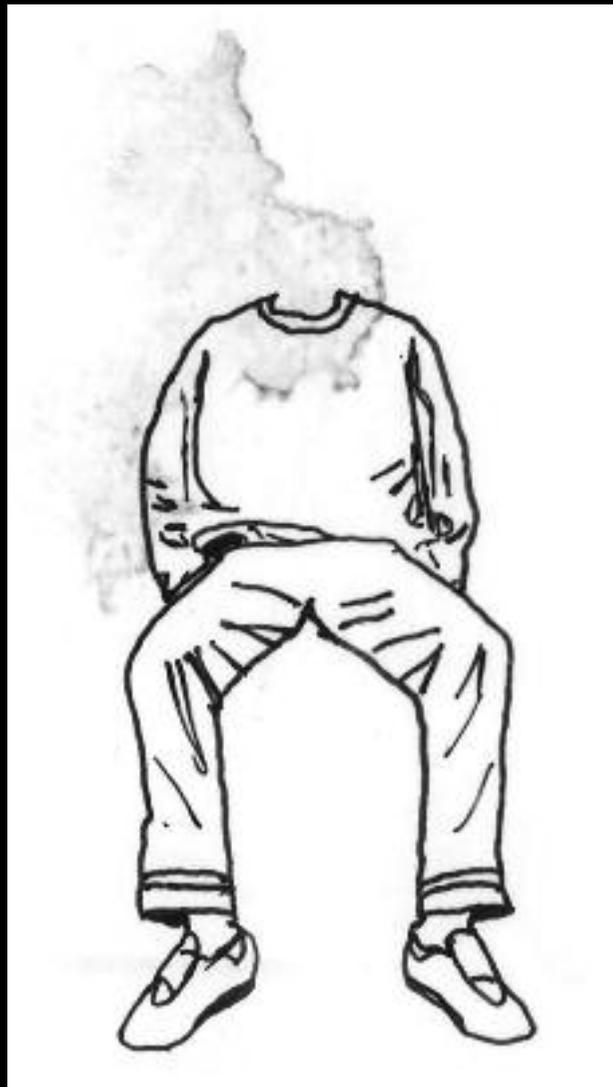


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Special Edition
The Prison and the Public

Artist or Offender?:

Braving the Mirror

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Introduction

This essay will analyse the impact of creating artwork in prison specifically for public display, by assessing the premises and outcomes of *Mirrors: Prison Portraits*, a self-portrait project which culminated in an exhibition (and film) exhibited at the Scottish National Gallery, 4 November 2010 — 26 March 2011. *Mirrors*, a National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) Communities Outreach Project, was part of Inspiring Change, an academically evaluated initiative led by Motherwell College to measure the rehabilitative potential of arts projects for offenders in five Scottish prisons during 2010.

By choosing self-portraits as the artistic form for the project the NGS Outreach Team foregrounded issues of seeing and being seen and of disclosing and hiding, central aspects of prison life. By asking the participants to form their own image of themselves for public consumption we gave them the chance to examine their own life experiences by creatively constructing an image, aware that the result would need to communicate with a wide audience. Often, due to the trial process, they were intensely aware of how they were regarded by the media and thus the public, but little used to self-examination.

The audience's reactions to the exhibition and the film provide valuable evidence about this project's ability to change perceptions, and develop a dialogue between those inside and those outside prison. The potential of this dialogue, sparked by its artistic catalyst, merits further discussion assessing the rehabilitative effect of artistic creativity and also its public recognition.

This article explores the positive results of this project, on both prisoners and public (including judges), and the pointers it offers towards developing future artistic initiatives that allow for therapeutic reassessment on both sides.

Identity at Stake

'Sometimes I just want to start again. I want to be a blank canvas.'

Participant, HMP Shotts.

Quoted in *Mirrors* documentary film.¹

'Reciprocally, we imagine ourselves as the objects of the point of view of others: society is the 'mirror' in which we regulate our 'countenance and behaviour'.'

Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow*:

The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh (2007)²

'Who am I?' This simple question is central to the self-portrait. The ability to answer this question also begins to unlock the door to participation in society. Having a sense of a self that can be described, that can be affected by, and that can affect others, is crucial to acting socially. For the majority of those in Scotland's prisons the means to develop that sense of self-empowerment and control over one's life have been severely limited.³

The National Galleries of Scotland's *Mirrors: Prison Portraits* project sought to offer offenders the creative means to fashion a self-representation that would increase their feeling of self-worth. Fashioning yourself for others' view is a crucial component of modern life. It imaginatively integrates the individual into the community. What selves are acceptable? Which desires must remain unsatisfied and which actions avoided? The creation of one self-portrait within a pilot arts project may appear to be a limited endeavour, but the singular experience of learning to form an object of value — a work of art — to be shared with others, using oneself as subject-matter, may be profound. This seems especially so for those who have damaged themselves — and who may also have damaged others — and are seeking a positive renewal of their lives.

The history of portraiture has witnessed both the birth of the idea of a unified, unique personality that can be captured as an image, and the disintegration of that idea of an undivided self. The national art collection holds portraits by artists from Allan Ramsay

1. National Galleries of Scotland, *Mirrors (Art Class)*, (2010). Director: Lou McLoughlan.

2. Duncan, Ian (2007) *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 265.

3. Unpublished paper by Mike Nellis, former Emeritus Professor, University of Strathclyde, reveals that 70% of those in Scotland's jails come from the five most deprived Council wards in the country. Presented as part of an Inspiring Change Training Day, Glasgow City Halls, Jan 2010.

to Douglas Gordon that reveal this steady rise of the 'self' and its subsequent fragmentation and dispersal in contemporary society.

The National Galleries of Scotland's outreach officers and commissioned artists aimed to use the national collection of portraits as inspiration to aid the process of the rehabilitation of offenders. We invited those whose identities had been shaped by the designation 'criminal', to begin to rebuild their sense of self. Participants were encouraged to take up the challenge of creating a portrait that reflected themselves and their lives, and their ability to project a positive future.

To define the quality that was necessary to bind the individualised subjects of modernity into a functioning civil society during the Scottish enlightenment of the 18th-century, moral philosopher and economist Adam Smith developed the concept of 'sympathy'. Late 18th and early 19th-century portrait paintings in the national art collection attest to this concept of mutual recognition as they display the emergence of a reflective moral physiognomy at work in the depictions of the faces of the sitters. The viewer is encouraged to judge the moral and civic worth of his fellow citizen. The stoic self-command and propitious self-possession beaming from the heroes of Edinburgh's 'Golden Age' attest to the role of the portrait in confirming social standing and promoting merit.

As participants in the five prisons came up against the weight of their task to redefine themselves through the process of portraiture, those qualities of self-command and sympathy were tested over and over again by those who often spoke of 'never having thought about themselves'. The offenders revealed feelings about themselves which were often centred on their self-confessed lack of self-awareness or, being in an empty space, in glaring opposition to the seemingly composed individuals of the historical portraits staring back at them from National Galleries of Scotland catalogues. Modern society thrives on the development of individuals as self-conscious, instrumental projects. Unfortunately, those from disadvantaged social groups who have frequently suffered from a lack of care, inequality, poverty, poor educational attainment and the ravages of unemployment, drugs and crime, are more likely to feel themselves the victims of circumstances, rather than their master.

The Five Projects

In HMP Shotts, long-term prisoners probed and discussed a selection of portraits — identifying, for example, the deep loss and sadness in the eyes of the fading, and alcoholic, 'Young Pretender', Prince Charles Edward Stuart, whose royal status is irretrievably lost. We had actually cut-out his eyes and shown them in isolation from the rest of the portrait, before his identity could be assumed, in order to develop the observational acuity of the participants. This interpretative analysis allowed the men to get behind the official masks in these images and to search for an emotional understanding of the sitter. We then asked the men to draw their own eyes whilst wearing masks revealing only this feature of their face.

The fact that a drawn, or painted, image could act as an emotional signpost was an insight about which the men in HMP Shotts took to heart. They now saw themselves as the elusive object of their own concerns, mediated through the process of making a portrait with paint and canvas. They began to realise that the translation of their thoughts and emotions into painted visual clues; imagery, textures, colours and tones, was a creative process that they could manipulate to have an effect on themselves and other viewers of their work. The self-portrait

Participants were encouraged to take up the challenge of creating a portrait that reflected themselves and their lives, and their ability to project a positive future.

allowed them to undertake redemptive work on themselves as an image, an image that at moments they would reject, erase, redo, adapt, struggle over for hours, or subsume in an elaborate metaphor. Metaphors are understandably prevalent in prisoners' artworks, often featuring clocks, labyrinths, masks and symbolic hand-gestures. Prison corridors regularly display figurative images based on prisoners' strong identification with the images of certain poster stars from popular culture, from rapper Tupac Shakur to Ché Guevara.

Creating a self-portrait encouraged the participants to deal directly with how they saw themselves. This seems straightforward, but as the film of the project reveals, in this process lay the possibility of them rehabilitating themselves by experiencing the connection between what they had done and their own image, and the possibility of seeing themselves as someone who could go beyond this action or event, without erasing it (**Figure 1**). As the academic evaluation of the wider Inspiring

Change project confirms, 'There is also evidence that for many ex offenders desistance is about personal redemption, not necessarily in the spiritual sense but rather in the sense of finding a way to 'make good' on a troubled and troubling past by making a positive contribution to families or communities now and in future.'⁴ This was why the cathartic experience of knowing that their portraits would be presented to the public in a national gallery was at once, so testing, and subsequently confirming, for them. As the curators of the exhibition we had a fantasy of being able to have a live, webcam relay of the opening night of the exhibition beamed into the prison for the participants to witness at first hand. This didn't happen but we made sure we relayed the visitor feedback and the content of the speeches on the opening night along with other comments by interested parties who had seen the show.

Those participants who did attend the exhibition opening, following release or having been granted leave from their open prison, were moved by the exhibition's reception and were quietly glowing due to their achievements. A young woman, formerly in HMP Greenock, brought her mother along, and both were tearful for most of the evening because they had something to be proud of. Two young lads recently released from HM YOI Polmont attended, having never expected to find themselves on display in an art gallery. They were all there at the end of the night, almost unable to leave, as they probably wanted to remain in contact with the precious, positive confirmation that the event was providing them. I experienced a similarly profound moment at HMP Shotts when on the day before the exhibition's opening we showed the film to those who had taken part in it. I could not look at the faces of the men as they saw themselves revealing their thoughts to director Lou McLoughlan's camera, but as we watched I could hear the deep intakes of breath and the sighs, the majority of the men tearful, motionless and silent at the end. They recognised what they had given to the film and in doing so had probably been braver and more honest in terms of facing themselves than many of us, outside prison, will ever be. The

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effect of taking part in the project in developing a positive persona, they subsequently informed us, was immeasurably greater than the effect of the Cognitive Behaviour Therapy courses offered by the Scottish Prison Service.

Once again the project evaluation report proves the benefits of public recognition, 'The public successes of the participants' efforts — in performances and exhibitions before audiences of significant others — opened up new personal and social identities (as artists or performers) that confirmed the possibility and viability of change in one's character and identity... participation in the arts projects seemed to help many prisoners begin to imagine or envision an alternative, appealing, conventional self.'⁵ For those taking part the production of a hard-won self-image was a vital catalyst in 'ceasing to see oneself as an offender and finding a more positive identity... successfully peeling off the criminal label that criminal justice systems are so effective at applying.'⁶

For the short-term women offenders in HMP Greenock, gender issues weighed heavily in their identification with the photographic portraits of contemporary American artist Cindy Sherman, and her compatriot Francesca Woodman. Sherman's attempts to reveal the constriction of female gender roles pushed towards the grotesque by the mass-media, were understood by women often at the mercy of undue male influence over their lives. The positive release they experienced from taking control of the construction of their own images is evident in their imaginative self-portraits, and in the feedback they communicated to the *Inspiring Change* evaluation team (**Figure 2**).

Young men in HM Young Offenders' Institution at Polmont often shied away from depicting their own faces and opted to hide behind the logos and labels of consumer goods as a means of identifying themselves (**Figure 3**). Artist Fraser Gray and National Galleries of Scotland outreach officer Richie Cumming encouraged those taking part to project a cut-out, self-portrait avatar into a real-life location where it

4. Anderson, K., Colvin, S., McNeill, F., Nellis, M., Overy, K., Sparks, R. and Tett, L. (2011) *Inspiring Change: Final Project Report of the Evaluation Team*, 32. Glasgow: Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, University of Glasgow.

5. Ibid. p. 63.

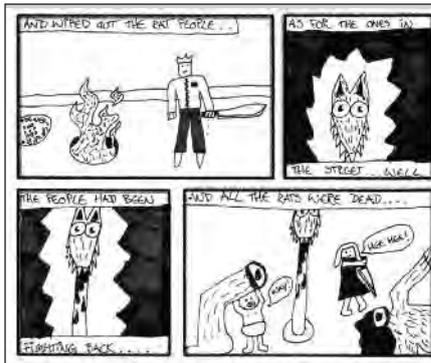
6. Ibid. p. 32.



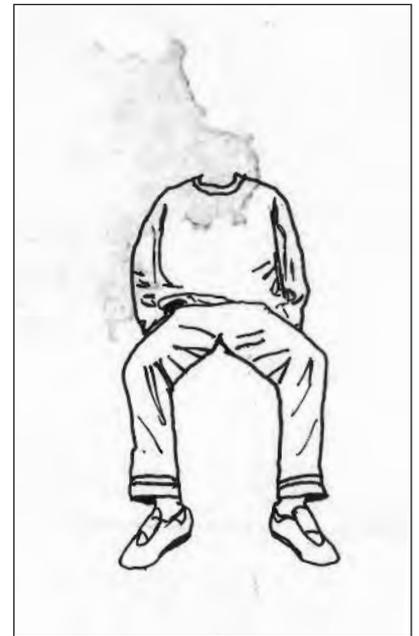
(Figure 2) *Angel*, HMP Greenock, 2010, copyright NGS Craig MacLean and Motherwell College 2010.



(Figure 1) *Doppelganger*, HMP Shotts, 2010 copyright National Galleries of Scotland and Motherwell College 2010.



(Figure 4) *King Dexter HMP Barlinnie*, 2010, copyright NGS, Kevin Reid and Motherwell College 2010.



(Figure 3) *Headless*, HMP YO1 Polmont, 2010, copyright NGS, Fraser Gray and Motherwell College 2010.

was then photographed. This re-positioning demanded awareness on the part of the young men about how they would be seen by others, when released back into society.

In HMP Barlinnie artist Kevin Reid moved further from the individualised model of the traditional portrait, and asked the participants to create scenes and stories for a graphic novel. Caustic prints by the Dadaist George Grosz (from the collection of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art), set the tone for a set of drawings and storyboards that speak about the reality of the environments from which these short-term prisoners come. The blight of social deprivation and the ongoing cycles of violent attack and retaliation are the background to the men's ironic yet clear-sighted understanding of their crimes and their position in society (**Figure 4**). They are on record as praising the freedom and responsibility they were given by the artist to speak from where they were actually placed, rather than from a notionally reformed position. As a result, their work hints at the bleak landscape to which they will return on leaving prison. Their book forms a collective portrait,

animated by a reflective awareness of the paths that their own lives have taken in relation to a societal structure that has done them few favours. As such, it asks its readers to share in the need to create a societal solution to the cycle of inherited deprivation to which those in HMP Barlinnie will return.

The directness of the HMP Barlinnie prisoners' accounts of their experiences struck visitors to the *Mirrors* exhibition, as evidenced in the following quote from one visitor:

*...the story of King Dexter and the Rat King (from the HMP Barlinnie graphic novel), a powerful and shocking parable of anger and alienation — a real story of the experience of many prisoners and a refreshing change from our wished for tales of remorse and rehabilitation. Confronting violence, the truth of it, is so vital.*⁷

This brutal retelling of grim realities, in the participants' own patois, was the key to developing their self-confidence, as measured by the academic

7. National Galleries of Scotland, (2011). *Mirrors: Prison Portraits*, Comments from exhibition visitors. p. 31.

evaluation. The HMP Barlinnie comic-artists scored the highest across all nine Inspiring Change art projects due to positive changes in all the prisoners taking part. Artist Kevin Reid, who led this project, allowed the inmates to have control over the publication, with him acting as editor, and this led to them developing a strong self-awareness as to the public's potential perceptions of their stories and images. This handing over of responsibility proved important to altering this group of offenders' perceptions of themselves, proving that the artistic process can function as a suitable training ground for positive decision-making in relation to cause and effect.

If the cycle of deprivation and violence is to be broken then offenders need to be supported in their role as members of their families, establishing stable homes and law-abiding lives. At HMP Open Estate those nearing the end of their sentences were asked to produce photographs of 'Home' whilst on leave. These images reflect the everyday circumstances of normal life, poignantly displaying the men's precious feeling for others and their own hopes for fulfilment. Criminology's theory of 'desistance' — whereby the offender eventually is tied more strongly to children, family and stability, and offending begins to cease — begins to take on an achievable form in these photographs.

Pertinently, re-employment rates for those leaving prison are small and continued support from the authorities is slim. As the participant released back into society at the end of the *Mirrors* documentary film points out, 'You know... they talk about community, but I don't see much evidence of community out here.'⁸ This statement is a challenge to us all in the field of community-based arts and as fellow citizens.

The precious subjectivity that empowers individuals to form a definable and productive identity is one of the defining qualities of our society. This sense of reflection and agency has been achieved to some extent by the men and women taking part in the *Mirrors* project. Moreover, participants have stressed the change that has taken place whereby

they have openly discussed personal issues and supported each other as members of a group sharing in the process of creativity and rehabilitation. This is very unusual in the prison situation where privacy is guarded closely.

Altering Public Perceptions

From the beginning of the project the participants were asked to consider the creation of their portraits in relation to their display in a public exhibition in the Scottish National Gallery, which was planned as the culmination of the project. The possibility of this public visibility of their work both intrigued and worried those taking part. Whilst attracted by the thought of their work being accepted on this level, they also feared it being used to confirm their identities as 'monsters'. They felt this 'monsterring' process had occurred during their court appearances, particularly those whose trials had been covered in the media. This process, whether based on any truth or not, had left the prisoners scarred, struggling with their own perception of themselves as 'bad'. The phrase I remember being used in HMP Shotts by one inmate was 'sometimes I do think I *am* bad, but...'. This negative perception was also an initial factor — but one that could be overturned — in the public response to the works of

. . . participants have stressed the change that has taken place whereby they have openly discussed personal issues and supported each other as members of a group sharing in the process of creativity and rehabilitation.

art on display, as revealed by a visitor's comment that 'there is often a perception that criminals are bad through and through. Young offenders in particular are seen as having no 'inner life', no capacity for self-reflection and change. This exhibition challenges that view. I was also stuck by how little the women looked like criminals, whatever criminals look like!'⁹

This comment reveals the preconceptions that can colour a member of the public's viewing of a portrait of an offender. The long history of quasi-scientific physiognomy and the criminal justice system's reliance on the photographic mug-shot, not forgetting portraiture's own adoption of facial and bodily taxonomy (e.g. Edgar Degas's late nineteenth century studies of prostitutes, ballet dancers and

8. National Galleries of Scotland, *Mirrors (Art Class)*, (2010).

9. National Galleries of Scotland, (2011). *Mirrors: Prison Portraits*, Comments from exhibition visitors. p. 31.

laundresses), has developed strong visual expectations in relation to portraits of prisoners. This is where the power of self-depiction can help to restore faith in the public that people can change, an impulse evidenced by a visitor to the *Mirrors* exhibition who commented, 'My initial reaction is 'Oh, something different', but soon I'm more deeply touched by the honesty — the powerful yearning for freedom, the grief over time lost, opportunities wasted. The question of talent — which some clearly have — seems less important than the question of mercy and forgiveness not only from the society to its outcasts, or the victim to the offender, but also the one stamped 'wrong un' or 'defective', or 'bad' or 'criminal', or the ones wielding the stamps.'¹⁰

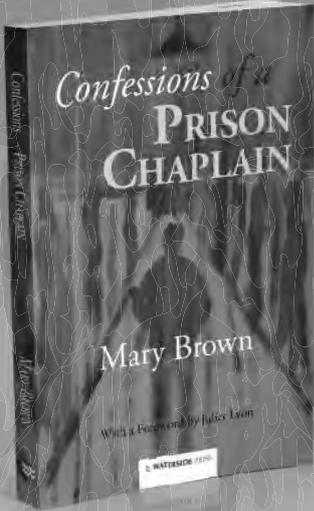
It could be said that the prisoners taking part were prepared to put themselves on trial again, but this time they were responsible for judging themselves. Their anxiety about being on public display once more via their self-portraits was understandable, as they struggled to create an image of themselves that they could share with others. What they achieved can be measured by the reaction of four High Court judges and three Sheriffs at a viewing of the exhibition and the project film.

These judges, including the legal Lord who was responsible for the training of judges in Scotland, spoke of their perceptions of those who passed before them being completely changed by the exhibition and particularly the film in which the participants from HMP Shotts explain the creation of their portraits and their motivations in making these images. They admitted that they had never seen defendants in the light of their own self-understanding and self-assessment. It was a revelation to them to experience the depth of insight and honest introspection on the part of those appearing in the film and immediately threw into perspective the 'narrow, negative powers' that they dispensed in relation to those they sentenced. They found it difficult to reconcile their powers of nugatory correction with the prisoners' revealed need for 'working through' and 'self-examination'. These reactions left us, as organisers of the project, with a sense of surprise that this lack of investigatory depth was the default position within the constraints of the legal system, and with respect for the honesty of these judges who were prepared to share their reactions with us on this subject, as they genuinely questioned themselves and each other on how they could act on what they had seen.

The judicial Lord responsible for training queried himself as to whether the film should be shown to all those being trained for the bench. Sadly this idea was

10. Ibid. p. 30.

'Engaging, thought-provoking':
Juliet Lyon

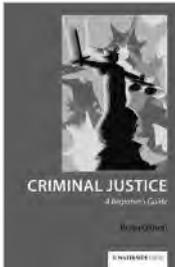


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not followed up, but the strength of the reaction of these judiciary officers to the revelation of the thoughtfulness of the prisoners in the film seemed to us to prove the genuineness of the participants' disclosure of themselves. The judges' new insight into these offenders as distinct personalities, seemed to parallel the portrait-makers' own sense of an ongoing redemptive journey.

Another example of the project's visibility in the public domain, was a visit to the *Mirrors* exhibition by the Head of the Scottish Prison Service, and the Scottish Government's Minister for Justice, Kenny MacAskill, who had welcomed the project from its inception. Their positivity towards the exhibition, confirmed by the findings of the overall Inspiring Change evaluation, reflected the government's intention to develop creative rehabilitation options in Scottish prisons. This aim was put into practice in 2011 via Creative Scotland's Arts and Criminal Justice Funding Stream for arts projects directed at offenders, or those at risk of offending.

Creating portraits, and proudly exhibiting them, has proved to be an extremely powerful mechanism

for those seeking to begin to change their lives. The works of art in this exhibition demanded attention and engagement on that basis alone. Further to this achievement though, is the effect the *Mirrors* exhibition and film has had on the public. Visitors to the exhibition have been overwhelmingly positive towards both the aims of the project and the quality of the work on offer. One expressed this view succinctly, 'I think many people see offenders as people who do not know how to contribute to society other than through crime. This exhibition gives a chance to reconsider and reflect on how important self-expression is to all.'¹¹ Our evaluation also attests to the willingness of members of the public to encounter the lives and thoughts of those who have ended up in prison, and to join with them in the task of projecting the possibility of a collective solution to the many lives that are wasted in our society.

In the final moments of the film a participant holds up his finally completed portrait and proudly states, 'There is a face there now. At the start I never thought I would ever be able to put a face on it.'

With acknowledgements and thanks to my colleague NGS Outreach Officer, Richie Cumming and project artists, Lou McLoughlan, Fraser Gray, Kevin Reid, Fin Macrae, Craig MacLean.

Images from the *Mirrors: Prison Portraits* project can be seen in the PDF of the exhibition catalogue at <http://www.nationalgalleries.org/education/projects/mirrors-prison-portraits>.

The *Mirrors (Art Class)* documentary film of the project is available to view on the same page. The HMP Barlinnie graphic novel, *Don't Judge a Book by its Cover*, is also available as a PDF at http://www.nationalgalleries.org/media/_file/education/barlinnie_graphic_novel.pdf.

11. Ibid. p. 30.