

## Breakfast at Bronzefield

By Sophie Campbell

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*Breakfast at Bronzefield*, is a lived experience narrative of one woman's time in HMP Bronzefield and HMP Downview, during 2017 and 2018. As explained in the Preface, the reason for writing the book is to 'expose the abuses that occur inside female prisons, but also to demonstrate that women can achieve great things despite having gone to prison' (Preface). Interestingly the author describes herself as being an atypical prisoner in the sense that she went to a public school, had a University education, was not a drug addict and prior to incarceration had somewhere to live and was employed. In contrast to how she would be treated on the 'outside' this difference meant that she felt she was looked down on by many prisoners and prison officers, largely because she didn't fit the unwarranted stereotype that female prisoners are uneducated and inarticulate. A key theme of this book is how such stereotypes shape the prison system, including the provision of education, mental health, drug use, race and family relationships.

The book is divided into three parts: the first recounts Sophie's (not her real name) time on remand, the second her sentence and the third her release. Part 1 is made up of 11 chapters with many focusing on important aspects/themes of life inside a women's jail. Chapter 4, for example, deals with the *Invisible War* on sexual assaults in prison, with the author suggesting how in many cases where a complaint of sexual assault had been made, the prison (Bronzefield) would not investigate or pass the matter to the police. The most that was done was that the suspect would be placed in

segregation and then following this punishment, either be placed on another wing or moved to another establishment. In a similar vein, chapter 5, deals with intimate relationships between female prisoners, with the 'sexually permissive atmosphere' (p. 57) in both Bronzefield and Downview, often allowing coercive abuse to be hidden and defined as a consenting relationship. The chapter also considered those women who were prepared to engage in sexual activity with a minority of corrupt officers (both male and female) so that they could have access to luxuries such as tobacco, alcohol, drugs or a mobile phone. Another interesting chapter, *Zombie Nation*, talks about mental health and the mental health unit at Bronzefield. While the author describes some of the women as 'really far gone' (p.86), she also describes others, including herself, who 'learnt how easy it was to play the mental health card when prison psychiatrists were conditioned to expect almost all females prisoners to be suffering from some sort of illness' (p. 86). Other useful chapters include those on segregation (Chp 6) and work in prisons (Chp 10).

Part two of the book recounts Sophie's time in prison as a sentenced offender and sees her move to HMP Downview, where, for a time, she worked in the prison library. Initially, she hoped that this establishment would be better than the last, but as her sentence progresses, this hope is not realised. While Downview had more job opportunities, there were less places available and on the occasion that she joined a debating workshop with students from Oxford, her title 'Cats are better than dogs?' (p. 198), was so simple because the students did not believe that the women could cope with anything harder. The fact that

the vast majority of education courses and opportunities are for those who had a poor education history is also mentioned, as too are the gendered bias for women to be trained in areas such as cleaning and beauty. One difference noted between the two prisons, however, was 'Downview really opened my eyes to the way a woman's race affected how she was treated. You couldn't just be yourself; you had to conform to racial stereotypes' (p.190). The stereotype here for a black women prisoner was 'overweight, aggressive, uncouth' with these women 'treated extremely well' (p. 191). Race and how the colour of your skin affected prison life is dealt with in chapter 19, although the author does point out that

*... bar a few incidences at Downview, I seriously doubt if I had been white — and I should say white middle class as opposed to white working class — whether my experiences would have been any different (p. 218).*

This is attributed to the fact that by not conforming to the black stereotype she was seen by many of the officers and other prisoners as a 'non-authentic black person' (p. 219). Racism, including some examples of how Sophie experienced it, is also dealt with in Chapter 20.

While the majority of the book is critical, Sophie is positive about Toastmasters International<sup>1</sup>, which ran public speaking workshops at Bronzefield. Despite her enthusiasm and positivity, she only participated for three weeks, however, due to being moved to segregation. This was not Sophie's first visit to the segregation unit, with there being several occasions reported in both

1. For more information see: <https://www.toastmasters.org/>

Bronzefield and Downview, largely due to assaults and violence against both officers and the other women. On some occasions, Sophie would purposely act out in order to be moved, either to give herself a break from the wing or because 'the showers were exceptionally clean' (p. 245)!

The final part of the book deals with Sophie's release from prison, although the latter chapters of part two start to look at this as well. In particular it deals with the first seven months from June to December 2018. The account is critical, not just of the agencies involved, including resettlement (which did not find her housing) and probation (who were unable to offer her anything of practical use) but also of the lack of support her family (particularly her father) gave her. In fact, the six days that she had to live with her father are described as the time when she was most at risk of returning to prison. The success that Sophie finds is therefore down to her own efforts, although she does admit that she didn't tell the recruitment agency about her conviction, later lied to her probation officer about what one of her first jobs actually entailed and managed to get bumped up the housing list due to her supervision requirements. Once more financially secure, Sophie applied for and was accepted to do a degree at University and states in one of the later chapters that her plan is to follow this up with a Masters. While this 'story' has a happy ending, it is acknowledged that for most women prisoners their paths are very different, often due to a lack of educational qualifications, secure housing and the ability or confidence to move away from destructive relationships and/or family members.

As a lived experience narrative, this book is interesting and valuable. One thing that sets it apart from some other lived

narratives is the fact that the text is littered with prison statistics and references to research. This extra information provides added value to the book and makes it useful to students and those trying to learn about prison life.

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### **Solitary. Alone We Are Nothing**

By Gladys Ambort

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In a change from the books that I normally review for the *Prison Service Journal*, *Solitary. Alone We Are Nothing*, is an account of prison conditions for political prisoners in Argentina during the late 1970's. The period in question 1975 — 1978 saw great political turmoil in Argentina with the President Isabel Martinez de Peron (third wife of President Juan Peron) deposed by a military right-wing coup (coup d'état) on 24 March 1976. A military committee was put in place to replace the government, led by Lieutenant General Jorge Rafael Videla, who in 1985 was prosecuted for large-scale human rights abuses and crimes against humanity, including kidnappings, forced disappearances, widespread torture and extrajudicial murder of activists and political opponents. Gladys Ambort was one of these political prisoners. In 1975, at the age of 17, she was imprisoned for being a left-wing political activist. The book is therefore an account of the three years that she spent in prisons in Argentina, before being exiled to France.

The book is divided into four parts, with a prologue (arrival in Paris) and an introduction preceding these. The introduction largely explains Gladys' life before arrest

and the political activism which she was involved in as a college student. While she was part of a left-wing political party called Vanguardia Comunista and did endeavour to spread its communist views, she was denounced by one of her college Professors and subsequently arrested and preventatively detained, without trial, for possessing communist literature. The main claim against her, as with other political activists at the time, was that she was a threat to the military right-wing rule.

Part One, which is by far the largest section of the book, then details the four prisons which Gladys spent the next three years of her life. This time of imprisonment began on 2 May 1975 when she was initially arrested and detained in a cell at the Police Headquarters at Rio Cuarto. The book describes the conditions of the cell and how she had to curl up and sleep on cold cement floors, although positively notes that, unlike others, she was not physically tortured. Despite the evidence against her being flimsy and her husband (who was also arrested with her) being released, Gladys' detention was continued and she was moved to the Convent of the Congregation of Bon Pasteur, in June 1975. The Convent, run by nuns was used as a women's prison and being the only political prisoner Gladys' time here was comparably stable. She got on with many of the nuns and while confined in the Convent was in contact with her family and had weekly visits to the prison in which her husband was incarcerated. While at the convent Gladys wanted to be among other political prisoners, although when this 'wish' was granted it was potentially the start of her mental destruction.

The move to her third prison in Cordoba took place on 13 December 1975. The wing in which she was placed was exclusively for