

# Comment

1982 cannot have left much behind that many people want to remember. For the Catholic Church, admittedly, the first papal visit to this island proved vastly more imaginative and thought-provoking than opponents of disseminated neo-ultramontanism feared. The murky connection between papal finances and the liquidated Banco Ambrosiano of Milan has exposed matters that would make anybody nervous who cared about the Vatican's reputation for common sense and integrity. But, by and large, anti-popish hysteria in Britain has clearly withered away. The long term effects of the papal visit are hard to foresee. The pilgrimage to Canterbury, however distant and unpredictable the practical consequences, must have been a historic moment.

The need for the Pope to go straight to Argentina after his visit to Britain only underlined how unavoidably his travels are implicated with politics. The euphoria in Poland at his return home soon after his election surely led to the misery of life under martial law. The possibility that the papal visit to Britain might be cancelled because of the war with Argentina did not make much of a dent on the belligerent nationalism by which the government and the media were mesmerized by then. The long faces of senior bishops flitting back and forth to Rome must have seemed a minor item on the news to most observers. The decision to go ahead with the visit no doubt represented a very mixed set of motivations. It was a diplomatic gamble as well as natural anxiety about the waste of money that there would have been. But, at the root of the indecision, there also lay real questions about the readiness of a people at war to listen to the Pope's preaching.

This time a year ago the Falkland Islands, owned by Coalite Ltd., were declining steadily, socially and economically. The King Edward Memorial Hospital in Port Stanley dealt with most cases but referred serious ones (some 45 in 1981, out of a total population of 1800 people) to Buenos Aires. The latest round of racial laws on the table at Westminster deprived natives of the Falkland Islands of the right to live in Britain. Cuts in the budget for the Royal Navy (to help finance the Trident missile programme) suggested to neutral observers that Britain was at last pulling out of the South Atlantic. Since the 1930s the Foreign Office had been negotiating to "reunite" (*sic!*) the Falkland Islands with Argentina.

A report in *La Prensa* (29 January 1982), from a well informed columnist, stated that Argentina was preparing to present Britain with an ultimatum over the long standing dispute over the Malvinas. Misreading all the signs, and a year too soon before the British naval cuts became effective, the Argentinians peacefully occupied the Falkland Islands, on 2nd April.

On 15th June the Argentinian garrison surrendered. Over a thousand men had died and many more have been maimed. The biggest loss of life was when the cruiser *Belgrano* was wantonly sunk on 2nd May, apparently on orders directly from the Prime Minister. Scores of Argentinian soldiers were fragmented by the cluster bombs with which the garrison was pounded night after night. In the end, saved by dud bombs and the gross incompetence of the Argentinian officers, Britain won the war.

It remains almost unbelievable. The bellicose hysteria in Parliament and in the popular press must be the nastiest memory of all. If anything honourable has come out of the whole disgraceful episode it must be David Tinker's letters home (*A Message from the Falklands*, compiled by his father Hugh Tinker: Junction Books, £3.50). He died, with twelve other men, when the *Glamorgan* was hit on 12th June. In a letter which arrived nine days after he was killed he wrote: "I cannot think of a single war in Britain's history which has been so pointless". He knew quite a lot about British history. It is very moving to watch this conventional English public-schoolboy's growth into total condemnation of Mrs Thatcher's militarism. That such a man, who clearly never hid his views, could become an officer in the Royal Navy, perhaps offers some small hope against Britain's regression even more deeply into belligerent nationalism.

David Tinker was an officer. What did "the men" feel about the Falklands war? Would they have been so critical of the government? If so, would their story have found a publisher? Of course Argentina is a military dictatorship, with no freedom of the press and suchlike, as we have. *Los Chicos de la Guerra*, a collection of interviews with Argentinian soldiers back from the war, is a best seller in that country. By all accounts the freedom and eloquence with which these young conscripts condemn their government's criminal incompetence is helping to cleanse their national conscience.