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The Prison and the Public

Editorial Comment

The Prison and the Public

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Superficially, the terms 'prison' and 'public' seem to have obvious meanings and to some extent the modern 'prison' is defined as not 'public'; that inmates are withdrawn by the state from public life, although certainly not to enjoy a private life. Paradoxically the enjoyment of a private life is one of the privileges taken away on entry into prison. In recent decades the words prison and private have increasingly been used together not to describe conditions or the experience of imprisonment but prisons being contracted out to 'private' operators on a commercial, for [private]-profit basis. On the other hand, the 'public' is a term often used vaguely to refer to the people or the community or anything connected with them. Incarcerated offenders are commonly perceived as anti-community or even at war with society with the 'public' being, economically and/or personally, victims of their depredations. Hence, the prison, its prisoners and the public have often been portrayed as opposite and opposing entities.

Historically prisons have aroused considerable public curiosity. The concealment of their internal worlds has kindled the imagination and inspired a desire for knowledge about their isolated, unknown spaces. At the same time, and paradoxically, the powerfully symbolic external structure of the prison — built to intimidate and deter — has arguably provided the public with a sense of familiarity and even comfort at the certainty of punishment. But despite this interest, the public have had little familiarity with the modern prison. This is not due to a lack of sources of information. On the contrary, media depictions of prisons and prisoners proliferate. However, as Cheliotis has argued, the public preference for 'immediacy' rather than 'complexity' shapes the nature of mediated representations.¹ On occasion this has fed into a fascination, verging on the salacious, with punishment and suffering. Thus, despite the abundance of popular sources (both 'factual' and fictional) which claim to expose the 'realities' of prison life, these are frequently misleading and decontextualised depictions which, when coupled with a harsh political rhetoric, serve primarily to consolidate misinformed, superficial and punitive public perceptions about prison, prisoners and punishment.

Media representations aside, in contemporary society, there are other means by which the public can be connected to the prison. Prison heritage sites and museums allow the public to experience the prison more directly, in some cases permitting them to physically enter the institution. Alternatively educational programmes and

projects can provide the public with constructive and contextualised meaning to the prison experience. However, all methods of connecting the public with the prison are inherently entwined with political and economic meaning and thus achieving 'authenticity' is challenging. This special edition of the *Prison Service Journal* attempts to challenge or at least problematize one-dimensional perspectives through examinations of the relationship between the prison and the public. It is hoped that these articles will not only demonstrate how earnest and positive these connections can be but also that, just like prisons in the early twenty-first century, historical prisons were diverse, fluid environments in which inmates tested and pushed the boundaries of their existence. Some prisoners, who were accepted at the time or later as being incarcerated for political reasons were best placed not only to imprint their own identities on their carceral space but on national politics of their times to the extent that the prisons which held them became identified with their morality and their suffering.

This themed edition will examine some of the ways in which the public can be connected to the realities of incarceration, past and present. Three of the papers have an international scope, discussing penal establishments and projects in a range of countries including Northern Ireland, South Africa, Australia, Tasmania and the USA. Contrasting this we have three articles that take a more localised perspective, focusing on prisons and schemes in England. But the edition begins with an examination of methodology and the ways in which the public, rather than relying on mediated representations, might *directly* investigate the lives of prisoners in the past. When French historian Arlette Farge recommended embracing the 'art' (as well as the 'science') of historical research, she was encouraging the researcher to negotiate the 'ebb and flow' of archival material, arguing that when situated in their appropriate contexts, even 'small glimpses eventually consolidate into patterns... which, when pieced painstakingly together, illuminate the everyday life of the distant past'.² In the first article **Helen Johnston, Barry Godfrey, David Cox and Jo Turner** demonstrate how this project might be achieved using digitised archives. Access opportunities for researchers (both academic and independent) have expanded with the exponential increased availability of digitised historical records. Their research, which carefully pieced together the lives of 650 individuals released from prison during the nineteenth century, used a plethora of digital resources including birth,

1. Cheliotis L (2010) 'The Ambivalent Consequences of Visibility: Crime and Prisons in the Mass Media', *Crime, Media, Culture*, 6(2): 169-184.
2. In Bosworth, M. (2001), 'The Past as a Foreign Country: Some Methodological Implications of Doing Historical Criminology', *British Journal of Criminology*, 41/3, 435.

death and marriage records, census records, military records, online criminal registers, newspaper trial reports and prison licenses. The paper explains how, from such broad data, intimate details of particular lives can be reconstructed and also reflects upon some of the problems and challenges that such methods potentially pose.

The edition continues with a selection of articles that examine the ways in which the public can connect with the internal world of the prisons and prisoners of the past. Three of these papers have an international flavour.

Eleanor Casella's article establishes a theoretical framework for the analysis of the physical construction of, and the use and negotiation of space within, penal establishments. As noted above, architecture can play an integral role in the disciplinary function of institutions and can be used, not only as a means to impress ideological meaning externally but also to encourage and establish social control and discipline internally. Taking a material perspective, she highlights the significance of prison design and by drawing on archaeological research conducted on a range of penal institutions (including prisons, POW camps, asylums and other detention facilities) she examines the role played by architectural spaces and artefact collections in the construction of everyday institutional lives. Acknowledging that power is 'capillary'³ she examines how the disciplinary intentions of physical spaces can be disrupted, resisted and rejected by those who inhabit them. In the next article, **Laura McAtackney** examines the way in which prison heritage sites might be used and interpreted in the context of societies in post-conflict transition, specifically Northern Ireland and South Africa. Presenting a comparative case study of Long Kesh / Maze prison, which remains closed to the public, and Robben Island, which was transformed into a museum and then a world heritage site shortly after its closure as a prison, McAtackney argues that the decisions taken over the use of such sites strongly denote how societies manage the political and moral complexities and implications of their difficult pasts. The paper examines the issue of the value decisions taken in terms of which narratives are emphasised in such sites. Clearly, for societies in transition, the silencing of particular voices can carry important political meaning and consequences. The Port Arthur penal station in Tasmania is the focus of **Hamish Maxwell-Stewart's** paper. The station has attracted tourists for over a century, becoming one of the most famous museums in Australia, and life in the penal colony has been colourfully recounted via literature and films. However the original tourist focus of the site presented a sanitised, official version of the past which obscured the realities of transportation and incarceration and excluded the voices of those subject to these penalties. Maxwell-Stewart examines the intentions behind, and development of, a new tourist venture, entitled the 'Lottery of Life' interpretation gallery, at the Port Arthur site. The article demonstrates how careful and meticulous historical research can be used to present a meaningful, complex and powerful representation of past lives.

The edition moves on to two articles that present a more localised focus. In his paper **Nicholas Arber** provides us with a history of Norwich Castle, used as the County Gaol for Norfolk from the mid-fourteenth century until its closure in 1887. Arber charts the long public interest in the prison that followed its closure and its shift to a formal tourist attraction. He examines the 'dungeon' tours that took place in the 1950s and 60s, largely sensationalised affairs which focused primarily on the violence and brutality of the prison but with little broader context. The paper draws on Arber's PhD research, exploring the changes in the way the prison has been presented to the public in recent years. With interactive exhibitions, a reconstruction of an original cell and 'real life' accounts of actual prisoners, Arber discusses the balance that is struck between detached objectivity and the ever popular, yet salacious, presentations of the past. **Lindsey Ryan** and **Elisabeth Chard** take Preston House of Correction as their focus. The article reflects on the influential work of Reverend John Clay, chaplain of the institution, and discusses the nature of the labour undertaken by prisoners in Lancashire prisons during 19th Century. The specific focus is a museum exhibition, which was inspired by research conducted by Ryan, scheduled to open in 2013/14. The exhibition, which uses a series of portable 'pop up' banners, compares the prison of the past with contemporary institutions in Lancashire. Specifically, the display covers the introduction of work into the prison regime, the rehabilitative methods used in prisons, the impact of early reformers including John Clay, and some themes of continuity and discontinuity in terms of crime causation. The aim is to link historical and twenty-first century prison practice to encourage debate about reformative methods and what can be achieved.

The articles thus far have primarily focused on how the public might be better informed of the realities of prisons and prisoners of the past. The final article in this collection presents an interview conducted by **Michael Fiddler** with Saul Hewish, founding member of Geese Theatre Company and co-director of 'Rideout' Creative Arts for Rehabilitation project. In this interview Fiddler and Hewish reflect on how the public can be connected to the experience of contemporary prisoners. Hewish discusses his work on two Rideout projects. The first, entitled 'the Creative prison', focused on the physical prison environment and was undertaken in conjunction with staff from HMP Gartree. As part of this project prisoners and prison staff were involved in the reconceptualisation of the internal landscape (in terms of both physical structure and regime) of the prison. The second project, entitled GOTOJAIL, featured a touring 'pop up' cell installation that toured festivals, shopping centres and other venues. What these schemes reveal is a vital optimism about the potential for change in the future. The response to the Creative Prison showed a serious interest in considering better, more creative penal alternatives. The engagement with GOTOJAIL suggests that there is a 'public' that wants to know what the 'prison' is and why its operation should be constantly questioned.

3. Foucault M (1980) *The History of Sexuality Vol I: An Introduction*, Vintage, New York.