

Growing Up in Prison

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EVERY YEAR in this country a certain number of people are murdered. It is a small number compared with other classes of fatality (the average seems to stick at about 140 to 150 per annum irrespective of the "crime wave" in general, and apparently unaffected by rival theories of deterrence; statistics from other countries, with and without a death penalty, tend to confirm this).

As a legal result of these separate tragedies, so singly unpredictable, an approximately equal number of offenders enter prison to commence a "life" sentence—it is with a small fragment of these that this article is concerned.

A few of those who have had the misfortune to acquire the label of murderer have the added complication of being minors, and these present the courts with an appalling difficulty. When a child of 15 or 16 kills another person, the scales of justice are swung to the limit—on the one hand the enormity of the offence, on the other the palpable immaturity of the offender. Nor is the oscillation much reduced, to most people's minds, when the culprit's age rises to 18 or 19, despite the macabre fact that under our law it is still

possible to pay the supreme penalty three years before it is possible to become a voter or ratepayer.

It is generally conceded nowadays that imprisonment is not a proper punishment for young offenders, and the trend of modern legislation is to eliminate it in favour of less drastic forms of treatment. In the case of the young "lifer," however, the extravagance of the offence makes any other kind of institutional treatment yet devised inappropriate.

The reasons for this distinction, of course—if reason be the right word—are to be found not in the character or background of the offender, nor even in his mental state, but in the primeval instinctive and moralistic horror of the ultimate crime to which all subscribe (in time of peace anyway) and the threat to our social security which it represents. So that it seems inconceivable that a person convicted of murder, however tender his years, could be dealt with (and be seen to be dealt with) in any manner less severe than prison implies; could be placed on probation for instance, or committed to a Borstal Institution, to rub shoulders with mere thieves, swindlers, robbers—with violence.

attempted rapists and bicycle-chain-swingers.

Certainly, few of us who have the custody of such people would wish to be saddled with this dilemma, on security grounds alone; few would wish to quarrel with a sentence of indeterminate length, to be served in a place of maximum security, where in course of time the young "lifer's" problem will merge and be lost in the sea of adult punishment—which is not to presume that the last word has been said on this question of "appropriateness" for all time.

In the meantime he grows up, one of a small, sorry band (too small to justify much special attention from either prison staffs or criminologists) in a close community of adult criminals of varying sophistication from whom he, along with other youths convicted of serious but less emotionally-charged offences, is nominally segregated; one of the *élite*-elect of the place, from which he may hope to emerge some decade hence, a man. Fate has singled him out for an extraordinary adolescence. How extraordinary is he, as a criminal and as a person?

Physically and mentally, there is little to distinguish the young "lifer" from other delinquents, except that he tends to be less mature, less tough and less sophisticated, his previous convictions (if any) few and petty. Many, like their adult counterparts, are "Stars." A minority may have attended an Approved School, virtually none

have "done borstal." On the whole they are childish, tender-minded and non-criminal in outlook. Emotionally—and this is the focus of interest—these boys not unexpectedly show, in one way or another, the marks of serious disturbance of personality, antedating their offences.

In some cases there is a physical factor at work, commonly temporal lobe epilepsy. Sometimes this was known to exist before the crime, more often it emerges in the course of psychiatric investigations on remand, and forms a significant part of the defence. Psychopathic personality and schizophrenia crop up also, but are difficult to establish, and the former, anyway, is no legal defence and may mean much or little. In terms of natural endowment, these lads tend to occupy the higher end of the intelligence scale, and to be "under-achievers." Otherwise, there is nothing which marks them out as different from their peers; at no time can one say "this was bound to happen, all the conditions were there." In every case there is a strong element of the unpredictable accident, the fatal conjunction of circumstances and personalities.

Adolescence itself is a disturbing period for the "normal" boy, and a percentage of adolescents will always display neurotic or psychopathic traits to a morbid degree; of this percentage a few will do serious damage.

This "accidental" quality is peculiar to the crime of murder,

which is rarely a 'cold-blooded affair, and almost never the diabolically clever device of the detective novel. In every community there must be a number of people whose tolerance to certain kinds of stress is very limited, and it becomes a matter of chance whether that limit is reached by the individual in his environment. What we lack is any system of measuring all the variables, or even of measuring normality—when a glass breaks, how is one to tell that it possessed a flaw? And when to such imponderables is added the complication of adolescence, there is little solid ground for either the scientist or the moralist to stand on.

Nor is emotional disturbance an essential factor in all cases—sometimes the case has all the hallmarks of a "pure accident." The number of violent assaults of one kind or another committed or attempted (let alone contemplated) every day by brawling workmen, quarrelling spouses, gang-fighting youths and children, immature and incensed people generally, must be legion. Fortunately, killing is not all that easy, or more death-wishes would father deeds. Yet the borderline between superficial and lethal damage is a very slender one, and not a few tragedies have followed from intentions which fell short of being murderous. Murder, in fact occupies its pre-eminent place for emotional rather than social reasons.

Some of our young "lifers"

offences, then, come into this "semi-accident—lack of intention" category. In very, very few is there any real proof of definite intention to kill for gain or revenge, though in some there is evidence of panic killing in order to silence a witness to some less serious offence. Age and sex of victim may provide a clue in particular cases, provocation appears to vary enormously. Sexuality in the Freudian sense often throws some light, bearing in mind the age-group; there may be direct frustration of the sexual drive, or through fear when the subject's sexual identity is challenged or threatened.

A significant number of these tragedies involve alleged assaults by adult homosexuals, inspiring panic and revulsion, not unmixed with curiosity and undertones of blackmail or profit. Murder too, has been described as predominantly a family crime, and adolescents are usually members of families. That most have unsatisfactory backgrounds does not help very much: adolescents are notoriously critical of parental standards (often with good reason) and material conditions are no criterion.

It is very difficult to get at the truth of these matters. There are brutal, bestial fathers who beat and abuse their families, and occasionally such a father dies at his son's hand. This at least is clear-cut; it is less understandable when the explosion of pent-up hatred and bitterness takes place outside the family circle, and the victim is

(presumably) innocent, a parent-substitute perhaps, or a rival hated sibling. Psychological damage is difficult to measure, and infinitely variable, as the differing personalities of children brought up under the same adverse conditions illustrates. It is interesting to recall D. H. Lawrence's dictum that "murderers are often murderable."

The only common factors that emerge, then, leaving out mental disease, are immaturity, personality disturbance arising from unresolved emotional conflicts, and some situation producing intolerable fear or resentment. On this basis one may hope to understand; to assess moral responsibility and prescribe punishment is another matter.

Legally, the answer is the indeterminate sentence, which allows for release "after careful consideration of the offence, the offender's record, his progress in prison and the opinions of the prison authorities on his fitness to take his place in society again." The real tragedy here, in the case of the adolescent, is that in almost every instance the thing need not have happened; the critical situation was trivial from a mature standpoint, existed because of a childish inability to understand and cope with crisis. The adolescent fears and fantasies creating the situation were unreal, and the experience needed to dispel them was lacking.

Most tragedies look avoidable after the event, but in dealing with

adults, especially menacing adults, the young are always at a special disadvantage. This perhaps applies equally in a dark street at midnight and in the dock at the Old Bailey. I can think of at least a half-dozen cases in which to kill was the least frightening alternative facing the disordered mind of the youth in question.

The situation of these lads in prison is as unhappy as their worst enemies could wish for them, but not, of course, materially. On the surface all is very often well. Tears and tantrums and defiant attitudes tend to be left behind at the remand prison. Ideas of (legal) escape and successful appeals have evaporated, and there remains "the bird."

Few have the haziest conception of what this means, and can only guess vaguely at unreal terms of years. This is not a borstal sentence of 12 to 18 months, or even a "four" or a "six," this is "Life." At an age when even the length of a school term can seem a desert in time, what does indeterminacy mean? It is a word, like Death, which you have to be a philosopher to think tolerably about.

It would be pleasant for moralists to believe that these young people have a proper appreciation of the justice of their situation, but this is scarcely the case. Their insensitiveness on this point could indeed at times be deemed offensive; yet

this would not be a correct impression either. Self-justification is commonly pleaded with great vehemence, and sometimes one is at a disadvantage to dismiss this, even when one suspects that it is merely a face-saving device. Amnesia of the offence and the events surrounding it may sometimes be genuine. The sense of guilt is often so strong that it cannot be acknowledged, or expressed adequately; a callous-seeming lad, when asked if he ever thought of his victim, burst into angry tears, saying that he "thought about it every night," and wondered if he would ever be free from it.

Another, who for months had behaved with monumental selfishness, and impressed everyone as a complete hedonist, suddenly collapsed into a mood of utter dejection and declared "I wish they had topped me. How can I go through life with the label of murderer stuck on me? How can I ever marry and have children?"

Another boy quite suddenly wanted to spend the whole of his small cash account on flowers for his victim's grave.

It would require the insight of a clairvoyant to decide how much of such remorse is really self-concern in disguise, or an attempt to propitiate and impress, but whatever the motive (and who can analyse his own motives with any certainty, let alone another person's?) the need for forgiveness and for self-respect is clear enough;

and the intensity of the conflict can be gauged by the familiar signs—regular and repeated sick-reporting, imaginary ailments, attention-seeking activity, moods and depressions, listlessness and boredom, taunting and flouting of authority, homosexuality.

It may take months (or it may never happen, if the right confidant is not forthcoming) for the true source of anxiety to reveal itself, and the guilt be acknowledged and faced. Otherwise, in the natural course of things, the painful memories will fade and be glazed over. In selected cases, psychotherapy with a psychiatrist seems to offer beneficial treatment, though the benefit to individuals is difficult to assess. For the majority, a supportive and accepting relationship with a lay member of staff, a "fatherly" officer perhaps, may succeed, firstly in relieving anxiety, secondly in assisting a "come-back." For the youngest lads, and some with disturbed family backgrounds, the presence of women on the staff, or as regular visitors, is tremendously useful, and it is to be regretted that regulations and tradition in male prisons limit their enlistment.

Homosexual entanglements in this group are common, but need not be too disturbing. Sex is clearly a paramount problem to adolescents who are condemned to spend their explorative years in male company. Society's attitude to such problems is frequently to look the other way and keep its

fingers crossed, and prisons are neither more moral nor more competent than other social groups in these matters.

Clearly young people in any such setting are going to have sexual activities, and since they cannot be heterosexual or "normal" they must be of some other kind. For most, masturbatory fantasies, aided by gorgeous pin-ups, probably supply the answer; for a few, sublimation in art or religion. But almost, all I think, contemplate a homosexual relationship at one time or another, not necessarily with active indulgence—for this is far from being purely a physical thing. Some of these relationships are romantic, even spiritual in content and intensity.

The need to love and be loved is an imperative at this age, and one should perhaps not worry too much about the phase; I do not think many of these lads are really "corrupted," and it is rare for any relationship to endure, though they are often distressing to those involved in them, and pathetic to observe.

The existence of heterosexual attachments cannot, of course, be ruled out altogether. Some lads have girl-friends who visit, and a very few have wives. The latter are the most to be pitied, and it is indeed painful and, rarely, inspiring, to watch these relationships drag on year by year. The faithfulness of the few is matched only by the fickleness of the many. For every tragic young wife and mother who

visits, month after weary month with apparently boundless hope, there are a dozen whose letters grow fewer and scarcer until, one day, arrives the half-expected "Dear John."

One hears many enthusiastic eulogies of sweethearts who have vowed constancy, and tries not to anticipate the inevitable outcome. It is not surprising; there are few more disenchanting prospects for a young girl than to be attached to a man serving a life sentence. Parents, for a start, are inclined to be against it. The boys often realise the situation very well, and that their efforts are doomed. Sometimes there is a desperate attempt to marry. Faced with a division of which neither can quite realise the full significance, the boy and girl in their unhappiness seek for something permanent—marriage, they feel, will give them the strength to cope, something to hang on to, may even, in some mysterious way, help their cause with the authorities.

The official answer, of course, is that no prisoner may marry except to legitimise a child, born or unborn, since the authorities are not concerned in these matters with the private feelings of individuals. So this avenue is closed, and the alternative is a long and essentially pure, if not quite platonic, engagement. In the nature of things, such engagements are ill-omened. Probably the authorities are right about this. The ability of the average marriage to withstand the strain of long separation, with

nothing to build on beyond a brief romantic acquaintance, is slender; add the complications of the offence and the dice are loaded.

But to have a girl-friend — even just any “bird” who will write regularly and visit occasionally — is a great thing, and much desired both for the comfort it brings and as a status symbol. Great lengths are gone to by some to achieve such an association, memories are racked for names and addresses of girls known, sometimes quite slightly, and if a lad has no such funds of his own to draw upon, one of his mates will obligingly supply an introduction to a sister or a discarded flame. Clearly, for many and obvious reasons, much of this correspondence never reaches fruition.

Overseas pen-friends are a sort of substitute: “I am 19 years of age and 5ft. 7ins. in height. I have blue eyes and light brown hair and am quite good-looking. You can see from the address where I am at present, but I am not really a criminal . . .” etc. etc. One lad had a correspondence with a Burmese girl for some years. Many write faithfully and regularly to former schoolmasters, Scoutmasters, ministers, Prison Visitors, Youth Club leaders.

Relationships with families can be difficult too, and the reactions of parents to the situation is sometimes curious, and occasionally alarming. Tragedy often has the effect of drawing a divided family

group together. Thus, some young “lifers” find themselves the objects of an attention that was hitherto conspicuous by its absence, an absence which in some cases may have been a contributing factor in the breakdown preceding the offence. One may well suspect the part that a deep sense of parental guilt and shame plays in this, manifested in a solicitude and a desire to support and defend which is recognisable as something new.

Parents who may have been at loggerheads in the past, or indifferent if not actually rejecting, turn up on visits together, united in their concern and grief, and voluble with excuses for their offspring and themselves. On the other hand, superficially loving and responsible parents turn up too, often puzzled, anxious, embarrassed, hiding their impotent sadness behind ingratiating smiles. One can learn much from them, and perhaps even do a little for them in return. Occasionally a neurotic wreck of a woman, or a blustering, apoplectic father, forcing civility which is not a part of his nature, gives half the game away and provides the clue to a puzzling offence.

What can they do in this situation, even the best and most insightful of them? Restricted to an hour or two each month (in some cases much less frequently, because of sheer distance and expense) it seems inevitable that they will lavish on this brief time-out-of-time all the pent-up endear-

ments and kindnesses of which they are capable—in short, that they will spoil their boy. Gifts abound, some very expensive and obviously ill-afforded (how does a mother “on National Assistance” procure a new guitar costing perhaps £20?). Certainly some of the lads not merely accept this homage as their right, but openly abuse it, playing their baffled parents like willing fishes.

I remember a tired father who had driven his car some 400 miles to see his son, only to be refused audience on arrival—not by the authorities, who bled for him, but by the little martinet himself. Yet so great was this father’s sense of responsibility, or so unmaning his general unhappiness, that he could take this intolerable rebuff on the chin, and come again undaunted.

What emotional undercurrents are flowing and counter-flowing in such a situation as this? But of course, this brand of sadism is unusual, most offenders look forward to and appreciate their visits, and are genuinely touched and grateful. Many a lad has said, in his own way, “I realise now that my parents really do care for me, and how they must have suffered.” Some would like to refuse visits if they dared, partly to save their families expense and travelling, but mainly to spare everyone the fresh agonies of parting which each visit brings.

Some parents are very understanding and anxious to co-operate with every stage of a lad’s training.

Some supply invaluable family background detail. Others are so incapable of accepting the situation as literally, in extreme cases, to refuse facts: “He is innocent, he didn’t do it.” The assertion may be supported by a mass of excited detail, imaginary evidence, accusations of corruption and wild theories implicating some person unknown. Possibly for such people to have to face the truth is unbearable, so that any kind of fantasy is preferable.

Unfortunately, this cobweb-weaving can affect the lad himself, to raise false hopes, and destroy any progress he may have made towards accepting his offence (and hence knowing and accepting himself) and learning to live with it. It can place him in the unsupportable situation of having to pretend to believe in his own innocence in order to placate his parents and keep their love, at the same time as his own conscience and the psychotherapist are urging him towards honesty and self-knowledge. Parents who seek to minimise the offence, making excuses and deprecating the moral responsibility involved, are almost as bad.

To the fatal question which all ask, “How long will he do?” there is, of course, no satisfactory answer. When it is asked by the lad himself, various partial answers are possible. Clearly, that he should behave himself and apply himself to work and education is a *sine qua non*, and signifies.

The boys are no fools. They soon learn to assess the probable seriousness of their offences on the social scale, to weigh up (in conjunction with any remarks passed by the judge) any extenuating circumstances, and they observe the release dates of adult 'lifers' with great shrewdness. Their guesses are often good. Furthermore, they know a great deal about psychiatrists, about the E.E.G., and about epilepsy, etc. They are quick to perceive that co-operation can help them, but unfortunately their performance often falls short of their intention.

Prison staff find this group amenable, more attractive than the "Teddy-boy" element, more interesting than the dull inadequates and the ex-borstalites. They have a freshness and (until it rubs off) a kind of innocence in prison. Allowances are made instinctively for their special kind of problem; almost no one wishes to apply to lads for whom prison is virtually their permanent home the militaristic régime that many feel would be "good for" short-stay delinquents in general. Their needs are primarily emotional — stability, affection—their problem is one of adjustment. Relationships are vital to them, hence the need to test out the sincerity of authority figures. They much prefer to be ruled by men who are older, calmer and more phlegmatic, and on the whole they tend to distrust young officers, and those who are rigid or lack

humour. Especially they resent inconsistency.

Educationally, many of them are bright, and respond to encouragement with classes and with general reading, discussion groups, etc. Trade training, however, presents problems. Most are at the ideal age for learning, and the temptation is to push them to the limit. But to what end? Qualification in a trade, unless followed naturally by the opportunity to practise the trade learnt, can be discouraging rather than helpful. Caution dictates that any "lifer," and especially a young one, should have completed a substantial portion of his expected term before being accorded the relative freedom of a tradesman.

The interests of security and training militate against one another. It seems wrong not to train the trainable, but it can be really cruel to relegate a trained person to the ranks of the operatives. Under existing conditions, then, training of this sort must be deferred until some time has been served.

The group is clearly a high security risk, though few actual escape attempts occur. Temptation must be considered to rise in inverse proportion to the age and maturity of the subject. Serious plotting may be rare, but the thought will be present sure enough, and the sudden impulse must be reckoned with, especially at times when domestic troubles or pressures within the group are making life difficult. In borstals an abscond raises few eyebrows, may even be

regarded as a useful part of the learning process. In a security prison, an escape which is no more than a boyish prank in reality, assumes the status of adult villainy.

The adjustment is made, for better or worse, in the first couple of years. Nothing is static, the most acute depression and the most hostile attitude will not last. In the sense that life in prison is very like life in a patriarchal family, these young people are regressing to an earlier stage of their development. Adult prisoners come into custody with patterns of life already formed; other delinquent youngsters, run off their legs in the healthy, cheer-leading atmosphere of borstal, are discharged before institutionalisation can take a deep hold. Only this small group is destined to grow from childhood to manhood in the supra-paternal environment of "secure custody," in a household where everything is provided and all decisions taken by the Head, where strict rules and swift punishment are administered with grim impartiality and humour.

Under these conditions, even the most rebellious will eventually capitulate—accept their incarceration, adopt the new life, and learn to live with the uncertainty of their future, like children of a double Fate. Until some future unknown date reveals itself, they can never make unaided any kind of free decision of any importance, or exercise any degree of free choice.

It is not easy to assess the disabling effects of imprisonment.

One can argue that very little free choice remains with the average victim of a highly industrialised society anyway. There is freedom to work in a dull job, and marry and have a mortgage, and share Blackpool every year with half a million other "free" men and women.

Prison deprives no one of intellectual, religious and artistic freedom, and it is ironic but true that some people need to be locked up in order to discover these things for themselves. In prison one can not only read poetry or Hank Jansen, listen to Beethoven or the Beatles, but one can actually make more time for doing so than one's "civilian" counterpart. The youths who are the subject of this article are not free to roam the streets or sit in coffee-bars or date girls, but there are wider horizons open to them, if they can grasp this fact. To help them to do so, in one way or another (without expecting them all to become poets or saints) is to my mind no less than a duty; it is the one sure weapon with which to counteract the destructive effects of long imprisonment.

All lives are limited, but the prisoner has his limitations imposed upon him, and the danger for him is that he will remain lost in a sad, backward-looking preoccupation with the past. It is in overcoming this obstacle of mind that the youth in prison must fight his critical battle, and some, of course, do not make it. They settle for the cramped, petty, paternalistic life of

the prison, with all its stupidities and vulgarities, just as "outside" they would have settled for a life that was more varied but equally proscribed in mental content. Others, a few, achieve the necessary mental revolution and become men. When they do so, it is an achievement that can be inspiring to anyone privileged to observe it, or to have helped in any way to bring it about.

The young "lifer" becomes an adult, and then he will move from the Young Prisoner group to take his place in the much larger group of men of all ages who are serving indefinite sentences, and who form a growing proportion of the long-term prison population. "Adult Status" does not come automatically at 21, it may arrive sooner or later, being a discretionary accolade.

General maturity is looked for, an elusive quality. But when a young man of 19 feels strongly that he is a man, and wishes to be treated as such, and finds the close society of other youths trivial and irritating, tending to hold him back in his development or interfere with his studies, then one may feel it right to recognise him. When, on the other hand, a similar request is made by a disturbed 17 year old, who is merely seeking an escape route from some piece of real or imaginary persecution, the decision will clearly be otherwise.

"Making up" is an important step, and the results are almost invariably beneficial, if it is done at the right time. Sometimes

remarkably so — the stabilising effect can be striking. In any event, whether it comes sooner or later (and some disturbed or over-dependent youths may need the protective environment of the Y.P. Centre beyond the statutory age) the transfer to an adult wing of the prison marks the end of a unique and vital phase in the lives of this extraordinary sub-group.

It means that something has been resolved, for better or worse there has been an act of acceptance.

From now on they will share with other men the mental and emotional problems of "doing" a life sentence, without the additional burden of adolescence. They will have "grown up" in prison.

This article has been based on observations made over a period of five years, during which the writer had close contact (but not as close as he would have liked) with this uniquely handicapped group of offenders. It is, however, a situation which calls for something more positive than observations, and it is therefore good to be able to record that there are signs of some official re-thinking on the subject. As individuals, these lads present a challenge to the therapist or caseworker which it would be difficult to parallel in terms of need and intensity; as a group, their existence demands from society, which is obliged to punish them, an equally responsible attitude towards their care and rehabilitation.

In the writer's view, they should never be an unconsidered minority

group in a big prison with its manifold corruptions; rather the need is for some small special institution, or part of one, with a planned programme of social education that should be woven into a domestic background affording emotional as well as physical security, and a high level of individual and group attention. The basic requirements then would be a mature, interested, and adequate (in numbers and training) permanent staff,

including a female element, as closely linked with the outside world through family and community contacts and visits as other considerations will allow; coupled with a live evaluation and research programme which would have the dual purpose of making reports and recommendations for release or further treatment, and of probing some of the conflicts of disturbed adolescence, about which we have still so much to learn.

There is a constant demand for articles dealing with all aspects of the Prison Service and this demand can only be met by those with the experience and knowledge gained from service in this field.

Comment upon previous articles is constructive and has also helped to illuminate problems in which theory could previously only grope. These articles have shown the way, but more are required on all subjects.

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