

Prison People

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AS THE ORDINARY citizen goes about his business, he sees something of other people's daily work: shop-keepers, transport workers, policemen, librarians, builders, refuse collectors and many others can be seen in action.

The officers of the Prison Service, by the very nature of their work, are usually out of the public eye behind their high brick walls or tucked away in remote rural fastnesses, as cut off from the rest of the community in some ways as the prisoners in their care—a point which the author of this book does not fail to make.

The man outside the high wall is, therefore, dependent for his ideas on prison life on the accounts given by the more imaginative journalists or by those with experience "inside", as prisoners or staff. The prisoner's view of prison life is likely to be a jaundiced one, tending to be an "exposure of appalling conditions" rather than a tribute to the training—or the food—received. The staff are likely to be too busy to write about their work until they retire and memoirs of a life spent in such a rapidly-changing organisation as the Prison Service are likely to be of considerable historic interest but less helpful to the general reader

in getting the "feel" of the present-day Service. (An honourable exception to this generalisation is the recent book* by Joanna Kelley, recently Governor of Holloway and still in the Service but, as *Prison People* makes clear, women's prisons form a surprisingly small part of the prison community.)

In their series "My Life and My Work" the publishers, Educational Explorers, have adopted the policy of drawing the writers of the books from people actively engaged in the profession described, senior enough to have outgrown the beginner's view (but not to have forgotten it) but still immersed in its satisfactions and problems.

Nicholas Tyndall comes in this category. A son of the vicarage, he is a graduate aged 37 and now assistant governor and lecturer at the Staff Training College, Wakefield. He has previously been a borstal housemaster and, briefly, a probation officer. When an assistant director of the

* See review on page 40

Prison People by NICHOLAS TYNDALL "My Life and My Work" series, Educational Explorers Ltd., Reading 147 pages: 16s. 0d. (8s. 6d. paperback)

Prison Department told him of the suggestion that he should write a book giving an idea of the Prison Service as a career, he was unenthusiastic. He did not feel, he says, that he was "one of the dedicated types who knew what they wanted to do, joined the Prison Service and never looked back". Another problem was time, a scarce commodity in the life of an assistant governor, since "penal establishments function on the we-never-close basis and much of the most important part of his work is done in the evenings and at week-ends when the prisoners are not working". His wife (and four children) might also take a poor view of his having even less time to spend with them.

Most of all, he wondered: "Can I ever write a book that will do justice to this Service? This demanding, frustrating, insensitive, wearying Service, that is yet so fascinating, rewarding, stimulating and so essentially human?"

The reader of *Prison People* would probably answer his rhetorical question with an emphatic "yes". John Everyman, who may have picked up the book casually, mildly curious about what goes on in prison, will finish his reading a better-informed citizen—and maybe a potential officer of the Prison Service? Certainly, he will find it difficult to shrug off prisons and prisoners as "no concern of mine". The starry-eyed idealist in the sixth form, anxious to "help people", may

find here a vocation he had not considered—but only if he or she is willing to shift the stars in his eyes into a good solid earthy base of practical commonsense. Should he decide the Prison Service is not for him, he will nevertheless have gained in his understanding of a public service the nature of which is too rarely given due recognition.

The book is available in a paperback edition as well as in a library edition and it is to be hoped that this will make it available to a larger number of general readers: the traveller on a long journey, perhaps attracted by the colourful cover, will find the contents at least as enthralling as "The Body in the Boudoir" (and considerably more edifying) for the author writes with humanity, humility and humour.

The title *Prison People*, is significant for borstal boys and prisoners are always people to Nicholas Tyndall—odd, inadequate or difficult people very often, who cannot cope with the demands of living. He does not see prisons as places for locking up "the scum of the earth" but as "transit camps for human beings in difficulty on their way to reacceptance by society".

At this point, a prison officer coming wearily from a spell of duty among a particularly difficult bunch, may be inclined to snort at what sounds at first like a rather rosy picture of the function of the Prison Service, but the author is the first to admit that present

methods succeed only in a proportion of cases. He is disarmingly frank about his own blunders and failure to achieve what should be achieved: the moments of self-congratulation and consequent relaxation of vigilance for a moment, providing an opportunity to abscond for the borstal boys; his early failure to master the ritual of the keys in a borstal.

As a more experienced officer, too, he shows a similar refreshing humility in his approach to his work. He does not assume that a pleasant sojourn in a comfortable country house is necessarily the best preparation for boys returning to urban society on their release—there are objections to farm training on similar practical grounds. He carries his same questioning attitude of mind into his work in staff training. Typical comments are:

"I blush when I look back on the course I ran for assistant governors only six years ago.

"We are now struggling to free ourselves from the generally accepted notion that the teacher knows everything and the student nothing.

"There is a great danger that people come into Prison Service with firmly fixed attitudes, never examine them and so continue to operate on the basis of their serious prejudices.

"It seems to me essential that the teacher should go on learning".

This is not to say that Nicholas

Tyndall is a vacillating man, lacking in personal conviction. Some beliefs he holds passionately. The first is that "Prisons are full of people. Many of them odd or bizarre, some of them likeable. Some of them difficult". His second belief, so often in apparent conflict with the first, is that prisons are also a system, "a complex system that has to be managed and developed". He accepts that the prison system must be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. One can never start afresh for one has the continuing responsibility of keeping in custody those who are serving sentences. Progress must be in one sense a piecemeal process.

On the other hand, the basic questions must be asked, such as: Does a staff structure based on 19th century prisons require radical alterations to achieve 20th century penal objectives? What sort of conditions is it necessary to create to make the needs of security and of treatment fundamentally compatible? His concern for the rehabilitation of the offender is not of the kind that ignores the victim: his concern extends to the old lady living alone who has been badly frightened by the break-in of some absconding borstal boys.

Perhaps the ability to appreciate the special stresses and strains for all the inhabitants of a closed community without getting immersed in them, and to see beyond to the relationship between the offender and

society was enhanced by Nicholas Tyndall's brief period as a relief probation officer, working in the wider community on problems ranging from the depressing inability of the inadequate personality to cope with a hostile environment to the colourful character demanding divorce because his wife would not "constitute the marriage".

The material in this book is arranged skilfully in a kind of Scandinavian multiple sandwich, with slices of personal experience, reflections upon them and descriptions of prison history and evolution, each illuminating and underlining the others. On one level, the reader can find the mixture entertaining, but only the most superficial reader will not also find the book thought-provoking. Some of his cherished stereotypes of officers of the Prison Service will have to go: the grim-faced insensitive bully with his bunch of keys, the remote dilettante governor miles from the sweat and slops of cell life—and recent sensational journalism has perhaps added the corrupt jailer and the inept jailer to the slanderous gallery.

The thoughtful reader may approach the end of the book thinking, "Well, it's nothing to do with me, thank goodness", but Nicholas Tyndall has not finished with him yet. He stresses that a Prison Service can deal effectively with prisoners only in a society with the backing of the public. "There is", says the author, "a constant need

to educate the man in the street to understand more clearly why people become criminals and what the penal system is striving to do with them; and to realise that though some prisons look forbidding places they are staffed by essentially humane people, however cut off from the life of the community they may be by the total involvement in their work which the Prison Service exacts".

Nicholas Tyndall points out three specific ways in which the public can assist:

1. By becoming informed of the aims of the Prison Service, working to integrate penal establishments into the local community and helping to counter the sense of isolation often felt by the staff.
2. By helping with the rehabilitation of prisoners, whether as an employer prepared to employ a discharged prisoner or as people willing to offer hospitality and friendship to individual ex-prisoners feeling their way back into society.
3. By encouraging research into new methods of individual and group treatment.

He elaborates the third point thus: "Such research is inevitably costly. But it is essential that our knowledge about personal behaviour and motivation be increased. Institutional case-work has to be developed. Group processes have to be better understood. And each new

member of staff requires training in basic casework and in group dynamics.

"As this training grows more sophisticated, both at Wakefield and in colleges of further education outside the Service, so will staff roles develop. An effectively trained staff, adequately prepared to anticipate and meet changing conditions, is an essential ingredient of any progress. Change is inevitably resisted if staff are not prepared for it nor trained to adjust to it".

As an example of glossy recruiting literature *Prison People* would compare unfavourably with the productions of publicity agents working on behalf of some large commercial and industrial undertakings. There is no stress on the prestige of the work though plenty implicitly on its importance. Nothing is made of security (in a career sense!), pension schemes, accommodation provided, congenial surroundings and the usual superficial attractions paraded before the career chooser. Young people, or older ones, who are tired of being "tackled" by such means will, however, welcome a sincere and honest description of his work by a man who combines to a rare degree passionate involvement and objective assessment. The writer of this review confesses to a closer acquaintance with careers literature than with prisons and could wish that more so-called careers books were of this calibre.

It is to be hoped that *Prison People* will find its way not only into public libraries and on to station bookstalls but also into the libraries of secondary schools, adult education colleges and of colleges training teachers. Institutions training social workers of all kinds should have it if only for the brief reflection on the relationship between "administration" and "grass roots" summed up in two short paragraphs at the end of chapter 5:

"When I went to Rochester I looked on my job as helping people in trouble and if anyone had questioned me I would have replied that I thought of myself as the person to give that help.

"But a house of 60 boys convinced me that this was unrealistic thinking. Certainly I could be an influence on some boys, but my task as housemaster was rather to encourage all members of staff to be helping people and to canalise their energies and potentialities".

Perhaps, too, the Prison Department or a Nuffield or a Gulbenkian on its behalf should acquire a considerable stock of *Prison People* to distribute to new entrants to the Prison Service, to more experienced officers afflicted by doubts or stuck in a rut with a special edition for issue to all girls contemplating marriage to a member of the Prison Service.