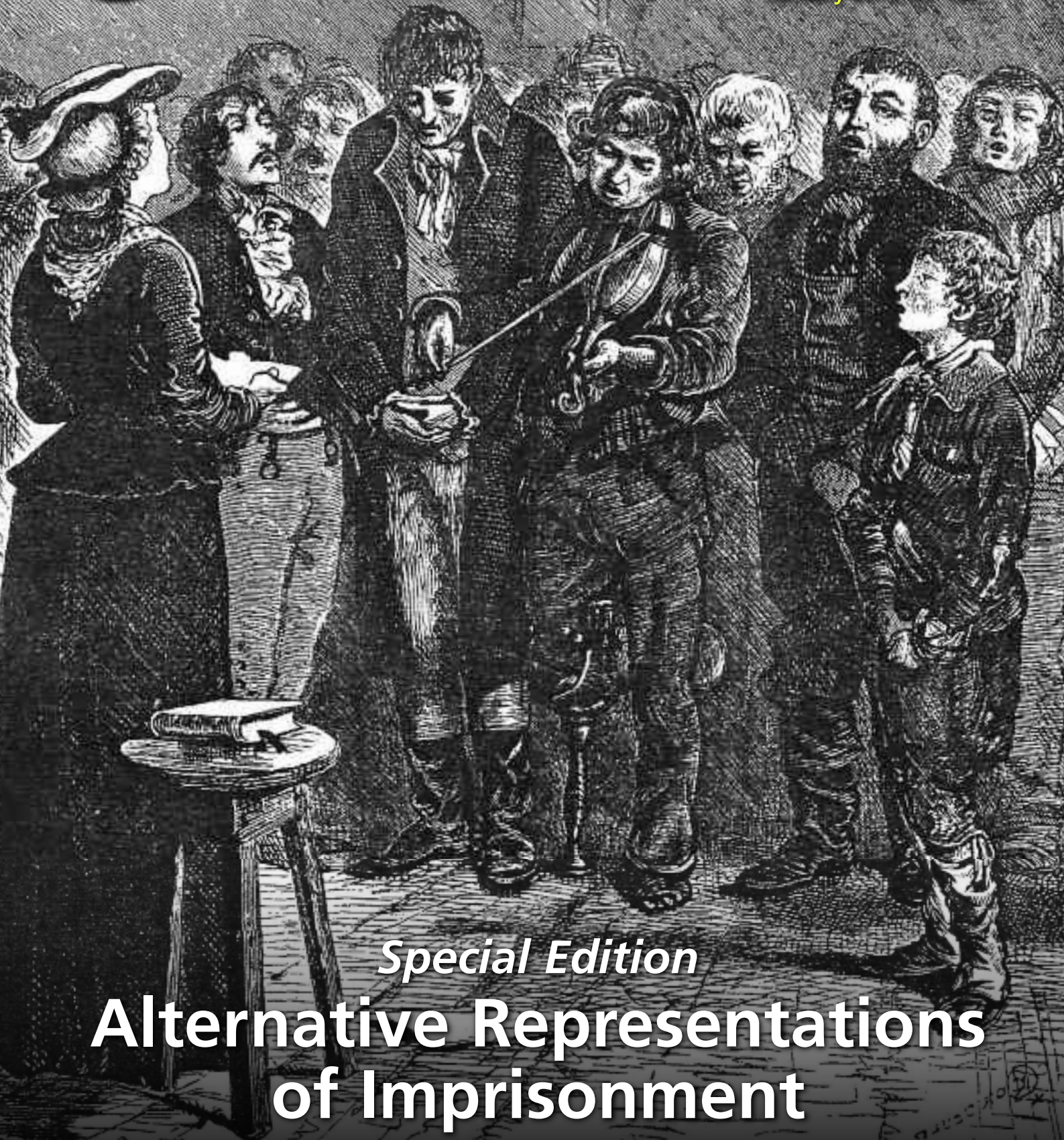


PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

January 2012 No 199



Special Edition

**Alternative Representations
of Imprisonment**

Porridge: 'A Night In'

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Since the release of *Porridge* in the mid 1970s it has become one of the most well known and loved comedy series and in 2004, it was voted seventh in a BBC Poll of the 100 Greatest British Sitcoms.¹ The central characters have become etched into popular culture as one of the most frequently scheduled programmes about prison and in recent years with the expansion of a large number of channels, it is often repeated on the BBC as well as on channels like Gold.²

Criminologists and media commentators though are divided about *Porridge* as a representation of prison and imprisonment. As Jewkes points out there are three main points of view.³ The first view is that the success of *Porridge* is nothing to do with the fact that it is set in prison but is related to the 'classic' sitcom set up; a two man double act, one older often quick-witted or sophisticated and the other an often younger, naïve, but likeable dreamer and the scraps they find themselves in. So *Porridge* is no different to *The Likely Lads*, *Only Fools and Horses*, *Blackadder*, or *Yes Minister*. These successful sit-coms also tended to mock authority, and those who wield such power, and *Porridge* fits neatly into the tradition but the backdrop is the highly restricted and controlled prison environment.

The second view is that prison is integral to the show and it has 'grit beneath the wit'.⁴ In this view, *Porridge* does have something to tell us about prison life in the 1970s and the changing philosophies of punishment of that period. This is represented for example, in the characterisation of the two main prison officers in the series; Mr Mackay, the strong disciplinarian with military roots who rules his wing with a firm grip, and Mr Barraclough, the well meaning benign officer who sees the potential for reform in all under his charge. The collapse of the rehabilitative ideal and the rise of 'nothing works' is also emphasised in the character of Fletcher, the habitual criminal, who sees prison as an 'occupational hazard' and for whom, rehabilitative efforts are totally ineffective in addressing his recidivism.

The final view, Jewkes points to, is that put forward by authors such as Wilson and O'Sullivan, and this argues that whilst highly successful and influential in terms of people's 'ideas' about prison, *Porridge* has been damaging, presenting prison life as cosy, and is an unrealistic image of prison life. Further, they claim that ultimately *Porridge* has set back prison reform, prevented challenges to prison conditions by ignoring significant features of prison life in the 1970s such as violence, prisoner protests and staff brutality, as well as the poor conditions related to slopping out and long periods of lock up.⁵

Others, such as Erwin James, claimed that during his own imprisonment, '*Porridge* was a staple of our TV diet' and he regards that the 'conflict between Fletcher and Officer Mackay was about the most authentic depiction ever of the true relationship that exists between prisoners and prison officers in British jails up and down the country'.⁶ Derek Lewis also stated that his main source of knowledge about prison came from the media and 'the BBC comedy programme *Porridge*' before he became Director General of the Prison Service.⁷ My own position is that *prison* is absolutely central to *Porridge*, this is not simply about two characters in a situation of adversity but that the fact they are in prison is the secret to the success of the series as 'both gritty and witty'.⁸

I am neither a film critic, nor a media expert, but I am someone interested in prison life throughout history and today. It is my intention to examine one episode of *Porridge* in detail, probably my favourite episode, although it is difficult to decide, and certainly one which the writers were particularly pleased with. '*A Night In*' is the third episode in the first series of *Porridge* and contains only five scenes. The first features Lennie Godber, a first timer in prison, who has been sentenced to two years for breaking and entering. Lennie is walking through the landings carrying his possessions and heading for the cell of Normal Stanley Fletcher: 'Fletch'. The second scene and remainder of the episode is set in the cell. This is only broken by two potent camera pans

1. *100 Greatest Sitcoms: Porridge*. (http://www.bbc.co.uk/sitcom/advocate_porridge.shtml) Accessed 14/09/2011.
2. Mason, P. (1996) 'Prime Time Punishment: The British Prison and Television' in D. Kidd-Hewitt and R. Osborne (eds.) *Crime and the Media: The Post-modern Spectacle* London: Pluto.
3. Jewkes, Y. (2006) 'Creating a stir? Prisons, popular media and the power to reform' in P. Mason (ed.) *Captured by the Media: Prison discourse in popular culture* Cullompton: Willan.
4. *Ibid*, p.139.
5. Wilson, D. and O'Sullivan, S. (2004) *Images of Incarceration: Representations of Prison in Film and Television Drama* Winchester: Waterside Press.
6. James, Erwin (2005) 'Doing time with *Porridge*', *The Guardian*, 5 October. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2005/oct/05/broadcasting.bbc>) Accessed 14/09/2011
7. The Times, 26 December 1992 cited in Mason, P. (2003) 'The Screen Machine: Cinematic representations of prison' in P. Mason (ed.) *Criminal Visions: Media representations of crime and justice* Cullompton: Willan p.279
8. Vaughan, Johnny — *Britain's Best Sitcom — The Case for Porridge*. (http://www.bbc.co.uk/sitcom/advocate_porridge.shtml) Accessed 14/09/2011. Johnny Vaughan has also served a prison sentence.

across the inside, and later the outside, of the prison as night falls on the wings and as the sunrises. Godber has been moved due to a fire in his cell, lit by his former cellmate, and is to share with Fletch. In the chronology of the series, this is the second time we have met Godber. He appeared in the first episode, a little 'green', arriving with fellow admissions to HMP Slade, Cyril Heslop and Fletcher, the frequent offender who has been moved up from Brixton. Godber only features briefly in the second episode during a kitchen scene in which Fletch is delivering eggs from the prison farm and Ives (an inmate who is frequently pilfering and is regarded as untrustworthy by both officers and prisoners) is discovered with eggs hidden in his pockets by Officer Mackay. Of course, Fletch's ingenuity allows him to narrowly escape discovery of his own involvement in what has occurred.

The third episode then is centred on the evening lock up of Fletcher and Godber and is a dialogue between just the two inmates; no other characters from the series feature and the only interruption to this is the routine of the prison timetable as the prisoners are checked by an officer through the observation hatch in the cell door at lock up and at wake-up call the following morning. The dialogue between the two inmates, one first time younger prisoner and one older recidivist is particularly able to capture and explore Godber's fears about prison life. Whilst it remains a comedy, the dialogue proceeds through the masculine banter of previous sexual conquests and sexualised representations of women. There are a few telling and potent points which *only* work because this series is set in prison, demonstrating the 'grit' behind the 'wit'. After unpacking his possessions and unexpectedly darning Fletcher's sock, the two men settle down for the night. For Lennie, this time of day exacerbates all of his fears about prison life leading him inevitably to thoughts about what he would normally be doing 'on the out'. This episode is all about Godber coming to terms with his imprisonment and it is Fletch's job as the reluctant 'father figure' to help him adjust:

Bells start to ring and doors start to slam, signalling lock up time. Voices are heard in the distance.

Lennie: Unnatural in't it, men in cages.

Fletcher: Bide your time.

There are a few telling and potent points which *only* work because this series is set in prison, demonstrating the 'grit' behind the 'wit'.

... [conversation continues]...

A prison officer appears, gives a cursory check, then slams the door and locks it.

Fletcher: Goodnight, sunshine ... Charmless nurk. Oh dear I forgot to put my shoes out to be cleaned.

Lennie walks across to the window.

Lennie: This is the bit I can't stand though.

Fletcher: What?

Lennie: Lockup. It's only quarter-to-eight. Barely dark. If I was at home now I'd just be going out for the evening.⁹

This is the beginning of the conversation that the two men are to continue periodically throughout the evening and into the night, as Fletch helps to guide Lennie through the 'entry shock' of his imprisonment. Fletch's response to Godber is that perhaps they should go out; get a couple of *Pan's People* dancers and go for a meal and to a night club, dance until dawn ...

Fletcher: ... But you see I done all that last night and so I'm a bit knackered. Also we'd have to get all ponced up and you'd have to darn me socks. So why don't we just have a quiet night in? All right?

Lennie: If you say so, Fletch.

Fletcher: That's what you've got to tell yourself. You're just having a quiet night in.

He goes back to The Sun [newspaper]. There is a pause.

Lennie: (Gloomily) Trouble is I've got six hundred and ninety-eight quiet nights in to go.

Fletcher: Less than some.

Lennie looks at the picture of Denise.

The conversation continues as Lennie wonders if Denise (his fiancée) will wait for him. Fletch interjects with various lurid comments relating to pictures in *The Sun* and Lennie explains how he and Denise met in a supermarket in the Bull Ring in Birmingham when he ran over her foot with his trolley, and Fletch regales his own courtship with his wife.

Later, in the middle of the night, a match flares as Fletch lights up a smoke. After earlier praying aloud, Fletch mocks Godber for only wanting something from God now, to which Godber responds:

9. All of the dialogue from the series quoted in this article is from Clements, D. and La Frenais, I. (2002) *Porridge: The Scripts* London: Headline.

Lennie: You're right. But I am in the face of adversity. I hate prison, Fletch. It makes me depressed and it makes me afraid. I hate the air of defeat and the smell of disinfectant. I hate the shouting and the keys. And I hate not having a handle on the inside of that door. *He nods towards the cell door. Fletcher is not unsympathetic.*

Lennie asks about the things Fletch has been talking about in his sleep:

Fletcher: Listen, Godber. No one asked you to eavesdrop on my dreams. It's about the only place you have any privacy inside — your head. You want to remember that, son. Dreams is your escape. No locked doors in dreams. No boundaries, no frontiers. Dreams is freedom.

This impresses Lennie.

Lennie: Freedom

Fletcher: No locked doors.

Lennie, That's true, Fletch, that's really true.

Fletcher: Well, I'm getting back to mine and I suggest that you do the same.

Lennie: I will do, I will. And thank you, Fletch. ...

[They settled down to sleep again].

In the morning, Lennie passes Fletch a small bag of Liquorice Allsorts:

Lennie: It's meant as a thank you. 'Cos when that door's locked I am depressed and I am afraid, and you — you know — just make it a bit more tolerable.

Fletcher: You'll get used to it, Len. And the night's not so long, is it? It's your human spirit, see. They can't break that, those nurks. We'll be all right, you and me, son. Here, we'll go out tonight if you like?

Lennie: With those dancers?

Fletcher: If you like. Or I could ring Miss Sharon Spencer, eh? [woman from article in *The Sun*] She'll have a big friend. Bound to. Soft lights, music, night club ...

Lennie: It's discos now.

He stands up.

Fletcher: What? Oh well — as you say. Anyhow, think about it.

Lennie: I will, I will. See how I feel. On the other hand, Fletch —

Fletcher: Yeah.

Lennie: If we don't feel like it, we might just have a quiet night in.

Fletcher: Right. Right.

Fletcher picks up the pot. Lennie picks up the bucket and they move to the cell door. Prisoners are walking along the landing with buckets etc. for slop-up. Fletcher comes out of his cell, followed by Lennie and they join the line. [Episode ends].

Porridge is a comedy but this episode in particular brings to the fore the 'pains of imprisonment' and the issues of insecurity, fear, time and isolation that many people confront when sentenced to imprisonment . . .

The 'night in' is one enforced by the prison system and ordered by the court. Prison is integral to this success of this idea and how it unfolds in the episode; the characters cannot leave, they have no choice as to the circumstances they now find themselves in, they know very little about each other, yet, share intimate aspects of their personal thoughts and lives as Fletcher slowly brings Godber round. Whilst this episode does not say much about the potential violence of prison life or any of the other issues raised by Wilson and O'Sullivan, it does engage with understanding prison life and how people cope. This episode may

only provide a window into the fictional thoughts of one young man but it does demonstrate the way in which both Godber and Fletcher cope with prison and how they confront their own identities and own masculinities in this process of adaptation. To a general viewing public, this is not a 'cosy view' of sanitised 'holiday-camp' prison that Wilson and O'Sullivan suggest. *Porridge* is a comedy but this episode in particular brings to the fore the 'pains of imprisonment' and the issues of insecurity, fear, time and isolation that many people confront when sentenced to imprisonment, especially for the first time, and that most of the audience may not ever have considered. The debate as to the accuracy of *Porridge* as a representation of prison life aside, I'll have to agree with Johnny Vaughan that this episode is probably 'the best ever two-hander to ever appear in a British sitcom'.¹⁰

10. Vaughan, Johnny — *Britain's Best Sitcom — The Case for Porridge*. (http://www.bbc.co.uk/sitcom/advocate_porridge.shtml) Accessed 14/09/2011.