

BOOK REVIEWS—cont.

Progressive opinion has long held that there must be an extension of non-institutional forms of training for offenders, and mention might have been made of Training Centres, an extension of the Attendance Centre idea, as suggested by Sir Basil Henriques. Training Centres might provide realistic training, and they would certainly be economical. Perhaps experiments will soon be carried out along these lines.

This book seriously questions many of the principles upon which the administration of justice is based, and perhaps some of them need to be examined again in the light of common sense.

G. P. McNEAL

PROBATION — THE SECOND CHANCE

John St. John
Vista Books 25s Od.

THIS IS an important book. It is the only non-textbook devoted wholly to an objective study of the English probation system and its author is an experienced writer, a skilled observer and an accurate reporter. The result is a picture of the probation officer's work as it really is.

He describes truthfully the background against which it still too often has to be performed; the inadequate office accommodation, the

dingy waiting-rooms, depressing to officer and probationer alike, the squalor and smells ('the bedridden, querulous grandmother; an insanitary, shared lavatory . . . urine, armpits, tired breath . . . very, very old dirt and the reek of boiling mutton bones') of many of the homes and doss houses the probation officer has to visit. This is the real stuff and will be recognised as authentic by anybody who has worked in this field.

The characters that people Mr. St. John's canvas are equally real; troubled, dishonest, feckless, aggressive, unstable, deprived, they are all familiar figures.

The author is conscious, too, of the professional difficulties within the service and indeed of the probation officer's war within himself. He is not uncritical of all that he saw and learned and he recognises the dangers the probation officer himself encounters in his work. Many probation offices will acknowledge, for instance, the soundness of the following observation; 'Despite his rich diet of human relationships and his daily contact with life at its rawest, the probation officer can in fact all too easily become walled in by the small, closed world of the court, the office and the cells: the isolation is in part self-protective and is intensified by long hours and evening visits that leave little time for normal leisure and friendships. There is always a risk, too, that the casework technique combined with the court's authority, gives the probation officer a false sense of omniscience and invincibility.

BOOK REVIEWS—cont.

Despite the new ideas and the cross-fertilization with other disciplines, is there perhaps a danger of a new orthodoxy, a casework academicism?

And here the author unwittingly reveals a curious weakness, and a major omission in his book for he, too, appears to have become so involved with individual casework techniques as to fail to attach sufficient weight, as an influence on the offender, to the pressures of sub-culture groups. True, in two chapters, he refers to society's own values but these rather superficial references fail to take account of the enormous force of sub-group

pressures as a factor resisting individual case-work techniques. It may be that the author is more aware of these forces than he here indicates and that he intends to discuss them in a later work.

Meanwhile we must be grateful to Mr. St. John for this rewarding result of much patient research and to the Home Office and the probation service for affording him the freedom and co-operation that made it possible. One would welcome the appearance of this book in a paperback edition so that it may be available to a larger public. It should certainly be read by all those engaged in or associated with this and allied fields of social work.

F. C. FOSTER.
