



# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

May 2020 No 249

Special Edition:

**Understanding the Past II**

# Understanding the past II

## Editorial Comment

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This second special edition of the *Prison Service Journal* links to an earlier one published November 2019. Many of the fascinating contributions to these two editions derive from research papers given at the British Crime Historians Conference (Edge Hill University 2018). The variety and number of the papers demonstrated the wealth and quality of research on crime history. The conference also celebrated the decade since the first of those biennial conferences had been held: a decade in which the study of crime history has gone from strength to strength. In that context we felt it was important to bring that work to a wider audience. Of course, it is not always possible for researchers to attend conferences, so we followed up with a call for interest in contributing to a special edition of the *Prison Service Journal*. The total response was much more than we had anticipated so instead of one special historical edition we decided to produce two. That the editorial board of the Journal accepted two editions is recognition of the importance of historical work in understanding the twenty-first century criminal justice system. Not that history can be mined in any straightforward and one-dimensional way, a mistake made all too often in media and political uses and abuses of history. Nevertheless, we ignore historical developments at our peril as structures, processes, philosophies and objectives have origins sometimes so deeply embedded in the past that they can remain unquestioned and unproblematised in the present.

The editorial comment in our first PSJ edition of 'Understanding the Past' observed briefly the risks of ignoring history. But another way to look at this is that criminologists, and indeed anyone with an interest who takes the trouble to learn about how our current criminal justice system operates, are inescapably learning about its history which is embodied in physical, administrative and legal structures. In this editorial we wish to highlight an approach that values the understanding of the past to more fully understand the present and which is evidenced in each of the articles published here. Tosh with Lang have examined the pursuit of history, its uses and social relevance at some length. History, they state eloquently,

'constitutes our most important cultural resource. It offers a means — imperfect but indispensable — of entering the kind of experience that is simply not possible in our own lives. Our sense of the heights to which human beings can attain, and the depths to which they may sink, the resourcefulness they may show in a crisis, the sensitivity they can show in responding to each other's needs — all these are nourished by knowing what has been thought and done in the very different contexts of the past.'<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, history is about human experience and human understanding; subjects that concern us all. We may not always value our rootedness in the past, but we can see the vulnerability of those who lack roots. We must understand the foundations to build and grow, whether that is on an individual level or a systemic one.

Beginning the edition with an individual focus, **David Cox and Joseph Hale** present a biographical account of prisoner governor 'Major H'. The authors note that, perhaps surprisingly, there are relatively few historical accounts written about, or by, English prison governors. Drawing on contemporary prison records and personal journal entries, they examine the life, character and work of Major Robert Hickey, who became governor of Dartmoor prison in 1870. As an ex-military man Hickey was a fairly typical governor for the period but his short tenure at Dartmoor was characterised by a number of challenges and changes. During the 19th century prison governance became more structured, standardised, regulated and monitored. This article explores Hickey's ability (or in some instances, inability) to deliver his duties effectively in this period of transformation.

The following article shifts the focus from prison officials to prisoners themselves, albeit not the stereotypical 19th century offenders. Here, **Ben Bethell** draws on biographical accounts of the so-called 'gentlemen convicts' of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to analyse how and why these particular prisoners perceived themselves to be radically different to 'habitual' or 'professional' criminals. Bethell examines the self-perception of these men within the

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1. Tosh, J with Lang, S. (2006) *The Pursuit of History*. Harlow: Pearson 4th ed.

context of Victorian masculinity and the construction of the 'English gentleman'. At this period, masculinity could be understood to be defined not in terms of its distinction from femininity (which was seen as 'completing' masculinity through the form of a compliant wife), but by its distinction from the lack of self-control and mental inferiority represented by the 'criminal class'. Bethell argues that because of these ideological constructions, association with 'inferior' groups through imprisonment was perceived by the 'gentleman convicts' as an emasculating experience.

Another group of atypical prisoners in the early 20th century consisted of those men imprisoned as conscientious objectors. Imprisoned between 1916 and 1919, many of these men remained in prison after the war ended in November 1918. **Steve Illingworth** draws on contemporary source material to look at the means of resistance conscientious objectors used to protest at their continued imprisonment, solitary confinement and the restrictions placed on forms of communication in Wandsworth prison, London, between September 1918 to April 1919. The protest was unusual in that it involved collective singing and lectures, on left wing and radical topics, delivered through the doors and ventilation grids of cells. The causes, nature and long term consequences of this unusual example of prisoner resistance are discussed.

Whilst some responses to prison regimes, like those in Wandsworth, have taken the form of powerful collective action, the following article by **Alyson Brown** focuses on a much more individualised, harmful

and prevalent response to the 'pains of imprisonment'. Discussing the suicide of Edward Spiers, sentenced to 10 years' penal servitude and 15 strokes of the 'cat-o-nine tails', she examines how this case began to raise public awareness and disquiet around the barbarity of flogging in the inter-war period. However, after the emergence of evidence to suggest Spiers' suicide was not as a result of his fear of corporal punishment, but rather the prospect of a long prison sentence, concern diminished and a potential campaign to abolish flogging was thwarted.

**Heather Shore's** reflections on 80 years of the Borstal system concludes this edition. The Borstal system represented a dominant means of responding to young offenders throughout the twentieth century yet, as Shore points out, relatively little attention has been paid to it by crime historians. The idea originated from the Gladstone Committee report (1895) and the system was perceived as being a 'halfway house' between the prison and reformatory to provide education, training and healthy 'moral influence' over young offenders. The article charts the institution's development and responses to it, from early criticism that it offered nothing substantially different to prison, through its period of expansion and apparent 'success' in the interwar years, to its use as an arena for academic and political 'experimentation' and its increasing visibility in the public consciousness in the post war period. Finally, Shore examines the demise of Borstal, amid concerns around violence, brutality and racism in 1982.