

# Book review

Julia Braggins reviews *The Prisons Handbook 2001*, edited by Mark Leech and Deborah Cheney, 5th Edition. Waterside Press: Winchester.

ISBN 1 872 870 97 X. 640 pp. £55. Special discounts for prisoners, families, friends and HM Prison Service.

The state of our prisons has not left the headlines recently. It will not have escaped the notice of any CJM reader that we have just clocked up ten years since the publication of the Woolf Report into the disturbances following the Strangeways riots. Yet, as Lord Woolf observed at the Prison Reform Trust lecture on the night of that anniversary, so much more could have been done to change things, and to instigate a more humane prison system, had the prison population not become so massive. The present population stands at around 64,000, and is projected to rise to 70,000 by 2002 and 78,000 by 2007. All the more need for *The Prisons Handbook*, perhaps.

This is a powerful book, and a seriously big one. It would fell an assailant at fifty paces. The editorial achievement of Mark Leech and Deborah Cheney, aided and abetted by Bryan Gibson of Waterside Press, compels admiration. This edition is dedicated to HMP Grendon, the prison which, as Mark Leech recognises in his editorial "was in large part responsible for turning me around".

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I have followed the progress of *The Prisons Handbook* since it started, and I know I won't be alone. In preparing to write this, I turned up the first review in CJM (20), of the original 1995 edition (a muscular 407 pages, and published at that time by Oxford University Press). Andrew Groves of PRT gave it a warm welcome. "It reads rather like an AA Hotel Guide" he said, but went on to stress the book's unique selling point. "The great achievement of Leech's book is to approach problems and questions from the prisoner's point of view: it tells them what they really want to know..."

At first sight, this has not changed. The A-Z section, which shows how you get to places (or how your visitors do), what the food is like, and what you can (or can't) do there (education, workshops, healthcare, chaplaincy, gym) gives the prison novice some idea of what to expect. There is a nice coloured map this time, too, courtesy of Internal Communications, HM Prison Service. There are some

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anomalies, however. Why are there prisoner's and governor's comments in some places and not in others? And one wonders, sometimes, about these. Two snatches from the 'W' section. "I have been to numerous jails on this 12 year sentence and this is an incomparable jail where staff and inmates bend over backwards to help you address your offending behaviour." A heartwarming tribute to HMP Whatton from a dazzled inmate.

And, from a governor, "Wormwood Scrubs offers decent and clean physical conditions, excellent gym and education facilities, and full employment for those who wish it." Does this sound like an advertisement for a rather bracing holiday camp? Not all entries are so glowing.

The range of topics covered in this book is amazing. For new readers, it might be helpful to know how it all started. As Mark Leech puts it: "It was as I was sitting in a caged reception cubicle at Wandsworth" that the idea for the book was conceived. There were questions, questions, questions from newcomers to the prison: What's it like here? What is the doctor like? Is the Board of Visitors any good? Do they allow sound systems? As well as the A-Z, there is a big advice section covering procedures (reception, requests and complaints, visits, letters and phone calls, the prison disciplinary system), what one might call 'activities' (offending behaviour programmes, education and training, religion), sources of help (the Criminal Cases Review Commission, the BoV, the Prisons Ombudsman amongst others), and a range of 'special categories' (lifers, women, young offenders, prisoners under 18, foreign prisoners.). There is a new section on disability in prison, with moving prisoner viewpoints on coping with imprisonment while at the same time losing one's sight, suffering from spina bifida, and managing a prosthetic leg.

There is also a "much expanded directory of organisations and resources" this time – and here's where I started to get a little picky. In putting together a book of this size, the collation and editing process must take the best part of a year, so perhaps inevitably parts of this section (and others) were already out of date. This part was followed by an excellent review of criminal justice and prison-related websites and resources – but with quite a bit of duplication. Perhaps these two sections could be dove-tailed next time? To continue in nit-picking mode just for a moment: there is a 'selected reading list', which, to be honest, looked a bit thin to me. The copy-editing and indexing

could have been improved, and there are some twenty pages of advertising at the back, mostly for solicitors. Perhaps this is necessary to cover production costs, but one wondered.

There is a legal section, a 'forum' (rather thin, but readers are invited to write in for the next edition), an excellent section on reports (HMCIP and others) and a flotilla of annexes: 'HM Prison Service: Its People and Policies', various awards and prizes, a section on parliamentary questions (July 99 - July 2000), and a chilling piece on deaths in prison (again, July 99-July 2000) by the redoubtable Deborah Coles of INQUEST. Though this seemed a bit out of place in a portmanteau section which also included the Charter Marks Awards scheme and the Windlesham Trophy for Prison Grounds and Gardens, it reminds us, as we need to be reminded, what a place of despair, neglect, fear and violence prison can be. From Grendon, Tom Carrigan (serving prisoner) and Tim Newell (Governor), write a shared foreword to the book, in which they bring the hope that all who read the handbook will "use the experience to consider the pains of imprisonment, how they can be acknowledged and how they can be made more bearable".

An innovation in this year's edition is the inclusion of

'viewpoints'. For me, and I have no doubt for most others, the prisoners' voices are by far the most compelling, though it has to be said there are more viewpoints from professionals than prisoners. Perhaps most striking is the number of contributions from Prison Service employees. The blurb for the book trumpets the fact that "many chapters are now presented with assistance from a range of HM Prison Service personnel." Apparently, too, there was a 100 per cent return from prison governors to a request for help to update the A-Z section.

As the current Director General, quoted on the back cover, says: "I find the book invaluable: it is in my top drawer and I refer to it frequently." Me too – though it will no longer fit in the drawer. I am delighted to have my own copy, and I know that I will make a good deal of use of it. Meanwhile, the weight, the price, and the tone of parts of this book prompt this reader to wonder about its intended audience. Who, in the end, is it for?

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## Notes for Contributors

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