

Prison Visiting

A Contemporary Approach

GRAHAME H. CAVE

I CANNOT HELP FEELING as I reflect on the life and work of Elizabeth Fry, that were she alive today, she would expect a different system of prison visiting than we have at the present time. After a careful study of the history of Penal Reform it seems clear to me that we have not come very far with regard to prison visiting. Over the past fifteen years we have witnessed an enlightened change in penal policy brought about by the passing of the Criminal Justice Act, 1948 and the 1957 White Paper, "Penal Practice in a Changing Society," only to mention two of the major parts. In the light of this, it is rather surprising that prison visiting has remained basically the same since 1901 when the Association of Lady Visitors was formed. It is well known that Elizabeth Fry first visited Newgate Prison in 1813—but this was before the formation of the late body of Prison Commissioners in 1877, so it is not really a fair assessment to take the story back thus far.

The original concept of a prison

visitor is someone who visited certain inmates, at the latter's request, once during a week to have a friendly talk, discuss any topic of interest to the prisoner and impart any relevant news of the outside world—in the words of a Governor, "to bring a breath of fresh air into the prison." Let us not lose sight of the fact that in those early days this was very welcome because there was no Norwich Scheme, no personal newspapers or periodicals, not so many letters were allowed and there were no educational classes. Today, all of these privileges are parts of prison discipline aimed to help the prisoner against becoming institutionalised. It is because of these facts that I am absolutely convinced that the role of the prison visitor, if he is to remain effective, must therefore undergo a metamorphosis. I suggest that we must be allowed to be more practical in our approach. Before I exemplify this statement let me explain that I am aware that at the time of writing, negotiations are going on between the Prison

Department of the Home Office and executive officers of the National Association of Prison Visitors, to revise the rule book issued to new visitors. Second to this, discussion is taking place between these bodies on the question of prison visitors becoming associates. However, in the meantime I will make my suggestions which incidentally, do not necessarily represent the views of the National Association.

The practical approach and application which I advocate means being allowed to give "real" help to the prisoners when it is required. Let me illustrate what I mean by "real" help. At the close of my weekly visit to the men on my list I always ask if there is anything worrying them or if there is anything I can do for them. (The dynamics of this approach is a subject for another time and place!). One such occasion, approximately a year ago, in response to my offer, a man whom I had been visiting told me that he was frantic with worry over his wife. It appeared she was in hospital and he had not received any news from her for at least a week. Of course, he asked me if I could go and see her and find out how she was progressing and why she had not written. It was my painful duty to inform him that rules and regulations would not allow me to undertake such a task and accordingly refer him to the Welfare Officer. His look was one of dis-

may and portrayed the words, "What the hell do you want to ask me if there is anything you can do for me if you will not do the thing I want most?" I say "will not" as opposed to "cannot" because as far as he was concerned—I just *would* not. He does not understand, nor is he concerned with the rules and regulations governing prison visitors. Let's face it—prisoners are people who are not concerned with rules and regulations otherwise they would not be in prison! No, let's be sensible about this. I maintain that I should have been allowed to go to this particular hospital, see this man's wife, find out how she was progressing and find out why she had not written to him. Then on the following evening I could have gone back to the prison and given the man the news. This would put an end to any uncertainty. Why should a man have to undergo mental torture of this nature because he is in prison? It was as far back as the early 1920's that Sir Alexander Paterson said "A man is sent to prison AS a punishment not FOR punishment." I wonder what his views on my suggestion would have been? The occasions when I have been asked to help the men I visit by negotiating outside the prison on their behalf or visit a relative are not isolated. Because of my repeated refusals, I can almost hear these men saying, "These prison visitors are all right until you ask them to do something

for you". We must guard against becoming a band of "Do-gooders".

Secondly there is the question of After-Care. Lord Longford has described this as the most neglected corner of our Welfare State. I believe that in this field the prison visitor can play a very prominent role indeed. I know that many do and have been doing so for many years. I did mention earlier that negotiations are proceeding in relation to the question of prison visitors becoming associates. I think that the Prison Department will have something more definite to say on this point now that the report of the Advisory Committee on After-Care has been published. Whilst on this subject, I would mention that executive officers of the Association were invited, and gave oral evidence to this committee; this in itself illustrates in some measure that the opinions of prison visitors are held in fairly high esteem. A visitor establishes a very close contact with a prisoner during his visits. Surely, there are cases whereby a prisoner would benefit by retaining this contact on release. Not all prisoners who elect to have a visitor want this, and in some cases it would be inadvisable for obvious reasons. On this point the visitor must use his discretion. Perhaps a visit or a letter once a month to see if all is going well, help with employment, help with domestic problems. It is a solid comfort to some prisoners to know

as they are nearing the end of their sentence and are apprehensive about facing life outside, that there is someone to whom they can turn for a sympathetic and understanding ear. Again, I know that many visitors have been doing this unobtrusively for years, but I mention these points because I have come across quite a number who feel that their responsibility ends when the man is released. Of course, nobody would be foolish enough to think that such visitors are any the less good visitors because they hold this view. My view is that if ever a man needed a companion, it is when he steps outside of the prison gates on the morning of his release—in the words of one of our more enlightened Governors, "When some men are released, they literally do not know whether to turn left or right". Whenever possible a visitor should be at the gate when any of his men are released, unless the prisoner prefers to be left to his own devices. I have come across men who would prefer not to be met.

In these views I shall doubtless have many critics from inside of the service who will answer me saying that in a situation such as the one regarding the man's wife in hospital, that this case should be dealt with by the Prison Welfare Officer. On this score I am bound to agree but I would make one proviso. I think it is an established fact that many prisoners

will more readily confide in their visitor than they will with members of the official staff of the prison. Nobody would wish in any way to deprecate the wonderful work done by Prison Welfare Officers, we all know that their load is a heavy one. The suggestion of the Maxwell Report calling for Welfare Officers in our prisons was one of the most enlightened pieces of social and penal policy of recent years. Nevertheless, the visitor could relieve this official of some of the burden if allowed to take on an occasional visitation on behalf of a prisoner if requested and report the findings to him so that he, (the Welfare Officer) could take up the case from this point if necessary. Here I am wide open to some very sound criticism, and that is, that prison visitors are not qualified social workers. We are all aware what harm can be, and indeed is, done in difficult social case work when it is "meddled" with by someone who is not competent to deal with the situation. In answer to this I can only say that I think a prison visitor is experienced enough to exercise the right discretion whether to deal with the case personally or refer it to the Welfare Officer. It may be that in a particular case a visitor may be able to deal with an outside problem quicker than the Welfare Officer could. The latter may be on holiday, on sick leave, or very busy on matters just as urgent.

Why should a prisoner have to wait if there *are* means to deal with his problem quicker? My more purist and conventional colleagues are always trying to impress upon me the dangers of visiting a man's relatives whilst he is serving a sentence. That these obvious dangers exist cannot be denied, and it would be most unwise to disregard them, but there is a way around this. If a visitor was allowed to visit the relatives of a man in prison or undertake something on his behalf in the outside world he can always take a third person with him, say his wife, a friend or even another visitor. Of course I use the word friend with reserve, obviously it would have to be someone with an interest in social work. The difficulties are not insurmountable.

There you have it. These are but a few thoughts after seven years as a prison visitor. I hope the next seven years will be allowed to be more practical. I think these thoughts are in accordance with the modern outlook on social work. I throw them out as a challenge. We must adapt ourselves to social changes which the advance of time makes inevitable. We must inspire confidence in the man (and women, because all I have said applies to the woman visitor although perhaps in a varying degree) that we visit. We can only do this by being men and women of action.