

Bedside Books for the Royal Commission

selected by

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WHAT ARE PRISONS really for? A simple question to ask but an exceedingly complex one to answer. Obviously prisons exist to express in concrete form society's disapproval of the criminal, and to this end custody is essential. Yet the frequent use, in addition, of such words as treatment and training imply that prisons exist for quite a different purpose besides.

Two recent books demonstrate clearly that we are playing half-heartedly at implementing these positive goals at present. Both examine different aspects of the Service and produce convincing arguments backed by extensive research to challenge our present schizophrenic attitude to prisoners and their reform, rehabilitation or what-have-you.

Sociological Studies in the British Penal Services, edited by Paul Halmos, is No. 9 in the Sociological Review Monograph series published by the University of Kelle (42s.). Please do not be put off by this formidable title.

This is in fact a collection of short but original articles on a wide variety of aspects of penology by prominent authors. Sprott and Hall Williams on Sentencing Policy; Howard Jones on Approved Schools; Mays on the Juvenile Liaison Scheme; Whitaker on the Police.

It is the articles concerned with penal administration, however, that demand the attention of all involved in the management of prisons. There is the first detailed study that I have seen of work in a training prison, a study undertaken by Cooper and King at Maidstone. In the light of the recommendations of the Advisory Council on the Employment of Prisoners they examine the various reasons expounded for making prisoners work. These seem to fall into two broad categories—economic and penological or social. These arguments are often confused, claim the authors: an industrial programme which seeks to implement them all will end by achieving none.

Maidstone's industries fail to achieve the economic aims. But more significantly they also fail to succeed with the penological aims. For instance, one of their objectives was to inculcate in prisoners the virtue of steady employment, yet the average time a prisoner had between work changes during sentence was about four months.

The demand for policy decisions about priorities in prison industries is echoed by Gordon Rose in an article on staff structure in prisons. Rose looks at the role of the Governor and stresses particularly the need for administrative decentralisation as an essential to clarifying penal objectives. Spencer also contributes an article of vital management importance examining the transition from security prison to therapeutic community, with somewhat pessimistic conclusions; such a change makes demands on all staff. "For the professional staff there is the unlearning of orthodox professional roles and the absence of support which comes from professional detachment and the possession of expert knowledge which remains unchallenged within the institution. For the custodial staff there are the strains arising from the removal of the former hierarchical system with its clearly defined regulations and the maintenance of social distance between staff and prisoner."

Each of these articles comes back to the need for a classification system based on a rational approach to penal treatment. An *ad*

hoc selection process with no feedback will perpetuate a haphazard penal system. Finally Gibbens and Prince examine the results of borstal training in more depth than mere reconviction rates.

The other book whose publication coincides happily with the Royal Commission is *Prisoners and their Families*, by Pauline Morris (Allen and Unwin, 50s.). This is for browsing through rather than reading from cover to cover. Here is a mass of material, and one wonders as much at the work involved in pursuing 824 married prisoners and their relatives with lengthy questionnaires from Lands End to Carlisle as at the fascinating results of the enquiry.

Of course one is not altogether surprised at what emerges. Everyone always says that it is the wives and families at home who suffer, while the prisoners enjoy telly and mixed grills inside. But, somehow, when presented in facts and figures, the reality comes into clearer focus. Only 54 per cent of wives visit their husbands on every possible occasion (i.e. monthly): 30 per cent of married prisoners never send out visiting orders: 58 per cent of wives were living on less than £7 10s. per week and approximately half the wives were receiving treatment for some form of physical or mental illness: 30 per cent of the wives of civil prisoners were living in conditions of dirt and squalor.

This research highlights that we are at present just scratching the

top of the iceberg of the rehabilitation of the prisoner and his family. It underlines the inadequacy of our present resources for coping with the problems, and hints that welfare officers at present are geared to deal with material problems such as finance and housing rather than personal problems.

But these personal problems loom large in the findings. A third of the wives were troubled about bringing up their children, a similar number by loneliness and sexual problems and almost as many about what would happen when their husbands returned home.

The husband-wife relationship seems to be the key factor. Three-quarters of the prisoners reported serious marital conflict before their conviction, arising from difficulties with in-laws, sex, drink and, very frequently, going out "with the boys". Viewing their marriage from the safety of prison, the husbands were more optimistic about their future relationships than the wives outside. Certainly any prison official knows that prisoners look at life outside through rose-coloured spectacles. But have we begun to deal positively with the clear implication behind these figures, that many prisoners are sheltering in prison from intolerable marital disharmony? It looks as if the husbands know it, and the wives know it, but that both collude with the officials in pretending it is not so. Let's face it: prison is the surest protection

from nagging wives, and from being reminded that one is a failure as a husband and father.

Crime and its Correction: An International Survey of Attitudes and Practices by John Conrad (California University Press, \$7.50), is another challenging book. Mr. Conrad has travelled the world with a tape recorder, from a corrective labour colony in Russia to an open borstal in the Oxfordshire countryside and he has produced a global view of correctional services.

He records faithfully what he finds, interspersing his pages with personalities as well as theories, often, one senses, with his tongue in his cheek. His final two sections face the issues in correctional services in realistic fashion, fully in keeping with his wish in an earlier number of this Journal that the doers and the thinkers develop greater understanding of what the other is doing. Thanks indeed to this American thinker for producing a book free of jargon, in a mere 300 pages, that is readily comprehensible to the doers.

Finally there are two other current books just worth a mention. *The Grey People*, by D. W. Menzies (Cassell, Australia, 18s.) is a very simple book, outlining the work of a Scottish priest who became a probation officer in Australia. He hates institutions (having himself suffered in a boarding school as a youngster), considers father rejection and social pressures are basic factors in creating criminals and

believes that prison and probation officers should be understanding father figures. All good, worthy stuff.

Not so *Our Dear Delinquents*, by Sewell Stokes (Heinemann, 25s.). As a journalist, Mr. Stokes is free to shoot off arrows at all and sundry, and does so with evident enjoyment. I made the mistake of reading his book without first seeing the sub-title which only appears on the dust cover: "A cautionary tale for penal reformers". Consequently I was expecting a serious assessment of the borstal system. What I got was a facile story about two characters, Audrey and Terence, presented as a lady do-gooder and borstal con-man stereotypes. Having set them up laboriously, Mr Stokes knocked them down, apparently supposing

he had demolished borstal with them.

Books about borstal are so few and far between that it is a pity he did not produce a more substantial criticism. Because, of course, he is right in his basic contention that there is much in borstal that passes for system but which is actually highly unsystematic. He only found two institutions that had any system (and, by that, he meant system that appealed to him), Reading and Huntercombe. The rest are condemned, along with "the powers that be who prefer to dawdle, rather than march, towards their objective". I hope the Royal Commission does not waste their leisure time with this book. But I hope also that some one takes the hint and produces soon a more scholarly assessment of mid-1960 borstal training.

AFTER FIVE years as an officer in the New Zealand Prison Service and two years in the clerical department of the Head Office of that same service Mr. Michael Burgess has recently written a series of five articles on "Practical Aspects of Penology" appearing in the *Solicitors' Journal*.

The "Judiciary's Blind Spot" suggests that penologists are not in touch with modern problems and Mr. Burgess has some fairly harsh things to say about prison officers. On "Prisons", despite what he terms "idealistic press releases", many are "far from being the reformatory institutions that many people would like to think". Prison officers, in New Zealand at any rate, appear to be subject to a fairly high divorce rate; the resignation rate the first twelve months of service is as high as 60 per cent.

The "prisoner"—Mr. Burgess makes the suggestion that perhaps brain washing might be given a chance, particularly on recidivists. Concerning the attitude of the general public, the author considers that apart from some misplaced sympathy there is very little idea about what is going on and he makes the claim that his own book *Mister* is as far as he knows the only book giving the prison officers' point of view.

Among the more interesting suggestions made is one that there should be produced a "Z Car" type of programme based on prisons and, like many other critics, he is much concerned that industry must be improved.

The five articles may be obtained from Oyez House, Bream Buildings, Fetter Lane, E.C.4, at 1/9d. per copy.