

Book Reviews

The honest politician's guide to prisons and probation

By Roy King and Lucy Willmott

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Pen Picture: Dr. Jamie Bennett is the Chief Strategy Officer at the Youth Justice Board

Reading academic books can be type-2 fun — a bit of a slog at the time but in retrospect it is rewarding and enriching. It was therefore a pleasant surprise to pick up this book and find that it was so engaging that I zipped through it in a few days. It offers insider accounts provided by the political and professional elites that have presided over prisons and probation since 1990, including interviews with six director generals of prisons, two directors of probation, sixteen Secretaries of State for Home Office or Justice, nine ministers responsible for prisons and probation, four Lord Chief Justices, four Chief Inspectors of Prisons and two Chief Inspectors of Probation. This unparalleled access makes this a unique, fascinating and valuable book.

The book has been written by Professor Roy King, a distinguished criminologist who has been conducting international research since the 1970s and has been regularly sought out to offer advice to politicians and senior professionals, and Dr. Lucy Willmott, who is based at University of Cambridge and has over two decades of research experience, including applied research in prisons and secure hospitals. They are

knowledgeable and insightful research partners, able to productively engage the interviewees, gathering rich data and presenting it compellingly. The title of the book is not intended to suggest that politicians are dishonest, but is instead a homage to Norval Morris and Gordon Hawkins' 1970 book *The honest politician's guide to crime control*. Both books are effectively intended to nurture evidence-based criminal justice infused with a liberal-humane set of values.

The book is set out in sections that follow the course of the governments of the last three decades — Conservative 1990-97, New Labour 1997-2010, Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition 2010-15 and Conservative from 2015 up to 2019. The chapters briefly introduce the political context, then present the accounts of the primary players — politicians and officials — so as to explore the major issues, primary aims, the critical events and significant challenges. The presentation of the accounts attempts to make any commentary or critique relatively discrete and constrained, allowing people to offer their own perspective. While this book does give retrospective access to the 'top table', such accounts need to be seen in a wider context. In particular, the people being interviewed do not have the same lived experience of those subject to or working in prisons or probation during that period, but are instead removed and at some distance. There is also often a gap between intention and reality, and between policy and practice, which means that rhetorical accounts present a more coherent picture than is the actuality. The data from

these interviews therefore offers a particular perspective or set of experiences rather than the definitive account. Nevertheless, the novelty and value is that the experiences of such a wide range of elite participants is rarely drawn together as comprehensively as they are in this book.

One of the reasons I found this book so fascinating is that it effectively covers the period of time in which I have had an interest in prisons. I recall seeing the images of the Strangeways riot on the television news in 1990 and as a law student in the 1990s learned about the Woolf report and the problems of order in prisons. Having joined the Prison Service in the mid-1990s, my professional life is being played out in these pages. There will be many others with similar experiences who will read this book looking back over a working life, with all of the optimism, satisfaction, frustration and anger that comes with it. This is three decades that have seen sustained increases in the prison population; varying levels of economic investment, and; continuous organization change, often informed by neo-liberal and commercial practices.

The book closes with the authors making a number of suggestions for a better politics of criminal justice. They identify the significant problems that arise from the changing tone of public discourse about criminal justice becoming more punitive; the rapid churn of politicians and officials meaning that a consistent direction cannot be maintained, and an erosion of the balance between executive, legislature and judiciary meaning that criminal justice has become more politicized. The

solutions, in the view of the authors, lie in a reduction in the prison population achieved through a systematic reform of sentencing, with measures to strengthen the independence of the judiciary as well as prisons and probation. None of these are new arguments, indeed in many ways they look backwards to a time when criminal justice was a less politicized issue and was largely led by expert criminal justice elites. The changes the author suggest are unlikely any time soon, as they recognize, but perhaps they are also failing to engage with contemporary society. One of the reasons that rational ideas of patrician elites have lost favour is that they aren't in tune with how significant parts of the population feel, whereas much populist rhetoric does resonate with many people. Perhaps the starting point to find better ways to communicate with the wider population is listening to their experiences and perspectives and engaging with them, whether that is through for example grass roots activism, education, or popular culture.

Roy King and Lucy Willmott deserve to be acclaimed for pursuing their research, getting the engagement of such a stellar cast and producing an engaging book. The data will be of huge value to those researching and studying prisons, and the insider account will be of immense interest to those who have been involved in prisons and probation over the last three decades. This book doesn't have all of the answers, no book could have, but I don't think any reader will come away without feeling they can and must do more to make a positive difference. The future of prisons and probation shouldn't solely be in the hands of honest politicians, academics or officials but also in the hands of honest citizens.

Understanding the Educational Experiences of Imprisoned Men: (Re)Education

By Helen Nichols

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Pen Picture: Angelique Mulholland is a Doctoral researcher focussing on the educational experiences and gender subjectivities of imprisoned men, and a former prison teacher. She is based at the Institute of Education, UCL's department of Education and Society.

There has been increasing interest in prison education over the last 10 years from recent successive governments and policy makers, as well as academics working hard to advance and understand better the educational experiences of imprisoned people. Helen Nichols' work is both located and integral to this uptick and offers a compassionate, informative and accessible in-road into understanding the educational experiences of imprisoned adult men in Britain today. I came across Dr Nichols' work whilst in my first teaching post in an adult male category B prison. Her newly published thesis, *An Inquiry into Adult Male Prisoners' Educational Experiences*,¹ deepened my understanding of the complexity of the educational experiences of the students in my classroom. Her book, *Understanding the Educational Experiences of Imprisoned Men*, thus reflects her 10 years of academic and teaching work in prisons, and has again offered invaluable insight to me, this time in my capacity as an aspiring prison education researcher.

Each chapter explores highly relevant themes connected to the educational experiences, identities and journeys of imprisoned men. The first chapter begins by identifying the tension for anyone serving time in prison, or for that matter, working in a prison education department. Nichols points out that the broad aims of prison and education are at odds: '...one aim is to punish and one aim to provide personal development' (p.13). It is within this tension, Nichols argues, that prison learners and educators must find a way to navigate the many complexities of prison life and the barriers that can impede educational flourishing. The first chapter also gives an interesting historical account of prison education as well as an overview of the present-day employability model, and a compelling argument for an alternative humanistic model based on 'care and dialogue' (p.19) for prison learners.

In the following chapters, Nichols discusses broad themes such as desistance, identity and relationships on the inside and outside of prison, and how these themes intimately connect with prisoners' educational journeys through prison. Her reflections are rooted in the words of people on the ground in prison, as each chapter has excerpts from serving prisoners, prison leavers and prison staff collated from her work over the last decade. In the course of these discussions, Nichols introduces the reader, through accessible language and an engaging tone, to some of the most important works of prison sociology. For example, Syke's seminal work *The Society of Captives* is discussed in chapter three, where she introduces his 'classic pains of imprisonment' (p.46) — deprivation of liberty, heterosexual relationships,

1. Nichols, HE (2016) *An Inquiry into Adult Male Prisoners' Experiences of Education*. Doctoral thesis, University of Hull.

autonomy, goods and services and security — followed by her (much needed) update of his work, and how education is used by many people in prison as a coping mechanism to many of these deprivations.

Chapter two is a must-read for aspiring prison researchers. Clearly outlining the practicalities of conducting fieldwork in prison, the important section on *Establishing rapport and speaking to vulnerable people* gives valuable advice for novice researchers on how to connect with people in prison during interviews and is followed by an honest and important discussion on a number of integral themes to conducting prison fieldwork. This includes feeling safe in prison, 'taking sides' (p.33) in the interview, perceptions of the researcher and their relationship with the prison establishment and most importantly, reflections on how criminological data has been historically presented without emotion, despite the suffering in the lives of the people behind the data. Building upon the important works of Jewkes,² Sloan³ and Liebling,⁴ Nichols argues that engaging with emotion as a tool throughout the research process is not weakness, but in fact a strength of a project. Summed up beautifully in the closing sentences of this chapter Nichols argues that prison researchers can conduct their research 'in a way that sheds light on the fragility of the human experience and is something which is integral to the study of social science' (p.43).

The penultimate chapter, *Education and Desistance*, is particularly compelling when reading the stories of those who have been able to move away from crime. This chapter centres on the stories of Liam and Steven, both of whom have managed to forge new, prosocial identities partly by engaging with education in prison. Nichols explains how a positive learner identity becomes an integral part of Maruna's redemption script⁵ and how desistance is not a linear process, but rather a challenge to change one's life, in the face of many external obstacles and personal demons, which haunt many who have experienced prison.

I'd highly recommend this book to aspiring researchers, especially those embarking on fieldwork with people in prison, busy prison practitioners who want a greater understanding of the theory and practice behind prison education and lastly policy makers. Nichol's work highlights the myriad of problems connected to prison education and how the barriers can stop some from progressing. The book highlights the challenge of navigating a path of personal development in an environment, like prison, which is fraught with turbulence and uncertainty. The many challenges that serving prisoners, prison leavers and prison staff experience in negotiating the barriers and tensions to educational fulfilment in prison is clearly delineated in the chapters of this book, and decision makers in government would gain positively from taking heed, and then acting on future prison education policy.

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Pen Picture: Glenn is a life sentenced prisoner at HMP Berwyn

I was 31 when I came to prison and had not completed any formal qualifications since I had left High School back in 1992, when I achieved several GCSEs grade A to C, including Maths and English. Over the past 15 years in prison, I have completed over 30 courses, most of which have been between Levels 1 and 3. I have attained two Certificates in Higher Education with the Open University, one in Law and one in Environmental Studies, and I have almost completed a degree in Business Management. My plans are to try and move on to study a Masters then PhD, but as highlighted in Dr Nichols' book, the support provided to prisoners wanting to study beyond Level 2 is poor. Prison education is primarily focused on getting prisoners to engage in lower-level studies. I have individual drive and a passion to achieve my study goals and I have been able to open doors for myself that have helped me to access the courses and support that I need. I was also lucky enough to take part in a Learning Together module at Level 6, with Leeds Beckett University

2. Jewkes, Y. (2002). "Autoethnography and emotion as intellectual resources: Doing prison research differently." *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18(1): 63-75.

3. Sloan, J (2016) *Masculinities and the Adult Male Prison Experience*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

4. Liebling, A. (1999) "Doing research in prisons: Breaking the silence?" *Theoretical Criminology*, 3(2): 147- 173

5. Maruna, S. (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-convicts Reform and Rebuild their lives*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association Books.

which was a unique experience and created a network of contacts in higher education that I still use for information and guidance to this day. Dr Nichols' book has for me highlighted the failings in the provision of support for those like myself that wish to study beyond Level 2, and I can only hope that prison Governors and education providers in our prison estate begin to place some resource into the provision of higher education sooner rather than later.

Having lived in the closed prison estate for the past 15 years, it is refreshing to read a book that is balanced and provides a true insight into the prison education system. *Understanding The Educational Experiences of Imprisoned Men* is not just the typical outsider's view of prison education, with detailed and considered analysis within each of the seven chapters, supported by contributions from prisoners past and present, and education staff who all provide vivid real-life testimony. Understanding the educational experiences of past and present prisoners is vital to inform future planning and development of prison education delivery and Dr

Nichols has successfully written a book that informs, reflects, and for me, provides some hope that my own studies in prison will contribute to a crime free life beyond the gate. Prison education has its own set of challenges, not least with the environment not being an ideal setting for study. However, as this book makes clear, engagement with education improves wellbeing, human capital, social capital, knowledge, skills, and employability.

It is also not a shock to me that engagement with education can significantly reduce reoffending. The proven one-year reoffending rate is 34 per cent for prison leavers, compared to 43 per cent for people who don't engage in any form of learning.¹ Literacy levels amongst the prison population remain significantly lower than the general population. Nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) of people entering prison were assessed as having literacy skills expected of an 11-year-old, more than four times higher than in the general adult population (15 per cent).² Dr Nichols' book helps us to understand the reasons behind these facts which can in turn help

us to understand how best to target prison education resources moving forward.

Dame Sally Coates' report in May 2016,³ made a number of recommendations to create a prison regime with learning at its heart. Subsequent changes to prison education contracts now allow greater flexibility to fund opportunities, such as arts, and informal learning to allow people to engage and progress their sentence,⁴ but more is still needed. Dr Nichols, in writing her book, has put the spotlight back on prison education and ignited fresh debate. Progress in the criminal justice system is always slow, but with a little effort and using this book as a guide, positive changes can be made. Through pulling together many studies and academic papers on this important subject, this is a powerful book that should be in every prison library and on the desk of all Governors and education providers to help inform future development and delivery of prison education. It will also be of interest to those working or studying in the field of criminology and social justice.

1. Prison Reform Trust (2022). Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile: Winter 2022. London: Prison Reform Trust
2. Prison Reform Trust (2022). Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile: Winter 2022. London: Prison Reform Trust
3. Coates, S. (2016). *Unlocking Potential: A Review of Education in Prison*. London: Ministry of Justice
4. Prison Reform Trust (2022). Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile: Winter 2022. London: Prison Reform Trust