

## Book Review:

### **Prison Governor's Journal**

By Brendan O'Friel

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Brendan O'Friel worked in HM Prison Service from 1963 to 1996, becoming a distinguished governor of HMP Featherstone, HMP Manchester and HMP Risley. This book offers a thoughtful and considered inside account of thirty-three momentous and eventful years in the history of British prisons. It is also a book in which the character of the author is very much apparent. O'Friel had a reputation as an effective leader with a sense of purpose and that can very much be discerned in these pages. He is a man with values shaped by his Christianity and his parent's public service. He is also a man who built his leadership craft over time, learning from others and honing his own approach through a deep understanding of those who lived and worked in prisons, how the institution functioned and infusing his work with values.

O'Friel's career started at the tail end of the post-War welfare optimism, working in the borstal system, attempting to help children to engage in education, training and community service. Conflict and crises were never far from the surface, and O'Friel worked through the crisis of security in the mid-1960s and the creation of high security prisons following the Mountbatten Report, then the years of industrial conflict, economic turmoil and prisoner disorder in the 1970s.

During the 1980s, O'Friel was a central figure in some of the most significant events of the decade. He was a key player in the setting up of the Prison Governors Association in 1987, and he was often called to publicly discuss the issues of the day, including overcrowding, poor conditions and disorder. In 1986, O'Friel was appointed as Governor of HMP Manchester. This was always a

challenging post; a busy local prison, over a hundred years old and with poor conditions for the 1400 prisoners. He offered energetic leadership, initiated improvements in activities and facilities, and introduced reforms of staffing. Yet he also faced chronic problems including underinvestment and an increasing prison population putting greater pressure on the already inadequate facilities. The Chief Inspector of Prisons gave a positive assessment of Manchester in March 1990, while also recognising the chronic problems. Despite the efforts of O'Friel and his colleagues, the prison descended into a riot starting in the chapel on 01 April 1990. The prisoners held out for the next 25 days there were copycat riots across other prisons in the country. O'Friel's account of those days are an important insider account. He faced immense pressures, attempting to contain and then end the disorder, maintain staff morale and prevent abuse, navigate the political and organisational challenges, respond to the public and media scrutiny, while also managing his own emotional reaction to such a devastating set of events. The detail of this account is a valuable historical record, and it is also a human portrait of leadership in an operational crisis. The subsequent inquiry into the riots, led by Lord Justice Woolf, credited O'Friel for his leadership at HMP Manchester both before and during the riot. The report did, however, forensically examine the poor conditions of prisons across the country and set out the need for significant reform and modernisation.

Following the inquiry, O'Friel took up post as Governor of HMP Risley, where he led an energetic effort to realise the post-Woolf vision. In 1994, the Chief Inspector of Prison praised the efforts to improve education, employment, offending behaviour programmes and voluntary work. It is testament to his resilience that O'Friel was not only able to survive the events of 1990,

but he was able to retain his energy and drive.

Although he retired in 1996 and has continued to have more than a passing interest in penal affairs, O'Friel has waited quarter of a century before committing his working life to paper. This is to the benefit of the book, written as it is with a sense of perspective and reflection. O'Friel rationally describes the events of his working life, but also imparts professional wisdom on the challenges of prison leadership, and he offers a measured critique of the problems of imprisonment and potential reforms.

This is a rewarding book that is well worth reading. For those interested in the history of prisons, it is an insider account of some of the major events of the late 20th century, but also offers a more personal story of how prisons, and society, evolved during those years. For those working in prisons, particularly those leading prisons, O'Friel's humane values and people-centred approach offers an alternative to the dominant managerial model. Although this is ostensibly an account of the past, there is certainly much that O'Friel has to say that continues to be relevant today.

*Dr. Jamie Bennett is a Deputy Director in HM Prison and Probation Service*

### Book review

#### **Privatising justice: The security industry, war and crime control**

By Wendy Fitzgibbon and John Lea

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(paperback)

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The role of the state and private sectors in criminal justice remains a contentious, controversial and polarising issue. As this book reveals,