

# Book review

Una Padel reviews

*Wandsworth Prison as seen through the prisoners' eyes*, edited by Marc Schlossman and Adri Berger, Inside Eye, London 1997.

**I**mages of prison life are probably more commonplace now than ever before. Television dramas frequently use real prison wings for location work. Documentary makers, following in the tradition of Rex Bloomstein's ground breaking series 'Strangeways' and 'Lifers', regularly bring prison life into the nation's living rooms. We have watched prisoners break down in tears on therapy groups in Grendon, women in New Hall

attempting to hang themselves or self-mutilate, prisoners withdrawing from drugs or being taken to the segregation unit. As we watch we are aware that in order for us to see these things there is an intermediary — someone who is actually there but not participating, standing with a camera recording events as they take place so that we can watch. How must it be to see prison officers cut the makeshift rope from a prisoner's neck, but not to take an active part? Is this inevitable voyeurism justified in the interest of allowing people to know about the reality of prison life? Or is it an unacceptable intrusion into the lives of many people who may not be in a position to weigh up the consequences of their participation? Television documentaries about prison life depend heavily on dramatic moments because an awful lot of what actually happens in the day to day life of any prison is routine, well managed and frankly rather dull. Not good television.

Inside Eye's remarkable book of photographs taken by prisoners at Wandsworth prison during 1994 is strikingly different. The majority of the photographs are of ordinary, mundane prison life. A few make rather clumsy and obvious attempts to offer wider truths, sometimes through the use of tricky effects, and these are the weakest images, descending into cliché. Most of the photographs provide very powerful images of prison life — stark, dreary, sad, and utilitarian. The fact that in this case the photographers, our intermediaries, are not passive observers but have an active relationship with the place and the people photographed is fundamental to the quality of the images. This relationship can be seen in the eyes of the people photographed. They look at us, as we look through the viewfinder, as though they know us.

Jason Shenai's introduction to the book speaks of the difficulties he encountered as the photography project started. The prison staff were nervous of the security risks



Kris Allan

they perceived in giving prisoners access to cameras and photographic equipment. They were also, according to Shenai, hostile and at times rude to the 'outsiders' setting the project up. It would be interesting to know whether the television crew filming 'Jailbirds', which adopted the more conventional approach of keeping the cameras in the hands of the filmmakers, had similar experiences. Few of the photographs in the book feature prison staff and it is not clear whether staff chose not to be photographed, or whether the choice came from the prisoner photographers.

*Wandsworth Prison as seen through the prisoners' eyes* provides us with a rare view of the experience of imprisonment. These photographs were taken five years before the damning 1999 report by the Chief Inspector of Prisons. Some of the prison has been refurbished since then, some of the procedures have changed, but the messages about prisoners' lives as conveyed in these stunning pictures is timeless and will remain relevant.

*Una Padel is the Director of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.*

*Wandsworth Prison as seen through the prisoners' eyes* is available for £16.95, inclusive of UK postage and packing, from Inside Eye, 126 Grierson Road, London SE23 1NX.

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