

Time to Think

Open University journeys in British and Irish prisons during the years of conflict 1972-2000

Transcript

Joe Doherty Republican: I was arrested under the Special Powers Act. I was sent down to Long Kesh Internment Camp, so I was 17. That was January 20th, 1972.

Ronnie McCullough Loyalist: It was 1974 we started on Open University courses amidst horrific events occurring in the prison. The Camp was set ablaze. There was serious rioting in the aftermath. The British Army riot troops came in supported by helicopters dropping CS and CR gas.

Bed sheets and pillow cases were ceremoniously thrown onto the razor wire that surrounded our compounds and they fluttered in the wind for weeks.

Title card: An estimated 30,000 men and women served time in British and Irish prisons during the conflict in and about Northern Ireland.

Dominic Henry, Prison Education Officer: There was people on remand, there was people with political aspirations who were lifted as part of some campaign, there were people who were convicted so there was real turmoil. The management of the prisons were at their wits' end to try and find out what these people could do.

Title card: The Open University held its first classes with internees in 1972.

Joy Clark, Chief Education Officer, Northern Ireland office: The prison education in itself could not provide third level education and The Open University was just an answer.

Title card: In 1974 the first Loyalists and Republicans studied with The Open University in the compounds of Long Kesh and then in other British and Irish prisons.

Raymond McCartney, Republican: I think, as a political activist, you always knew that prison was a place where you had the time and space to develop whatever you felt politically, and education was like a natural add-on to that.

Title card: Prison life was marked by constant struggles over political status.

Title card: Throughout, education offered precious space and time to think.

David Smyth, Loyalist: For any prisoner or long-term prisoner, part of living is making use of all the time.

Student C, Loyalist: You had time on your hands to think in a way that you cannot think in the environment that you left outside.

Student H, Republican: I found myself putting a towel over my door and sort of creating a wee space for myself, a wee positive space. I was actually able to study. If you go back and look at them cold hard cells, I learnt in there, I studied in there.

Michael Culbert, Republican: There was no way that I was ever dropping The Open University 'because it was a constant for me it helped break down the isolation that the prison was trying to instil in us.

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Prison Governor, The Maze and Long Kesh: After about nine months in the job of working in Maze, I would go to bed at eleven o'clock, very, very tired. I would wake up at one o'clock in the morning and my head was buzzing. I couldn't get to sleep again, so, I signed up and started the OU.

Title card: Time to explore

Martina Anderson, Republican: It was like going on the moon [laughs]. A university world; that wasn't my pathway in life. I took a deep breath and just loved studying and thinking and applying what I was learning.

Garnet Busby, Loyalist: I just wanted to educate myself. I wanted to become better equipped to talk to people about the Troubles and about my political views. I wanted to understand where different people were coming from.

Diana Purcell, Senior Counsellor, The Open University: I felt very strongly that with education, that people will think a bit harder or think in a slightly different way or use thought, perhaps before action.

Title card: Time to change

Seán Lynch, Republican: I remember, in particular a conversation with a man saying: "What are you going to do with your time?" and I told him: "I'll read history and learn the Irish language" and he says ... "What about the OU?" and I remember this distinctly. He says: "Do you ever think that we have to go into government?"

Sean Wynne, Headteacher, Portlaoise prison: The expression then was a Kalashnikov in one hand and a ballot box in the other. The drama teacher – an ex-army man, ex-Irish army man – he used to say to me "Sean," he says, "we will have the ballot box in one hand and we will have the degree in the other hand going out of here."

John Wallace, Loyalist: There's a thread, in my view, through to the Peace Process. A lot of the UVF guys would have been influenced by what they did in the OU. How they thought about things; started to change.

Liam McAnoy, Republican: It gave you an opportunity to think wider than the Compounds you were in, wider again even in the society from which you had just come out of and it gave you an opportunity to actually meet a lot of people that you would never have met, to be in a position where you could have discussions with them.

Billy Hutchinson, Loyalist: Being one of the first group of people who were talking to the Irish government, the American government, the British government and also Republicans in terms of Sinn Féin and the Provisional IRA; The Open University taught me how to actually do that.

Title card: What could you do with time to think?

Credits:

This film and the Time to Think archive would not have been possible without the inspiration and commitment of Dr. Jenny Meegan.

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Archive: Loyalist prison artwork courtesy of Action for Community Transformation

Republican poster images courtesy of Republican News

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