

Growth to Freedom

J. H. FITCH

THE BORSTAL SYSTEM really has been taking some hard knocks recently. Not only has it had to contend with the popular press's excessive concentration on the more melodramatic happenings in its institutions, the fights, the riots, the abscondings, the cliff-hanging episodes; it has also had to contend with the picture of itself as an anachronistic expression of middle-class guilt and anger emanating from such films as *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and television programmes such as the recent (January, 1965) *Inside*. Then too the literate and verbally self-confident ex-inmate, often only literate and verbally self-confident because of the help he received from his period of training, has been afforded many popular platforms on which to depict himself as a casualty in a chronic battle between social classes and to condemn the institutional system as an arena wherein that battle is fought out. And now the social scientists, the social commentators and the social therapists add their views to this critical chorus. No wonder the borstal officer and the borstal housemaster today at times wonder

what their job is and what society is asking them to do. Their confusion and doubt only reflects that of society as a whole.

It is doubtful whether they will receive much direct comfort from Dr. Miller's book, absorbing, engrossing and stimulating as it undoubtedly is. *Growth to Freedom* is an account of his work at an experimental hostel for homeless ex-borstal boys, for just a very few of the number of homeless boys in the system. Since the inauguration of Borstal Training as we know it, the After-Care authorities have been concerned with how best to help the homeless boy on his discharge from an institution. Many of these boys have had lengthy experience of many kinds of institutions and are very dependent on that type of sheltered life. Their experiences of such family life as they have had are often bitter and corroding. They seem to need some half-way house between the borstal institution, within which they feel secure but which they also resent, and the free society to which they yearn but within which they feel inadequate and unwanted. They need an

understanding shelter within which to learn about themselves and their feelings for society that is not associated with the dependence and control of the traditional institution.

The possibility of establishing some sort of hostel for homeless ex-borstal boys materialised when a charitable trust conveyed to the Director of Borstal-After-Care its willingness to support a project likely to make a positive contribution to the reclamation of offenders. The result was "Northways", a hostel set up to run as a sort of small therapeutic community and in which treatment could be combined with research. Dr. Miller, a psychiatrist who has been associated with the venture since its conception, has now written an account of its first two and a half years. As a book it is a delight to read; as a technical study it is a clear and helpful account of both social processes and therapeutic techniques. It also affords much insight and illumination into the personalities and needs of the boys that the hostel has tried to help.

What the hostel provided for these boys, who were all initially specially selected on well-defined criteria, was a social situation where they would learn about inter-personal relations and test out such learning. It had to be neither a too permissive nor too rigid environment but one wherein the boys could learn to handle freedom with responsibility. The boys had to be able, too, to identify

with parental figures, stable and consistent ones, through their relations with members of the staff. Thus the Warden needed to be the mother-figure and the psychiatrist the father-figure and Dr. Miller devotes much time to discussing the role the staff played in this situation. In his position as consultant to the whole scheme, he had to give much support to the staff. They needed help in interpreting their therapeutic roles, understanding the meaning behind the boys' behaviour, coping with their own tensions and anxieties. Dr. Miller also points out the help and understanding he received from the staff. In this atmosphere of mutual support, personal and inter-personal relationships between staff and boys were built up that enabled the whole community to cope with its own inner tensions and to learn from them. Dr. Miller's account of the house meetings that were held weekly and which became in effect therapy groups, is especially illuminating in this direction.

Dr. Miller stresses also the importance of the physical aspect of this supportive environment as well as the social and the psychological ones. The hostel was a large family-type house and they furnished it with the sort of bulky, comfortable furniture that might give an association of warm homeliness to deprived boys. The boys ate together in a family group and access to food in the pantry and refrigerator was never denied them. It is well recognized that food is a

symbol of love and Dr. Miller draws some significant conclusions between the boy's disturbed feelings and behaviour and their intake of food and drink. Everything was done to try to make the boys feel they were cared about and wanted. This was what they had missed throughout their lives to date and what they had so signally failed to find in their institutional experiences. Their natural reaction at first was one of distrust and Dr. Miller analyses with some care the ways in which the boys tested-out the sincerity and tolerance of the staff in their intentions.

Dr. Miller follows other investigators in distinguishing between three types of delinquent behaviour. There is that delinquency which appears to be culturally engendered, with its roots in the situational social problem, the contagion from the bad social environment. There is that delinquency which appears to be intra-familial in its origin, the results of conflict within the family where the delinquent member is either acting-out the family problem or has been damaged as a result of internal family tensions. Finally there is that delinquency which is due to the disturbed personality itself, where the delinquency is the attempt to relieve internal tensions of anxiety or rage by attacking others. The hostel boys here described seemed to be predominantly personality delinquents, suffering from character disorders and schizophrenic reactions, but many

could have been seen to be situational offenders also.

We have no clear-cut evidence to date to suggest how these three types of delinquents are distributed within the borstal system as a whole. It may be that about half the boys serving Borstal Training sentences could be assessed as predominantly situational offenders. Thus it seems likely that Dr. Miller's hostel group represents a minority, but a minority that nevertheless presents a major problem in terms of rehabilitation as it would seem that the needs of such boys are essentially different from those of the predominantly situational offender. The traditional borstal institutions with their insistence on the disciplined instilling of learned social behaviour, would seem more geared to the training of the situational group, than to the treatment of boys with major emotional and personality difficulties who need more skilled understanding. With which groups are they most successful? Further research is clearly needed here.

As a research document itself, Dr. Miller's book can only emphasize trends. The total number of boys concerned in the hostel experiment to date have been too small for firm conclusions to be drawn. The results are encouraging in that fewer of the hostel boys have been reconvicted compared to a similar group of homeless ex-borstal boys who did not go to the hostel and compared to a group of boys with homes of their own. Longer time periods and more

rigorous controls would be needed to provide statistical significance to the results but everything seems to suggest that these are in a positive direction.

In its way, Dr. Miller's book must, I think, be viewed as a critique of the borstal system as a whole. If borstal training is really to be training and not merely detention and punishment, what has been attempted in this hostel experiment should be attempted in all borstal institutions. It is not only homeless ex-borstal boys who need love and understanding as well as guidance and support. All boys who have found their way into borstal institutions share that need. Whether their delinquency was predominantly a reaction to social, family or personality difficulties, they share an injury in their relationship with society which needs a skilled examination of their personal and their interpersonal relationships to heal. This is particularly the case when this treatment has to be done in a context of ambivalent attitudes to authority such as an institutional life must provide. How critical are our institutions of their capacity to examine themselves in the way that the hostel had to examine itself? What do they see as their tasks today?

Borstal institutions as we know them obviously cannot provide the depth of understanding in interpersonal relations that this small hostel for highly selected boys could. Their task is too great, the diversity of their inmates too

immense, their staff too few in number, their resources too small. Because of their size, they have to regiment their routine and thus lack flexibility in their approach to the individual. Because borstal training is part and parcel of an indeterminate penal sentence, they tend to be more concerned with making moral judgments about behaviour than understanding it. Because they are the agents of a society highly ambivalent in its attitudes and feelings towards its nonconforming members, they are too much associated with fantasies of guilt, punishment and revenge. Their philosophy still seems based upon ideas of charity, education and privilege that are out-moded for many of their inmates and staff. In short, they reinforce a picture of society as authoritarian, demanding, critical and judgemental while trying to aid the casualties of just those aspects of society.

The critic of the borstal system does not lack for targets these days. He can point to the diminishing success rate to begin with but if he is a fairer man he can begin to suggest some of the possible causes of this. He can point to the fact that for many, borstal training is still based on such popular adages as "A healthy mind in a healthy body" and "Hard work never killed anybody" rather than on a critical examination of the needs of the individual inmate for rehabilitation. He can observe the fact that the majority

of institutional staff still receive only rudimentary training in the social skills necessary to understand and handle disturbed and difficult adolescents. He can indicate that the greater number of borstal institutions are far too large for any experimentation in community living or for any meaningful staff/inmate interaction. And the inmates themselves will say, almost to a man, that as far as they can understand it, borstal training only requires from them a respect for impersonal authority, a willingness to stick at dull and monotonous work for little reward, a toleration of a communal way of life where personal comfort is at a minimum and an acceptance of an almost militaristic smartness in their personal appearance. In too many places does a resentful and suspicious population of inmates face an angry and disappointed group of staff in an atmosphere of mutual distrust. A more difficult environment within which interpersonal relations of a positive and constructive kind might develop cannot be envisaged.

All this adds weight to the implicit argument in Dr. Miller's book that an institutional experience of this kind will damage further those personalities already severely damaged by early emotional deprivation and social rejection. A critic of the borstal system from the inside, Mr. T. R. Carnegie, writing in this journal recently outlined the essentials of social rehabilitation as he saw them presented to the borstal

system: learning to live with oneself, learning to live with society, learning some supporting skills. These are, in basic requirements, in no real way different from the therapy that Dr. Miller was attempting to offer his homeless boys. Dr. Miller shows us how difficult he found the task. The borstal system has also to contend with all the obstacles outlined above, most of which, as Mr. Carnegie suggests, it may have made itself.

So where do we go from here? It may be a long time before we can really feel that borstals are treatment-centred units for social rehabilitation rather than the amorphous, unwieldy institutions of ambiguous and conflicting social purpose that they appear to be. We may need to re-design their curricula if vocational and educational programmes are to be effective. We may need to site them nearer those areas of urban living from whence their inmates come. We will have to offer their staffs more effective training in social skills and more specialist support in carrying out treatment programmes. We should think about the necessity of providing some sort of trained inspectorate to make sure that they are really doing their jobs. We will essentially need a built-in programme of research and evaluation so as to provide the feedback and knowledge of results without which no dynamic system can survive. This cannot be brought about overnight but because the task seems so

immense and because the goal may appear so distant, there is the more reason to keep them clearly before us. And though at the beginning of this review I suggested that Dr. Miller's book brought nought for the comfort of those working in borstals today, it can in this way be seen as a most constructive

commentary on the system and its working. For it shows us the goal very clearly and indicates some of the ways in which we might achieve it.

Growth of Freedom

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