THE ARREST

It was the evening of June 19th 1952; Frs Owen O’Kane and Paddy Reilly were busy translating prayers using a Latin dictionary when they were disturbed by the sound of Owen’s name being called and at the same time the door being hammered by a Communist policeman’s fist.

Owen said to Fr Reilly, “It’s those devils again, what are they up to now?” His heart pounded with dread at the thought of another ‘interview’.

Downstairs he was greeted with an unusually smiling and exceedingly polite and excited policeman. He told Owen to call down Fr Reilly and for them both to come with him to the Dispensary to discuss some business.

Owen refused to do so, telling him they could conduct the business there. Unfortunately when Fr Reilly came down stairs he proceeded to follow the policeman outside towards the Dispensary, thinking Owen had already agreed to go.

Owen was left either to stay and remain in suspense of what was going on … or to follow. So he threw off his cloth slippers, pulled on his boots and grabbed his coat from the end of the stairs and pulled it on as he proceeded to follow the others to the Dispensary.

The business was in relation to a supposed visitor they had had recently and for whom they had no pass. Passes agreed to by officials were used to control the freedom of the people. The pair denied this accusation countless times. They were instructed to reflect as perhaps they had forgotten. They refused to acquiesce to their demands.

Eventually into the Dispensary charged a band of about twelve soldiers. They were armed with rifles and fixed bayonets, revolvers and pistols. The priests were then ordered into the waiting room where they remained surrounded by soldiers with their guns at the ready. Owen’s name was called and a warrant for his arrest was read.

He was charged with having organised the reactionary Legion of Mary and other reactionary activities. Ultimately these were only two of about 60 trumped up charges they brought against him. All of which he persistently denied throughout his ordeal.

He was then handcuffed. A rope put over his shoulders, brought beneath his armpits and tied tightly behind his shoulder blades. What was left was used as a lead with which the soldiers took him away.

Fr Reilly was treated the same. Before being led away, they both knew this wasn’t a situation they could control, so they quickly gave each other Absolution.

After Fr Reilly’s handcuffs were fastened they were ordered to run. Owen was in the lead and was in no hurry to get to their unknown destination so he dug his heels into the soft earth and eventually when the guards tired they were allowed to move at their own pace.

Many questions were going through his mind: Were they going to be paraded through the town as disgraced criminals? Were they going to be subjected to a public trial? Were they going to be shot … a possibility but not very likely. Were they going to prison ... not likely at all!!!!!

They arrived at the local police station where they had to surrender their personal belongings. Owen’s consisted of a few safety pins, nails and buttons, a handkerchief, notebook, his beads and his watch which the people of Carnlough had presented him with on the occasion of his Ordination in 1945.

They were then taken on a two and a half hour journey by boat to Tetsin Prison. Except for an occasional glance, this was the last contact they were to have for the next 17 months. Owen was placed in a cell with 14 other inmates. It was 14x16ft (Note this marked on the floor)

Owen and his other cell mates lay side by side in cramped conditions where the mosquitoes and fleas turned out in full strength finding the fresh blood of the new arrival a welcome change. The rats frisked around like playful pups. Sometimes they left the little bit of vacant space in the cell and played hide-and-seek over and around their bodies. He could hear the sounds of chains which some of the prisoners were shackled with. Eventually he managed some rest.

Morning ablutions were scant, with four using the same bowl which contained up to two quarts of water. Then started the relentless ‘interviews’.

He was subjected to daily pressure from his fellow prisoners. They formed a group under instruction from the Reds. These were ‘group meetings’. For four weeks, as the new boy, he was the ‘centre of attention’. These ‘meetings’ lasted eight hours, during which time he could only move if he asked permission. Even then he was only allowed to stand for a two-minute stretch.

If the group members could get each to commit to their crimes.. It would be beneficial as it could lessen their sentence. Many of the prisoners were ultimately placed in hard labour camps.

Owen showed his stubborn streak when he refused to sit at the centre of the group. With regard to the relentless questioning He had made up his mind to use St. Peter as his guide, making sure he didn’t ‘put his foot in it’ and therefore - the best answer was silence.

As the pressure mounted and they kept shouting at him, ‘was he deaf’? Did he hear the question? He thought he was going to go mad, so in order to gain relief he coolly told them what Communism was and Catholicism was. This further infuriated the officials and he was taken to another room at 8pm where he was surrounded by soldiers. They made him stand beneath a light, the brightness of which blinded him. He had to stay standing for the entire six hours with his feet together, his hands by his side and not move. All the while there was a soldier in each corner of the room, one beside him and one by the door. A revolver and two pistols lay on the officer’s desk.

Surprisingly or perhaps not... sarcasm rose to the surface when they asked him his name. ‘He said he was surprised that they had to ask him considering they had arrested him’.

As the time wore on at one point he wished the ground would open up and swallow him. He wanted to tell them to shoot him. Instead, he told them they were wasting their time (getting him to confess). The haranguing, silences and questioning went on all night until he was eventually allowed back to his cell. He was exhausted. For the next three weeks this happened 17 times.

Those were weeks he shuddered to remember, but he was glad to say he never admitted to anything. Strangely, he felt no anger towards his cell mates who tortured him; only great pity. They were men whom Communism drained of their self respect.

**A New Abode**By the 3rd August 1952 they were on the move again. This time to a new jail in Kashing where they would be in solitary confinement for the next 15 months. First, Owen and Fr Reilly were taken to the courtroom where there was much excitement evident in the demeanour of the soldiers.

He tells how he was so frightened of guns that even the sight of them made his heart ‘beat violently’. He was even more terrified that in their state of excitement one of them would accidently pull the trigger as they had their fingers on them constantly.

He was dressed in just pyjama bottoms, cotton undershirt and a coat. No socks nor laces in his shoes. Handcuffs back on; arms tied so tightly behind his back that his shoulder blades were almost touching and his chest so stretched it felt on the point of bursting. They remained like this until 6.30pm that evening as they travelled via boat and train.

At one station he was subjected to cigarettes being stubbed out on his hands and had his fingers twisted by the gangs of aggressive youths who followed them. Along the road to the prison, they encountered three young boys, digging for worms. The first two noticed them and stood staring, not saying a word... the other, when he realised that something was happening, remarked to his companions: ‘They’ll never get that fellow in a Chinese coffin.’ Being a Communist prisoner led to only one end - a Chinese coffin.

When they finally, with great difficulty, got his handcuffs off, his arms, bleeding and bruised at both wrists and swollen from the fingertips to the elbows, fell limp and listless at his sides.

**Solitary confinement in Kashing**He tells how the cell he ended up in was 6ft x 3, reminiscent of a pigsty with a raised portion for sleeping on. It was filthy. He eventually was given a brush to clean it and he tried washing the floor with what little water was available daily and a piece of his clothing. It took him 10 weeks and it kept him busy.

Food was initially good but after three weeks it was steamed rice twice a day with a few spoonfuls of cabbage and an odd piece of pork. The bread was half-baked and Fr Ronan was able to make the beads of his rosary from it. It hardened up so much they could hardly be broken.

Fr Owen made his rosary out of old rotten strings which he knotted. He kept it in his breast until one day it fell out when he was taken out for his ‘interview’. After this he was reprimanded for praying.

He told them ‘free people’ had the right to pray, and that they couldn’t stop him praying’. His duty, they said, was to reflect on his crimes. Confess and have his case settled. Owen was comforted by the thought that his fellow priests were now nearby and their presence was confirmed via coughs and nose blowing. They used this way to receive and give absolution.

At first Owen thought having a cell on his own rather than with 14 others was a luxury. Sadly during his time in the cell he would be constantly transported back to the gruelling interrogations he had suffered, under the dazzling lamp with constant questioning until his brain called out for a rest – always denied.

At one point he had to repeat to himself, ‘I am sane, I am sane.’ Then becoming ‘horribly conscious’ of the meaning of his words, he thought, ‘You won’t be sane for long if things go on like this.’ He knew he must do something or he would go mad.

He decided to forget the past and the future and concentrate on the now. Nowadays it’s called mindfulness..... Owen was a trailblazer. He slept if he felt like it. Prayed, if he felt like it.

But eventually prayer got on his nerves. His constant praying was starting to harm him. So he had to cause a diversion. He started playing, with the red ants, flies, and spiders which were plentiful in the cell. He killed the mosquitoes. Like much of this story, he describes this in detail in his part of the ‘Four Felons’ book.

From 6th August to 15th September the interrogations began again and when the Reds didn’t get from him what they wanted, they tried to frighten him with threats. But he protested that his conviction was dearer to him than escaping either suffering or death and that he would stick to it through both.

The threats had been to spend the rest of his day without friends, relations, no one to speak with and nothing to do, bad food, no fresh air, sickness and suffering.

He replied ‘If that was the price, I could at least try’.

On September 15th  extremely fatigued, legs weak, feet sore, arms to heavy for his shoulders. His eyes doing things he couldn’t describe. He could stand it no longer, so he asked the judge if he could sit down, instead he was sent back to his cell to Reflect and ready himself to make a confession.

These periods of ‘Help’ eventually caused him to remain in bed for 7 weeks

The winter of 1952/53 was the toughest time physically for him when his body succumbed to Dysentry which lasted for 6 weeks and Beri Beri caused by manlnutrition.

Raw turnips and rice proving insufficient to keep his body healthy.

It began by burning and swelling in his toes and feet. Travelling up through his body, wreaking havoc.

The pain was intolerable. His skin dried up and fell off, his muscles wasted and bones creaked. His limbs were useless. And amongst other ailments, his hair fell out and his eye sight became weak with his eyes glued together. His captors, failing initially to provide him with medical assistance.

Finally he received medication and with time his health started to improve.

After his illness he wondered how he could regain his strength.

His body was emaciated and he couldn’t bear to place his hand on his chest – it was like rubbing naked bone. He could count his bones in his hands and his knees were protruding like huge swellings. His body in a state of unimaginable filth, with only cold water to wash.

At first he was unable to stand and In order to prevent himself getting hurt he had to put himself into a kneeling position before eventually getting to his feet. He felt it was less damaging a height to fall from.

On 3rd November, once again he was subjected to a session of ‘Help’ he had to cling to the wall as he could barely walk to the courtroom. He had no strength to talk and was told that they had looked after him well during his illness.

When it became dangerous the doctor was allowed to treat them to keep them alive not cure them Any medications were paid for from the money the Kitz seized when taken prisoners. He knew the others were being subjected to the same treatment as he could hear their groans

On 11th November 1953 all 4 Felons were again subjected to court examinations by a judge who knew practically everything on the Catholic Church.

By the 22nd he felt that release was imminent when they asked for his coat etc so they could air it. They were all allowed a hot bath and a shave.

On 23rd they were taken to the courtroom where all their clothes and possessions lay on the floor.

They were told to identify their belongings. However a particular item was missing .. The watch and his wireless which they took in 1951.

There was a stubbornness in him that he refused to leave China without his Watch and wireless. Over the next two days he kept asking for them.. He gave them the names of the officials who took them and eventually they were returned.

On 14th November their photos and fingerprints were taken and a return to the courtroom resulted in them being expelled from Chinese soil forever. On this occasion he got a crack on the side of his head by an excited Soldier when he failed to remove his hat.

Their expulsion ‘cut deep’ as he knew that ‘as long as the Communists ruled China, Christianity would never be preached’.

When he first saw both Fr’s Reilly Ronan and Casey he said their appearance was frightful. They were all like men back from the grave..thin, tired, stiff and old looking.

Finally they were sent on the Seventy mile journey with Six armed guards by railway, to Hong Kong and freedom via the barbed wire fences of No Man’s land.

Fr Reilly was unable to walk and Owen with great difficulty.

The Guard had the revolver pointed at his ribs which ‘he thought seemed too foolish to be possible’ considering he was unlikey to run away considering he could barely walk.

In his writings it is documented how Fr Reilly and himself collapsed with exhaustion after crossing the border, but no doubt feeling relief that their ordeal was finally over. It was now 28th November 1953.

The book by Bernard Smyth called But, not Conquered, pertains to how the Columbans were unable to see their mission flourish in China.

However I also think about how the Chinese Communists failed to’Conquer’ those four young brave strong men who throughout their time in jail never faltered in their faith and the belief that all the parishioners were praying for them to be freed.

In the account of his time in the Chinese jail Owen finishes with the following.

**I have painted, I fear, a grim picture of life in Chinese communist jails. Before I end there is something I want to add.**

**Out of my fifteen months in Kashing jail I can recall only two days on which I was unhappy.**

**One of them was Christmas Day 1952, for my thoughts tore loose from their narrow moorings and sped in spite of me to Ireland, Antrim and home.**