

Quaker Values and Penal Reform

Mike Nellis reviews a long history in pioneering criminal justice reform.

The contribution of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) to penal reform is probably best known through the person of Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845), whose pioneering work was recently commemorated on new £5 notes. The origins of Quakers in a resurgence of the non-conformist spirit in late seventeenth century England is less well known, as is the fact that in their early years they themselves were persecuted and imprisoned, and that this was the bedrock upon which their subsequent concern with prisons was founded. George Fox, the 'founder' of Quakers used his own prison experiences to appeal to magistrates for reductions in the severity of the punishments they routinely meted out to the mostly poor people he encountered there.

Quakers established themselves in the New World, and William Penn's 'holy experiment' in the 1670s was remarkable in its day for the greatly reduced use of capital punishment,

included a suggestion that the Roman Catholic church, the Salvation Army and the Quakers be allowed to run prisons on behalf of the Home Office, on the grounds that they would show more perseverance with offenders than secular minded people.

Quakers never did run prisons, although they did manage a number of approved schools for juveniles, the last one, New Barns, closing in the 1980s. By then all approved schools had been renamed community homes with education, the change being intended to signify a shift of emphasis from training to therapy. W. David Wills (1903-1980) was an important influence on this development. A trained social worker, influenced by both psychoanalysis and Quakerism, he grew disillusioned with the authoritarian regimes he first encountered in approved school and borstals.

From the 1930s to the 1970s Wills pioneered a range of more progressive approaches to delinquent and (as they were once

In their early years they themselves were persecuted and imprisoned, and this was the bedrock upon which their subsequent concern with prisons was founded.

whose finality was a deep affront to the enduring Quaker belief that there was 'that of God in every man', and that no-one was beyond redemption.

Unsurprisingly, modern Quakers are more uneasy about their ancestor's involvement in the creation of the first modern prison in 1790, the spiritual sounding 'penitentiary'. The Walnut Street jail in Philadelphia was not wholly their idea, but they undoubtedly supported it, and the fact that it was intended in part as a benign alternative to the barbarism of corporal punishment does not wholly make up for their complicity in a baneful development. Madness and broken spirits, not rehabilitation, were the fruit of the silent and solitary regimes the penitentiary set in place.

Many twentieth century Quakers, here and abroad, have devoted their lives to reducing the harm that prisons can easily do, either by humanising prison regimes or promoting alternatives to prison *per se*. Much of Geraldine Cadbury's (1865-1941) work to develop better services for juvenile offenders can be seen in this light.

Opposed to violence generally and war specifically, many Quakers were imprisoned as conscientious objectors (COs) during both World Wars. After each one, they formed a body of respectable, middle class opinion whose criticisms of prisons the authorities found hard to ignore. After WWI, released CO Stephen Hobhouse (1881-1951) became Secretary to a Fabian Society enquiry into the prison system. It relied heavily on the testimony of conscientious objectors, and the resulting report, co-authored with Fenner Brockway (not a Quaker, but also imprisoned for war resistance) became a landmark in penal reform. Fabians Sydney and Beatrice Webb's own book on English penal history testified to the esteem in which faith groups' contribution to penal reform was held at this time; it

called) 'maladjusted' young people, writing up each project in books which inspired many careers in social work. An influential cohort of rather establishment-minded Quakers did not sympathise with Wills' approach and his efforts were never fully owned by the Society.

Nonetheless, he caught the ear of the Home Office civil servant responsible for authorising the transition from approved schools to community homes in 1969. With the hindsight afforded by the exposure of widespread sexual abuse in Britain's residential childcare system we now know this dream turned to ashes, but the therapeutic principles which Wills advocated, although nowadays unfashionable, have not been invalidated.

In 1979 Wills and five colleagues produced *Six Quakers Look at Crime and Punishment*, an attempt to revitalise the Society of Friends' commitment to penal reform. Its gist was a plea for Friends to oppose the very principle of punishment, and to commit themselves wholeheartedly to rehabilitation and therapy with offenders. This seemingly extreme stance divided Friends, not all of whom could accept that punishment was always an expression of the violence that they would otherwise feel bound to condemn.

The booklet was never formally endorsed by Friends, and wrought no formal changes in their position on criminal justice. It did, however, contain the germ of the idea of restorative justice – to which Friends have subsequently grown deeply committed – and in that sense it can be said to have initiated a slow-burning shift in Quaker consciousness.

Writing a few years before, the American Friends Service Committee (1977), in *Struggle for Justice*, took a diametrically opposed view to Wills' group. They argued that the ideal of rehabilitation had been corrupted, was used to justify long custodial sentences, and provided rhetorical camouflage for



dehumanising prison regimes. Their proposed solution was a 'justice model' of sentencing, a rediscovery of retributivism in which the punishment would fit the crime rather than the putative psychological needs of the criminal.

On this basis the American Friends believed that many minor offenders would no longer be imprisoned, that custodial sentences would get shorter – and in that way the prison population would diminish. They were influential partly because other groups in American society also held these views, and they shared in both the glory of the strategy's initial success and then, sadly, in the inevitable co-option of retributivism to more repressive ends – intensified punishment and increased prison numbers.

There were North American Quakers with more radical views. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, Ruth Morris encouraged the Canadian Friends

Service Committee to develop the idea of prison abolition, and to explore its practical ramifications. She initiated a series of International Conferences on Prison Abolition, whose fruits were an intensified commitment to restorative justice and a renewed emphasis on constructive community alternatives for offenders. She was concerned that government-funded voluntary groups working with offenders may be inhibited from criticising social and penal policies which exacerbated injustice, and encouraged Quakers always to speak truth to power.

Service provision is vital, but the political tensions remain for those involved. Quaker ideas may not always have been influential at the level of policy, and when they have the results have been mixed. Nonetheless, at grassroots level they have inspired many workers with offenders, professional and voluntary, to act in compassionate and imaginative ways, and to channel funding into progressive initiatives.

Some of what Quakers have tried to do has been tinged with utopianism but in the main they have sought to make the wisest possible choices in the circumstances in which they have found themselves. This continues, and for those wishing to know more about

contemporary Quaker activity in this field, Tim Newell's (2000) recent book is a good place to start.

Mike Nellis is Senior Lecturer in Criminal Justice, University of Birmingham.

References:

AFSC (1977), *Struggle for Justice: A Report on Crime and Punishment in America*. New York: Hillard and Wang.

Newell, T. (2000), *Forgiving Justice: a Quaker vision of criminal justice*. London: Quaker Home Service.

Wills, W.D. (1979), *Six Quakers Look at Crime and Punishment*. London: Quaker Home Service.