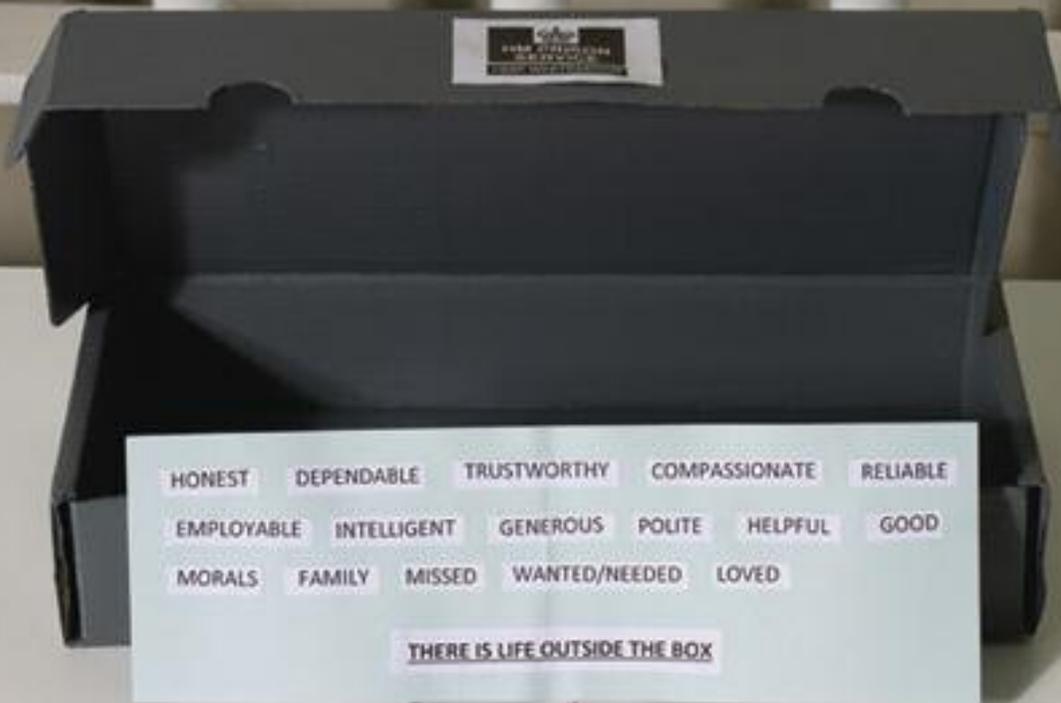


PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

September 2019 No 245



Reviews

Film as radical pedagogic tool

By Deirdre O'Neill

Publisher: Routledge (2018)

ISBN: 978-1-138-63182-3

(hardback)

Price: £100 (hardback)

It has been widely argued that the general public have little or no direct experience of imprisonment and therefore rely upon media representations, whether documentary or fiction, to inform their views.¹ These representations often emphasise particular aspects including the most serious and violent prisoners, the most dramatic situations and the most unusual characters. They therefore reinforce the legitimacy of prisons and even support more punitive responses.² Although there are more empathic and reforming representations, these are less prominent.³

Inside Film is a project that challenges this orthodoxy by working with prisoners, ex-prisoners and people on probation to produce their own short films. These are then screened at small scale events and made available online. The intention of these projects is to raise the political consciousness of participants; offer an alternative form of production and distribution, and; create films that provoke and challenge audiences with different perspectives. As the title of the

book suggests, these projects aim to enable participants and viewers to undertake learning and personal growth (pedagogic) while also challenging dominant political ideas about the criminal justice system and those entangled within it (radical). This book examines the work of Inside Film, and is written by its co-founder, Dierdre O'Neill.

O'Neill describes that her particular concern is with class. Her own biography has shaped her work, particularly her experiences as a working class, single parent living in social housing, who came to academia later in life. She has undertaken her own journey to critical political consciousness, understanding the structures of power and inequality that dominate the world in which she lives. This is reflected in the work of Inside Film, where: 'Our aim is to build an awareness of the possibility of an oppositional consciousness and provide the students with an analytical framework within which they can begin to explore the ways in which this hierarchy, this them and us, is produced.' (p. 7).

The project involves practical sessions on film equipment and techniques as well as theoretical sessions on class politics and radical cinema practice. The participants produce '...short, questioning and angry films...' (p.4) that 'represent the

'embodied experience' of the working class...' (p.5). O'Neill nearly summarises the radical element of the project as offering: '...a counter-hegemonic intervention challenging the essentialist, personalised, and negative taxonomies of working-class people and working-class life. Not just by pointing out that they are, to put it very simply, 'wrong,' in the representational sense of bearing very little resemblance to working-class life but also wrong in what can only be called the moral sense because of the ideological role these representations play in normalising the negative images of working-class people utilised in the media to justify, legitimize, and continue the brutal inequalities that are the reality of working-class life in this country' (p. 14)

Throughout the book, O'Neill offers decoding and critique of popular films. These readings are significant in understanding the strengths and limitations of her approach. Predictably, as a Marxist, the films of Ken Loach are praised for exposing the problems experienced by working class people and the structural causes of inequality. While I also love the work of Ken Loach, I would also recognise the criticism that he offers a sometimes romanticised view of working class life, that his films can overplay the political critique at the expense of

1. Surette, R. (1997) *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice* Second edition Belmont: West/Wadsworth

2. Brown, M. (2009) *The culture of punishment: prison, society, and spectacle* New York: New York University Press

3. Wilson, D. and O'Sullivan, S. (2004) *Images of Incarceration: Representations of Prison in Film and Television Drama* Winchester: Waterside Press

4. <https://www.amber-online.com/>

authentic dialogue and experiences. Better, if lesser known illustrations would be the work of the Amber collective in Newcastle, who have for over 40 years used photography, film and documentary to represent the lives and changing communities of the North East of England⁴; or Peter Watkins, who in films such as the six hour long *La Commune* (2000) mixes recreation, mock documentary and back stage material in order to radicalize the actors and technicians as well as the viewer. In contrast, a film such as *Billy Elliot* (UK 2000: dir Stephen Daldry) is dismissed by O'Neill for its representation of working class culture as an obstacle to the title character fulfilling his potential as a ballet dancer. Such a dismissal ignores that the film reveals some of the tensions between the intersection of class with masculine identity and sexual orientation. *Billy Elliott* is about more than simply a narrow concept of class and O'Neill's reading reveals a dogmatism in her approach: a film is either an acceptable Marxist text or it is nothing. Further, O'Neill describes how she viewed and discussed *The Green Mile* (US, 1999: dir Frank Darabont) with a group of students. While they were positive towards the film and its representation of the unjust sufferings of the main black character, O'Neill is insistent that her more critical reading is correct and that the alternative is simply the product of false consciousness on behalf of a group of people indoctrinated into dominant ideas and values. Such a stubborn and reductionist view again reveals the dogmatism at work.

This book is both fascinating and infuriating. O'Neill's work

with *Inside Film* offers a distinctive and particular approach to art in prisons. Arts have often been promoted on the basis that they humanise the prison experience, but have also been criticised for lending prisons an air of legitimacy for an elite audience.⁵ *Inside Film* seeks no such cosy accommodations, but instead intends to induce discomfort and resistance. The frustration comes from the narrow Marxist perspective, trenchantly expressed and inflexibly applied. Class is not the only lens through which to view the world and there is more than one perspective. Having said all of that, this book is to be applauded for being provocative, for stimulating a reaction and wanting to make some noise. Whether O'Neill is right or wrong, she certainly couldn't be accused of being bland.

Dr. Jamie Bennett
Deputy Director, HMPPS

Opening the Doors: a prison chaplain's life on the inside

By Paul Gill

Publisher: Waterside Press (2018)

ISBN: 978-1-909976-60-3

Price: £19.95 (paperback)

It is first important to say something about the format of this book. It is published in A4 and on each of the pages, a different design (sometimes a photograph) in colour provides the background of the text. The images are often of prison or objects commonly associated with crime and street life. The text itself is set in different typefaces and font sizes,

and the layout of the pages varies a great deal. This design is suited to its content which is divided into nine chapters (with titles such as 'On The Inside', 'In the Nick', 'Justice', and 'Finding God in Captivity'), each of which is subdivided into sections that are rarely longer than a page and frequently only a short paragraph. There are 167 of these sections in a book of just 154 pages (including the frontispiece, the 'Author's Note', 'A Word of Thanks', a foreword, the Contents and a short note on the author).

Although the book's sub-title indicates it is a prison chaplain's life, it is less an autobiography than an anthology of the experiences of the author's ministry in prisons (he served in prisons in Australia and latterly in England, before he recently retired). Much of its content can be described as a series of 'snapshot' contributions (sometimes with quotations) from prisoners, victims (and the families of both prisoners and victims) and staff. Accompanying almost every contribution is a brief reflection or religious commentary, sometimes a prayer or quotation from the Bible.

Some of the images used in the design are powerful, as are some of the insights the contributors have provided. For someone who has worked in a prison, however, few of either the images or the contributions will be new. That doesn't mean that they may not be meaningful: it is salutary to be reminded of the difficulties faced by those who live and work in prison, and those faced by their families and their victims. There is, for example, a poem about crystal meths written by a woman who was imprisoned

5. Cheliotis, L. (Ed) (2012) *The arts of imprisonment: Control, resistance and empowerment* Farnham: Ashgate

for drugs offences. The poem tells of the fateful control this drug has, and a footnote informs us that the woman took her own life shortly after her release. Another contribution is from a man who was executed after having spent 22 years on death row (some contributions are, with footnoted acknowledgements, taken from other books).

However, for all the poignancy of some of the content, the absence of any fuller contextualisation of the experiences depicted — and without too some extended commentary on some of the complexities these experiences reveal — something is missed. The reader who knows prisons well with most likely think this. Without it, someone with less knowledge of prisons may be misled or at least less fully informed. The contextualisation and commentary that is provided is that of a sincere man of faith, whose faith is explicitly evangelical. This will deter some because not everyone will find scriptural quotations, prayers and the offer of spiritual redemption helpful or even relevant. The very succinct references to criminology will frustrate the knowledgeable reader. The less knowledgeable reader will need the discipline to use this book to research elsewhere the issues that arise.

It is therefore likely that book will be picked up and read more frequently by those who know little of prison. However, it is not an 'introduction to prisons' or even a vade mecum for prospective or new chaplains. It is, to coin a phrase, towards the 'kaleidoscopic' rather than 'encyclopaedic' end of the information continuum. As such, it is a book that will probably be dipped into rather than read straight through — which the

clearly detailed 'contents' enables. It is first and foremost the reflections of a life spent working in prisons as a chaplain. It provides a reflection of the witness this man of faith has borne and his evangelical convictions.

William Payne, former Prison Governor

The Maze Prison: A hidden story of chaos, anarchy and politics

By Tom Murtagh OBE

Publisher: Waterside Press

ISBN: 978-1-909976-50-4

Price: £40.00

The tensions over the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in early 2019, have highlighted how fragile and complex the political situation is in the province. Whilst the Troubles are over, an unsteady peace was forged that still simmers with conflict beneath the surface. During the period of time labelled 'The Troubles' very few places or institutions were more synonymous with the chaotic political manoeuvres, violence and fatalities of the time, than the Maze Prison.

Tom Murtagh has brilliantly captured the culture and tactics of the often opposing factions of prisoners, who over a period of 29 years completely undermined the authority of the prison staff and managers who were attempting to provide a decent custodial environment for them. He has also managed to detail perceptions of the political wrangling that the Northern Irish Prison Service HQ and Ministers were engaged in with these factions in custody and

the community. Their aim was to try to assist attempts at a peace process in the province by offering concessions to prisoners as the Maze, unlike many prisons, was not isolated from the rest of Northern Irish society but was in fact a social pawn in various propaganda campaigns by all sides. Murtagh describes in epic detail (at times on a day by day basis) how this further undermined managers and staff already dealing with an almost impossible situation.

Murtagh worked in prisons in Northern Ireland and England for almost 40 years, including governing various prisons in both jurisdictions and ending his career as Area Manager in the English Prison Service. Crucially, he was Head of Security and Deputy Governor of the Maze, which provides the uniqueness of this book; although many accounts have been written of life inside the Maze by former Republican and Loyalist prisoners little has been offered from the perspective of those working there. Murtagh spent ten years researching documents and interviewing people with experience of the Maze and has produced a fascinating and well evidenced tome that runs to almost 800 pages covering the 29 years of the Maze largely in chronological order. The book can be read cover to cover as a historical account but also be used for academic reference following the extensive research Murtagh has undertaken.

The story of the Maze is full of extreme experiences and incidents. This book describes how staff witnessed the hunger strikers being pressurised by those powerful in the Provisional IRA to continue to the point of death even when they knew they would not achieve their aims. It includes elaborate mass escape attempts,

occasionally involving guns, that were facilitated by the way staff were intimidated and undermined by the situation that was allowed to develop. It also describes how the prison was essentially totally destroyed by rioting prisoners attempting to force the government into mass releases due to lack of suitable accommodation. In this respect, Murtagh provides first-hand accounts of how a few brave staff, Spartan-like, prevented a huge number of prisoners escaping from the prison. He also describes how the Army, who patrolled the perimeter and did not understand the culture of imprisonment, used excessive force when resolving that incident. The latter provided a rallying call for prisoners held in the Maze and a propaganda boon for those outside.

Moreover, Murtagh details the intense pressure on staff working in the prisons of Northern Ireland. Not only were they subject to an immensely rising population, unsuitable accommodation, serious assaults, intimidation, understaffing and corrupt colleagues, they were also subject to death threats, assault and murder within the relatively small and close-knit outside community. During the period described in the book 29 members of prison staff were murdered and the police foiled 6 murder attempts on the author, one attempt to kidnap his wife and child, and one attempt to murder his wife with an explosive attached to her car. It was only at this point he relented and returned to the English prison system.

Importantly the book also describes how staff, managers, headquarters and the whole system was effectively conditioned to allow prisoners to separate into discrete units, consolidating their power and influence over staff,

and frustrating the aim of imprisonment in every sense. The conditions ultimately obtained by prisoners in the Maze are also relevant to how the prison system, particularly in England and Wales, manages the present day terrorist threat from within prisons.

Overall, this book provides lessons that are relevant to practitioners, students, academics and even politicians, wishing to draw lessons from history on dealing with high risk terrorists, understaffing and new recruits, corruption and conditioning, and the importance of considering the views of prison service professionals when engaging in significant changes that can impact the lives of those who work and live in prisons.

Paul Crossey, Deputy Governor at HMP Huntercombe

Your Honour, Can I Tell you my Story?

By Andi Brierley

Publisher: Waterside Press (2019)

ISBN: 978-1909976641

Price: £19.95 (paperback)

The latest in a line of acclaimed turn around stories from Waterside Press, *Your Honour, Can I Tell you my Story?*, provides a unique insight into the author's personal journey through care and incarceration, to youth justice practitioner. The author shares his experiences openly, bringing abstract concepts to life through a reflective lense. This creates a unique exploration of criminal justice narrative alongside lived experience.

The author, Andi Brierley, gives an emotional account of his experiences of care as a young

child, the prison system as a child and adult, and his later desistance from offending in this candid and authentic text. Andi, now a married father, works as a Children Looked After/Care Leaver Specialist within Leeds Youth Offending Service. With his qualifications, experience, and work ethic he has now dedicated his career to supporting young people involved with the YOS.

The book aims to give readers the opportunity to explore the author's childhood trauma, alongside his socio-contextual situation and the subsequent reactive pathway of addiction, offending, and incarceration. The author provides a personal account and perspective on desistance with an honest and emotional inner dialogue that distinguishes the text from many others. The overarching themes of the book explore current criminal justice policy narratives of risk, choice, and consequence in the trajectory of the author's lived experience. The author paints a highly convincing argument in a heavily researched and debated area; that is to address the criminalisation and incarceration of young people.

The author begins his story with a succinct introduction, this chapter goes beyond its implied introductory title of 'Who am I?' and gives a detailed insight into the family experiences, and structural and ecological factors involved in his early life. The next chapters then develop into the common cyclical narrative of care, crime, addiction and imprisonment in which the author shares his experiences of navigating through, and surviving the prison system. The final chapters of this book discuss the author's road to desistance, including finding work after custody, volunteering and

becoming a youth justice practitioner. Themes of identity, stigma and resilience follow the author throughout his journey into the world of work and education in these final few eye-opening chapters.

There are many strengths within this book, and within those of the same genre. It provides readers with an inside view into the physical and emotional experiences of someone who becomes involved in offending. It is written in a clear way and is accessible to a wide range of audiences. However, this book particularly stands out for the following two reasons. Firstly, the author writes as a qualified youth justice practitioner, giving the book an interesting reflective characteristic. The author applies criminal justice discourse and narrative to his own experiences and uses this theme to pose questions to the reader. This guides the readers interpretation somewhat but highlights important points to consider within criminal justice practice. Secondly, this book provides insights into the thoughts and

experiences of someone with lived experience that then goes on to work for the criminal justice sector. It is interesting to read the author's position on the operation of the sector and to see how this view is utilised within the service. It also provides points of reflection relating to the stigma associated with criminal convictions and challenges us to consider our unconscious bias with interesting accounts of the authors experiences with colleagues.

Whilst finding this book so engaging, there were points I felt I was left wanting more information. Whether this was regarding detail of the events or perspective of the author, I wanted the narrative to develop its evaluation. Admittedly, this was largely to satisfy my own intrigue. It is likely that added analysis would detract from the accessibility of the work.

Overall, this was an excellent read. I got through the book very quickly, which is a testament to the compelling nature of the memoir. I would recommend this book to a range of audiences;

from academics and students, to criminal justice practitioners in prison, probation, and youth justice services, to social and youth workers. It provides insight into the common socio-economic circumstances of offending which become unfortunately familiar. However, this is alongside the emotional and cognitive experiences that people rarely disclose, therefore broadening understanding of the affective domain. Additionally, I would recommend this book to young people or adults with similar experiences. Pathways into offending behaviour are often individual, however this book provides discussion of the very personal experiences of emotional battles around shame, confidence and identity. This gives the book relatability throughout which, as the author points out, is essential when providing positive role models and, essentially hope for the future.

Sarah Waite, Leeds Beckett University and Sheffield Hallam University