

# The Cross and the Wire: a recollection

Philip West

'Muddy.'

'Certainly is ... Nice bit of wood that.'

I finished lighting the candles beneath the cross and squelched over to the wire. It was Molesworth, December 22nd 1985, 9.00 p.m., and for a change it was not raining.

'Yes, nice bit of wood that.'

'You on all night?'

The M.O.D. man behind the wire had just arrived for a three-week shift, and he wanted to talk. He seemed genuinely pleased to see someone tending the cross.

'Are you a Christian yourself?'

'Catholic.'

'Same thing.'

He laughed. We trudged off along the wire. He had one young girl, and would miss her opening her presents on Christmas morning ...

At Molesworth, unlike at Greenham, the cross was outside the wire. It was solid, ten feet tall, set in concrete a few yards from the new high-security fence, and thoughtfully illuminated by the M.O.D. spotlights. It had been erected illegally on Diocese of Peterborough land, without the blessing of the Bishop.

The cross and the wire at Molesworth symbolized the contrast between two radically incompatible ways of conducting human affairs. On the one side lay power. It was a solid fence, well patrolled, starkly lit-up against the rural softness of the Cambridgeshire countryside. In less than two years' time it was to enclose the power to wreak human suffering several hundred times in excess of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. Russian suffering, that is. Only at the price of threatening its use, it seems, may we continue to live our relatively privileged lives unmolested. On the other side lay the symbol of an ancient judicial execution. Its occupant had not been a powerful man politically, and he had not—in the genteel phraseology of the academic circles within which I move—been 'well received' by the establishment, religious or secular. To embrace that symbol seriously would be to reject both privilege and unmolestedness. Ours, that is.

The Christian church down the ages has had a problem with that symbol and its occupant. On the whole it has found it convenient to domesticate it. It has become silver, jewel-crusted, carried about, genuflected to, lit up in neon, embossed on service books—neutered. At Molesworth that had not yet happened. It was still muddy and wooden. It was still an embarrassment, as were the handful of people who camped near its base, enjoying the privations of the English winter. It and they were a particular embarrassment to the Diocese of Peterborough, which had recently served them with an eviction notice. It and they had not been 'well received' by the establishment, religious or secular.

Hostile pundits who pronounce upon the peace movement generally regard it as hopelessly naive and idealistic. In some cases this is no doubt true. On demonstrations one meets many well-meaning people who assume that if we could only get rid of nuclear weapons everyone would live happily ever after; that peace and security would spontaneously break out. That, of course, is quite untrue. The question is, however, at what price are we prepared to maintain our present style of life—to put it bluntly, how many Russian civilians would you or I be willing to incinerate in its defence. What indeed can and must be said about the justice of a way of life that needs to be undergirded by the threat of such spine-chilling force?

The cross stood outside the wire at Molesworth to ask that question, and to suggest an uncomfortable answer. In doing so, it could not but question our present western existence as well, and the comfort and security that we take for granted as our right. There had, after all, been little comfortable or security-conscious about the wandering Palestinian prophet that had once been nailed to it. He had been apt to make statements about the need to lose one's life in order to find it, to take up one's cross, to give all one had to the poor and follow him, to turn the other cheek. And his actions and fate had fitted his words.

The cross does indeed symbolize a different way of organising human affairs from that of the wire, but one that often involves privation, loss of freedom, and suffering for those who attempt it—as that band near its base at Molesworth had accepted and we perhaps yet need to learn. Its message was not only for the Ministry of Defence, it was for us as well. To renounce the threat of ultimate force in our own defence today might well have some unpleasant consequences tomorrow. The alternative to the wire is, as they say unrealistic. It might, however, be right.

If so, that cross was indeed a nice bit of wood.