since the valiant attempt by Senators Noel Browne and Mary Robinson back in the mid nineteen seventies to seek protection for the hare.

There appeared to be a slight majority of deputies in favour of a ban, but that was allowing for a large number of likely abstentions in the event of a vote on such a Bill. The main obstacle to getting Gregory's Bill through the Dail was the whip system observed by the major political parties.

The party chief whip compelled each Deputy to vote on a given issue whichever way the party had decided. There was scant allowance made for conscientious objectors when it came to parliamentary voting.

Dissent was rare, and could result in a rebellious Deputy being expelled from parliamentary committees or ostracised within the party.

Despite this tradition, Gregory was hopeful that an exception might be made in the case of hare coursing, as it was clearly a non-party issue, with supporters and opponents of the blood sport in all the parties.

He hoped that fair play and the spirit of true democracy would prevail; with Ireland's persecuted hare population emerging the winner from what he knew would be a titanic and emotionally charged debate that would split the country down the middle.

Tony Gregory was at that time hailed as the Cool Clean Hero of Irish politics. As an independent deputy representing an urban working class constituency, he had cut a swathe through the dull plodding morass of mainstream political activity, standing fearlessly for the poor, the underprivileged, and for the victims of ruthless drug pushers who were making their evil presence felt in the big cities.

He was the only politician who named and shamed drug dealers in the Dail, and also the only Dail Deputy never to wear a tie at work.

In the early 1980s, he had negotiated a famous deal with the then Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister), Charles J. Haughey, whose Fianna Fail party was short of the majority he needed to form a government. Gregory agreed to support the new administration after getting top-level commitments to improving the lot of his constituents.

The Gregory deal, as it came to be known, provided for massive investment in the impoverished inner city areas that so desperately needed a boost.

He was the quintessential parliamentary rebel, and was likened in his fearless hands-on approach to implementing his electoral mandate to the way Clint Eastwood handled the bad guys in Spaghetti Westerns.

Except he didn't shoot or spit when he "outed" the drug pushers or challenged their power over exploited and economically ravaged youngsters. Words were his bullets, and eloquence his greatest asset.

His declaration of war on hare coursing was in keeping with his track record of principled opposition to injustice and everything that was rotten in Irish society.

For him, hare coursing was a relic of the same era that spawned institutional abuse, the savagery of corporal punishment in schools, and the tradition of sending unmarried mothers to slave camps all over Ireland for their "sins".

He saw it as a throwback to dark medieval times when the Muck Savage mentality dictated the pace and quality of life in a land marred by incest, superstition, clerical abuse, and rampant wife battering.

Other politicians reacted with disbelief to his plan to take on the might of the coursing clubs. Many of them who didn't support coursing out of conviction had to watch their backs at election time.

A candidate could fail to win a Dail seat by just a handful of votes. In counties where coursing was relatively strong, it was deemed political suicide to say a word against the baiting game.

Cute-hoorism, the bane of Irish politics since 1922; was the dominant force at work in these constituencies when any public posturing on the issue became necessary.

These non-committal types would waffle and wring their hands and appear to take both sides at once in typical catchall populist fashion. One Deputy, for example, assured me in a letter typed on official Dail stationery that he admired my concern for the hare and understood why people disapproved of coursing...but on the other hand, he added, it was a traditional sport in his constituency and he had to take account of constituents who approved of it.

The Deputy in question was Oliver J Flanagan, who was far less ambiguous in expressing his views during a Dail debate in July 1943 on the Emergency Powers Act.

On that occasion, he praised Germany for "routing the Jews from society" and advocated similar measures against them in Ireland.

At least people knew where he stood on that issue, but the coursing of timid little hares he obviously perceived to be a real hot potato. He exercised great caution when answering queries about it.

The old proverb about running with the hare and hunting with the hounds was never as apt as it was when applied to the nod and wink "have it every way" attitude of most Irish politicians to hare baiting.



The Campaign Goes International

From the day Gregory announced his intention to grasp the coursing nettle, animal welfare groups endeavoured to step up their lobbying of politicians and public campaigning. At a meeting of leading anti-coursing campaigners, somebody suggested that like-minded groups in other countries should be contacted.

They could then mobilise people in their lands to lobby the Irish government.

I volunteered to establish contact with animal protection organisations abroad.

Instead of asking them to lobby the government, we decided it might be more effectual if concerned people wrote to the President, who happened to be Mary Robinson, the same woman who had spoken up for the hares in the Senate sixteen years earlier.

Though she could not take a public stand on the issue, being constrained by the protocols of her largely symbolic office, we knew that all correspondence received at her residence would be passed onto the relevant government department.

Within weeks of my circulating hundreds of groups worldwide, letters and signed petitions started pouring in from all over the planet...expressing outrage that hare coursing was not only legal in Ireland but financed by the State, worshipped by many politicians, and doted upon by the clergy.

News of this lobbying filtered into the media, and it was heartening to know that decent people everywhere were backing our efforts at home and abroad to make Ireland a coursing-free zone.

Then came an escalation in a campaign that had truly gone international. In August 1991, animal rights protesters appeared outside the Irish consulate in New York. They picketed the building for four hours and distributed thousands of leaflets detailing what “sportspeople” were doing to the hares of Ireland.

In the months that followed, similar pickets were mounted at the Irish embassy in Australia and outside our nation’s consulate in Bonn, Germany. Irish emigrants joined German animal lovers for the Bonn protest.

These pickets received widespread publicity in the Irish media and also in the countries concerned.

The protests from abroad reached their peak in the second half of 1992 when members and supporters of several U.S. animal welfare groups began calling for a tourist boycott of Ireland over hare coursing.

In addition to writing to our President urging a ban on coursing, they pledged not to visit the country until the government moved to protect hares. This development provoked outrage from the coursing clubs but also angered people who had no sympathy for them.

The Evening Herald of November 27th 1992 reported that upwards of seven thousand potential American tourists had cancelled trips to Ireland because of hare coursing.

Four months later, on March 17th 1993, there was an anti-coursing protest at the biggest St. Patrick’s Day Parade in the world, in New York.

As police, troops, and costumed revellers ambled down Fifth Avenue to celebrate everything Irish, members of the International Society for Animal Rights (ISAR) held a large banner on a reviewing stand.

Its message, in bright green lettering on a white background read “Ireland-Ban Hare Coursing”. The organisation had decided to highlight the plight of Irish hares on the day honouring the sixth century preacher/saint who had converted Pagan Ireland to Christianity.

This protest drew forth a heated correspondence in the Irish media, some of it critical of a perceived attempt to hi-jack the Patron Saint of Ireland’s Holiday by “fanatics”. Others blamed the government for allowing a practise that generated such unwelcome publicity for the Emerald Isle. A more reasonable criticism, I thought.

The protesters on Fifth Avenue claimed they were acting in the true spirit of Patrick himself, given that he preached compassion towards the animal kingdom and had rescued a stag from a band of hunters.

“He’d be here today, protesting alongside us if he were still on this earth” one ISAR member opined in a magazine interview.

Shortly after the St. Patrick’s Day New York protest, a date was set for a Dail debate on Deputy Tony Gregory’s Private members Bill. This was pencilled in for the last week of June 1993.

Coursing clubs and animal welfare groups geared up for the showdown in our national parliament. The conflicting views on hare coursing were fiercely aired and teased out on TV, radio, and in the print media in the weeks prior to the moving of the Bill.

They were the usual arguments for and against the blood sport that had been heard thousands of times before and would be re-cycled for many years afterwards.

The coursing clubs argued that their sport was a humane activity since the killing of hares was not a specific aim, just an unfortunate side effect, of a match between two competing greyhounds.

They claimed that hares enjoyed being coursed and that without coursing clubs nobody would bother to look after them. The animals might disappear from the countryside entirely.

They eulogised about the endless hours of fun and entertainment coursing brought to quiet rural districts that might otherwise be as dull as ditchwater, what with the camaraderie and community spirit that accompanied the holding of a local coursing event.

They saw coursing as indivisible from Eamon De Valera’s vision of an Ireland where “comely maidens” danced at the crossroads with virtuous young men...a land where everybody went to mass, single motherhood was a big taboo, and heroic country folk toiled faithfully, crooning Irish ballads as they forked the hay, ploughed the good earth, tilled the virgin soil, or milked, whether by hand or machine, the cows of our National Herd.

And what of the wealth it generated? Did coursing not inject much needed cash into local economies, especially in the fair county that hosted the marathon National Meeting in February? They rattled off the names of hotels and guesthouses that filled up with coursing fans and their wives or girlfriends in wintertime.

They pointed also to spin-off employment in the production of collars and dog-leads, specialised food for greyhounds, special dog medication, the sale of hamburgers, ham sandwiches and sausage rolls at baiting events, and the building of car trailers for greyhound owners.

They claimed that the “coursing strain” in Irish greyhounds gave them an edge over greyhounds from other parts of the world. It made them faster, cuter, nicer to look at, and more versatile than their foreign counterparts, the coursing clubs swore.

And just look at the type of fanatic that opposes coursing, they shouted, “people who burn our hay barns!”

They invoked tradition and recalled that coursing was among the recreational pursuits beloved of ancient Celtic tribes. It had been around since the dawn of creation, they pleaded, so why ban it now?

Our side countered by saying that whatever the supposed good intentions of coursing clubs, the fact was that hares did get caught in the jaws of greyhounds and what then occurred was hardly an experience that a hare could be said to enjoy, unless the animal had a masochistic streak that science or the wildlife experts knew nothing about.

If hares were happy with their lot, an apt caption over the tug -of-war image would be “struggling for Ireland” or, to quote the words of a song: “Torn between two lovers...”

The coursing clubs conserved hares for the sole purpose of later using them as bait. There was no serious wildlife management or misty-eyed altruism involved.

The jibes about burning hay barns that belonged to coursing people fell flat when the doggie men were reminded that the only person convicted of that offence was, quite literally, “one of their own”.

As for tradition, nobody disputed that animals had been hunted “since Adam was a chap”...but ancient man hunted mainly for food, to survive.

The coursing of captive hares in specially constructed wired enclosures was by contrast an artificial or contrived event, one that dated to the nineteenth century.

The animals were snatched from their natural habitats, from their true home in the wide-open countryside, and held captive in unnatural conditions. It was totally against nature for wild animals to be confined in wire cages, paddocks, or compounds and then forced by unnatural “training” to run in a straight line.

The hare was a nervous, timid creature and it was never the same again once humans had abducted and imprisoned it for baiting.

It was bullied and terrorised from the day men set out to steal it from its humble abode. It wasn't just the killing and the mauling on coursing day that concerned us, but the entire process that commenced with the netting. For us, the whole practise from start to finish was branded “cruel and unnatural”.

Whatever profit was to be derived from coursing hardly made it any less cruel or unnatural, we argued. Drug pushing had brought lots of wealth into some homes, but that didn't justify it.

We wanted to replace live coursing with a practise known as Drag-coursing in which a mechanical lure performed the role of the hare and no animal got killed or injured.

This sport had become all the rage in Australia after hare coursing was banned there. So why not introduce it here? Since the killing of hares was “incidental to coursing”, according to its advocates, what then would they be losing by taking the live lure out of the equation?

Thus we argued, hoping against hope that parliament would somehow see through the carefully fanned smokescreen of pseudo-pastoral crawl thumping and outlandish propaganda when debating the Bill.



Democracy Denied

The parliamentary debate kicked off in predictable fashion. Tony Gregory strode into the Dail, armed with copious files and documents. His arrival was greeted by courteous or barely perceptible nods of admiration from friends of the hare and tetchy sneers of contempt, some more overt than others, from the pro-coursing faction.

I was among the observers allowed into the public gallery of the debating chamber to hear the exchanges.

It called to mind the courtrooms in which I had sat day after day awaiting judgement, except that this time I wasn't the focus of attention.

It was the humble hare that was on trial for its life. Though innocent of any crime, apart from having been born under an Irish sky, the fleet-footed denizen of field and forest was being tried in its absence.

The verdict was a foregone conclusion. And the sentence equally assured: Agonising death by torture.

Every Deputy present knew that, and all of us observing the debate from behind the glass panel knew it too. The three largest political parties in the State had denied a free vote to their Deputies. Not one member of Fianna Fail or Labour, the two government coalition parties, or of the opposition Fine Gael, was authorised to support the Bill to protect the Irish hare from cruelty.

They had been warned of the consequences of defying the party whips on the issue. Their instructions were to vote down the Gregory Bill. The fact that repeated marketing surveys pointed to a significant majority of Irish adults favouring a ban on hare coursing meant nothing, it seemed. Coursing had to be safeguarded.

It was the sick and depraved infliction of suffering on a timid creature that was to be protected, not the victim of the abuse.

Deputies were advised to leave their consciences at home or in the Dail Bar when they went into the chamber to debate the anti-coursing Bill. Hares had no votes, they knew, and their parties had reminded them of that reality. But coursing fans did. And they would remember, come election time, which Deputies had shafted their delightful pastime.

Undaunted by this stark and well-aimed kick in the teeth to the whole principle of democracy, Gregory went ahead.

He outlined the motivation behind his Bill. He wished, with parliament's permission, to illuminate a dark, hidden aspect of Irish life.

He said he wanted to highlight an obscenity that had masqueraded for generations as a legitimate sporting activity in Ireland, passing itself off as a happy-go lucky enjoyable bit of harmless fun when in fact it was a callous, sickening, and distressing form of torment that was an affront to the whole concept of sport, which was about competition and fair play...two essential elements conspicuously lacking in hare coursing.

He went on to deliver a lengthy and hard-hitting speech in which he hammered home the need to remove what he described as a "blot on civilisation". He cited case after case of gut-wrenching cruelty, each one backed up by irrefutable evidence and documentation.

He appealed to the humane sentiments of the Deputies who sat listening to him. At the height of his legendary oratorical powers, he stunned the vast congregation in the public gallery. Even some of the coursing club officials looked uneasy and just a little bit ashamed, unless my eyes deceived me. Guilt-laden eyes beheld his dignified posture.

I felt there was a chilling candour about his delivery that wrong-footed the opposition.

He held up a mirror to the baiting game. There was Shakespearean pathos in his evocation of the indefensible, stomach-churning, blood-spattered horrors of the coursing field.

He spoke of how an animal that never harmed anyone was sacrificed on the altar of medieval butchery.

Some pro-coursing Deputies gawped dourly at the floor, twiddling their thumbs, fiddling with their notes or scribbling on bits of Dail stationary as he held forth.

Leaving nothing to the imagination, Gregory blew away all the red herrings, feel good fabrications, fallacious arguments, and “Celtic Twilight” fantasising that he knew his foes would be trotting out by the bucketful.

Deputies from the small Democrat Left and Progressive Democrat parties spoke in favour of the Bill, as did some members of Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, and Labour, the parties that were officially committed to rejecting it. Other Deputies from these same three parties delivered equally passionate speeches against the Bill.

Moments of high drama and excitement followed when the Green Party’s single Dail Deputy, Trevor Sergeant, reached a point in his presentation when he had occasion to refer to the hare’s death screech.

“It sounds likes this,” he announced calmly, before switching on a tape-recorder that he held close to his microphone.

A siren-like screech echoed throughout the debating chamber. It sounded like a baby howling for its mother. For the first time in the history of the Irish State, the cry of a hare being pulled apart by two coursing greyhounds was heard in our national parliament.

Deputies reacted with shock, disbelief, and embarrassment. Some shielded their ears from the piercing scream.

Initial surprise and amazement at the audacity of the Green Party man gave way quickly to howls of indignation, both from the Floor of the House and from the adjudicating Deputy who chaired the Dail proceedings. The adjudicator was on his feet, outrage stamped on his face. “Switch off that recording immediately”, he hollered, “You are in breach of Dail procedure”.

The wayward Deputy obliged. But he had made his point. The cries of the animal whose fate all those politicians had gathered to deliberate on had been heard. The shrill truth about State-sponsored cruelty had cut like a knife through the waffle, sophisticated hot air, and political double-talk of the debating chamber.

The effect was electrifying. The humble hare had delivered its own message to Dail Eireann, and to the people of Ireland.

From my vantage point in the public gallery, I was fascinated by the different reactions of the Deputies to that well-choreographed interruption.

Some were happy, it seemed, that coursing had been effectively “outed”. They felt vindicated, judging by their expressions of approval. Others were furious, gesticulating to indicate their annoyance, chattering in flustered tones to each other, and blushing from ear to ear. They had been caught off-guard. They had not expected anything like this.

The coursing officials in the gallery looked subdued. They were, of course, quite used to hearing that cry of pain and terror and had lobbied hard to ensure that it would remain a feature of the Irish sporting scene.

But not even that shattering reminder of what coursing was all about could save the Gregory Bill. With all the contributors to the debate having spoken, the adjudicator called for a vote. Deputies supporting the Bill passed through one little gateway in the Dail, while opponents walked through another.

It was heartbreaking to observe this process. The Bill's supporters had all registered their votes within a few seconds, while those voting against it took several minutes to complete their task. The Bill was annihilated. I noticed many Deputies who had advocated hare protection in the past but were compelled by their party whips to reject the Bill.

Like a jury about to convict, they moved sullenly, with heads bowed, to vote against a measure they had publicly pledged to support.

The margin of defeat was overwhelming. The Bill was rejected by 104 votes to 16. It was a bad day for democracy, but a far worse one for the hares waiting on death row for another coursing season.



Muzzling Cruelty

The coursing clubs, responding to the intense debate on a proposal to ban their sport, announced a measure they claimed would “eliminate the cruelty” from it. They would muzzle the greyhounds at coursing events and then nobody could ever again complain that hares got a raw deal...since the dogs couldn’t tear them apart. The Government expressed delight at this idea, hailing it as a resolution of the issue.

But animal protectionists, and the Dail Deputies who had sought a ban, warned that muzzling would not make coursing a humane sport. Instead, it would just make the cruelty less visible. The netting would continue...and the mauling...only the tug-of-war scenes would become a thing of the past.

Without the bad PR they had gotten from those dramatic spectacles of horror, the coursing clubs could hope to avoid the negative media coverage they had attracted in the nineteen seventies, eighties and early nineties. Meanwhile, they would be free to inflict as much pain and suffering on hares behind the scenes as they wished, without fear of censure or public condemnation.

Muzzling was the ultimate snow job. It would make coursing look relatively innocuous on the surface, while leaving its worst and bloodiest elements intact.

The hares that became entangled in nets, breaking legs and sustaining other injuries, would continue to be “dispatched” by the Masher Whelans of this world, and the animals would not fare any better in captivity than they had in pre-muzzling days.

And hares mauled or tossed about by muzzled dogs would either be “dispatched” as before or released back into the wild to die of their injuries.

The government’s acceptance of the muzzling compromise evoked memories of a previous “Irish solution to an Irish problem” proposed in an effort to restrict access to contraceptives in Ireland.

One devout politician called for a compromise on the issue of artificial birth control that would satisfy “most reasonable people”.

Contraceptive pills and condoms could be made legally available...not from chemist shops or even vending machines, he enthused, but from slot machines, of the kind one saw in amusement arcades. You would only obtain a packet of these “ethically questionable devices”, he explained, whenever the three apples, oranges, or other fruit motifs flickered in alignment across the screen.

In other words, you would have to hit the jackpot to get “protection”.

The proposal to muzzle greyhounds rather than take the live lure, and thus the potential for cruelty and suffering, out of coursing smacked of another “Irish solution to an Irish problem”...if not necessarily on a par with the slot machine solution to the row over contraception.

From day one of the 1993-1994 coursing season, the sleight of hand muzzling innovation quickly revealed itself as a mere cosmetic exercise. Greyhounds inflicted injuries that in many instances resulted in greater cruelty to the hares and more protracted deaths than were common prior to muzzling.

So Ireland’s animal protection lobby opted to maintain opposition to coursing for as long as live hares were baited.

An Anti-Hare Coursing Protest... On Fifth Avenue

Half way through that first season of muzzled coursing, I received a phone call from America and an invitation I just couldn't refuse.

The person on the other end of the line was Helen Jones, President of the International Society for Animal Rights (ISAR), the organisation that had mounted a protest at the previous year's New York Saint Patrick's Day Parade.

She had my phone number from correspondence relating to the Gregory Bill and the plea for outside help in the campaign.

She informed me that ISAR was planning a protest for the 1994 Saint Patrick's Day parade in the same city. The idea, as before, was for a number of volunteers to hold a large banner on one of the reviewing stands along Fifth Avenue, calling for a ban on coursing in Ireland.

But this time, she suggested, it would be more effective if one or two Irish campaigners could join the protest. I began to explain how the cost of sending people to New York would be prohibitive for Irish animal groups, but she interrupted gently, informing me that ISAR had already decided to finance such a trip for two of us.

She asked me if I would be willing to travel for the picket, and if I would contact a second person who might also be prepared to stay in New York for three or four days and participate in the protest.

I hesitated at first; mindful of the way my presence on a picket in another country directed at Ireland might appear. Especially when the event was the biggest Saint Patrick's Day parade in the world.

The previous year's picket had proven controversial. How would people react to the direct involvement of Irish campaigners this time around? Would it backfire on us? Would it appear treasonable...an act of disloyalty to Ireland?

I shared my initial misgivings with Helen Jones. She said she understood perfectly my reservations about the idea, recalling the risks associated with all sorts of awareness campaigns her own organisation had initiated in the U.S.

But then she informed me that she was herself of Irish descent. Her maternal grandmother emigrated from County Mayo in the 19th century. She had honoured the memory of her ancestor by several visits to Ireland. She had thoroughly enjoyed these trips.

She found the Irish a wonderful friendly people. But despite her fondness for the Emerald Isle, she felt that she had a moral duty to help her Irish counterparts in their valiant fight for the hare.

The protest would, she felt, have a greater potency and relevance if Irish citizens were among those holding the banner. Otherwise, she feared, it might be seen as an example of Americans telling the Irish how to behave.

I agreed to travel to New York. ICABS selected one of its members to accompany me on this rather novel assignment. She was Nora Brennan, a thirty-something farmer's daughter from a remote midlands village. Nora had been picketing coursing events for close on fifteen years in addition to gathering vital evidence of the cruelty involved.

She bore an uncanny resemblance to American film actress Goldie Hawn and had, not surprisingly, been mistaken for the diminutive blonde bombshell on a number of occasions.

I had met her a few times at meetings and protests, so she wasn't a complete stranger to me. Three days before the big parade, due to kick off on March 17th 1994, we boarded a plane at Shannon airport. Nora had the same reservations I had about the possible downside of us joining the protest.

But she couldn't pass up the opportunity to visit New York and anyway, she jested, weren't the coursing people always inviting the citizens of other nations to attend their annual baiting session in Tipperary? They promoted their cruelty abroad, without apology, so why shouldn't we tell people everywhere about our cause?

Half a dozen ISAR members greeted us at JFK airport when we arrived after a six-hour flight. The organisation had earlier made hotel reservations for us. Helen Jones was among the reception committee and quickly extended us a warm welcome. She was a low-sized gentle, soft-spoken woman in her mid-seventies, and reminded me of my own grandmother.

Owing to the late hour, we opted to retire for the night after giving them a run-down on the Irish anti-coursing scene.

The following morning, Helen phoned the hotel to invite us for lunch at a cafe that she promised would make a lasting impression on us.

A big yellow taxi pulled up at the hotel entrance with Helen aboard. The cab took us along the bustling streets and avenues of the great city. Snow had fallen overnight and the streets were covered with a thin white carpet. Teams of men with deck scrubs were busily brushing it off the sidewalks.

The colossal buildings and endless stream of traffic swept past. The sea of glass reflected a calm, cloudless blue sky and the pleasantly warm sunshine.

Even with the car windows closed, the strident hum of the city intruded...a non-stop babble of noise, movement, and haste. I longed already for the quiet if sometimes strife-laden life I had left behind.

I asked Nora if she were nervous about the picket. She shrugged. "There shouldn't be a problem; it's just a protest, and a very peaceful one at that. What could go wrong?"

"It'll be fine" Helen soothed.

Catching our accents as we spoke, the driver quipped: "Hey, you Irish? Over for the parade?"

"Yes, for the parade" Nora confirmed, casting a mischievous sideward glance at Helen.

"The greatest show on Earth" the cabbie enthused.

The cab halted close to an exceptionally tall building, or rather two buildings, that Helen informed us were the tallest in America... "These are the twin towers ...the World Trade Centre".

We entered one of the enormous glass structures, overawed by the enormity of the tower that seemed to reach up into the clouds. "Like the beanstalk that Jack climbed" Nora jested. The cafe was on the 43rd floor, our host revealed. My ears popped as the elevator whooshed up.

Neither Nora nor I had ever visited New York before, so the mild dose of culture shock we had experienced since arrival at the airport was daunting. But this masterpiece of human engineering and architectural ingenuity really took our breaths away. Helen led the way to the cafe.

It was an elegantly furnished room with a panoramic view of the Manhattan skyline. We sat at a table beside a window, to savour this magnificent vista. It was a breathtaking sight that overwhelmed the senses at first glance...the vertiginous expanse of skyscrapers and the great Hudson River that flowed haughtily under a calm blue sky.

“It’s a feast for the eyes”, Helen agreed, “though I wish I could have taken you a bit higher...to the 107th floor. There was a lovely restaurant up there. Windows on the World they called it. It had an even better view of Manhattan, taking in Ellis Island, where so many Irish men and women landed before becoming U.S. citizens, and you could see where the Hudson meets the East River.”

“Sounds fascinating” I remarked, “so has it closed then?”

“Temporarily, it hasn’t opened since that terrible bombing last year. Those crazy Al Qaeda guys parked a vanload of explosives in the base of the Trade Centre. It was horrible. The blast killed half a dozen people and injured hundreds. The damage was unbelievable, but New Yorkers are a damned resilient lot.

“Within a month, the towers were open for business again and most people back at work here. Though not at Windows on the World. It’s undergoing a lot of renovation and it’ll be another few months before it’s open again. A pity. I’d love to have taken you two up there.”

I had totally forgotten that the building in which we sat had been the target of a major terrorist attack, though I recalled that well-publicised atrocity once she mentioned it.

The dramatic TV images came back to me: hundreds of frightened people emerging from the smoke-enshrouded towers, coughing and gasping for air, some of them with blackened faces, screaming and shouting and running in all directions.

Over coffee and light salads, the three of us discussed the protest planned for the parade. Helen handed us passes that would allow us on to one of the reviewing stands. Nine other volunteers would be joining us, she revealed, though six or seven would be enough to hold the banner at any one time.

“There shouldn’t be a problem” she comforted, “last year the banner was unfurled at several vantage points along the parade route and there were no objections. We even got some applause.”

Pausing momentarily, she shrugged sadly and added: “of course we’d be assured of massive publicity if we did something weird or disruptive...like run across in front of the Grand Marshal...or block the entrance to St. Patrick’s Cathedral when the Cardinal is saying Mass inside...but that sort of gesture, though it would get us on primetime news, would alienate lots of people who might otherwise be sympathetic to our cause...and your cause.

“We’ll make fewer column inches with our peaceful protest, but I really believe it’s better in the longer term...looking at the bigger picture. Picketing at the St. Patrick’s Day parade is dicey enough without actual confrontation. What do you think?”

Nora and I agreed that a silent dignified protest was the way to go. The other kind, Nora thought, might make us feel better and grab the headlines, but confrontational pickets had an ugly look about them on TV. Instead of focusing on the cause or grievance being highlighted, viewers tended to zero in on the aggressive, noisy, or worse still, violent, images being beamed at them.

I nodded agreement. Helen told us she was a life-long believer in dedicated non-violent action to address the many injustices of the world.

She cited Gandhi and Martin Luther King as people she admired for the way they achieved their aims without ever once having urged anyone to assault or injure, let alone kill, another human being.

Though the cause of animal protection might not be as urgent or important as the great human rights issues of our time, she believed that a similar non-violent but passionate and committed approach to ending the cruel abuse of animals would yield success, however long it took.

In this as in other humanitarian causes, she opined, violent or intimidatory tactics were almost always counter-productive.

I mentioned the hare-releases in Ireland. She didn't regard these actions as violent or aggressive, but she felt that the burning of lorries and the strewing of glass on fields could only serve to put people off animal causes, even if such tactics sometimes achieved, or appeared to achieve, short term benefit for animals.

"Some animal groups are going way over the top and doing crazy things" she sighed, "here in the U.S., in Britain...everywhere. The frustration felt by people petitioning or lobbying without result is understandable, but I really think we've got to remember who we are and what we're fighting for. If we go down the road of terrorism, even the watered-down form of it that some groups seem to condone, we lose the high moral ground. We become as nasty in the public mind as the guys who do horrible thing to animals."

She laughed softly. "Maybe I'm just an old fool. Younger folk would tell me, and have done, that I need to get with the times...that violence is an option. I don't share that view. I think we need to hold fast to a dignified stance. I'm seventy-seven. I guess I won't live to see animals liberated from zoos, fur farms, labs, safeguarded from hunting, or for that matter to see that awful hare coursing outlawed in Ireland. But I'm sure that the legal route is the one to follow, however heart-breaking the setbacks and disappointments along the way."

Changing the subject, Nora brought the conversation back to what had happened to the building in which we were sipping our third or fourth cups of Espresso and munching delicious jam doughnuts.

Tentatively, she looked Helen in the eye: "This is a nice café, beautiful, but don't you find it a bit eerie to be here...I mean knowing that a bomb exploded underneath the towers...and that six people were killed?"

"Nah, I don't think of that way. You don't give in to somebody who wants to bully you. You do the opposite. That's why I make a point of dropping in for a coffee, or visiting friends at the Trade Centre, whenever I come to New York. The twin towers are very potent symbols of America. That's why they were attacked. What happened here was dreadful.

"The guys who planted that bomb believed in a cause, but what cause justifies putting innocent people in their graves, or maiming them for life? What happened here is another reason why I dislike violence of any kind. It's just not the way forward. It's a backward step. What does killing or crippling or blinding someone prove? Certainly nothing good"

Nora and I agreed that she had a point.

Looking out the window, I beheld a multitude of other towers and high buildings. Birds fluttering past. Faint traces of cloud on the horizon. A jet ascending into the deep blue sky.

And a blazing orb that I could watch without shielding my eyes. It resembled a gigantic orange that had caught fire. Its benevolent rays were mirrored like thousands upon thousands of glistening jewels by the Hudson River.

Though a sight that overawed me, I would have exchanged it in an instant for a peak at the old Norman moat, with its labyrinth of rabbit burrows; that I saw whenever I looked out the rear window of my house back in Ireland.

The Irish Hare Still Cries Out For Protection...

Armed with our passes for the reviewing stand, Nora and I set off from the hotel next morning with five ISAR volunteers.

The two of us wore large sprigs of shamrock that we had taken with us from Ireland, and badges proclaiming Saint Patrick as “the greatest Irishman ever”. Nobody could accuse us of being unpatriotic.

Trudging along well-designated streets and avenues, we shivered with the cold despite being reasonably well insulated from the freezing temperature. Approaching Fifth Avenue, we were joined at a pre-arranged meeting point on a street corner by another four would-be protesters.

There were now eleven of us...just one short of the twelve required to form a jury, I teased myself. That dark phase of my life was forever intruding. I had spoken of almost nothing else to Nora on the flight to New York.

A slim elegant lady wearing dark glasses and thick grey winter clothing was standing with three male colleagues, one arm embracing a tall pole with the banner wrapped around it. I noticed her prominent “Fur is Deadly” badge and assumed the double meaning was intended.

Greeting her colleagues and her “Irish guests” as she called us, she quickly explained that she had spotted an apt location for the protest, and led the way for the rest of us. We took turns at carrying the banner.

The reviewing stands along the parade route were already filling up. Hundreds of policemen and women stood guard in front of the stands, and close to street barriers that lined the route. Groups of revellers were breezing along on either side of us, and as far ahead as I could see along the avenue. They sported all the colours of the rainbow, but one colour dominated: Green.

There was surely more than the proverbial forty shades of it: green sashes, unseasonal green sweatshirts, green socks, green sunglasses, faces painted green, plastic green imitation blackthorn sticks, and a few jolly characters dressed up as Irish Leprechauns.

A man clad to resemble Saint Patrick had a scraggy green beard and a long Bishop’s mitre, a green cross was inscribed on his flowing white robe, and dangling from his green white and orange neck by pieces of string were what purported to be “Tins of Irish Fresh Air”.

People of all ages were exchanging greetings and extravagant green badges or lavish rosettes. The police were getting hearty claps on the back, and returned the compliment with handshakes or curt but benign acknowledgement.

I didn’t catch any Irish accents, but I was sure there must have been a few visitors from Ireland apart from Nora and myself. All around us, people were wishing complete strangers, including myself, a happy St. Patrick’s Day. Someone was crooning When Irish Eyes are Smiling behind me who didn’t have a note in his head. But his friends were urging him on.

An overpowering friendliness abounded. It was a good feeling, but also a little disconcerting, I thought. How would these same people react to the airing of a highly controversial message to the “Home Country”?

Would they take it as insult to the land of their ancestors, or would they make a distinction, as Nora and I did, between love of one’s country...and abhorrence of a cruel practise that shamed it?

Our ten-minute walk through a gathering and increasingly vocal and excitable throng ended with a signal from the woman leading us that we had reached a section of the reviewing stand she had deemed suitable for the protest.

We ascended the steps, taking up our positions on the platform second from the top. This gave us a perfect view of the avenue, and we knew that the passing dignitaries and revellers would have an equally clear view of us.

We were among the first to occupy this division of the reviewing stand. Less than a dozen sightseers had got there before us, but the stand quickly filled up. The lady with the dark glasses, who it turned out, had been assigned charge of the protest by Helen Jones, advised it might be prudent to wait until the parade was well underway before producing the banner. She suggested we take turns to hold it, five or six at a time.

She revealed that ISAR had assigned a professional photographer to stand on the opposite side of Fifth Avenue, directly facing our position. If anyone attempted to interfere with the protest, or assaulted any of us, he would take snapshots of the incident.

“But there won’t be any trouble”, she whispered calmly, “last year we stood here for hours and there wasn’t a hitch. Hare coursing isn’t an issue here so nobody will bother us.”

Then the parade started. From somewhere far to our right we heard the beating of drums and then loud band music. There was a thunderous cheer in the distance. It grew louder by the second...the melodic blare of brass, the boom of rolling drums, and the applause.

A formation of green uniformed men and women with green berets came into view, each of them holding aloft a banner denoting some aspect of Irish heritage or culture: tricolours, harps, shamrocks, Teddy Bears Head depictions of Ireland, iconic images of romantic hills and misty glens...all tastefully stencilled or painted in eye-catching style.

A rousing cheer went up from both sides of the avenue as they filed past where we stood. Behind these marched a brass band playing a trendy rebel tune. Revellers on the stands sang along: A Martyr for Old Ireland, Sean South of Garryowen.

More banners swirled behind the band, followed by members of Emigrant Societies and then bag pipers in kilts, their shrill music pulling at the heartstrings.

The sun shone down benevolently, though there was no warmth in it. Back in Ireland, I reflected, it would never be as cold as this on Paddy’s Day.

A long procession of men and women decorated with green sashes and sporting green bonnets or top hats trailed the bag pipers...strolling, marching, or quick stepping along the route, waving at the stands. Soldiers and police marched past, and men fronted by Irish wolfhounds on leashes.

Then came lines of enchanting tin-whistlers, casting a spell with their sweet melodious evocation of everything Irish. Enchanting airs alternated with the booming rhythm of drums and military band music.

Thinking, for me at any rate, was difficult in this heady mix of merriment and starry-eyed sentimentality...let alone thinking clearly about our mission. The anti-coursing campaign seemed so far away that it might be on a distant planet outside the known universe.

The stream of marchers and bands seemed endless. The combination of rejoicing and musical celebration was, to my ears, almost deafening. One had to shout to be heard above it.

I began to doubt the wisdom of hoisting an anti-coursing banner in this atmosphere. If misunderstood, we could be lynched.

I didn't voice this fear to my American colleagues, but I cast a worried look at Nora, who was standing to my right. She read my thoughts. "We're entitled to protest, we've got the passes, so nobody can do anything" she soothed, but her tone was anything but assured.

The ISAR members seemed confident, or if any of them had reservations they didn't show it. I imagined they were probably used to protesting in unusual places and circumstances.

Twenty minutes into the parade, the lady in charge signalled it was time to unfurl the banner.

A young man immediately rolled it out, and a second activist caught the end nearest to her, stretching it to full length. All around us, the crowds were exhilarated.

The passion was all encompassing. Everybody's attention was fixed firmly on the parade. They won't even notice us, I thought.

Along with Nora and five others, I held the banner calling on the Irish government to ban hare coursing. People standing close to us examined it to see what message it proclaimed.

Some asked us what hare coursing was. We explained as best we could amid the ear-splitting boom of drums and the non-stop roars of patriotic fervour.

None of us expected to make a big impression on the people filing past. It was the next day's newspapers back in Ireland that we banked on for publicity.

Relaxing, and breathing a sigh of relief, I stood with the others displaying our plea to Ireland's political establishment.

The protest was at least proceeding without incident. My colleagues seemed relieved too that nobody was objecting.

Then it happened. A tall man in a greatcoat, cap, and wearing dark glasses stepped off the avenue beneath us unto the reviewing stand. A thin tricolour strip was draped over one of his shoulders. He was looking straight at us and heading in our direction.

Behind him two other men, similarly attired, were climbing towards us.

The first man stopped directly in front of our banner. He walked slowly along its full length, seeming to read the message while his lips moved silently.

Abruptly, he faced one of the protesters, a young man, and asked: "Who's in charge here?" The protester pointed to the lady with the anti-fur badge. The other two men, also wearing dark glasses, now flanked the man who had posed the question.

"Is there a problem?" the lady asked. "There sure is, Madam" he replied curtly, "there are dignitaries here from Ireland and they're pretty peeved with you guys. I'm going to have to ask you to remove that banner. I mean right away. Sorry. Take it down."

At this he made a gesture as if he were about to confiscate the banner, pulling at an end of it. His two colleagues were staring at the rest of us.

The lady in charge tried to remonstrate; pointing out that the first Amendment of the US Constitution permitted lawful non-violent protest. He countered by saying that while we might have passes for the reviewing stand, we didn't have formal permission from the Parade Organisers to stage a protest.

She reminded him that the previous year's protest had gone off without a hitch. "That may be Madam, but there are important people here from Ireland who're gravely offended by what you're doing. I'm sorry, but you'll have to remove the banner. If you don't we're calling the police to have you arrested."

The lady in charge, recognising that the law might be technically on the side of the "dignitaries" from Ireland who had objected, opted to end the protest.

The three men thanked us, their spokesman adding that they had nothing personal against our efforts to highlight hare coursing. It was the delegation from Ireland that wanted us off the stand, he repeated.

As we rolled the banner back up, the lady with the anti-fur badge smiled and said: "Don't lose heart. A banned protest is better than one that gets no publicity. It's bigger news. They've done us a favour".

With the banner out of the way, she strained to see something or someone on the opposite side of the avenue. "I hope Vito got that," she announced worriedly. The photographer, Nora reminded me. I had forgotten him. I wondered if he had captured any part of our brief protest with his hi-tech camera with extra powerful zoom lens.

Looking in the same direction as the woman, I caught sight of a medium-sized middle-aged bespectacled man on the reviewing stand opposite, waving frantically with one hand, and holding up a camera with the other. "That's Vito Torelli", a man to my left explained. Vito had a mighty smile on his face. A good sign, I presumed.

"Hey guys, Vito's got something!" another protester intoned. The woman in charge signalled at the photographer to leave the stand, and asked her colleagues, including Nora and I, to accompany her to a pre-arranged destination to meet him.

It was not until Nora and I returned to Ireland that we saw the photographs Vito had taken. He had a few excellent shots of us holding the banner, with mounted police passing the stand. But far better than that...he had caught the moment when we had begun to put the banner away.

I am to the left in the picture, lowering the banner. One of the men in dark glasses, hands clasped together, is standing in front of us...facing the camera, Poe-faced.

The man who informed us of the high-profile objection from "Irish dignitaries" has his back turned to the camera, his tri-coloured streamer clearly visible drooping from one shoulder.

In the foreground, slightly out of focus, uniformed soldiers are marching past on Fifth Avenue. And dozens of heads on the reviewing stand are turned in our direction, diverted by the disintegrating protest. Vito had captured the moment perfectly.

The lady in charge of the protest was right. The short-lived picket received ten times more publicity in the Irish and U.S. media than the one mounted at the previous year's parade. The picture of the protest being broken up was like gold dust.

And the fact that politicians from Ireland felt sufficiently threatened by a peaceful protest against hare coursing at the largest Saint Patrick's Day Parade in the world was a boost to our campaign.

It reinforced the belief that this blood sport was an embarrassment to the country, depending for its survival on censorship and one-sided coverage.

The protests in Ireland continued, and the coursing issue remains unresolved. I am still campaigning for a ban, motivated as much by a determination not to give in to the bullying of the past, which still hurts to a degree, as by a desire to see our countryside freed from this man-made Chamber of Horrors.

Hare coursing is now banned in Britain and Northern Ireland. Our own government still permits it, and our tourist industry encourages fans of the practise from countries that have banned it to come here and savour the cruelty.

They take up this invitation with enthusiasm. And why wouldn't they? They find a proverbial Welcome on the Mat when they arrive on our shores to join in the taunting and the gambling as captive hares perform for them.

And the hares face another threat: They have become locally extinct in many parts of Ireland, and our country's Red Data Book on native wildlife lists the hare as an endangered species.

Modern farm practises threaten it too; especially the vast mono-cultural tracts of grass and cereals that have replaced the little family farm enterprises that once dotted this island.

The hare is in full retreat from the relentless march of hi-tech agriculture. The wholesale chopping away of hedges and other expanses of growth in the countryside militates against it, depriving the species of its familiar habitat.

So the hare in Ireland is fighting to survive as a species...even as cruel humans seek to abuse it for fun.

As to whether the campaign itself has been worth all the hassle, including, for me, the unfair loss of my Co-op job, the arrests, interrogations, and five court cases, I cling to the hope or belief that these were the inevitable rough patches along the rocky road to success. The turbulence that precedes a safe landing.

I have always felt that life has a purpose, that each of us has a mission or assignment to which we must, to the best of our ability, seek to dedicate ourselves.

I don't think of it in religious terms, though I am open to the view that higher forces may be at work in our lives. Among our various interests and objectives, there is always one that stands out from the others. In my case, it has been the anti-coursing cause.

I am also involved in letter-writing campaigns aimed at freeing prisoners of conscience worldwide, and other human rights initiatives that don't make media headlines, but the fight to save the hare is the single issue that I have, so to speak, "majored" in.

I don't consider this cause an obsession, though I realise that it will appear to be just that to some readers of this book. Otherwise, they may ask, why would I persist in the face of such grotesque and crushing obstacles?

Why would anyone bother...especially, one might add, when all that suffering and personal turmoil was incurred by concern for a dumb animal?

One reason I have been attracted more towards this cause than even other animal welfare-related campaigns is the sheer innocence and magical appeal of the hare.

In one of the ancient traditions of the Far East, the Buddha is said to have assumed a hare's mortal form in one of his re-births.

According to legend, the Buddha (as a hare) had three companions: an otter, a monkey, and a jackal. He tried to educate them in the Holy Ways and the doctrine of compassion to all living beings. They laughed at him, doing the exact opposite of his advice...cheating, betraying, and breaking every Holy Rule in the book.

By contrast, this hare occupied by the Buddha's spirit sacrificed himself to the God Sakka. He ran headlong towards a blazing furnace, the legend says, "and like a royal swan alighting on a lotus bed, threw himself in an ecstasy of joy into the flames".

Owing to his pureness of heart and saintly nature, he didn't suffer the mildest hurt or mutilation.

Impressed by this gesture of self-sacrifice, the God Sakka extracted juices from the rocks of a great mountain and with these painted the image of the hare on the bright side of the Moon, where it can still be seen to this day.

I wonder sometimes if anti-coursing campaigners are also expected by "somebody up there" to make exorbitant if not necessarily superhuman sacrifices. To tread a bitter and lonely path for the sake of compassion.

We have certainly endured our share of hard knocks.



Epilogue

We Irish are marvellous for attending funerals, and I am no exception in that regard. The death of anyone you know, whether you liked them or not, can be a sad event. So, when I heard that Masher Whelan had drawn his last breath, I decided to attend his funeral.

I put aside misgivings about what to me were his cruel ways. Death comes to all and nobody is perfect.

He was in large part responsible for my decision to take up the cause of the hare.

I might never have joined the campaign if I had not seen Masher perform his dispatching act that day in the countryside, surrounded by his acolytes.

It was my introduction to hare coursing. Masher Whelan served as tutor, opening my eyes to the whole point and purpose of the game. His practical demonstration of how to end a hare's life, while at the same time punishing the animal's unfitness for coursing, was a valuable lesson. Its impact on me was both immediate and lasting.

The Parish Church that hosted the funeral mass was packed to overflowing. I seated myself discreetly in a central pew. Surprised expressions greeted my presence.

A deferential hush in the chapel was interspersed by coughing and sneezing and the hum of low toned prattling. Snippets of whispered commentary came at me from all directions:

“He caught a fair few hares in his time, didn't he Patsy?”...

“By Jaysus he did, the best feckin net man in the county, if not in the whole of Ireland”...

“Ah sure he's with God now...he'll be showing the angels how to catch hares. Before they know it, Saint Peter and Jesus and all the holy boys above will be knocking back whiskeys with him.”

“Aye, and they'll marking their cards at that great coursing meeting in the sky”...

“You said it, Tom. The apostles and the saints will be shouting for the red or the white...the dogs will have golden halos...and Masher will be the best dispatcher Heaven ever clapped eyes on”.

Tears flowed freely. I didn't shed any, but I had no animosity towards the deceased either.

Though he saw me as a bitter enemy, I never hated or even disliked Masher Whelan. He was just not the kind of fellow with whom you could have a rational conversation if you were a known critic of hare coursing.

He probably saw nothing wrong with what he did. Of course his reputation as a ruthless abuser of wildlife; a man who engaged in gratuitous cruelty and torture...didn't endear him to me.

I had never in my life exchanged a word with him. The nearest I had got to it was on the evening he sat in that old farm house in my schooldays, a sullen figure at the table among his friends who were cheerful and upbeat about their hare catching.

Even then, he had stared menacingly at me, his face full of suspicion, as if he had an inkling or intuition that I would some day represent a threat to him and his way of life.

Looking around me in the chapel, I saw familiar faces. Bannon, the drunken Branchman, was kneeling in prayer close to the main mourners, near the altar.

In another pew sat the man who had assaulted me in the Co-op store. He had aged considerably. Once an erect powerfully built man, he was now hunched, totally grey-haired and unnaturally thin. He wasn't well, I surmised.

Some of the highest-ranking coursing officials in Ireland were seated in the third pew behind the family members. These had a more dignified air about them than the rank and file fans that thronged the church. They remained tight-lipped throughout the service, their eyes fixed on the altar.

Then, one by one, the clerics in their splendid green and gold priestly vestments entered the chapel from the sacristy behind the altar. I was amazed at the size of the officiating team: The requiem mass was to be concelebrated by no less than five priests and two canons.

As somebody in the congregation joked, the big guns had been wheeled in to give Masher a mighty send-off.

The priests took turns at heaping praise on him. "He was a kind and gentle soul, who was devoted to the Lord and lived the life of a true Christian," drawled one cleric.

Another, his arms extended and his eyes raised Heavenward, moaned: "Masher (not the name used) you were one in a million...you gave your all to the greyhound industry. The greyhound owners and trainers will never forget you. Coursing's grievous and irrevocable loss will be Heaven's undoubted gain.

May you find eternal happiness...for now you sleep in the bosom of the Lord."

I tried hard to exclude unkind thoughts about Masher from my mind during the mass...a vain effort, given my knowledge of what he stood for. I wished coursing had died with him.

Towards the end of the service, part of the ancient ritual of the Catholic Church conspired to re-focus my mind on the dark side of this man who was being mourned and venerated.

One of the seven altar boys began heartily swinging a thurible of incense over the coffin. A burning sweet scent wafted its way along the pews. It was the smell of hope and death combined. But for me this poignant and reverent symbolism was inapt. There was an odd whiff of perversity in the air.

The pendulum-like movements of the censer as it creaked back and forth dredged up a sickening image.

Again, as clear as the day it happened, I saw Masher swinging that hare in the field, battering it against the wall of the old church. I saw him as clearly as I saw the thurible swinging over his coffin.

I remembered the cries of the dying animal...a heart-piercing shriek that once heard is never forgotten.

I saw the eye dangling from a crimson mutilated socket.

I saw again the men and boys gathered about him as a frenzy of bloodlust held him in thrall.

I heard the nervous laughter and the guffaws.

I saw the two dandelions pasted to the stonework.

I remembered all that I had seen and heard from my hidden vantage point.

I recalled my fear of the gang in the Church Field and my failure to intervene.

After the mass, I left the churchyard before the hearse containing Masher's mortal remains began its slow drive to the cemetery. It was enough to attend the mass. Standing at the graveside would be a gesture too far.

I wondered where his soul was now...in what part of the afterlife or the Spirit World he had taken up residence.

And I hoped, for Masher's sake, that God didn't turn out to be a hare.



Glossary Of Words That May Be Unfamiliar Outside Ireland

ICABS: Irish Council Against Blood Sports, the main animal protection group in Ireland campaigning peacefully and within the law for a ban on cruel animal baiting practises such as hare coursing, fox hunting, and stag hunting.

Hare: A timid, fleet-footed mammal common in Ireland and Britain. It resembles, but is larger than, a rabbit. In North America it is more commonly referred to as the “Jack Rabbit”.

ALF: Animal Liberation Front: a highly controversial organisation or network that originated in Britain but later spread to Ireland, the United States, and a number of European countries. It is ostensibly committed to the ending of all exploitation of animals, an objective it hopes to achieve by both legal and illegal means. In Ireland, it was blamed for sabotage of hare coursing venues in the 1980s following claims of responsibility that could not be verified.

Gardai, or Garda Siochana (pronounced She-a-cauna): Ireland’s police force.

Garda: a policeman- or woman, a member of the Irish police force.

Garda Station: Police Station.

Branchman: a member of Ireland’s police Special Branch.

Dail: One of the two houses of parliament in Ireland, the other being the Senate.

Fianna Fail: Irish political party

Fine Gael: Irish political party.

Labour: Irish political party.

Progressive Democrats or “PDs”: Irish political party.

Democratic Left: Irish political party that no longer exists.

Cute Hoor: A crafty fellow with the gift of guile and cunning, who may be perceived as a devious or shifty character, or as a lovable rogue, depending on one's point of view.

Cute Hoorism: An attitude, or mode of behaviour, reflecting the modus operandi of the cute hoor that has diminished Irish politics and engendered a lowering of ethical standards in the country's political system.

Munster: The southern-most of Ireland's four provinces.

Finn Mc Cool: Mythical Ancient Irish hero.

Mountjoy: A notorious Irish prison.

Boreen: A narrow Irish country lane, commonly dotted with tufts of grass and loose stones.

Thurible: A container of incense used in Catholic Church ceremonies.

Offences Against the State Act: emergency legislation enacted in Ireland to combat paramilitary violence and safeguard State security, but also used, controversially, against anti-hare coursing campaigners, trade union activists, and street traders.

Maneen: A boy who seeks to mimic the demeanour or general behaviour of a man, or who believes he is one.

Cork: Ireland's second largest city.

Craic: offbeat caper or enjoyable session. Also, any situation or scenario, as in "what's the craic, lads?"

Bollix: In Ireland, any man you dislike with reasonable intensity, whether he merits such dislike or not.

Reviews of Bad Hare Days

"...Spellbound, horrified yet enthralled..."

Review by Andrew Knight BSc, BVMS, CertAW, MRCVS, FOCAE
Fellow, Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics
(on official website of Animal Protection Party)

There have been very few books that have made me lock myself into the bathroom, bolting the door to ensure I simply could not be interrupted. None, in fact, until *Bad Hare Days*.

Oblivious to the demands of life outside, I read on spell-bound, horrified yet enthralled, by this incredible true-life story. As a young man John Fitzgerald's accidental witnessing of the secretive and brutal killing of a wild hare led to his revulsion of the cruelty inherent within the traditional Irish sport of hare coursing.

His campaign to educate the Irish public and politicians about such cruelty was entirely understandable, 100% legal, and motivated by compassion. Until the publication of this book, few would have believed the depths of hatred and vilification that such a campaign could provoke, in a supposedly modern society.

Most disturbing of all, was the prolonged harassment of the author by Ireland's Garda Síochána, or national police force. The sordid role of the Gardai in these events was disturbingly similar to that of a secret police force, tasked with the harassment or suppression of political dissidents.

Repeatedly arrested at dawn, and taken to locations kept largely secret from his family and friends, the author endured the most appalling psychological interrogation techniques, all aimed at securing false confessions, and implicating others. The use of such blatantly unethical and illegal techniques has deeply stained the honour of the Gardai.

The author is to be commended for surviving these prolonged interrogations, with his resolve intact to continue his campaign against animal cruelty. *Bad Hare Days* provides a vital warning for social activists of any persuasion about what might lie in wait for them, should their campaigns become more than a minor irritation to the powerful.

By publishing his gripping story, John Fitzgerald has cast a spotlight upon a profoundly rotten core of our society. Such corruption severely undermines public confidence in Ireland's justice system, and must be rooted out.

"...Compelling, inspiring, and alarming..."

Review By Mike Rendle of the Irish Hare Initiative

John Fitzgerald's public and very brave opposition to hare coursing inIreland.... resulted in him being subjected to prejudice and bullying in his day to day life. Bad Hare Days chronicles his experiences and details his appalling treatment at the hands of elements in the Republic's police force.

This book accurately portrays the mindset of those groups and individuals who practice and support hare coursing. The events unfold to illustrate the subversive influence that the coursing lobby exerts over the political and justice systems inIreland.....

John Fitzgerald reflects on the environmental and ethical cost of hare coursing on a species that is being pushed to extinction.

This book is at once compelling, inspiring and alarming.

"Local author launches new book on anti-hare coursing..."

Kilkenny Advertiser review, November 20, 2008

Bad Hare Days is The Kilkenny Advertiser's 'Old Kilkenny' columnist's newest literary offering recounting a story of the author's high profile involvement in the Irish anti-hare coursing campaign.

John is renowned for his anti-blood sports opinions and in his book which has been published in the UK, he recalls how witnessing scenes of cruelty in a field where hares were being netted for coursing opened his eyes for the first time to the downside of Ireland's field sport tradition.

He joined the campaign against blood sports, with coursing high on the list of activities that animal welfare people wanted banned by law. This they sought to achieve by picketing coursing events, letter writing on the subject, and lobbying politicians.

But he found that taking a strong public stand on a deeply emotive and controversial issue almost always carries a price tag.

Much of the book focuses on what happened when radical activists linked to the so-called Animal Liberation Front resorted to sabotaging coursing venues and releasing hares from captivity.

John insists he had no connection with the militant elements but that, despite this, he was tried five times in the 1980s for alleged intimidation of coursing club members and officials and landowners who permitted hare coursing on their fields.

There were two mistrials, another trial ended with a hung jury, a fourth resulted in a unanimous Not Guilty verdict, and a fifth case was withdrawn in the District Court before being sent for trial.

Between September 1986 and March 1990 he was arrested eleven times, mainly under the anti-terrorist Offences Against the State Act (Section 30) and questioned about alleged ALF actions directed hare coursing. He describes these interview sessions in detail.

The book is written in a novelistic style and all names of legal personnel and some place names are changed for legal reasons.

"A gripping account...explicit and at times disturbing..."

Review by Brogan Hayes (Freelance Journalist) on Amazon UK

From his teenage years, John Fitzgerald has been a committed campaigner against blood sports. *Bad Hare Days* is his recollection of life as a campaigner.

In the book, he paints a vivid picture of what the sport of hare coursing entails: greyhounds chasing hares and viciously mauling them to death. He compares the cries of the dying hares to the sobs of a baby or the wail of the Banshee.

The story is explicit, honest and at times disturbing. Fitzgerald shows the analogy between the cruelty he was subjected to at the hands of coursing supporters and the cruelty these same people inflicted on hares.

Bad Hare Days is also an account of a turbulent time in the history of hare coursing in Ireland and the events that brought this cruel sport to national attention. The author details opposition that former President Mary Robinson and Senator Noel Browne encountered when they made their case in favour of banning hare coursing in the Irish Parliament.

Bad Hare Days gives an interesting insight into Ireland in the mid-1980s. Fitzgerald shows how money, power, and establishment figures such as priests and farmers influenced parishioners and people in the surrounding neighbourhoods where the story is based.

Fitzgerald appeared in court on a number of occasions, accused of threatening and harassing hare coursing officials. On each occasion he was found either not guilty or the case collapsed.

For all Fitzgerald's efforts to raise public awareness of the cruelty of hare coursing there has been little change in legislation governing the sport. Had the 1993 Gregory Bill been passed, it would have banned hare coursing in Ireland. However, this Bill was defeated in the Dáil by 104 votes to 16; so hare coursing continues to be legal, albeit with the dogs muzzled.

The author captures rural Ireland of the 1980s. His use of descriptive language shows the contrast between Ireland then and Ireland of the Celtic Tiger. He does not pull any punches when repeating the verbal abuse that he endured while protesting against the cruelty of blood sports. The quirky nicknames that he uses for those who abused him, based on their own most-used insults, inject a much-needed air of humour into the book.

This book offers an interesting insight into the lengths that people will go to in order to protect their beliefs. Fitzgerald was willing to go to prison for speaking out against a cruel sport. Those who supported hare coursing were willing to allow an innocent man to be persecuted if it meant they could preserve their sport.

Bad Hare Days is a gripping account of what one person endured in order to campaign for what he believed in. The book asks the question, was John Fitzgerald treated any more humanely than the animals he campaigned to protect...against the brutality of hare coursing?

"Splendidly crafted...vivid imagery... It is to be hoped this memoir will inspire its readers to do what they can to have hare coursing outlawed in Ireland..."

Review by Chris Morris (writer and environmental campaigner) on BanBloodSports.Com

John Fitzgerald is a freelance journalist living in County Kilkenny, Ireland. He is an avid campaigner against blood sports and is well known throughout Ireland for his stance on hare-coursing.

This memoir opens with the fourteen year old Fitzgerald walking through the "church field", enjoying a break from his studies, when he hears loud voices in the distance.

Curious to find out what is happening, he walks in the direction of the voices and sees a group of men and boys combing the church field... "like I'd seen on television when they are searching for a missing person". When he gets closer to the group he feels un-nerved by the expressions on their faces.

Fitzgerald takes refuge in an abandoned church in the "church field" and looks through the fuchsia bush that covers the opening, where one imagines there was once a Harry Clarke religious stained glass window. Hysterical voices echo around the old church as he watches the leader of the group holding aloft a badly injured hare.

The leader passes the trembling hare to a boy, around the same age as Fitzgerald, and tells him to "stiff" it. When the boy fails to kill the hare the leader snatches it from him and proceeds to batter the hare against the church wall... "in a mounting frenzy of excitement until another man taps him on the shoulder and tells him it's dead now you're ok."

When the group, led by their alcohol-swigging leader, walk off with the dead hare, Fitzgerald examines the scene and sees the hare's blood splashed on the church wall and on blades of grass.

The image of the blood on blades of grass reminds one of the poem: I see his blood upon the Rose, composed by the Irish Roman Catholic poet, Joseph Mary Plunkett (1887-1916). One is also reminded of St Francis of Assisi who loved and revered birds, bees and all of the animal kingdom. On the feast of St Francis, adults and children bring their pets to be blessed by the priest at a special mass.

As he walks home, shaken by what he experienced, Fitzgerald meets an old man and tells him what he had witnessed in the church field. The old man advises him: "You'll say nothing, not a word. You'll only get yourself into trouble."

When he leaves school and starts work, still haunted by the memories of what he witnessed in the church field when he was fourteen years old, Fitzgerald starts to write letters to the national papers, highlighting the cruelty of hare-coursing.

One day the parish priest, Fr. Aloysius, visits Fitzgerald in his place of work and asks him to stop writing letters to the papers. He tells Fitzgerald his letters have caused great distress to Fr. Carrigan, who had been a curate in the parish for many years.

Fr Carrigan, Fitzgerald reminds the reader, used the pulpit at Sunday mass to appeal for volunteers to help in the netting of hares: "He would follow the final blessing with a favourable reference to hare-coursing or a rallying call."

One would be forgiven for thinking Fr Aloysius' visit to Fitzgerald's place of work on that day was a kind of warm up act because within an hour a man smelling of whiskey enters Fitzgerald's place of work. He verbally abuses Fitzgerald and then physically attacks him for writing letters to the papers about hare-coursing.

This does not deter Fitzgerald. If anything, it makes him more determined: besides writing to the national papers, he goes on local and national radio highlighting hare-coursing as a barbaric form of entertainment.

Early one morning there is a loud knock on Fitzgerald's front door: "Standing on the footpath outside the door were five tall men in suits. They looked like men dressed up for a wedding."

The leader of the men introduces himself as Detective Sergeant Michael McEvoy of the Garda Special Branch: "...We're here to search this kip", he said, as he pushed his way into the house. The Special Branch men raided the house and when they found a leaflet from the Animal liberation Front, McEvoy chortled "Hip hip! We've nailed him!"

Fitzgerald gives a graphic account of his arrest and interrogation. McEvoy and Garda Collier sit behind a desk in the barren investigation room and Fitzgerald is ordered to sit on a high stool. From time to time, McEvoy circles around Fitzgerald using all kinds of threats to try and extract a confession from him.

One sees Fitzgerald in the same terrifying environment as the hare caught in the net in the church field. McEvoy tells Fitzgerald, as he is about to take his fingerprints, "I can break every one of your fingers if you don't co-operate."

McEvoy continues to circle Fitzgerald trying to get him to sign a false confession. When he refuses to sign the already prepared statement, McEvoy tells Fitzgerald he will have his very ill father brought down to the station and interrogated. It is this threat that breaks the strong willed Fitzgerald and he signs the false confession.

Within three months Fitzgerald is arrested for the second time. This time the Special Branch's interrogation tactics don't have the same terrifying effects on him. Though he is held in Garda custody for forty-eight hours, the Special Branch fail to break him down or frighten him into signing a false confession, so they take him to court, using the original signed "confession" as evidence.

Fitzgerald describes how the jury is selected for his trial; this in itself makes interesting reading. The jury try to restrain their giggles as the prosecuting barrister, "...in his refined, Anglo-Irish accent..." reads aloud to the court the foul language and obscene expletives from a letter Fitzgerald is accused of writing to members of the hare-coursing fraternity.

This court scene's dark comedy lends light relief to an otherwise tragic, gruesome story.

Fitzgerald goes to the funeral mass for Masher Whelan; leader of the group in the church field on the day the fourteen year-old Fitzgerald witnessed the brutal killing of the hare.

Having read of the brutality this man acted out on vulnerable helpless creatures, I can't help thinking a more appropriate name for him would have been "Basher" Whelan.

When five priests and two cannons parade from the sacristy to the altar, "...someone in the congregation joked that the big guns had been wheeled in to give Masher a mighty send off..."

As he watches the altar boy swinging the thurible of incense over the coffin, Fitzgerald gets flashbacks to that time in the church field when he watched Masher Whelan swinging the helpless, terrified hare and bashing it against the abandoned church wall.

This is a splendidly crafted work. Fitzgerald's writing skill captures the reader's attention in the way he describes, in vivid imagery, each event as though it is happening as one reads.

The religious imagery in the opening chapter is all the more daunting when one remembers that the abandoned church in the church field was once a sacred building.

This abandoned church once displayed the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, symbolised by the lighted sanctuary lamp.

Though the names in this memoir have been changed, I feel this does not detract from its authenticity.

It is to be hoped this memoir will inspire its readers to do what they can to have hare coursing outlawed in Ireland: a land of breathless beauty...and dark shadows of obscene cruelty to animals?

"Riveting and Enlightening..."

Review by BadgerWatch Ireland

For a most riveting and enlightening read be sure to pick up *Bad Hare Days* by John Fitzgerald, a lifelong campaigner against blood sports.

The 400-page memoir reads more like a thriller than your typical autobiography. In it he recounts how he became involved in the campaign to protect the endangered Irish Hare, which faces a twin threat from coursing/hunting activities and the loss of habitat caused by urbanisation and modern agriculture.

John Fitzgerald paid a high price for his stance against blood sports...bullying in the workplace, including assaults; the loss of his job with a Farmer's Co-op, and a series of arrests and interrogations at the height of the militant anti-coursing activity of the 1980s when mysterious night-time raiders sabotaged hare-holding venues and released the fleet-footed creatures from captivity.

Though not part of this underground movement, with its clandestine balaclava-shrouded figures darting about like shadows and creating mayhem within the greyhound industry, the author of *Bad Hare Days* was targeted frequently by the Forces of the State, wrongly and unfairly, due to his high profile in the legitimate anti-hare coursing campaign.

His no-holds-barred accounts of interrogations, dramatic courts cases revolving around alleged "ALF" actions, and the treatment meted out to protesters on the picket lines by coursing fans... make for compelling reading.

The book is written in a free-flowing, highly readable style and once you open it you won't be able to put it down. It is alternately shocking, thought-provoking, informative, and quite hilarious in a darkly comic way.

Anyone remotely interested in animal Rights/welfare/protection causes or in the politics of environmental activism will find this book immensely provocative.

"He and his book are inspirations to those of us who have been battling the barbaric 'sport' of hare coursing for years..."

Review on Amazon UK by Geoffrey Woollard, South East Cambridgeshire, England; a lifelong campaigner against hare coursing in Britain

Though I am honored that John Fitzgerald is now my friend on facebook, I wish very much that I had read his book earlier, for he and his book are inspirations to those of us who have been battling the barbaric 'sport' of hare coursing for years.

I feel so inspired by John Fitzgerald's story of courage against almost unimaginable odds in his native Ireland that I think that he should be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Unlike Barack Obama who has done little thus far, John Fitzgerald has done much for the humble hare and for humanity and he deserves greater recognition - at least from all lovers of wild animals.

'Bad Hare Days' describes in extremely graphic and horrific but almost matter-of-fact detail John Fitzgerald's nigh-on-three-decade campaign against cruelty, against bigotry, against hypocrisy and against much of the Irish 'establishment.'

I say cruelty because, whilst some people regard greyhounds chasing and tearing apart hares as a 'traditional' British (and it is and has been predominantly British) 'sport,' others have long since seen it as sheer cruelty.

I say bigotry because, whilst the cruel 'sport' of hare coursing has been practiced in both England and Ireland by out-and-out rogues and ruffians, it appears that in Ireland, even the Catholic priesthood and others in the countryside otherwise looked upon as 'respectable' and 'respected' have supported it and, worst of all, have participated in it.

These people are neither respectable nor respected and they are bigoted in their opinions and practices. The priests and the politicians, in particular, should have known better - much better.

I say hypocrisy because it is evident from both John Fitzgerald's book and my own long experience in England that there are misguided hypocrites in both Ireland and England - misguided hypocrites who seem to believe that they and their greyhounds are in some manner superior to the poor and gentle and mild-mannered hare.

They appear to believe that God provided the latter to amuse the former. God help them, for it appears that they cannot help themselves.

The dreadful difficulties that John Fitzgerald has had with An Garda Siochana (the Irish police force) and the Irish Special Branch, both of whom appear often to have sided with the hare coursing 'establishment,' mirror to some extent my own in much earlier times with the Cambridgeshire Police, some of whose people it was difficult to work with. Time out of number I have been told on the telephone that 'we are a bit short of resources this morning, Mr Woollard.'

This was shorthand for 'stop bothering us: we have better things to do with our time than attend to cruel rural crime.' Thankfully, things have improved in recent years, partly due to local police initiatives and partly, of course, to the fact that all hare coursing was made unlawful in England and Wales through the Hunting Act of 2004.

John Fitzgerald's campaigning in some respects also mirrors my own. Whereas he has been fighting the curse of hare coursing for nigh on three decades, I have fought it for four. Whereas he has seen some success, I also have seen some success.

But whereas he is to be praised for never giving up, I retired from active farming (and pursuing hare coursers) in 1995 partly because the menace of hare coursing was getting me down. I gave up at that point, but John Fitzgerald battled on with uncommon bravery.

I continued in desultory style to support those who brought about the British ban on hare coursing (and fox hunting), but I only came to life again when I realised that, if the Conservatives win the next General Election, they are almost certain to undo the Hunting Act 2004, to 'un-ban' fox hunting and, maybe, to 'un-ban' hare coursing as well.

Taking the magnificent example of John Fitzgerald into battle, I now intend to do all that I can to prevent these barbarians prevailing. We British led the way in banning the slave trade and in banning slavery in the Empire, we led the way in banning bear baiting and cock fighting, and we led the way in banning hunting and hare coursing. We must continue to make progress and not let our civilisation take a backward step.

Thank you, John Fitzgerald, for your courage, for your campaigning, and for your wonderfully well-written book chronicling both your courage and your campaigning.

Needless to say, this wonderful work warrants five stars.

Websites

Follow John Fitzgerald on Facebook

<http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=1473520596>
(www.tinyurl.com/johnfitzgerald)

Witness the cruelty of hare coursing

Click on “Videos” at www.banbloodsports.com

Ask Irish politicians to ban coursing

Email members of the Dail / Irish Parliament from:
[http://www.oireachtas.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=/documents/
Members_emails/document1.htm](http://www.oireachtas.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=/documents/Members_emails/document1.htm)
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Join the campaign against coursing

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