

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

March 2011 No 194



Class, discipline and philosophy: Contested visions in the early twentieth century

Dr. Alyson Brown is a Reader in History at Edge Hill University.

One of the best known men in penal history, Alexander Paterson, died in 1947 only months after his retirement. His obituary in the *Times* (10 November 1947) was headed ‘faith in human nature’ and it is very much in that vein that Paterson has been immortalised both within and outside of the prison service. To a large extent this has also been the case in popular and academic histories that have considered Paterson and his role in shaping penal reform during the early decades of the twentieth century. He is believed to have been the dominant influence in the Prison Commission during his time as a Commissioner between 1922 and 1946, which has been labelled the ‘Paterson era.’ Harold Scott, Chairman of the Prison Commission between 1932 and 1938 called Paterson ‘one of the most remarkable men I have ever met’ who was behind the transformation of imprisonment not only in England but throughout the world.²

Lieutenant Colonel Charles.E.F.Rich, a prison governor in England from 1903/4 to 1931 is not so well-memorialised, although his autobiography *Recollections of a Prison Governor* (1932) received quite a lot of attention when it was published. Unfortunately, he got in trouble for publishing it as he had not obtained prior permission from the Home Office! Rich has been perceived in a very different light to Paterson; as a traditionalist and a disciplinarian, antagonistic to change.³ Rich joined the prison service at a time when governors were expected to be gentlemen, often retired military or naval men, and when the job did not require their full-time presence in their institutions. He was a man who believed and benefited from the advantages and influence that belonging to the upper classes could bring. He believed in discipline and social balance, that individuals should know their place. He was sceptical about reformers and critical about senior prison service staff, like Alexander Paterson, who had not themselves been prison governors.

So here we have two different men with seemingly very different attitudes and visions regarding the prison system. In some respects Paterson and Rich certainly had opposing philosophies about the way society should be and this of course was reflected in their views on the form and the shape that penal institutions should take in

a rapidly changing world. However, upon closer examination there was also a great deal of sympathy in the outlook and practice of these two men and to some extent their differences were ones of degree rather than being completely irreconcilable. This paper will examine briefly some of the sympathies and antagonisms between these two men and consider what this can tell us about perceptions of ‘traditionalists’ and ‘progressives’ in prison reform and about reform during the first half of the twentieth century.

In different ways the backgrounds of these two men represent the changing times. Lieutenant Colonel Charles E.F.Rich began his prison service career with his appointment as Deputy Governor at Wakefield Prison, he was then Acting Governor at Maidstone, and Governor at Northampton. Then, following his war service during which he was awarded the D.S.O and the Croix de Guerre, he was appointed (in 1920) Governor of the Borstal institution at Rochester. Following that he took over Walton Prison, Liverpool and then Wandsworth until he retired in 1931. He had initially joined the prison service from his military service during the Boar War because he believed the pay was high and the hours low, he was certainly to be disillusioned with the pay. In order to get a governorship he had pulled the strings that were at his disposal from his ‘old school’ networks. While at his first posting as Deputy Governor at Wakefield Prison he inaugurated a system of intensive training for young inmates in a separate wing. Throughout his career he showed particular concern for younger inmates and felt that prison should be a last resort for young offenders. He supported Evelyn Ruggles-Brise’s (Chair of the Prison Commission 1895-1921) early endeavours to establish the Borstal system and was instrumental in re-establishing it after the First World War. According to his own account, was always anxious to try and help any prisoner who demonstrated hope for reform and he believed in improving aftercare. However, his general outlook was what could be termed ‘traditional’; a belief in Empire and the class system and hostility towards Communists and socialists. In his governorships he believed in discipline, autonomy rather than centralisation, and was against what he saw as over-weaning bureaucracy and interference from reformers like the Howard League.

Both Paterson and Rich supported separate disciplinary regimes for young offenders but what did

1. V.Bailey, *Delinquency and Citizenship: Reclaiming the Young Offender 1914-1948* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), chapter 8.

2. H.Scott, *Your Obedient Servant* (Andre Deutsch, 1959), p.67.

3. P.Quinn, ‘Managing Prisons in a Time of Change: The Visions and Values of Colonel Rich, *Prison Service Journal* July 1994:2-10.

this actually mean? For Rich, Borstal was about combining punishment, deterrence and training. The 'happiest ship is the best disciplined ship' he asserts in his autobiography. He bemoaned what he perceived as a dangerous relaxation in discipline, the 'soft, sloppy 'sob-stuff' which crept in slowly but surely ruining the chances of reformation not only in Borstals but across the prison system. But in its time the approach and movement that he was a part of under Evelyn Ruggles-Brise was seen by some magistrates as 'new-fangled' and sentimental. That system in Borstal included the introduction of 'houses' with monitors, marks for good conduct and a belief in healthy sporting competition. At Wandsworth he had even allowed younger inmates to play football matches against local teams.

Alexander Paterson came to represent, even to personify, the penal reform movement which developed during the 1920s. While at Oxford University, Paterson became involved in social work and went to live in a slum tenement in Bermonsey. Paterson's beliefs and motivations reflected idealist principles integral to new liberal thought in England and embedded in a generation of Oxford graduates. These men demonstrated their commitment through community work and public service. Emphasis was on direct and personal influence and in many respects the Borstal model exemplified this faith in paternalism, moral development and personal ties between the classes. He attained considerable public and professional acknowledgement for his book, *Across the Bridges or Life by the South London River-side* (1911) which was based on his twenty-one years of involvement with the Oxford and Bermondsey Medical Mission (later the Oxford and Bermondsey Boy's Club). The 'bridge' of the title was the bridge to greater social enlightenment and to help those in need. By 1911 he was Assistant Director of the Central Association for the Aid of Discharged Prisoners and Assistant Director of the Borstal Association.

On active service during the First World War Paterson was awarded the Military Cross and twice recommended for the Victoria Cross. Following the war he joined the civil service but continued his social work. Perceived as a progressive, Paterson was appointed a Prison Commissioner in 1922, the same year much of the criticism of the contemporary prison system had become crystallised in the publication *English Prisons Today* and problems in Portland Prison which had become a Borstal institution in 1921. Like Rich, Paterson was particularly interested in regimes for young

offenders. In Borstals he was to persist with reforms on the model of public schools, such as the use of first names and the abolition of uniforms as well as emphasis on loyalty, obedience, self-reliance and corporate spirit. Some of this was present, and supported by, Rich before he retired. Many of the differences between the two men here actually lay in the extent of reform and Paterson went further to dismantle formal disciplinary mechanisms than Rich found acceptable.

A good deal of what Rich complains about are the different elements of the move towards greater centralisation, bureaucratisation and professionalisation of the prison service. Another element in Rich's complaints is derived from measures taken as a result of cutbacks during the economic depression of the inter-war years. Hence, he suggests searching of prisoners

became less rigorous but admits this is due to reductions in staff.

Also, he says it is 'extraordinary' that most prisons were still by the early 1930s lit by gas. Rich was sceptical about bureaucracy that he saw as not dealing with real problems but merely bringing in measures which might look like a resolution on paper, and used appropriately unintelligible language, but which in practice were ineffective. However, he was also critical of the training and book of standing orders, the size

of 'a modern Debrett's Peerage' in existence when he began in the service in 1903/4. Rich was critical of senior individuals like Paterson who had not served as governors yet Evelyn Ruggles-Brise, a man he said he respected and admired, had not done so.

Rich was suspicious of the press which he stated had a tendency to exaggerate and sensationalise. Paterson recognised this but was also very media aware at a time when newspapers were becoming part of everyday life. He published widely in journals, magazines and newspapers, promoting the image of a progressive and reformatory prison system. Much of this focused on the considerable work going on with young offenders and detracted from the often rather limited progress being made elsewhere in the system. For example in convict prisons, inmates were able to talk to one another at work and had increased access to books but the cells and basic routines remained very much the same. Cutbacks were made due to reductions in Government funding during the depression no doubt increasing the reliance upon voluntary or charitable efforts to enable and even drive reform. These included the expansion of prison visiting, prison entertainments and educational classes as well as the first modern experiment made in paying prisoners for labour, which

Alexander Paterson came to represent, even to personify, the penal reform movement which developed during the 1920s.

was sponsored by the Howard League. This lent considerable support to a prison system short of money and concurred with idealist views of an organic society much more than Rich's suspicion of outside influence. Rich perceived additional 'privileges' for prisoners not as encouragements to good behaviour but as showing weakness which he was sure to be taken for granted and then taken advantage of. He saw these changes as trying to 'Borstalise' the whole system.

Nevertheless, both Paterson and Rich had a great belief in prison staff at all levels to achieve reform, often in difficult circumstances. Both commended the hard work and loyalty of prison officers. Paterson felt that the key to the success of Borstal regimes lay in the hands of a new generation of committed governors who would work with the young rather than above them. This was a move too far for Rich and he condemned such informality, although he agreed that the role of the governor was crucial.

One of the events for which Rich was most known and which was referred to in the notice of his retirement in the *Times* (14 July 1931) as well as in his autobiography was his apparent single-handed quelling of a serious disturbance at Maidstone Prison. The convicts there refused to return to their cells and began to riot. Owing to Rich's prompt action, he had the prisoners surrounded by armed officers, and strength of character he was able to successfully order the prisoners back to their cells and no one was injured. In his autobiography he cites the large-scale riot that occurred in Dartmoor Convict Prison on 24th January 1932 as evidence that the 'modern' system was too lax and was failing. Ironically, the Du Parcq inquiry which investigated the riot seemed to bemoan the lack of precisely Rich's brand of disciplinarian and class-confident approach to prison disturbances.

For the best part of two hours prisoners took over effective control of the prison and set fire to the main administrative block. The disturbance was quelled only

by the aid of the local police.⁴ One of the issues highlighted by the report was that the Governor of Dartmoor at the time, Mr Roberts, had, unusually for then, risen through the ranks (through service in local prisons) and had no previous experience of a convict prison. The Report noted that there was some ill-feeling against him because of this. Furthermore, the Governor was smoothly but effectively condemned by its conclusion regarding him, 'I think a man of exceptionally strong character might have been able to quell the growing disorder by force of character ... he has not this rare gift' (*Du Parcq Report*). The criticism here is clearly at least partly class-related and reflects an attitude perhaps

not a world away from that of Rich. The Du Parcq investigation was conducted by only two men, Mr Herbert du Parcq, K.C and Alexander Paterson.

Both Alexander Paterson and Charles Rich were dedicated men who devoted their lives to public service and believed in reform. Despite the inherent difficulties in trying to change a system embodied by old buildings, established procedures and lack of money, Paterson was to see some of his efforts rewarded and to receive considerable recognition during his lifetime. Rich was to see the developments within the prison system go beyond what he perceived to be positive and feared the dilution

and even breakdown of what he felt he had achieved. His disappointment is reflected in his autobiography but it was not just disappointment with the direction of prison reform but a disappointment with change in wider society where he perceived loosening morals, lower standards and deteriorating discipline. In fact Alexander Paterson, a liberal man who believed in social responsibility, did achieve a great deal in difficult circumstances. However, his skill in promoting and advertising relatively limited change, particularly in regimes for older and recidivist offenders, was such that the extent of change did not match public perceptions of actual change.

. . . both Paterson and Rich had a great belief in prison staff at all levels to achieve reform, often in difficult circumstances. Both commended the hard work and loyalty of prison officers.

4. For more see, Brown (2007) 'The Amazing Mutiny at the Dartmoor Convict Prison', *British Journal of Criminology* 47 (2): 276-292.