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Reviews

Book Review

A Sense of Freedom

By Jimmy Boyle

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A Sense of Freedom was originally published in 1976. The book eloquently, movingly and compellingly demonstrated a fundamental, transcendent truth, namely that prisoners such as Jimmy Boyle, labelled as 'the worst of the worst', 'the animals' and 'the incorrigibles', could leave their destructive, and self-destructive, pasts behind if the theory of rehabilitation was put into practice. Prisoners were not fixed forever in one immutable, unchanging identity. In short, they could be rehabilitated and their self-development could be realised. As Boyle notes in the Afterword to the new edition of his autobiography:

Rehabilitation shouldn't be a dirty word: it should be one of civic pride. Most prisoners are looking for a way out of a lifestyle in which they feel trapped. It is only right that we should equip them with the tools to do so (p. 310).

A Sense of Freedom ranks alongside one of the other, great prison autobiographies — *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Both books, not only poignantly and unflinchingly chart the deep, personal changes undergone by each author, but also how these changes were propelled by a profound confrontation both with their masculine identity and the culturally constructed binaries that divide human beings. Understanding

themselves both as prisoners and as men led to deep-rooted, existentialist changes. Initially, however, for Boyle this life-force change was impossible as, after being given a life sentence in 1967, and then being labelled Scotland's most violent man, he was continually ghosted between the Cages in Inverness prison and the segregation unit at Peterhead, sites of convulsion and despair.

The book provides a devastating contrast between the grim barbarism, and agonising physical and psychological brutality systemically imposed on prisoners in these institutions, with the philosophy and practices of the Barlinnie Special Unit (BSU), which was opened in February 1973. Originally, the BSU was designed to contain those who, like Boyle, were labelled as the most disruptive prisoners in the Scottish prison system. However, as it developed, the Unit shifted the objective of confinement away from violent, alienating authoritarianism to a system which treated the prisoners as human beings to be trusted rather than as objects to be beaten, humiliated and vilified.

Boyle describes the seismic changes he underwent after his transfer to the Unit:

To go from what I was to who I now am was a massive shift. It was only in a place as unique as the Special Unit that such a change could take place. In order to get to where I was, I had to make great changes, hidden changes, not discernable to the human eye.....The subtle day-to-day, free-flowing routine of the Special Unit

was unknown to us at the time, gradually whittling away at our inner brick walls (pp. 299–300).

His redemptive transformation was encouraged by the humanity and decency shown by prison officers like the late Ken Murray — 'a man of vision' (p. 300) — who himself had escaped from the traditional culture of masculinity that dominated prison officer culture. He articulated an empowering philosophy and vision of what that culture could be if prison staff were committed to supporting the process of prisoner rehabilitation. In the BSU, staff and prisoners groped their way forward into unknown penal territory, unlearning years of negative and hostile attitudes and behaviour. The relations of domination, so fundamental to everyday prison life, were increasingly replaced by hearts and minds committed to forming bonds of trust, empathy and understanding.

Crucially, and contrary to the dominant political and commonsensical narrative around the BSU, the regime was not an easy option for the staff and prisoners involved. Psychologically undressing in front of other men, shedding the layers of masculine, psychological skin that both groups had adhered to over the decades, exposing their vulnerabilities, doubts and anxieties through speaking with other prisoners and staff and being accountable for their actions, was a very difficult, painful process. The BSU took seriously the principle that prisoners were sent to prison as punishment and not for punishment. It stood sharply against the lamentable and self-defeating discourse of deterrence built around the idea that the prisoners needed to be punished further when

incarcerated if crime was to fall and victimisation was to be reduced.

Their sense of self-worth was developed through their contributions to *The Key*, the BSU's in-house magazine. *The Key* published articles, poems, drawings and short pieces which were written by them and by their visitors. The editorial in the third edition eloquently confronted the Unit's critics who had:

*. . . been very quick to voice loud opinions decrying the efforts of the Unit. It should be said that our critics have been invited to visit us — they have not come! Perhaps we are wrong to reach the obvious conclusion but we think it is fair comment to ask the question if, once again, there are those among us who are so blind they do not wish to see. We welcome constructive debate, we welcome the ideas to improve behaviour at all levels. The Special Unit is all about investigating methods which can help. We believe it is better to be committed to a REAL sense of social justice than to be committed to a policy of retribution and hate.*¹

Insidious, and often ill-informed attacks, were not confined to the prisoners. Ken Murray was transferred back to the traditional system in July 1979. Scandalously, not long before he retired, he was threatened with the loss of his pension rights if he participated in a television programme focussing on demonstrations in Scottish prisons.² This was part of an officially-inspired backlash towards him and his courageous colleagues who were

shamefully attacked by the wider prison officer culture, the mass media, the Scottish Office and the then Labour government. This backlash occurred because Ken Murray and his colleagues illuminated the hypocrisy at the heart of official discourse. Rehabilitation was fine in theory but if the 'animals' really began to change then this caused a problem for the expanding, self-serving behemoth of a prison-industrial-academic complex which was, and is, built around the relentless, delusional search for the 'real' causes of crime and the roots of recidivism. Here was a place, and a philosophy, that challenged the cynical instrumentalism of this complex and the dismal banality that 'nothing works'. Instead, the BSU provided a vision of a penal future which was both utopian and practical in terms of delivering actual results regarding individual change, reduced recidivism and public protection. In short, it worked.

This point leads to other, related questions which have resonated over the last four decades. Why was the BSU closed in 1995? Why have like-minded institutions such as Parkhurst C Wing also been closed? Why have the philosophy and practices of institutions such as Grendon Underwood, whose empathic and supportive work has been praised by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, not been extended into the wider prison system? The answer lies in the politics of punishment. In the last forty years, politicians and state servants, insidiously supported by a rapacious mass media, have obsessed over law and order, not necessarily because they are concerned with victims of crime (the treatment of women in the criminal justice system continues to bear this out) but because it was a vote-winning, populist, expedient cause to be manipulated for their own,

nefarious political ends. Therefore, when politicians and the mass media bleakly maintain that punishment needs to be intensified further, and accredited academic and pressure group experts talk about 'nothing works', they consciously and unconsciously ignore the most obvious lesson arising from *A Sense of Freedom*, namely that with the right empathic philosophy, committed staff and an environment that encourages the development of an individual's sense of self-worth, self-esteem and self-awareness, the 'animals' can change, and confinement can work.

In discussing *A Sense of Freedom* 40 years after its publication, it would be easy to talk in reductive clichés about the book being written at a different historical moment. Yet, for all the momentous economic, political, ideological and technological developments that have occurred in these four decades, the prison, and its capacity for the often-ruthless delivery of punishment and pain, has remained a constant and often terrorising presence in the lives of the poor, vulnerable and dispossessed who make up the vast majority of prisoners in the UK and globally. In that sense, the book is timeless and directly challenges the disingenuous hubris articulated by those in power that things have changed and that critics have failed to realise that penal progress is being made. However, as Boyle notes:

. . . no lessons have been learned. If anything, things have got worse. The prison system seems to be a lost cause. No one cares. Drug intake, in my day, was not the dominant factor it is today. It is a dereliction of duty by the authorities when a prisoner's only chance of getting off drugs

1. *The Key*, No 3, no date, p. 2, emphasis in the original.

2. See Brian Wilson's obituary of Ken Murray in *The Guardian*, 11th October 2007.

is when they are released. It makes no economic sense that politicians accept the failure rate of the prison system. Every single failure results in another victim in the community, as well as the cost of keeping the person in prison (pp. 309–10).

This remains a profoundly important message in 2017. Nonetheless, it is a message that is likely to be ignored because of the vested interests involved in talking up some crimes, especially crimes of violence, although not, of course, the social harms generated by corporate criminality, or domestic, racist and homophobic violence. The nefarious presence of private companies, and third sector interests, have only added another vested interest to the penal mix and another layer to the withering contempt towards prisoners (and indeed welfare claimants) burning within the wider political and popular culture in the first decades of the twenty first century.

Those who have any interest in prisoner rehabilitation, and any desire to develop penal practices that are radically transformative, should read *A Sense of Freedom*. It lays the foundations for not only thinking about what it means to be a human being but also it provides a blueprint for building something truly different which prisons, with some honourable exceptions, miserably fail to do at the moment; change individuals for the better, reduce recidivism and ensure public protection. *A Sense of Freedom* provides this moral foundation. Forty years on, it remains one of the finest, and most humbling books, I have ever read.

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Book Review
Redeemable: a Memoir of Darkness and Hope

By Erwin James
Publisher: Bloomsbury Circus Publishing, London (2016).
ISBN: 978-1-4088-1397-3 (hardback)
Price £16.99 (hardback)

Erwin James writes a powerful account of his life, depicting a dysfunctional childhood and family. In a raw and unapologetic manner he recounts his life both before he was imprisoned and during, and he details the lifestyle and circumstances that led to his crimes. The book feels dark and gritty on every page and James presents the distorted explanations for his difficult choices. He talks about life experiences that are, by definition, uncomfortable and he does so in a frank and connecting manner. The reader is drawn uncomfortably close to the very upsetting events that constitute a life that has contained so much tragedy.

Redeemable charts James' life in three main acts: the point at which he resigns himself and returns from service in the French Foreign Legion to surrender to two murder charges; his life before prison, which explores some of the most troubling aspects of his life, including the impact of domestic violence and the complex psychological damage of childhood tragedy; and finally, James' navigation of the prison estate, which included high security prisons and his eventual re-entry into society.

Redeemable describes deeply personal events, thoughts and perspectives. James' brutally honest description of turmoil and transformation is as disarming as it is disturbing. This reviewer can relate, through his own personal experiences, to the fact that even the most shameful and socially disagreeable feelings and logic of a man who is psychologically damaged are all here: James has not diluted or

censored anything. James establishes his brave and honest delivery on the very first page as he admits to resenting the 'dignified conduct' (p. 1) of his victims' families because it seemed to exaggerate his own sense of shame. Not only is this candid, it also begins to describe some of the distorted and highly contradictory thoughts of serious violent offenders, who can often demonstrate an understanding of guilt and empathy at an intellectual and abstract level but *feel* personally cold towards them.

James' account continually offers insight into the psychology of someone with deep social issues. Initially, his decision to surrender to the authorities appears as a virtuous pilgrimage (p. 18) but this serves to further illustrate the distorted logic of a person who has found himself transient, violent and, ultimately, incarcerated. By page 39, his façade of outward justification and the minimising of his awful decisions begin to lift and, where we could assume that a sense of relief and optimism would replace it; there is a dark connection to the void often felt when one divorces such a large part of their own identity.

This review could become entirely about my own personal connection to the writer's experiences. However, it is important to note that the theoretical framework which applies to serious violent offender research is apparent in James' memoir. There are obvious intersections between James' account and what we know, for instance, from Farrington et al.'s Delinquent Development Study, that '[t]he most important childhood risk factors for offending are criminality in the family, poverty, impulsiveness, poor child-rearing and low school attainment...'¹

There are further echoes of psychological and criminological theory about deviancy, the effects of long-term imprisonment and

1. Farrington, D. et al. (2006): 'Criminal careers and life success: new findings from the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development.' Home Office #281. Crown Copyright 2006.

established understandings of routes to desistance. For example, the passage which illustrates the very difficult process of dealing with 'dead time' (p. 45) could easily be a case study from Dr Ben Crewe's analysis of life sentence prison experiences as presented in his 2016 paper.²

Although, academically speaking, one view of one life experience is rarely considered empirical; it is possible to find confirmatory acknowledgements of sound criminological research throughout what is essentially narrative data from a successfully desisting, former life-sentence prisoner. James' life continually assents robust social theories, as with the two examples given above. However, perhaps the most optimistic of these provides an insight into how he began to re-imagine his identity in a way that allowed him to move away from the label of being a 'serious violent offender' to one as a positive member of society. This is detailed extensively in Bottoms' Sheffield Desistance Study where '[d]esistance perspectives stress that the process of change exists before, behind and beyond the intervention'.³ Bottoms also analyses the impact of the agency and language afforded to would-be-desisters; and, James infers this on page 286 with his building connection to a psychologist who effectively believes in his potential: '[...] yet I had to hang on to the idea that I wasn't inherently a bad person.'

Ultimately, though, *Redeemable* is an evocative insight into a difficult life and must be understood, perhaps like all dysfunctional life stories, in its human context before anything else. The impact of imperfect social institutions, such as the care system to which James was subjected, are all too often considered in terms of social policy or socio-economic data

rather than through the lens of its emotional consequences. James' account gives a comprehensive perspective on the complicated and often dissonant processes of: dealing with trauma, neglect or abuse; the impact serious, and even fatal, offences have on the perpetrators' psyche and ability to find internal redemption independent from public stigmatisation; and, the development of more substantive and pro-social coping strategies from entrenched attitudes such as 'I must have deserved it...' (p. 129) and 'I wondered if now that I am a criminal it meant that I am a bad person' (p. 130). *Redeemable* offers a narrative of desistance that is an extraordinary demonstration of personal triumph as well as a beacon for all who are attempting to change the psychological and social structures which interact with those who are at risk of committing the most serious of offences.

James' most valuable achievement, for readers of the *Prison Service Journal*, is the potential to affirm faith in the humanist motivations for entering into criminal and penal vocations. There are many obstacles to helping people to align their futures with something that is compassionate and social, but what James has provided is hopeful evidence for people who work with, for or 'on' offenders that everyone has the capacity to impact on how kind people can become and how successful even the most 'lost of causes' can be. Although choices to go straight are ultimately individual, James is able to remind us of the influence people have around us and how their attitude towards us can help to shape us in positive ways. James' 'psycho office' (p. 286) appointments with a woman called Joan cause me to hope that the people I have met through my experiences within the criminal

justice system will be able to say that their care and compassion have helped me to live the rest of my life in a positive and meaningful way. There is a reason why it pays to remember the value of each human being, regardless of what they have done and, as James explains it, it is that when they finally make the decision to be someone other than an offender it will be the people who support them who will most significantly affect how they view and realise their, ultimate, success.

Redeemable has the potential to be an important tool for criminal justice practitioners and theorists as it offers a striking insight into the life and precedents of a perpetrator of serious offenses. James' ability to contribute so valuably to our understanding in this field, in ways which are intensely personally tragic and socially compelling, gives vigour to criminal justice reform movement. He invites people to look harder at how social institutions are failing in heartbreaking ways, and yet he never does so with nothing other than his own perspective of his own life. This is an honest portrayal of a very unpalatable journey which, sadly, continues to be shared by too many people within the criminal justice system. James offers an intimately powerful narrative which is tragic but ultimately inspiring. He characterises key theoretical knowledge about the roots of crime and how people build towards a positive, law abiding life within, and independent from, the criminal justice system, but he also manages to vividly bring them to life. He connects us to social theories and this underpins the need for continued theoretical work and compassionate social practices.

Gareth Christopher is a social sciences student and a former resident of HMP Grendon.

2. Crewe, B., Hulley, S., and Wright, S. (in press) 'Swimming with the tide: Adapting to Long-term imprisonment' Justice Quarterly.

3. Bottoms, A. (2012): 'Desistance from Crime:' Forensic Practice in the Community. Ashmore, Z. and Shuker, R. (ed). Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, London, p.268.