

Sean Bourke the actor

by May Griffin



Sean Bourke

In 1962 I was examinations officer of a professional organisation which had its headquarters in London, where I lived at that time. My job covered the administration of examinations, not only in the many colleges throughout the U.K. which were running the courses, but also students throughout the world who studied privately or by correspondence courses and for whom special arrangements were made regarding the transit of papers and the invigilation of the examination.

A letter came to our office one day requesting us to examine the possibility of allowing prisoners to study and sit for the examinations. My employer casually said to me: "Make arrangements to go to Wormwood Scrubs Prison and see what this request is all about". As he was a person not given to jokes, I realised, with some dismay, that I was going to have to go.

All arrangements for educational activities in the prison were the responsibility of the tutor organiser and after some preliminary correspondence a convenient date for my visit to the prison was agreed.

I arrived at the main gate and went, somewhat reluctantly, into the reception area. The tutor organiser arrived, identified me, and I was admitted to the jail. Never having seen the inside of a prison before, I had only the ideas gathered from films and TV of what to expect. I wanted to look but didn't want to stare, all at the same time.

It was a few minutes before it registered with me that a group of men, dressed in what looked like air-force blue, were in fact prisoners going from one part of the prison to another, in the care of an 'armband' prisoner. When my business discussions were over, the organiser asked me if I would like to be shown round the rest of the prison. I accepted, admittedly not too happy but not willing to say that I was scared.

Going round the different blocks and

departments, I became very conscious of the keys. Wherever we went doors were unlocked. When we went into a communicating area the door was locked behind us, and it was only then that the door facing us was unlocked. We were then allowed through and the door was locked behind us.

The educational courses were many and varied, and covered music, drama, art as well as O and A levels, degree and more specialised courses. One of the students in the Art appreciation class that day was George Blake.

Before I left, the organiser asked if I would be interested in attending the plays and concerts put on by the prisoners and to which some members of the public were invited. I accepted the invitation with alacrity as I had by this time got over the nervous feelings and had become very interested in what was happening inside the prison.

An invitation to a play arrived quite soon afterwards, and my husband and I went off together to see it. We were given little programmes on which the cast was identified by their first name only.

The first character to come on stage was a very good looking man, with dark, curly hair. As soon as he spoke, my husband Dan, who is a Limerick man, said to me: "He's from Limerick - that voice is unmistakable". We checked the cast list and there was the name - Sean.

Naturally, we became intensely interested, though we did not know who he was. During the interval, by a strange coincidence, when talking

about the play we were told who Sean was and why he was there. The actor was Sean Bourke.

At the end of the play, Sean and one of the actresses who belonged to the drama group working with prisoners, were standing hand-in-hand on the stage and it seemed so sad that they wouldn't be able to go and have coffee or a drink afterwards to talk it all over. Because he had been convicted of sending a bomb to a policeman, Sean was going to be in prison for years.

We went to several other plays and each time Sean was in the cast. He was a good actor and had a fine presence on the stage. (The stage designer and manager was E.D. Sgt. Emmett Dunne, who had murdered his friend in order to marry the wife of the man he had killed).

We still knew nothing of Sean Bourke, other than that he was from Limerick, until the news broke of the escape from the Scrubs of George Blake and the involvement of Sean Bourke in the affair. As I had by that time changed my job and lost my contacts with the prison, I had almost forgotten the plays and actors until my husband reminded me of the story.

I never met Sean Bourke, but he interested me because he came from Limerick and also because of the curious circumstances in which I came to know who he was.

CHARACTERS in order of their appearance :-

JONATHAN FOTHERALL	Sean
RICHARD FOTHERALL	Pat
PRISCILLA FOTHERALL (Mother of Jonathan & Richard)	Sheila
TAYLOR (Butler)	George
CLAUDE FOTHERALL	Frank
JUNE WHITEWAY	Valerie
PAUL	Kevin

Part of the programme.