

The Koestler Awards

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MOST PEOPLE who have served a prison sentence try to forget about prisons—indeed, the desirability of rehabilitating themselves in society makes this almost a laudable aim. Many people, making their wills, “remember”, as the saying is, their old schools and universities, to the benefit of future generations of members of those bodies.

Nobody, as far as I know, has thought of leaving any money for use in H.M. Prisons for the comfort of the inhabitants, present and future, of these establishments—nobody, except of course, Arthur Koestler. He has been a political prisoner in Spain and France, and during the war when he escaped with faked papers from the Continent to England, he was detained for six weeks in Pentonville until his identity was established. He has not only not forgotten the frustration of creative instincts in those prisons, he has “reimbursed” them in his will. The residue of his estate is to be used to provide awards to anyone serving a sentence in one of H.M. Prisons or Borstals for creative work in the fields of literature, the arts or science, and

for “imaginative ways of prison reform” in general.

Furthermore, being a man of impatience, he is unable to wait for death, and, pending it, is financing the awards out of his income.

If he reads these introductory remarks—in that writing is not my profession, I hope he will not—he may resent any suggestion of generosity in his action, which is inspired by his sense that our time, talents and money should be used to the common advantage of the present and future generations. It is, however, necessary to provide this background to the origin of this scheme, to know what lies behind it.

Imprisonment is, of course, particularly stultifying to intellectuals and creative artists, whose talents, when curbed, are lost to society and civilization. Equally, imprisonment of any man or woman means a loss to the community of such good services as that man or woman is capable of rendering. Unfortunately, the occasion arises when the hostility, by attitude or action, or both, of an individual to society

necessitates his temporary removal from it for its protection. Once in prison, not only his capacity for harming society is removed, but also his opportunity for aiding it, at least whilst he is there.

Whilst there will always be such individuals and restraint must be placed on them in the interests of the community, it is equally in these interests that on their release they should be less likely to offend and to return to prison. In the sphere of training for trades and craftsmanship progress is being made, whilst organised classes are providing some scope for unoccupied hours. It is to encourage these activities that the Koestler Awards are being made.

Mr. Godfrey Heaven, writing in the April issue of *THE PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL* on the objects of classes in prison said: "There also should be some objectivity in the sense of turning outward from the self: personal problems may be acute, but they need to be got away from as well as faced, and they can be easily over-indulged . . . The role of education is concerned with re-uniting . . . The greatest problem, of course, is his (the prisoner's) transfer and settlement on the other side of the cultural divide. But perhaps the parting would come sooner and the settlement be easier if he had developed some commitment, had enhanced his possibilities of achievement and judgement or even if he had lived in a common market of ideas rather than in a vicious circle".

Arthur Koestler was well aware of the work being carried out through classes in prisons when he decided to offer his prizes. He hoped in so doing to achieve various ends.

Firstly, he wished to stimulate and crystalise through competition the creative efforts of prisoners, thereby helping them to develop such ability that they may have whilst serving their sentence and so strengthen interests which would make easier their re-unification with society on their release.

Secondly, he hoped that the existence of the Awards would be helpful to those already involved in a practical way in teaching in prisons.

Thirdly, he felt that there was value in the concern for the prisoner implied in his actions and also in those—Trustees and panels of adjudicators—whose co-operation he obtained.

The scheme was discussed with Mr. Peterson and other Home Office personnel, whose co-operation and advice has proved most helpful. Trustees were appointed to administer the Fund, from which annual awards may be made to inmates of both sexes in prisons and borstals (other than closed local prisons) for original work in the fields of literature, arts and crafts and in musical composition. A first prize of £100, two of £50, four of £25 and ten of £10 will be available annually, the larger sums being divisible into small prizes if no work is submitted of sufficient

merit in the opinion of the panel of experts appointed by the Trustees to justify making the higher awards.

The subject matter of literary and artistic work must not be concerned with the prisoner's conviction or sentence, in the prison life or other prisoners. Sums in excess of £25 which may be awarded will be held by the Trustees against the prisoner's release. Income or sale money derived from a prize-winning entry will be paid to the Trustees to use for the benefit of the prize-winner or his dependants after discharge.

The first competition was held in the Summer of 1962, and attracted nearly 300 entries from fifteen prisons—201 in art, 80 in literature and 14 in music. Whilst no genius was revealed, much of the work was of good standard, particularly in handicraft and modelling. One poem was published in *Encounter*. The full £400 of the Trust's annual income was distributed in prizes (all administrative expenses being covered by a generous subscription from Mr. A. D. Peters, one of the Trustees) but no entry was considered worthy of a £100 prize.

Much hard work was put in by the panel of judges, which included

Sir Kenneth Clark, Mr. Eric Newton and Mr. Julian Trevelyan for Art, Mr. J. B. Priestley, Mr. V. S. Pritchett and Mr. Philip Toynbee for Literature and Sir Arthur Bliss and Mr. Sidney Torch for Music.

An exhibition of the winning entries was held at the Home Office in the Autumn, and this year a similar exhibition is to be arranged, possibly in a public gallery.

It is the earnest hope of the creator of the Fund and its Trustees that these annual competitions will increasingly encourage the participation by prisoners in those leisure hour activities which can relieve some of the tension of their imprisonment and make easier their re-unification with their fellow men and women on their release.

The scheme, it is hoped, will be regarded as supplementing the work of those in the Prison Service, and in the words of Mr. A. W. Peterson, speaking at the exhibition of prize-winning entries "... encourage prisoners to develop constructive ways of thought and action, perseverance, application and effort—qualities which many people who find themselves in prison sadly lack".
