

Prison Authors

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A MODERN logical fallacy has grown out of an assumed relationship between (a) going to prison and (b) writing a book. Its origin is the sound enough proposition that all human experience is the province of the reporter. Imprisonment is something that happens to a minority of people, crime and its consequences attract a majority of readers, books about prison life have had a wonderful vogue for the past thirty years or so—and all this has nourished the belief that because prison is something to write about, all those who go to prison come out writers.

They don't. They come out with a tale to tell, much less flesh-creeping than it used to be, and sometimes with the ability not only to write it down clearly but to be satisfied with mere clarity. ("Clear writers," said Walter Savage Landor, "like clear fountains, do not seem as deep as they are: the turbulent look the most profound.") But not one in a hundred of them is a writer. You might think that since the Prison Commissioners (or shouldn't one say Sir Lionel Fox?) decided some years ago to scrap the policy of official secrecy about prison conditions, and allow the Press to come in, look around, take their photographs, and write about what they saw, there has been less scope for ex-prisoners' "revelations". Certainly, if you compare a modern prisoner's reminiscences with Charles Reade's

It Is Never Too Late To Mend or even with MacCartney's *Walls Have Mouths*, there is less now to reveal. And yet I doubt that the publishing world has ever before seen such a torrent of prison "revelations" as it is now coping with.

When I say that the publishers are coping with it I am using a figure of speech. They send the manuscripts to publishers' readers, an occupation left over from the slave-trade, and pay them two or three guineas a time to read a manuscript and report on it. In dealing with a non-fiction manuscript (a classification to which a prisoner's story is always charitably assumed to belong), the publisher looks for a specialist "reader" who knows something about the subject it deals with, and usually has to pay him a bit more. The ideal specialist, of course, is the man who can see both sides of a question, a consideration which may be felt to rule out the other obvious plan of sending ex-prisoners' manuscripts to members of the prison service to read. Because I have long been interested in the penal system, have visited many prisons here and abroad, and have written about the subject oftener, perhaps, than I would if I knew more about it, a lot of these manuscripts come to me. I am proposing to make no secret, here, of the fact that I sometimes pass them on to friends of mine in the prison service, asking for an expert opinion on some "revelatory"

passages (and, believe me, sharing the fee).

But if a manuscript reaches this stage it means that in my view at least, it's fairly good; and the proportion of which you could really say so much as that is about one per cent of the main torrent. The very first paragraph of a manuscript shows whether or not its author is literate—not "literary", which is not the same thing. The styles, of course, may be as different as Peter Wildeblood's *Against The Law* was from Frank Norman's *Bang To Rights*, both of which I read and reported on (with enthusiasm) as manuscripts, the former professional and cultivated writing, the latter the work of a "natural"—cheeky, vernacular, and I thought wildly funny.

I remember being puzzled about the reception of *Bang To Rights*. It wasn't sent to me by a publisher—it came from Frank Norman himself. I didn't know him then: someone suggested me to him as a possible source of advice about placing his manuscript. It seemed to me the work of a born writer, in the sense that W. H. Davies was a born writer, or Robert Burns. I tried it on a publisher, who was frightened of it. (It's fairly outspoken even in its present form, but its first draft spoke out more still.) I sent it then to a well-known literary agent, who returned it with the astonishing verdict that it was illiterate and that he really preferred not to try it out on any of his regular publishers. (He needs to retain a reputation for knowing a good manuscript from a bad one.) I showed it to a friend in the prison service and he said: "I don't agree with a lot of it, of course, and I think he's unfair, but I don't know

how fair I should be in the same circumstances. Anyway if that's what he wants to say I think it ought to be published. Nobody would be able to call it dull." Eventually Mr. Stephen Spender published about 10,000 words from it in *Encounter*. I suppose you could hardly have a more distinguished literary judgment on it than that. It was made. The publishers came after it in full cry. Secker & Warburg got it, and Frank Norman has remained with that firm ever since.

What is more puzzling still is that, despite the intelligence and ability of a growing proportion of prisoners, no-one writes a temperate, constructive book about what is good, what is hopefully experimental, in the penal system. Not even to the ex-prisoner can prison today seem wholly bad. Ex-prisoners often tell me, appreciatively, about open prisons, about group counselling, about vocational training, about pre-release hostels, about individual members of the prison service who have stopped them (to use a constantly recurring phrase) from "going right up the wall". We could do with a first-hand written account of all this from the receiving end, to compare with the Governors' reports. I think you would hardly expect a panegyric from a man who had served the whole of his sentence in a local prison, but about these there is little more that is really printable to be said, at least in any objective sense. The subjective reaction to a prison sentence is always a thing of poignant interest, differing much with every human being to whom it happens, but only once in a generation, perhaps, do you get a book like *De Profundis* or *Against The Law*.

What I try constantly to bear in mind is the post-prison therapeutic value in the writing of prison reminiscences, whether anyone is destined ever to read them or not. By the time I receive a discharged prisoner's manuscript from a publisher, that stage has often been passed: the man has written his book, it is out of his system, he is getting over it, it belongs to a miserable past; he may not care too deeply now whether or not it is ever published. But when he comes to see me and says he *wants to write* his book, I know that he is moved by one of three things, the first two conscious motives and the third an unrecognised one. Either he wants to know which publisher will give him a cash advance in anticipation of royalties (answer: none); or he wants me to "ghost" his reminiscences for him (answer: sorry); or he has a load of chips to get rid of, and will feel better—and be much more manageable—when it is done. Books in the third category, however, seldom get beyond Chapter III. The first two Chapters are devoted to the exposure of a vile miscarriage of justice, and the third describes Reception Day at the prison—a chapter which, whatever the quality of the writing, always has the ring of true tragedy. "Send not to know for whom the bell tolls."

And what I've ventured to call the therapeutic value of autobiography for ex-prisoners encourages me to invade the hospitality of this Journal with a suggestion that involves a criticism of the prison regulations. It is that prisoners should be allowed to do as much writing as they like, on as much paper as they like, and take it all out of prison with them when they go.

What possible harm could it do? It is the restrictions on writing that seem to me needless and harmful. And the lifting of all restrictions would need to be accompanied by a prompt completion of the slow-motion change-over to sixty-watt lamps (at least) in cells, so that prisoners could write without ruining their eyes. Only a minority would write, and a dwindling minority at that (today's privilege is always tomorrow's chore). Their output would no doubt contain much that was expendable, subversive, and obscene. Why would this matter? I believe that it wouldn't matter to anyone except the writer, and that to him (and thus, in due course, to society) it might do a power of good.

Rumour

Have you heard?

Not a word.

They say it's a fact,

Caught in the act.

Me on the spot?

Certainly not.

Sure it's correct?

Well, I just suspect.

Meet him face to face?

You know this place.

Perhaps I was wrong.

Got to go; so long.

It wasn't told to me;

I only heard.

S.M.