

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

September 2018 No 239



*Special Edition*  
**The Arts in Prison**

# In Place of Hate

*Yvonne Jewkes is a Professor at the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent.*

**In Place of Hate comes at the end of a two-year residence at HMP Grendon, during which acclaimed photographer Edmund Clark has taught, mentored, encouraged and inspired the prisoners there to express themselves through a wide range of artistic mediums, including drawing, painting, writing and drama. The quality and quantity of art on the walls of Grendon and at recent Koestler Trust exhibitions is testimony to Edmund's success in unlocking the men's creative potential. But in the current exhibition, he presents us with glimpses of his own time spent in Grendon, a period of deep immersion as artist-in-residence, and the work he produced there.**

The exhibition reveals multifarious discourses that link to Edmund's wider body of work, yet also reveal much about the therapeutic *raison d'être* of HMP Grendon. The first prison in Europe to operate as a therapeutic community, and still the only HMPPS therapeutic community in the UK, Grendon is a special prison. Regarded by many as the jewel in the (admittedly currently tarnished) crown of Her Majesty's Prison Service—not least because it lays claim to a significantly lower reoffending rate than the rest of the prison estate—Grendon provides, in the words of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons a 'uniquely supportive environment.'<sup>1</sup>

Yet Grendon is no easy option. It is inherently more 'panoptic' than other prisons because its therapeutic mission requires a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week, 52-weeks-a-year commitment by the prisoners to analysing and understanding the underlying reasons for their offending and changing their attitudes and behaviour. The men are, of course, monitored and assessed by prison staff and psychologists, but they must also attend regular group therapy and psychodrama sessions and community meetings, making them answerable to their peers and to themselves. They become, in effect, bearers of their own surveillance. It is common to find in academic research on imprisonment references to prisoners striving not to 'lose face', to feeling it necessary to 'wear a mask' and 'front it out', but these strategies are simply not possible at Grendon. The therapeutic culture necessitates exposure—exposure of your offence(s), of your inner world, of your imaginings

of what your victim(s) experienced and felt, of your very soul. It strips you back to the rawest of states.

'Doing time' also takes on a particularly heavy meaning at Grendon prison. Nearly three-quarters of the men here are serving an indeterminate sentence—in other words, they do not know when they will be released from custody. In such circumstances, time takes on even greater significance than is usually the case for people in prison. It elongates and distorts temporality, as one's 'own' time becomes institutional time, and time without a visible end. But while most individuals serving very long prison sentences do indeed have 'too much' time, they must simultaneously cope with a sense of their lives being foreshortened; of time being taken from them.

Surveillance, panopticism, exposure and the multiple meanings associated with time are facets of life in Grendon that chime with themes that we are familiar with from Edmund Clark's previous work—among them, repetitiveness, tedium; trauma; torture; absence; fear; seeing; unseeing; and being seen. The photographs give visual form to the fears, pains and preoccupations that come with a long prison sentence: the tricks that are played with time; the meaninglessness of passing from one season to the next; the pain of being separated from loved ones; the fear of dying inside; and the feelings of alienation and anonymity that can arise from being deeply buried in the prison system—a 'ghost in the machine'.

Here, then, are the eerie images of the men taken with a pinhole camera. The shadowy, spectral figures are evocative of a different age. Blurry and indistinct, they play with the idea of criminal 'mug shots'. Of course, the mug shot was originally devised to represent the sitter's face accurately and infallibly, and to improve the identification of recidivist criminals. Its origins are in positivism, a nineteenth century 'science' that measured facial features (length of earlobes, distance between the eyes etc.) on the premise that identification of common characteristics or 'abnormalities' enabled others to 'see' guilt and innocence. At around the same time, domestic photographic portraiture also became popular, and these images also recall nineteenth century professional portraiture. Accurately recording people's images for posterity at a time when previously the only means of

1. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons (2017) Report on an Unannounced Inspection of HMP Grendon, 8-18 May 2017, London: HMIP (page 46).

capturing a likeness was to commission a painting, photography was certainly democratic and has become even more so in our self(ie) obsessed times. But it also extended the disciplinary gaze and by being used to identify 'born criminals', whose faces were observed and recorded to indicate criminality, photography simultaneously widened the carceral net.

The deliberately indistinct photographs taken by Edmund of the men at Grendon remind us of those early years of photography and the daguerreotype process. Named after its inventor, Louis Daguerre, it was the first practicable method of obtaining permanent pictures with a camera by producing direct positive images on a silver-coated copper plate. But because the cameras of the late-nineteenth century had long exposure times, which meant that people had to sit absolutely still for up to fifteen minutes, the end products frequently included figures who were blurry and distorted, because they had fidgeted during the shoot. In this project, Edmund asked the men to tell their stories within their own spaces, their cells, and their facial expressions, body movements and hand gesticulations are captured in ethereal and blurred form. Some might see a haunting beauty in them, something that is rarely present in conventional images of offenders. Others will find the images disturbing or discombobulating—we are, after all, accustomed to connecting with people through eye contact and making judgments based on appearance, however fallible this may be.

Contrasting with the pinhole images are the huge, brightly lit flowers and leaves; the result of Edmund picking and pressing everything that grows at HMP Grendon. Much could be read into the symbolism of a decaying flower plucked from carceral ground. For me these images are reminiscent of the common metaphors used to describe a long prison sentence—being frozen in time, left in cold storage, stuck in a state of arrested development. But they also remind us that there is loveliness even in the unlikeliest of places and that there is an intrinsic link between beauty and being just.

Penal aesthetics are, then, much more than the monolithic buildings, bars, razor wire, cameras and other security paraphernalia that typify custodial environments. During a recent research project in a prison in the Netherlands (actually, the one that is rented out to Norway), prisoners described to me the power of nature. As we sat in the prison garden, just beyond a communal association area known as The Park, where 54 mature oak trees stand, one man in his thirties who is serving a 17-year sentence (very long by Norwegian standards) said: 'My parents like that I've grown myself again. This is rehabilitation. No drugs courses. No behaviour courses. Just looking at the trees. I'm better because of the trees'. His words revealed the potential

of nature, not only to transform the environment, but to seemingly reach 'beyond and beneath intellectual cognition' to 'engage directly with the sensual'.<sup>2</sup>

But while the aesthetics of imprisonment might be somewhat softened by the vivid beauty of nature, the third part of the exhibition presents us with the disenchanting appearance of some of the architecture of HMP Grendon. Its buildings date from the 1960s and 70s—not an era known for sensual, empathetic or imaginative institutional design. Here, then, aesthetics are transformed into anaesthetics, functional but indifferent, dulling and numbing the senses. Of course, the penal palimpsest has as many interpretive layers of meaning as one is prepared to uncover, but the banality of the prison buildings as seen, in black and white, through Edmund Clark's lens return us to themes of stasis, monotony and alienation. The colour images, captured as Edmund took circular journeys around the prison grounds, offer something else again. They may be pixilated to obscure information that would be considered sensitive by prison security officers, but the self-censorship clearly has artistic purposes, turning non-descript buildings into graphic art and once again emphasising the blanks, the redactions and the absences that underpin the highly surveilled experience of imprisonment.

In Place of Hate is, then, both a continuation of Edmund Clark's work and, in many ways, a more personal and intimate story than some of his previous projects. His two-year residency at Grendon has allowed him to present the powerful and complex realities of life in a 'therapeutic prison'; itself something of a paradox. Contrasts abound in this exhibition—just as they do at Grendon. Frequently chaotic places, places of dynamic tension and occasional bursts of explosive energy, prisons can also be conducive to stillness, calm and inner reflection—indeed these are among the qualities demanded in a therapeutic community. By submersing himself in the everyday life of Grendon, Edmund has captured a sense of its routine mundaneness and also its occasionally amorphous temporal rhythms. There is a simplicity and directness in all the work on display, but it also jars slightly. The softness of the pressed flowers and leaves sits alongside the impermeable edifices of the boxy buildings made of brick and concrete. We are shown aspects of an environment that is usually hidden, and even introduced to some of the men held there, who Edmund now knows well. But we don't 'see' them; they are there but not quite there. In the work before us, the mundane becomes intriguing and just out of our grasp, while the scarified emotional texture of life in a prison is flattened and stripped of its visceral qualities. In many ways, then, Edmund's work tells us something universal about incarceration.

---

2. Hancock, P. (2005) 'Uncovering the semiotic in organizational aesthetics', *Organization* 12(1): 29-50.