



BOOK REVIEWS

The Violence of our Lives, Tony Parker.
Harper Collins, London, 1995. Price
HB £18.00

Some two years ago an American friend took me to the State Prison in Pennsylvania to meet a group of lifers who were endeavouring to compile written responses in draft form to legal representatives of their victims' families. The Chair of the group, who was serving life with no prospect of licence, asked me if I knew of Tony Parker who had been gathering interview material for his new book. I said no, but that Parker's work, particularly 'The Courage of his Convictions' and 'A Man of Good Abilities' had been one of the biographical influences that prompted me to join the Probation Service so many years before. He replied 'some guy, a real gentleman'. I agreed.

Parker's latest work is set in the U.S.A. It comprises 18 taped interviews with life sentence prisoners, seven of them now released, eleven of them in prison, many with no likelihood of release at all following recently passed State laws. As a coda, he also includes interviews of five victims, whose loved ones were murdered, none of them related to the lifers described. Parker describes scrupulous interview techniques that are beyond reproach. The subject's anonymity is preserved, the tapes are transcribed and finally destroyed.

The American interviews are a follow up to an earlier work 'Life after Life' which consisted of twelve written encounters with English lifers. The American perspective is telling, especially as contemporary British criminal justice policy appears hell bent on aping some of the more dubious aspects of that country's penal measures: electronic monitoring, boot camps, 'three strikes and you are out' and fortress prison tombs. The United States currently imprisons 1 1/4 million people, more than half of them black or Hispanic. As Parker reminds us, this level of incarceration in no way reduces crime, either petty or serious and gives no statistical support whatever to those who proclaim its efficacy (any more than the use of the death penalty in those States which practice it reduces the murder rate).

Parker's powers as an aural historian are unsurpassed; only Studs Terkel, the Chicago based chronicler of American Everyman can live in his company as the most empathetic listener in modern times. Each interview is beautifully crafted so that the authentic voice of the subject, the pain, the guilt and the hope, comes across the pages almost as if the reader was eavesdropping on an intensely private

conversation. The range of the subjects is wide. They consist of black and white, gay and heterosexual, Vietnam veterans, people from middle income America, as well as urban ghettos, those that had well supported childhoods and those like Gus, a 69 year old with 45 years inside, who recalls bleak orphanages, no parental memory and no experience of 'an exchange of affection'.

The images conveyed by the lifers remain fresh in the memory long after the reading. Muhammad Hussein, now released and working as an Admissions Officer in a University, recalls a turning point in his life when a Quaker prison visitor challenges him to recognise that there is something of God in everyone. Parker's skill is to make you believe it despite the horror and the waste of the killings.

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Prisoners' Handbook. Edited by Mark Leech. Oxford University Press, 1995.
pp407. ISBN 0 19 825960 3 (hb) £30 - 0
19 825939 5 (pb) £9.95

The problem of providing up-to-date and accurate information for prisoners and their families is one that must tax the time and resources of everyone working within the criminal justice field. Although the 'official' Prisoners' Information Book, produced jointly by the Prison Service and the Prison Reform Trust will be distributed throughout the system over the summer, ex-prisoner Mark Leech has taken things one step further with his new Prisoners' Handbook, a detailed guide to every prison in the UK.

Based on an extensive series of questionnaires, it reads rather like the 'AA Hotel Guide', listing the facilities (sports, food, education etc) at each prison. More importantly, it gives the names of key staff, an idea of the disciplinary situation and the average number of adjudications, together with

up-to-date details about visiting times and facilities.

A very thoroughly-researched piece of work, the book also provides some telling statistics for those who are not themselves prisoners or visitors. For example, it compares the so-called Certified Normal Accommodation of each prison and compares it with the actual average population; the book also records the year in which an establishment was built and reports on how accommodation has been or is being upgraded.

The great achievement of Leech's book is to approach problems and questions from the prisoner's point of view; it tells them what they *really* want to know rather than being simply a bland 'explanation' of the rules. The sections on prisoners' rights are rather brief - the lack of a specific chapter for Lifers is a significant omission and the language used may not always be appropriate to its 'target audience' - but the information that is provided is accurate and well researched.

There are some interesting appendices - a chapter, for example, on 'Prisoners and the Law' by Vicky King and Simon Creighton of Prisoners' Advice Service, and summaries of a number of recent Reports from HM Inspectorate of Prisons.

At £9.95 (£30 in hardback!), the Prisoners' Handbook may well be outside the reach of many prisoners and families - but it is, perhaps, a sign of the times that information, much of which the Prison Service has a statutory obligation to provide, has had to become the subject of a profit-making enterprise. It makes entertaining and highly informative reading, and is thoroughly recommended to anyone with an interest in the way our prisons are run today.

Andrew Groves

Prison Reform Trust

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