there is no state allowance when the 'bread-winner' is in prison, this can be tough.

Exercise and association is on offer. The prisoners are currently building their gymnasium. Religious Services? - well, again they didn't understand the question! Things are changing, though. On the day of my visit a group of Hymn singers from Finland arrived to entertain.

The Russians allow conjugal visits. I had read that this was the case. Three-day visits. Apparently there were few if any criteria to be satisfied before these visits were allowed. Other visits were allowed but only up to six per year. These visiting arrangements seemed to be designed to cause the greatest amount of frustration but my Russian friends did not agree.

*"These visiting arrangements seemed to be designed to cause the greatest amount of frustration but my Russian friends did not agree."*

The prison houses 500 prisoners and serves the whole north-west of Russia. The prisoners are all male and are aged 18 and upwards. They were all clothed well - grey trousers and thick blue anorak-style jackets. I saw the four pm labour parade. It was not terribly military at all - very relaxed, in fact. Though, like all buildings in Russia, there was a run-down, neglected appearance, there appeared to be order and basically the interiors were clean and reasonable well maintained.

*"After the visit we returned to the outside compound and to the mess where I was entertained to a fish soup - a local delicacy."*

I asked about staff. Are they all military? Yes, but are permanently assigned to the prison service where most will make their career. It is not well paid work and it is difficult to find sufficient recruits. I asked about staff reliability, staff morale and staff training. I was re-assured by positive responses.

In short, I was very impressed. Of course they have problems and in true Russian fashion, they weren't going to share these with me. On the face of it, I could have been in any western European low category prison.

The Commandant and his visiting boss were keen to learn about the British Prison Service. I told them all I could. 'We share many problems, that is why we both have grey hair' laughed the Commandant. His boss did not share the joke ■

OBITUARY

# WILLIAM DOUGLAS-HOME (1912-1992).

Author of 'Now Barabbas'.

*Mike Nellis, Lecturer in Probation Studies, University of Birmingham.*

William Douglas Home, the playwright, who died on 28 September 1992, attracted long and fulsome obituaries in a number of national newspapers. Although the consensus seemed to be that 'The Chiltern Hundreds' and 'The Reluctant Debutante' were his best known plays, all the major obituaries acknowledged the quality of his first, 'Now Barabbas', which was set over an eight day period in a British prison, on the eve of an execution. *The Independent* (30 September 1992) said 'probably it was his best play. It was certainly his most serious', while *The Daily Telegraph* (30 September 1992) described it as 'the play he thought his best'. Although clearly against capital punishment, it was not a particularly polemical play, and sought merely to aquaint theatre-going audiences with something of the reality of prison life.

The raw material for the play was gathered from personal experience. As a captain in the Army in 1944, Douglas-Home refused orders to bomb Le Havre before civilians were evacuated from it. He was court-martialled and sentenced to a year in prison, of which he served ten months before the war ended, first in Wormwood Scrubs, then in Wakefield. Like a number of other first-time prisoners (later turned writers) he

described how his expectations of what imprisonment would be like had been conditioned by American prison movies (Douglas-Home 1954: 191). He wrote the play for want of something to do while recovering from the experience at his parents' home (Douglas-Home 1979: 63-4).

It opened at the Bolton's Theatre, Kensington in February 1947, transferring to the Vaudeville in the West End in March. The half-dozen main prisoners in the play were composites of the characters Douglas-Home had known in Number Ten Mess at Wakefield, although there is no indication in any of Douglas-Home's biographies (1954; 1979) as to whom O'Brien, the IRA bomber, might have been based on. The Mess itself became the model for the theatrical set, and the by now retired governor of the prison, Mr W Smith, acted as

**"a real public service by giving to a wide public his experience of prison life."**

technical adviser to the director. The plot, which concerned the possibility of a condemned murderer being reprieved, and the effect of his imminent execution on staff and prisoners alike, seems to have owed something to Douglas-Home's conversations with the Scrubs' Welsh chaplain, as executions did not take place in Wakefield at that time.

In the published version of the play, Prison Commissioner Alec Patterson, despite his own more favourable view of capital punishment, gave it a powerful endorsement:

*Mr Home has performed a real public service by giving to a wide public his experience of prison life. He studied his fellow prisoners with close sympathy and understanding. The resultant sketches of their good points and weak ones are in consequence life-like and attractive. He will by this play, both on the stage and in book form, reach a far wider thinking public than can ever be affected by official reports, and he will without any sign of personal rancour or bitterness focus the attention of any upon the prison problem.*

*...The play will do good because it will enlist the sympathy and interest of a wide circle of intelligent people, and will make them think and ask questions; and above all it should make them more ready to help men who have passed through this strange experience, and on emerging are a little dazzled by the first taste of freedom. (Introduction to Douglas-Home 1947; viii-ix).*

Among the recent obituaries, only *The Times* (30 September 1992) mentioned that the play was turned, more or less faithfully, into a film two years later. The producer, Anatole De Grunwald, was noted for his readiness to tackle more mature and unpatronising themes than his more Hollywood-oriented contempories in the British film industry. He adjusted the screenplay himself, and seems to have left little discretion to his journeyman director, Gordon Parry. The film was shot in 28 days between January and February 1949, and released in May with an 'A' certificate. A retired principal prison officer, George Blake (sic) had acted as technical adviser. The main set itself - the wing of a typical Victorian prison, four tiers of landings, observation bridges and an immense skylight - constituted the first screen attempt at an accurate architectural portrayal of a British (as opposed to American) prison. It was designed in perspective, to look deeper than it actually was, and children dressed in prison officers' uniforms were used in long shots to give the impression of greater size. Low-angle camera work and low-key lighting combined to create an image of a vaulted, tomb-like environment which far surpassed the pictorial representations of prison interiors that had been available hitherto. Those involved in the design were given a tour of a large prison, (unnamed in the studio publicity, but presumably Wakefield) but were nonetheless forbidden to take photographs even of trivial items such as prison cutlery and prison breadloaves. (For a fuller account of the making of the film, see Nellis 1988).

The film was well received by the majority of contemporary critics. The Sunday Pictorial (5 June 1949) named it 'film of the month' against strong competition 'because it attempts to deal intelligently with a serious theme, and within the limits of censorship, it does face up to problems of social significance'. Jim Phelan (1949), who had spent 14 years in prison had experienced a last night in the condemned cell himself, compared 'Now Barrabas' favourably to all American prison movies, commending

**"The first authentic British prison film...a far better attempt at conveying penal reality than many subsequent prison movies have done."**

its attention to detail and acknowledging that it accurately captured the mentality of both officers and prisoners. Yet despite such praise, the film has been strangely neglected by British film historians (and never, to the best of my knowledge), shown on television, though a perfectly good print survives in the National Film Theatre archive). The only (brief) mention it has had in recent years has been in biographies of the then rising star Richard Burton, who played O'Brien.

It deserves a better memorial than this because it was the first authentic British prison film (previous ones having been comedies, melodramas or historical dramas), and because within the conventions of the time it made a far better attempt at conveying penal reality than many subsequent prison movies have done. As a play 'Now Barabbas' was respectfully, if predictably, compared to John Galsworthy's prison play 'Justice' (1910) which had some degree of influence on the then Home Secretary's decision to reduce the amount of time newly-convicted prisoners spent in solitary confinement (Dupre 1976; 1990). But, while it had no discernible influence on an official decision, 'Now Barabbas' was in fact a much better play (and better film) than 'Justice' and William Douglas-Home deserves at least as big a footnote in the history of penal reform as his more revered predecessor in the field of penal playwriting ■

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