

# Book Reviews

## **Prisons of the World**

By Andrew Coyle

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Reviewer: Darren Woodward  
is a Lecturer in Criminology at  
Arden University.

This book is a tour-de-force that examines and combines two main elements of penology. The first is the professional account of Andrew Coyle, who has spent 50 years working in criminal justice across the globe, immersed in the world of 'the prison'. The second is a critique on the many different prisons that he has visited, or worked in, whilst in this professional capacity, offering an absorbing insight throughout. He recounts his journey in interesting and sometimes mildly humorous detail; one that he calls an 'odyssey' (pg.1) from the start. I agree, this is an odyssey, and it is one that I feel privileged to have been part of, albeit from the comfort of my own home.

One of the most notable and exciting features, is how Andrew delivers the story of his professional career in a way that is engaging, whilst adding an important layer to the academic literature pertaining to prisons and the people who work in them. I cannot recall reading a book that is so detailed, and one that covers a history of prisons and penology in such a fashion. Indeed, there are large periods in time that are underrepresented in academic

literature, but Andrew has lived through them (think about the impact of 'fresh start' in the late 80's for example). This is where the book has strength, as his leadership in large prisons such as Peterhead in Scotland, or Brixton in London, not only comes to the fore, but it also feels honest and genuine.

Initially, Andrew introduces his experience in Peterhead Prison. This was his first Governorship at a time when the Scottish Prison service was facing similar challenges to those in England and Wales, with large scale disturbances, a loss of staff morale and a social and political shift regarding the use of prisons in general. For those of us who have worked in large prisons, the qualities of the Governor are one of the most important aspects that can help to bring about change and development, especially during hard times. Andrew's account seems to fit this bill. An introduction like this is rare in any form, and it sets the parameters for what we can expect throughout.

This experience is also intertwined with a critical view of the nature and use of prisons in the UK and across the globe. For example, Andrew recounts the many political issues of running such large and high-profile prisons, but he also opens up to the reader about his thoughts on prisons in Latin America, Cambodia and Barbados. Indeed, his 'tour' of prisons has taken him to some fascinating places. For example, on Page 81, while he is discussing the prevention of

torture in Europe, Andrew introduces the reader to a meeting he had with Mehmet Ali Aja, in a Turkish prison. In a matter-of-fact way, he adds that this man attempted to assassinate Pope John Paul II in 1981. It is little additions like this that help to create a meaningful book, one which keeps the reader enthralled because they never know what they will encounter next!

His conclusions are some of the most poignant and important that I have seen in recent years, and they are based firmly on the evidence he provides, in main due to his professional knowledge and experience. He discusses how prisons need to develop in such a way that they show greater understanding towards the humans with who they manage and incarcerate. This is where his book really shines, as it is the humanisation of the prison complex that I believe Andrew is attempting to get across to the reader. Here I mean that prisons are often thought of as 'dehumanising', which is really at odds with reality, as they hold people, many of whom are vulnerable and in need of care and help. Andrew fully understands this, and this is apparent throughout.

Overall, this book will be of great importance to anyone who has an interest in 'real-life' prison stories and experiences. Usually, these accounts come from prison officers and prisoners, and they are told in a seemingly sensationalised way, often masking the truth behind the walls. Indeed, Andrew avoids this

sensational approach, choosing a more honest and academic narrative. This book will also help penology students and scholars to understand the 'lost' periods in prison history, ones which are yet to be fully discussed. For me, I have a somewhat nostalgic attachment to this book, as I grew up in a 'prison officer family', where my father, his brother, and myself all worked in large prisons. That is the beauty of this book, its appeal is far-reaching.

### **Criminal: How our prisons are failing us all**

By Angela Kirwin

Publisher: Orion Books

ISBN (eBook) 978 1 3987 05869

Price: £3.99 (kindle edition)

Reviewer: Mike Kirby is a retired prison governor who has been in charge of prisons both in England and Wales and in the Channel Islands. He is also a member of the Perrie Lectures committee.

A conservative white paper of 1990 stated "we know that prison is an expensive way of making bad people worse". Roger Graef OBE, the renowned documentary maker, used the same phrase in a blog, in 2012 but omitted the word "Bad". The author of this work is taking this statement and exploring it in depth using individual case histories of people she has worked with in custody to fully illustrate her argument.

Angela Kirwin grew up in Manchester and has an Msc in Social Work. She won praise from HM Prison Inspectorate for her work on substance abuse and mental health and went on to

secure a research fellowship from the Winston Churchill Memorial Fund to study the criminal justice systems of America and Norway.

The initial chapter uses the story of Deano to illustrate the fact that so many low-level offenders have never learned what it means to be "a law-abiding citizen" and will be endlessly trapped in the revolving door of offending-custody-release-offending, until there is an effective intervention that will help them to break out of this cycle. The author argues that the constant throughput of short sentences, prison overcrowding, the lack of appropriate staff training and the absence of treatments for mental health and substance abuse only help to prolong the failure of prison to effectively reduce re-offending. She speculates that any organisation that had a failure rate of 50% would not last long. Recidivism is running at this level and the way we currently operate our CJS does nothing to ameliorate this trend.

Despite the title, the author is not criticising the prison service, but instead lays the blame for the current malaise in the lap of the politicians who compete with each other to be "tough on crime".

Tony Blair as Prime Minister used a similar mantra but strengthened it with the addition of "tough on the causes of crime". That annex appears to have been overlooked by politicians over recent years and the author lists some of the catastrophic interventions by the likes of Chris Grayling MP, which have done nothing to make prisons work better and have actually had the opposite effect.

This leads into a question of what the aims of a criminal justice system should be. Is it about keeping society safe? Is it about punishment? Is it a deterrent or is

it about rehabilitation? The author argues "Incarceration is the least successful punishment available to us, particularly when sentences are short. It's proven to create and perpetuate more crime, costs an absolute fortune, and traumatises both staff and inmates" (pages 7-8).

The author is acutely aware that taking such an abolitionist view is only going to invite comments about murderers, child offenders and rapists and accepts that some offenders will need a custodial sentence, but in prisons that are not overcrowded where the staff are well trained and supported and where appropriate health and psychological support is available for both staff and prisoners. Like for example the prisons in Norway.

As part of her research fellowship, Angela visited some Norwegian prisons including the high security prison Halden to look at how they have managed to reduce their prison population and have a re-offending rate which is far better than England and Wales. What she found were establishments where the staff were trained up to the equivalent of a degree level, where they had good levels of health and psychological support and where prisoners were trusted to behave in an environment that was clean and tidy, healthy, and supportive towards rehabilitative aims. Staff and prisoners respected each other and in specialist areas like mental health or the drug treatment units the staff receive additional training. The author compares this to the poor quality of training and support given to officers here.

The author explores the impact that the tabloid press has on penal policy, with politicians reluctant to move away from the rhetoric of being tough on crime,

despite the waste of resources that results from this approach. For example, during the pandemic, criminal justice systems across the globe used early release to ameliorate the pressure on the prison estate. In France 10,000 prisoners were released as a result of COVID with no increase in crime or any public outcry. Even in the USA many thousands of non-violent prisoners were released early. The government here set up a similar arrangement and about 4,000 likely candidates were identified. By mid-May 2020 only 55 were actually released early and overall throughout the pandemic the total released under the scheme was only 275.

Using individual case histories the author looks at the prison experience of people with

substance abuse issues, mental health problems, IPPs and a prisoners on remand. This last case is particularly disturbing as the person in question spent six months in custody on remand during which time he lost his home, his business and damaged the relationship with his family. At his trial he was found not guilty and left court innocent but ruined, without recourse to any compensation.

I would not describe the book as an enjoyable read as it frequently demonstrates the cruelty and ineffectiveness of our criminal justice system. It should however be an essential read for law makers, students of criminology and anyone interested in making our CJS fair and just. Overall the author has argued that

we spend inordinate amounts on a system that is not achieving a reduction in re-offending. She maintains that if those with substance abuse issues and people with a mental health diagnosis were treated in properly funded treatment centres by appropriately trained staff, it may cost more in the short term but would pay for itself in the long run, with a significant reduction in crime and prisons freed up to work with individuals who need that level of security.

The ebook that I used for this review has extensive footnotes that have an electronic link to the article or publication that is referred to in the text. The endnotes are extensive and very informative and easy to access during reading.