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A Lifetime with Pentonville

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Where it all began

It is more than fifty years since I first had the idea of studying a prison. I was a prison visitor at the Scrubs at the time when under the benevolent regime of Gilbert Hair, who had come from Strangeways, outsiders like me could not only have a cell key, but wander around the prison to visit inmates on our list if they happened to be working their allotment gardens (later to become the dog track under the perimeter wall) or in one case, stoking the prison boilers. All the men I visited were serving long sentences, the majority 'lifers' reprieved from the gallows.

But my connection with Pentonville goes a long way further back. When I was still quite a small boy, about seven I would think, my father was visited by a man of unusually gaunt appearance. When he left, I asked about him. My father replied that he had just done six months hard labour[1] in Pentonville for receiving a stolen gold watch. I asked what hard labour was and where Pentonville was located, so on a Geographia map spread out on the floor, we identified all the London prisons. In due course, I cycled round most of them. Twenty or so years later, the research began.

My experiences at the Scrubs and the publication of Gresham Sykes' *Society of Captives* (1958) together with Donald Clemmer's *Prison Community* (1940), all encouraged me to approach the Prison Commissioners with the idea of a comparable study of an English prison. The then Chairman, Sir Lionel Fox, and his successor Sir Arthur Petersen, were both enthusiastic, as was Duncan Fairn and the Chief Medical Officer. This positive support by the Commissioners for the research was immensely valuable when the going became difficult, as it did from time to time.

But this is not a simple tale, but one that has two threads — the prison and the gallows. My father was a life-long opponent of capital punishment, and it was from him that I came to learn of the trial and hanging in 1922 of Edith Thompson and Frederick Bywaters. Bywaters' bones, to the best of my knowledge, still lie within Pentonville's walls in a plot once marked on the official ground plan as Crippen's Grass. When Holloway was rebuilt, Edith's remains were re-interred with decency in the woodland cemetery at Brookwood. It so happened that during the research, although there had been no executions at Pentonville for five years, two were to take place within weeks of each other. I had not anticipated that hardly had the work at Pentonvillle begun when not one but two executions would so suddenly and unpredictably come to dominate the entire scene.

I was in the prison, walking round the yard with an officer for whom the idea of hanging was repellent when, at 9 a.m. on April 24th, 1959, Joseph Chrimes[2] met his end. We looked at our watches, each, I suspect, sharing a mental vision of that moment when the trapdoor would bang open, and of a lifeless body slowly gyrating in the pit below until at last the prison doctor had certified death. Later that morning I found the Governor sitting in his office, utterly dejected. He had witnessed judicial killing for the first time. Then, on May 8th, Ronald Marwood was hanged for the murder of PC Raymond Summers.

Recruited by Alexander Patterson, David Waddilove had never served in a local prison before. His institutional career had been spent in the Borstal Service and his previous posting had been that of Governor at Hollesley Bay. 'Old Butcher', as his Deputy Governor was known, was a former Coldstream Guardsman with more than thirty years prison service behind him. He reminded me of a Company Sergeant Major I had once known, of stern bearing but great competence; certainly the sort of man you were glad to have around when things were not looking good.

If I seem to emphasise the importance of these two executions it is because in the last days of capital punishment the gallows cast a long shadow over almost every local prison in the country. In London the only prison without a gallows was Wormwood Scrubs. In spite of the enthusiasm that many of the staff expressed for it, equally there were those who were deeply troubled by it. But Pentonville recovered from the events of 1959 if only because as an institution it possessed the cultural wherewithal to take it in its stride.

1. He would have almost certainly spent his time picking oakum, the fibres of tarred rope used for caulking the wooden decks of ships.
2. Chrimes had killed in the course of a domestic burglary.

The Maidstone Pilot

Before work at Pentonville began I spent six weeks at Maidstone. I slept in a cell in the hospital, had my breakfast with the staff and my mid-day meal with the prisoners. Prison fare I found well below what had previously been my institutional benchmark, namely that produced by the Army Catering Corps. In particular, I found unpleasant the practice at dinner time of pouring back into the huge metal teapot what remained in any mugs that were not completely empty. The contents were re-heated and served again later in the day. Tea, milk, sugar and possibly other liquids were all mixed together!

I worked alongside prisoners in the laundry, on the same machine, it so happened, as the late James Hanratty[3]. The laundry experience was invaluable. It demonstrated Sykes' theory that order in prisons is based as much upon a mutually co-operative consensus as it is on coercion. If we worked well as a team — and we did — the officer in charge of the laundry would ensure that we had a plentiful supply of biscuits with our mid morning tea break. He provided them himself.

Pentonville was bigger, noisier, dirtier, and an altogether more restlessly discomforting place.

Maidstone also introduced me to prison humour. One morning on his rounds, the Governor, Robin Ffinch[4] was baffled by the sight of us all in the process of taking one of the washing machines apart. It was explained to him that one of our number had accidentally lost his denture inside, and he was due a visit that afternoon and wanted to look his best.

I also met up with the Board of Visitors. The Chairman was the 77 year old Sir Garrard Tyrwhitt Drake (1881-1964), High Sherriff of Kent, twelve times Mayor of Maidstone, Justice of the Peace[5] and owner of Maidstone Zoo. The Deputy Governor, known affectionately as 'Jumbo' Harrison, introduced me to the Board meeting, explaining that my presence in the prison was with the complete approval of the Prison Commissioners. Tyrwhitt Drake would have none of it. 'Leave this room, both of you!' he commanded. Harrison protested that as Deputy Governor, he was in charge of the prison that day. The riposte from Tyrwhitt Drake was as sharp as it was gratuitously offensive: 'You are merely a public servant!'

What, I suspect, had really enraged him was having learned that very morning that the Home Secretary, Rab Butler, had declined to approve a sentence of birching the Visitors had imposed some weeks previously on a prisoner found guilty of striking an officer. I was reminded of a line in Shakespeare:

> *Man, proud Man, dressed in a little brief authority, most ignorant of what he's most assured*[6].

Maidstone was then a prison for Corrective Training[7] so it had none of the short-term inmates who were a significant proportion of the Pentonville population. Overwhelmingly, those at Maidstone were young men with a growing history of property crime. The atmosphere was positive and from the most junior discipline officer to the Governor grade there was a predominantly optimistic commitment to the goal of rehabilitation, in the belief that while they would not succeed every time, they would certainly do so some of the time.

The Pentonville contrast

The differences could hardly have been greater. Pentonville was bigger, noisier, dirtier, and an altogether more restlessly discomforting place. The admixture of smells — cabbage water, stale tobacco smoke, the sanitary recesses, and unwashed bodies — hung like a pre-war London fog. For the cleaners on their knees scrubbing the landing floors and doing their best with recesses reeking of overnight urine and faeces, it was a labour of Sisyphus. The battle against dirt was unending and that against odours unwinnable, certainly as 'slopping out' was a routine activity[8].

For David Waddilove it was a culture shock, as it was for me, not least since I had spent so much time at The Scrubs where the regime was driven by a positive commitment to the ideal of rehabilitation. The Scrubs, being the last of the London prisons to be built in the 19th century was constructed not on the radial design of Jebb, but with the separate blocks or 'Halls'

3. Hanged at Bedford 4th April 1962 for the so-called A6 Murder.
4. His name employed the archaic 'double lower case' as a substitute for the capital letter 'F'.
5. Justices of the Peace must nowadays retire at 70.
6. *Measure for Measure*. Line 114.
7. A sentence of three years duration, introduced by the Criminal Justice Act 1948.
8. Jebb's Pentonville of 1842 had lavatories and wash basins in every cell. They were removed in the 1870s under the regime of Sir Edmund du Cane (1830-1903), a military man of authoritarian character and short temper. See Seán McConville. *English Local Prisons. 1860-1900: Next Only to Death*. Routledge. 1994.

preferred by du Cane. I think this had a lot to do with the fact that in the 1950s it was an altogether quieter and less smelly place than Pentonville. In the 'ville' everything seemed to move at a frenetic and unremitting pace in order not to be overwhelmed by the pressures imposed from outside and the urgency of getting everything that needed to be done on the inside completed before the daily round began once more. Even when the prison should have been quiet, save for the footsteps of the night patrols, the silence might be rent by men shouting to each other. There was a sense that for most of the staff, just keeping the place going was their first priority, and there were few illusions about sending inmates out better than when they had come in.

Early every morning, excepting Sundays a group of men would emerge from the Gate on discharge. At the end of every day the prison vans, having gathered up prisoners from around the London courts, would distribute them around the London prisons. Through Reception at Pentonvillle would pass hardened villains, eventually to be transferred to Dartmoor, petty offenders, the mentally ill, and deteriorated alcoholics, the human detritus of the great city; Pentonville had accommodated them all. Coming or going, they were for the most part a sorry sight, reminiscent of Doré's[9] illustration of the exercise yard at Newgate in 1872. The *rite de passage* of reception with its public nakedness, compulsory, if brief bathing, and cursory medical examination, would conclude with the issue of prison uniform, every item of which, including underwear and shoes, would have been worn by some other inmate before.

I used to spend a lot of time in Reception, becoming used to the rank body odours and the pitiable sight of some for whom magistrates and judges thought prison was the only answer. For some Pentonville was their only experience of medical care, antiquated and inadequate though it was.

Yet even here there was humour. On being offered a shirt by the 'Red Band' inmate who was issuing them, one rather 'posh' newcomer inquired if there might be one with a size 15 collar. To this unusual request the reply came, quick as a flash:

> *Two sizes in 'ere mate. Too big an' too fuckin' small.*

I was reminded of this later when a prisoner remarked to me that when things in prison become too bad for tears, there is only laughter left.

Professor Liebling in her paper has succinctly re-iterated how the overt objectives of the Pentonville regime in those days were handicapped by confusion and contradiction. Exactly how *do* you go about turning offenders into ex-offenders and eventually into law abiding citizens? And how, at the same time, do you resolve the problems raised by the need to protect society from its predators while yet marking certain actions as wholly unacceptable by the infliction of what is termed punishment?

Given the resources at the prison's disposal, the task was hampered not so much by the raw material — making the bricks without the straw — but by firing them in a kiln that could never reach working temperature.

For a substantial proportion of its inmates, the great door of Pentonville was a revolving one.

Four years after the publication of *Pentonville* I was appointed to the magistracy in Inner London and for the next thirty four years I spent what seemed to be an increasing amount of my time in two courts in south London, Tower Bridge and Camberwell Green. Before 1966 appointment to the Bench had been essentially a matter of political patronage, there being no mechanism for selection and no provision whatever for training. Both were introduced in 1966, but in my early days on the Bench I encountered a majority of those who had been appointed rather than selected and who declined the opportunity of training available to them[10]. I soon discovered at first hand why big city 'locals' like Pentonville were regarded as the penal equivalent of the municipal tip. Unfortunately, much of what was deemed suitable for such disposal returned in fairly short order as recycling. For a substantial proportion of its inmates, the great door of Pentonville was a revolving one.

For men sentenced to periods of less than a month, there was really very little that Pentonville could do for or with them beyond provide food, shelter and the most rudimentary healthcare. For the most part social derelicts, these were the human flotsam of the London streets, kept afloat outside on a tide of alcohol. The curtain had not risen on the drug scene. In the 1960s the list in every Magistrates' Court in London began with what were termed 'the overnight drunks'. But there was also an endless procession of petty

9. Gustave Doré. (1832-1883) did many sketches of the life of Victorian London's underclass.
10. When I raised this point in conversation with the then Chairman of the Magistrates' Association he replied; 'My boy, where there is death, there is hope'.

recidivists for whom, in the days before Community Service Orders, a short prison sentence was considered the appropriate norm.

The very first time I had myself to pronounce a sentence of imprisonment from the Bench, a vision of Reception at Pentonville came immediately to mind. What would this man make of prison but, more importantly, what would prison make of him?

Although the experiment of ‘H’ Wing was the jewel in the Pentonville crown, the majority of inmates had no experience of it. The workshops, in which most men spent their days had an atmosphere that belonged to the era, if not of Jebb, then certainly that of du Cane.

In the mailbag shop rows of men crudely stitched by hand the coarse sacks that were used by the Post Office. The manufacture of coir mats was more skilled and probably more rewarding. But the same could hardly be said of the dismantling shop where old telephone equipment was laboriously taken apart[11]. At the bottom of this industrial heap was the lightest labouring task — the rag shop where most of the illiterate and socially derelict prisoners would sit tearing up old clothing[12].

Attempts were made to repair the shortcomings of educational experience with classes in simple literacy and numeracy. Progress was generally very slow.

There is no doubt that some members of the prison staff, unhappy at our presence in any event, took great offence at some of the things that appeared in print, especially the suggestion that both staff and inmates shared elements of a common culture.

At this time, when the idea of prisoners being able to make telephone calls was unheard of, letters were restricted and all visits were ‘closed’ in that inmate and visitor were separated by a wire grille. Physical contact was rendered largely impossible. Audio-visual entertainment came in two forms. Loudspeakers on the landings would reproduce, normally with a high level of distortion, radio programmes selected by the staff, while at weekends films were shown in the chapel that served as a cinema for this purpose. There was a flourishing library, with a selection of picture books for those unable to read. There was no television.

Re assessment

That for me, is what a young person might nowadays describe as ‘a hard ask’. When one has passed 80, contemplating work begun when one was not yet thirty, demands not only a good memory but also scrupulous objectivity.

Re-reading passages of *Pentonville* I am astonished at how much ground we covered. Not only was the first draft of the book completed in longhand, but also we had a massive hand written card index of every staff member and every inmate with whom we had any conversation that enabled us to find the notes of those conversations. The notes, copied on a mechanical typewriter, were destroyed long ago, but the index cards only went to a certified confidential shredder in June 2012.

The work was achieved by a division of labour. Pauline Morris did about 80 per cent of the fieldwork on a daily basis while I did the remainder. Barbara Bieley, whose contribution was crucial, transcribed the notes and analysed them by topic. I wrote the text of the book.

Not all of the final report was published in that we were required to excise the chapter dealing with the disorder in the prison on the evening before Marwood’s execution. Someone in the Press Department of the Home Office had stated that there were no disturbances that night and as Arthur Peterson put it to me, he could hardly authorise publication of an account and analysis of disturbances that (officially) had never taken place! No doubt the minutes of the series of disciplinary hearings that subsequently took place were part of the same fantasy. An unexpurgated copy of the report was in the library of the Prison Service Training School at Wakefield for many years and to my personal knowledge at least one academic researcher was given access to it about twenty years later.

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11. Some of this was put to good use by a few skillful prisoners who built (illicit) crystal radio sets. One is illustrated in *Pentonville* between pages 158 and 159.
12. Another source of prison humour. Question: ‘Where is all this stuff going?’ Answer: ‘To be used by the Portuguese navy for engine room cleaning.’

print, especially the suggestion that both staff and inmates shared elements of a common culture. With hindsight, things might have been expressed better. It was felt by some that we were saying that prison officers were no different from offenders, which was not what we were saying. Better expressed, we might have said that they came from overlapping worlds that understood each other — the same can be said of the police — and it was never intended to have pejorative implications. Prison officers like policemen, certainly in those days, were well aware of the social and cultural features of the world of offenders.

I suspect one issue to which we paid insufficient attention was the way in which the research was perceived. No-one had ever done anything quite like this before. Some staff suspected the true motive for the study. If it had been approved by the Commissioners then there was clearly something in it for them, remembering that In the 1950s the Commissioners were perceived as the 'enemy without' whose default attitude to prison officers was seen as critical rather than supportive. Many prisoners, on the other hand, saw the research as some kind of forum to which they could bring their grievances. In those days the grievance was a basic issue of psychological kit, for the prisoner no less than the conscripted private soldier. The staff, aware of this, were presented with an additional concern. And while the perception of the researchers as 'prison reformers' was a positive thing for the inmates, it served only to increase the anxieties of some staff who were suspicious of the idea of penal reform in any event.

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Objectively and half a century away from the situation, I am bound to admit that any evaluation of prison conditions is relative. I have mentioned the odours of Pentonville and they left much to be desired. But at least prisoners did not have to wash and dry their own laundry.

A few years later, when writing about a prison I had been asked to report upon by the Colonial Office, I found that inmates were obliged to perform that task themselves, hanging it out in the prison yard. I had to report that at high spring tides the town sewer that discharged into the ocean backed up and flooded the yard. On those occasions the inmates had to attend to their washing lines barefoot, and awash in raw sewage. In contrast, I have come across prisons in North America that were spotless examples of social control from some Orwellian nightmare.

The problem for the researcher who comes in some way to identify with those whose lives he or she is researching is not new. Without exception, the great social anthropologists whom I was privileged to have as teachers all succumbed. Edmund Leach thought of the Kachins of Highland Burma as 'his people' as did Isaac Schapera of the Bantu of southern Africa. Raymond Firth was excited when he learned that the Colonial Office was sending me to look at prisons in the South Pacific. But the inhabitants of Pentonville were not one people, but two; captors and captives who shared a common social space. At times both were 'our people' and at other times, neither. The prison community is undoubtedly a place of shared existence, something that the wisest of prison officers readily understood though they might not always have articulated their keen awareness of it. To ensure that the prison ran as smoothly as possible, co-operation was not only preferable to coercion but the most efficient way of getting things done. This became clear to me during the Maidstone pilot study when I was working in the laundry when staff and inmates were united in making it clear to the puzzled Governor that dental recovery had, for the time being, priority over all else.

It is still worth considering the maxim of Sir Alexander Patterson, that men go to prison *as* and not *for* punishment. The punishment of prison is the deprivation of freedom and personal autonomy; a prison sentence is the imposition of a mark of shame, often upon a wider group than the prisoner himself. But if the rehabilitative ideal has any reality, it must make demands upon the offender. It may be an uncomfortable option to be required to undergo critical self-examination, dispensing with those techniques of neutralisation that are persuasive that all is the fault of others and never of the self.

It is because so many of those who still adhere to the simplistic view that crime merits nothing but punishment, whether that punishment has any effect or not, that the rehabilitative ideal is perceived as a soft option. Reflecting upon the comment of one Visiting Magistrate in a northern prison who commented that inmates 'ate like fighting cocks', I was minded that for

magistrates nowadays an alternative source of hope comes in the form of statutory retirement at age 70.

What future is there for prisons?

I have been genuinely surprised and indeed gratified recently to learn that *Pentonville*, notwithstanding controversy at the time, has played some positive role in the thinking of prison staff, although re-reading passages myself, I am only too aware of some of its shortcomings. Prisons have moved on since the 1950s although I cannot say necessarily for the better.

This prompts me to succumb to the temptation of another kind of re-assessment. Half a century ago, I saw no fundamental conflict between the ideas that were infused into the prison system from the top and the visions of those who were committed to what was broadly termed 'reform'. Rab Butler and the majority of his immediate successors at the Home Office, independently of their party political persuasion, were committed to rehabilitation as a priority, while taking into account the need for public protection against the most socially dangerous offenders. If reformers had any quarrel with that, it was in respect of the execution of that policy, not the policy itself.

A great deal is indeed now changed, though, I would argue, by no means necessarily for the better.

There is no doubt but that some things, like sanitation, have changed for the better. I suspect prisons are cleaner, too. I recall once interviewing an inmate at Armley while watching the soot particles coming through on open window fall on my notebook as we talked. I remember, too, finding on my first visit to Parkhurst that cell lighting consisted of a gas jet set behind a glass pane in the wall, lit from the landing outside.

A great deal is indeed now changed, though, I would argue, by no means necessarily for the better.

The seismic shift in penal philosophy was first felt in America when the United States was converted to the politics of neo-liberalism. Social rehabilitation was derided and social incapacitation lauded. The solution was simple; 'Just bang 'em up!' Offenders behind bars cannot prey on the community, so three strikes and you're out perhaps for 25 years, even if this time you did only steal a hamburger. And at the same time, capital punishment came back into fashion along with life sentences without possibility of parole. By the 1980s variants of this deadly philosophical virus had crossed the Atlantic. We were to hear the proclamation 'Prison works!' along with the injunction 'if you don't want to do the time, don't do the crime'. It was a blending of an extreme form of the theory of social defence as used by the Classical criminologists in the late 19th century with a theory of deterrence belonging to the 18th, that mankind seeks pleasure but avoids pain. I leave the reader to speculate on how it is that the prison population has risen four fold since the 1950s.

Leaving aside whether what I would term the 'warehouse/archive' theory of penology has any identifiable merits, I am tempted ironically to observe that the re-introduction of widespread capital punishment might well be a better solution. Dead men (and women) cannot commit further offences, and when compared with the overall cost of long and indeterminate prison sentences, might well be the cheaper option.

Mercifully, such notions are for the vast majority of us the stuff of nightmares. But there is another element to be considered besides whether or not the penal pendulum should once more swing in the direction of the rehabilitative ideal and away from the warehouse solution. That, shortly stated, is the involvement of what is termed the 'private sector' but what I prefer to call the commercial prison industry.

The saying attributed to George Santayana, that those who know no history are destined to re-live it, may have some relevance here. The office of gaoler in the 18th century was an office of profit. The administrative confusions of local and convict prisons in Victorian times led to the establishment of the Prison Commission in 1877 that introduced a consistency into the prison system that made possible the 20th century reforms of Alexander Patterson and his disciples.

The re-emergence of a market in the sub-contracting of prisons is merely one instance of the neo-liberal political philosophy that regards the state as the natural inferior of the market. The market in prison services is likely to be followed in short order by an extension of the market in security services including aspects of policing. And why stop there; might not consortia of law firms beable to run the court system, perhaps? Already probation is under consideration for 'marketing'.

If the 18th century gaoler could charge for the provision of bedstraw and candles, what, in terms of 'marketised' model of prisons, is there against a charge for the provision of TV sets and computers?

I have yet to be persuaded that the provision of public services for profit is preferable to public services, publicly provided for the common good. Those

fundamental things that it is the duty of the state to ensure for its citizens ought to be, unequivocally, the transparent responsibility of the state.

A future for prisons, especially big ones

Given the size of the prison population there is little hope of the prison estate divesting itself of any surplus property and from an economic viewpoint an extensive programme of demolition and rebuilding is out of the question[13]. So we are left with a series of buildings now well into their second century. Who will be contained within them?

At the time of writing the Minister of Justice is suggesting changes in the law that would provide for mandatory life sentences for repeated offences of certain kinds. It might be objected that the prison system has enough lifers already, never mind those prisoners subject to IPP, a proportion of whom are already 'over tariff' through no fault of their own. If the pattern shifts, such that the majority of inmates are long termers, short sentences becoming the exception rather than the rule, then it may well be that what used to be the 'big city locals' may have to adapt their regimes to those of long term imprisonment.

There is always the possibility that one or more of the trans-national conglomerates that already provide prison facilities on a commercial basis might well become involved in some form of private finance initiative to rebuild some urban establishments, but green field sites remain more attractive. What seems more likely is that should 'two or three strikes' legislation take effect, the slow moving lifer/long term population will ensure the steady growth of the prison population as a whole.

It is, of course, an ironic paradox that what is a problem for the state is at the same time a positive opportunity for those companies who can provide incarcerare services on a commercial basis. That is essentially a political as much as a practical choice.

As a general rule, the smaller the human group, the easier it is to manage most aspects of social activity and interaction. But if the prison population is inexorably to rise, the pressures to house it in ever larger institutions that can achieve economies of scale will be no less. The character of the prison will, of necessity, shift towards becoming not so much that of the warehouse where the stock at least moves on and off the shelves, as the long term storage depot where nothing moves save at rare intervals. The North American experience is not encouraging.

All of which leaves me with this thought. The idea that 'progress' is inexorable is a myth. Society has more than one reverse gear in the box. The Victorians brought things forward from the inefficient squalor of the 18th century. The reformers of the early 20th century continued with the task. And since the early 1980s, we have largely gone backwards, and at best stood still. The blame can scarcely be laid at the door of the prison service, or indeed the judges. The address for delivery is London SW1A 1AA.

13. A falling prison population and prison closures were a brief quirk of the 1930s.