

Brendan O'Leary on 40 years of Amnesty International campaigning

Amnesty International turned 40 this year. The organisation, especially in comparison with most international non-governmental organisations established in the 1960s, has been a great success. It has significantly grown in strength, resources and global reach and impact despite key changes to its original mission and mandate, and despite some big errors of judgement by some of its past leaders and some of its member-state branches.

The metaphor of "water on a stone" is not quite right as a description of its history. Water always beats stone in the end. "Words in the wind", "reasoning with bullies", "persuading the unspeakable" or "conversations with tyrants" may be more accurate if less poetic descriptions of Amnesty's work, because it has often lost its struggles and seems likely to continue to do so.

Despite the self-intoxication of some present-day liberals, there can be no guarantee that the improvements Amnesty has promoted and helped to bring about are sustainable. If Rudolf Rummel's calculations in *Death by Government* (1994) are correct, the 20th century saw

Like Water on a Stone: The Story of Amnesty International
more people killed and abused by governments than in all preceding human history: a fact that sobers all but the most fanatical exponents of human progress.

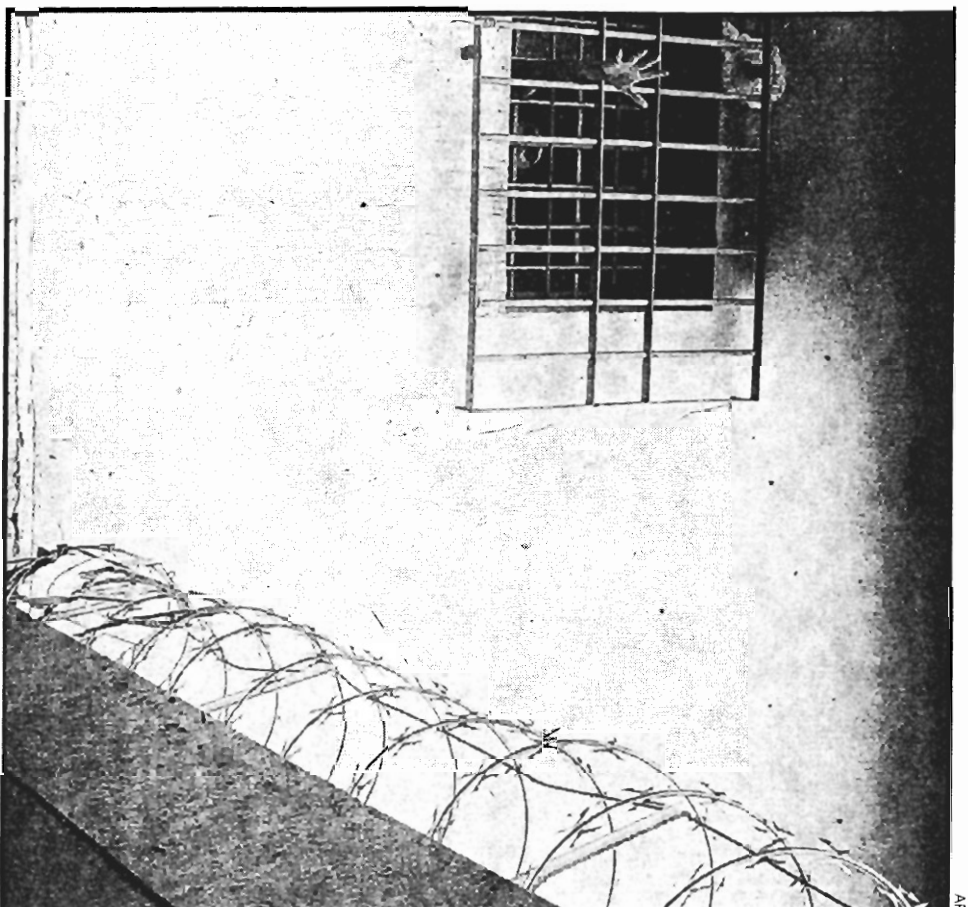
By Jonathan Power
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were Russian and English and who also has Jewish roots. His branchchild, naive as it seemed, and still seems, was to organise letter-writing campaigns to free non-violent prisoners of conscience through moral pressure and to target regimes irrespective of their ideological orientation. He started it in 1961, on the 100th anniversary of the freeing of the serfs in Russia and slaves in the United States.

Today Amnesty has more than 1 million members. It has more than 4,000 local groups; supporters in more than 160 states and territories; a budget approaching £20 million; and a core staff of about 360. Normally praise for civil society is uttered by someone who is working on or has just won a government grant. But this slur does not apply to Amnesty and its staff. It takes and seeks no monies from any government. Its membership is now larger than the population of some of the combined mini-states of the United Nations, and its campaigning skills often exceed those of public-relations and advertising giants.

Amnesty's mission has gone from rather clear objectives — campaigning for the release of non-violent prisoners of conscience; for humane prison regimes; against torture; the death penalty; internment or detention without trial — to the more demanding and less tractable objectives embedded in the promotion of all international and regional human-rights codes. One example with which I am familiar is Amnesty's detailed proposals to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, a body obliged under the Good Friday Agreement to make suggestions on how the European Convention might sensibly be supplemented for local circumstances. And Amnesty has long since departed from an exclusive focus on governments: it removes with paramilitaries, and badgers major corporations to sign up to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Amnesty is, of course, kept in permanent business by the abusers of human rights, be they governmental, corporate or paramilitary. While reading this history, I found myself engrossed in a parallel recent book, John Conroy's *Unspeakable Acts. Ordinary People: The Dynamics of Torture: An Examination of the Practice of Torture in Three Democracies* (2000). Its focus on relatively recent UK, Israeli and US tortures in North



Not much to celebrate: inmate in a Paraguayan prison, 2001

To: Dictators Re: Torture

ern Ireland, Palestine and Chicago should disabuse anyone of the notion that democracies are guarantors against torture. Conroy's harrowing tales of authorised or condoned torture, the rationalisations of the torturers and the seeming indifference of bystanders explain why Amnesty or its functional equivalent will always have a mission.

To have Amnesty's biography written by a man called Power might seem very apt. But, by contrast with Conroy's work, *Like Water on a Stone* is something of a disappointment, and not just because Jonathan Power, like any good journalist, is a shameless borrower of the ideas and stories of others. The disappointment is caused by simple

considerations: given the gravity of its role in recent history and the dogged hard work of its activists, Amnesty deserves a less vain, less self-obsessed, less opinionated and less self-congratulatory chronicle. It certainly does not need a biographer with the following exultant conclusion (in a chapter titled "The world is a better place"): "Unlike in previous ages, neither economic, religious nor ideological forces point us or push us in the direction of war." Such comments required a steady editorial hand. Power does not seem to have done his research with a free run in Amnesty's archives; for good reason (protecting client records); and he seems to have written the

First Impressions

This week's competition, in which you have to identify a book from its opening sentence, is from a novel whose title comes from the first speech in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*:

"The snapshots had become almost as dim as memories."

Entries, including postal address, should be sent to First Impressions, *The THES*, Admiral House, 66-68 East Smithfield, London E1W 1BX, faxed to 020 7782 3300 or emailed to theschat@thes.co.uk
B L A C K W E L L ' S The winner receives a £25 Blackwell's voucher and the closing date is B O O K S H O P S December 11.

The winner of last week's competition, who correctly identified Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, is Eric Willis of Bristol University.

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book by sewing together the 1,500-word essays that appear to be his forte.

He begins with a prologue, "The wheel turns in Nigeria"; that is longer than his later capsule history of Amnesty's 40 years. In it, Power accompanies Amnesty's secretary-general to Nigeria on a mission to advance the organisation's cause. We learn that the author is a friend of Nigeria's current president, General Obasanjo, a former Amnesty prisoner of conscience, and we are given the transcript of an interview he had with his old friend. Power justifies this prologue on the grounds that it demonstrates how far Amnesty has come from its beginnings. But instead of then examining these beginnings and the story of Amnesty's growth, we are plunged into narratives of killings in Guatemala, atrocities against children in Emperor Bokassa's self-styled Central African Empire and the Pinochet case. Then, after the capsule history, we are dropped into two fresh stories, "Brian's dirty war" in Northern Ireland and Amnesty's "Black mark: the Baader-Meinhof gang". A quick segue into "Amnesty's success stories" is followed by two chapters on its limited impact in China and the United States.

Like most contemporary media professionals, Power believes he can capture his audience's attention only with shocking stories, "hooks" that he must send out before he can deal, almost apologetically, with the book's ostensible purpose: the history of an organisation. This style is regrettable because it infantilises the readership and pays insufficient attention to patience as a factor in the successes of Amnesty — an organisation that surely merits a management history for circulation among comparable NGOs. There is also insufficient focus on Amnesty's part in a wider human-rights movement, without which it could not have had the same impact. In brief, the book fails to account for Amnesty's successes in its internal management and in its external impact.

To give Power his due, he is no uncritical whitewasher of his subject. Amnesty's founder nearly fatally compromised its independence and impartiality by becoming something close to an agent of the British Foreign Office. Its German branch was allowed to show undue concern for members of the Baader-Meinhof gang, despite Amnesty's rules that require strategy for each state to be considered by non-citizens of that state (to ensure greater detachment). And its tactics may, Power suggests, have encouraged some Latin American dictatorships to make their citizens "disappear", precisely to avoid having communications with Amnesty and its sister organisations about prisoners admitted to be in detention.

Five big dangers will always haunt Amnesty International and kindred NGOs. One is the danger of local capture by those with a separate agenda — the ultra-left may, for example, seek to compensate for its failures to build parties by entryism. The second is an embrace by political and corporate establishments that will render it less effective. The third is that it will pursue universalist prescriptions that go further than the core base of agreed universal human rights, when it may well be that regional, national, ethnic and cultural conditions require more subtle constitutional and institutional designs. Fourth, it may suffer from "mission creep" and try to address socioeconomic rights, which would mean losing its neutrality between liberalism and socialism. Last, it may suffer from its own successes, leading it to miss its goals and overestimate its importance. Happily this has not happened, yet.

Reviewers should declare their interests: I am a credit-card but non-letter-writing member of Amnesty. The secretary-general, Senegal-born Pierre Sané, who features most prominently and attractively in *Like Water on a Stone*, was one of my first students — a fact that gives me much satisfaction but for which I can take no credit.

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BOOKS

'A news-paper poll suggests that only a minority of Scots know when St Andrews Day falls or why Andrew — rather than Ninian or Columba — is the national saint'
BRIAN MORTON

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'Part of the strangeness of Japan, for the foreigner, is that call girls often dress like ladies, while ladies (and teenage girls) would boast of being virgins) dress like call girls'
PICO IYER

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