

Of Rats and Real Men?

Prison as community

'The best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley'

(Robert Burns 'To a field mouse'.)

Introduction

I want to examine a deceptively simple concept which has become somewhat unfashionable of recent years and that is the idea of the prison as a community. To avoid any misunderstanding, I should make clear that I am not referring here to 'community prisons'. Although there is some overlap between the two concepts, and each has implications for the other, my concern today is with the prison as a community in itself. I want to suggest that both academic criminologists and politicians (for differing reasons) have become pre-occupied with debates about the role and symbolism of prison in society, and have neglected the more complex and less glamorous task of understanding the gradations of deprivation and the nuances of social interaction that constitute the reality of daily prison life (see Carlen 1994). Practitioners, on the other hand may perhaps take it for granted that the prison is a community — the community in which they work — but may fail to examine and use that 'common sense' assumption to best effect in their work.

The blame for turning the heads of criminologists can be placed on Michel Foucault, whose text *Discipline and Punish* (1977) revolutionised our understanding of the purpose of prison. My colleague, Richard Sparks, at last year's Perrie lectures, spoke of the way in which Foucault draws our attention to 'the prison as an ideal image of social organization', as a template for a carceral society where we are all increasingly subjected to monitoring, surveillance and benign but sinister control. For politicians, the symbolism of prison is less subtle. 'Prison works' to the extent that it allows us to rid ourselves of those people (sometimes dangerous but more often just a nuisance) that we are no longer willing to tolerate; in our increasingly security-conscious and exclusive communities. As such, what actually

I goes on inside prison is not important, providing it is contained *inside* (the imperative of security) providing it is always less attractive than what goes on *outside* for the poorest and most disadvantaged law-abiding citizen (the imperative of less eligibility).

Another reason for our declining interest in studying the daily social interaction of prison systematically is that we have become increasingly dependent on prisoner biographies. There was a time when being a prisoner oneself would have immediately discredited anything one said about life in prison. Macartney's 1936 classic account of prison life *Walls have Mouths* was denounced by a former Home Secretary of the time, the Rt. Hon. J. R. Clynes, in the following terms:

'This book is one of the most savage and insensate attacks on prison life that I have ever read. The author is an individual, I observe, who makes no secret of the fact that he recently emerged from Parkhurst Prison after serving a ten years' sentence on charges of espionage.'

But all that has changed. Jimmy Boyle, John Me Vicar, Norman Parker, Audrey Peckham, Chris Tchaikovsky, Josie O'Dwyer — the list goes on. We now accept, quite rightly, that those who have experienced prison may well be the best people to talk about the significance of what goes on there. But such ex-prisoners are by definition exceptional in their ability to analyse and articulate their experiences and whilst we must continue to use such personal accounts to illuminate our understanding and perhaps to shock us out of our liberal complacency, they should not be abused as excuses for neglecting the systematic study of prison life.

I am not suggesting that we have stopped being concerned with the behaviour of prisoners. The behaviour of individual prisoners is probably subject to more observation, assessment and efforts to change it than ever before. We require

Dr. Anne Worrall, Lecturer in Criminology, Keele University

prisoners to 'address their offending behaviour', we challenge their 'distorted thought processes', we assess their risk of re-offending. We also try to prevent them taking drugs, committing suicide, bullying other prisoners or being racist. We offer them incentives for good behaviour and, of course, we punish bad behaviour. But all too often this involves, on the one hand, a range of specialists focusing on individual psychology and, on the other, the carrying out of procedures emanating from policy decisions and directives applied in blanket fashion across the whole prison estate. What I want to argue today is that this twin-track approach will only succeed in the context of a recognition that prisons are unique forms of social organisation with cultures and subcultures that sometimes support and sometimes militate against 'the best laid schemes of mice and men'.

My intention is to outline firstly the long-running academic debate about the nature of prisoner subcultures and amongst other things, to demonstrate their male-centredness. I want, then, to turn to a less well-documented discussion about prison officer culture. And, finally, I would like to conclude with some reflections on the ways in which we might influence or engineer the social environments or cultures of our prisons.

Prison subcultures

'As closed institutions with hierarchical structures, in which prisoners have little power over their own lives, prisons are very different communities to those outside. The boredom of everyday prison life, the absence of choice and of freedom to seek privacy are key elements in the pains of imprisonment.'

(MACRO 1994).

So what do we know about prisoners' abilities to survive, adapt to, resist or fight back against the pains of imprisonment? Writers on this theme have been concerned to ask three questions:

- i. are prisoners' responses purely individualistic or are there identifiable patterns or subcultures governing the responses? (Individualistic vs. collective)
- ii. do prisoners respond predominantly to the here and now of the institution (prisonisation) or are their responses dictated by their previous experiences and outside identities (importation)?
- iii. are these responses purely reactive (fundamentally defences of the weak) or are they interactive (indicating the power of prisoners to preserve their own identities

and shape their social environment in the face of apparent total power of their keepers)?

Historically, the first modern author began to look at the prison experience with Clemmer (1940) in *The Prison Community*. He posited the existence of an inmate code subculture or pattern of social relationships which developed as a direct result of experiencing prison and which helped to sustain prisoners. The code is seen to be characterised, firstly, by refusal to cooperate with staff over discipline and informs; and, secondly, by loyalty to other inmates; Clemmer wrote of the process of 'prisonisation', the gradual destructive socialisation of prisoners the norms of prison life which make it difficult for them successfully to adapt to law-abiding life outside, thereby deepening their criminality.

Perhaps the two best-known studies of 'prisonisation' are those by Gresham Sykes (1958), *Society of Captives*, and Erving Goffman (1961), *Asylums*. Both writers stress the distinctiveness of prison life (Sykes specifically an; Goffman as an example of a total institution because of its encompassing character, relatively shut off as prisoners are from the world at large Sykes' focus is on the 'pains of imprisonment' - the deprivations of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and security, the latter meaning personal rather than total security.

Goffman describes the mortification processes and the reorganisation to which the inmate is subjected. On entering the total institution the inmate is stripped of his identity kit often in a physical and symbolic way, and his identity is then reconstructed to fit in with the institution. The central feature of this reorganisation is the breakdown of barriers normally separating the three spheres of life — sleep, work and leisure — activity takes place in the same physical area (shut off from the outside world) under the total authority and always in the presence of others — it is batch living. The inmate no longer has responsibility for his own material provision and all decisions about his present and future are made by other people.

So how do prisoners respond to the 'assaults on the self'? Goffman argues that the response is basically one of adaptation to the reality of total power. The inmate responds in a individualistic and essentially powerless way; he withdraws mentally and emotionally from the situation, keeping his eyes to the ground and drawing as little attention as possible to himself. He may engage in some form of resistance, but this intransigence, a strategy which Goffman argues can be only temporarily successful, if at all.

may decide to colonize the prison, work the system to his advantage, find a niche, which may or may not involve exploiting fellow prisoners or manipulating prison officers. Finally, he may decide to convert — to accept the ideology of the prison and do everything that is required of him in an attempt, either genuinely or tactically, to impress the prison authorities.

Sykes, however, is less pessimistic about the inmate response. He argues that a situation of total power is an inherently unstable one, that prison staff are subjected to conflicting demands of, for example, custody, efficiency and reform, and have to continually negotiate the legitimacy of their authority. Consequently, the maintenance of stability is dependent on interaction between staff and inmates — on give and take. This puts the inmate in a more powerful position than Goffman would allow, especially if his actions are collective rather than individual. Sykes describes a variety of prisoner 'types'. Among them are the rat, who informs on other prisoners to ingratiate himself with prison officers, the gorilla, who takes what he wants from other prisoners by force or its threat, and ball-busters, who are 'always giving the screws a hard time'. By contrast, real men show self-restraint, reserve, taciturnity and emotional balance — a concept of fortitude which has its roots in a vision of manhood and integrity which far transcends the prison. Mutual aid, inmate solidarity, the development of an inmate code or subculture, mitigate the pains of imprisonment and sustain the inmate. They also provide the key to maintaining order because it is the mutual respect between prison officers and the 'real men', those who endure privation with dignity, that prevent inevitable minor crises developing into full-scale disorders. It is within this continuous struggle to maintain equilibrium that Sykes argues that prison disturbances can be understood. Disturbances occur when staff fail to recognise tacit understandings about the rights of inmates to run their own affairs. In other words, the smooth running of the prison is dependent more on collective inmate consent than on the total power of the institution.

But one of the weaknesses of these studies is precisely their emphasis on the power of the institution to strip inmates of their former identities. Other writers, perhaps the best-known being Cohen and Taylor's *Psychological Survival* (1972) argue that prisoners' adaptation will depend on the strength of ties outside prison. Prisons are permeable institutions and prisoners' acceptance of inmate codes will depend on their support networks (or lack of them) outside and the stage of their sentence. It is, of course, at this point that the concept of 'community prison' creeps in. If prison has damaging and unintended effects on

prisoners (unintended in the sense of being over and above the inevitable and possibly desirable effects of incapacitation) then one way to reduce those effects is to make the prison as permeable as possible, maintaining and creating as many links with the outside world as may be compatible with the confinement required. But this begs the question of whether we (or the public) really want prisoners not to be 'prisonised'. If prisons become too permeable, what are the implications for the maintenance of good order?

Women's imprisonment

But these classic studies all concerned with men's prisons and the notion of an inmate code or subculture is inherently masculine. Even early studies of women's imprisonment (for example, Giallombardo 1966; Ward and Kassebaum 1965) recognised the irrelevance of much of the analysis to women's experiences. Women, it was argued, have little sense of inmate loyalty and are more likely to collaborate (in the worst sense of that word) with staff because they are criminally immature and less 'con-wise' than men. 'Women bring to prison with them identities and self conceptions which are based principally on familial roles' (Ward and Kassebaum 1965:70) — as wives, mothers, daughters, girl friends. Consequently, they have different social and psychological needs. Above all, they are not prepared to behave like 'real men'.

Now all this may be true, but the implications, according to these early writers, are not such as would now be described as either progressive or 'feminist'. What women need, it was argued, is to reconstruct family relationships inside prison but the danger of this may be a degree of homosexual behaviour far in excess of that encountered in male prisons. This resulted in the salacious demonisation of a certain 'type' of female prisoner the 'butch' lesbian. In order to prevent such social structuring, great effort must be made to encourage all women prisoners to be feminine and child-like or, if that is not possible, then to be seen as being in need of medical care and attention. As Jessica Mitford observed -

'Is this not the essence of women's prisons, the punishment of unchaste, unwomanly behaviour, a grotesque bow to long-out-moded, nineteenth-century notions of feminine morality?' (1974:26)

More recent studies of women's imprisonment (Carlen 1983; Genders and Player 1987; Eaton 1993) have focused on the ways in which 'prisonisation' tends to feminise, medicalise and infantilise women. The ideal woman prisoner is not the female equivalent of the 'real man', who 'plays it cool' and earns respect by being strong and silent, rising above the petty conflicts of the

'inadequates'. on the contrary, 'the good [female] prisoner 'opens up' to the officers and doesn't think she is any better than the other women' (Carlen 1983:102). Women are encouraged to be dependent on officers, not on each other, yet every recent study on women prisoners shows that women, ironically more than men, gain self-esteem, support and help from each other, when they are allowed to. I attended a conference recently which was also attended by women prisoners and prison staff. One of the problems identified was the complex one of how and when to give new prisoners information, and how much information at any one time. The prison being discussed had a good induction pack of information but that, of itself, did not empower women to ask questions. Staff said that they had tried in the past to get small groups of women together but that staff shortages were now preventing this. One woman suggested that established prisoners could run these induction groups. 'That's an interesting concept', she was told, 'but it wouldn't work!'

Women as a category seem to find it even harder than men to cope with the pains of imprisonment, as is evidenced by their higher levels of mental and emotional disorder and disciplinary infringement. In addition to engaging in the same responses as men, women also have a disproportionate tendency to self mutilate, to turn their anger and despair in on themselves. Why did the Woolf Report not concern itself with women's prisons? (Liebling 1991) Because women prisoners don't riot — they just 'mess about'. They get themselves in trouble of one sort or another.

Let me give you an example. Tracy was recognised as being a suicide risk. She had been extensively abused sexually as a child. She was given counselling in prison but this, initially was making her more depressed. Staff decided, without consulting her, to move her into a room with her friend. This was explained to her as being in her own best interests but she was angry and told an officer to 'piss off (not for the first time). She was put on report for being disrespectful. She was dealt with leniently and again it was explained that staff wanted to help her and that she should talk more to them. I do not tell this story in order to blame anyone. I don't know how it could have been handled differently. But it makes the point that some women bring the most horrendous and intractable problems to prison which can only be made worse by the experience of imprisonment, however caring and well-meaning the prison staff are. Prisons are places of punishment. They may be trying to do other things as well but in conditions which make those other things well-nigh impossible. Prisons cannot be run as democracies. Decisions have to be made, but

decisions have consequences which continually be blamed on prisoners for their inability to accept that some staff may be trying to help them.

Prison officer culture

I want to turn briefly now to the issue of prison officer culture. When one considers the extensive literature on 'cop culture' it is not surprising that so little has been written on 'screw culture' and that so little of what has been written has any level of sophistication. An exception is the recent publication, *Prisoners of Order* (Sparks, Bottoms and Hay 1995). Most studies, however, seem to distinguish between a fairly crude way between officers who are authoritarian and punitive (who hark back to the golden age of 'real men' and governors who respect!), those who are concerned to see prison running smoothly and who set great store by common sense and good humour, those who are strongly committed to rehabilitation or those who are simply after an easy life. All of them, of course, are men. Opposite postings have provided an incentive for research into the prison officers' world but, as studies have dealt only with the more obvious issues about harassment and what it is appropriate for men and women to do in opposite sex prisons. The fact that most officers welcome opposite sex posting at least in principle; as creating a more 'normal' working environment is surely an area which deserves investigation.

By and large, however, prison officers; fair game for stereotyping and caricaturing. Proof were needed of this, one only has to read the opening paragraph of the Woodcock Report, its journalistic exposure of scrabble-pl. officers in the SSU at Whitemoor. The tone of such descriptions, designed for maximum media effect, demonstrate that 'any serious appreciation of the mundane dynamics of prison life and how they might realistically be managed are going to be subordinated to the provision of glib judgements and superficial soundbites.' KITE: j 1995)

Conclusion

'Any effort to reform the prison system ignores this social system of the prison is 3: futile as the labours of Sisyphus.'

(Gresham Sykes *The Society of Captives*)

My purpose in drawing attention to the cultures of prison is not to engage in what Carlen (1995) refers to as 'zoo-keeping studies

by which I think she means the voyeuristic exercise of labelling different breeds or species of prisoners and observing their 'quaint rigmaroles'. My purpose is to emphasise the fact that prison is a community but not like any other community. It is a community for the infliction of punishment and, as such, it contains very few of the mythical Teal men' and gratefully talkative women. Rather, it consists of unhappy, troubled and troublesome people, whose management requires skill, sophistication, perception and imagination. We seem to be lapsing into a mind-set of despair that blames lack of resources and a punitive penal climate on the one hand, and the nature of post modern society with all its fragmentation and uncertainty, on the other. It never ceases to amaze me, therefore, that most prisons seem to maintain a reasonable sense of community most of the time. But the difficulty of maintaining the equilibrium should never be underestimated and it is for that reason that I believe we should continue to study the minutiae of prison life and not take its richness for granted.

Hans Toch has written an impassioned plea for what he calls community-building in prisons — where 'enriched options become available in enriched settings' (1994:100). He sees the notion of an inmate code of silence and loyalty as being one which encourages violence and victimisation in prisons, but also as one which prison officers compound by 'buying into' and reinforcing hypermasculine norms:

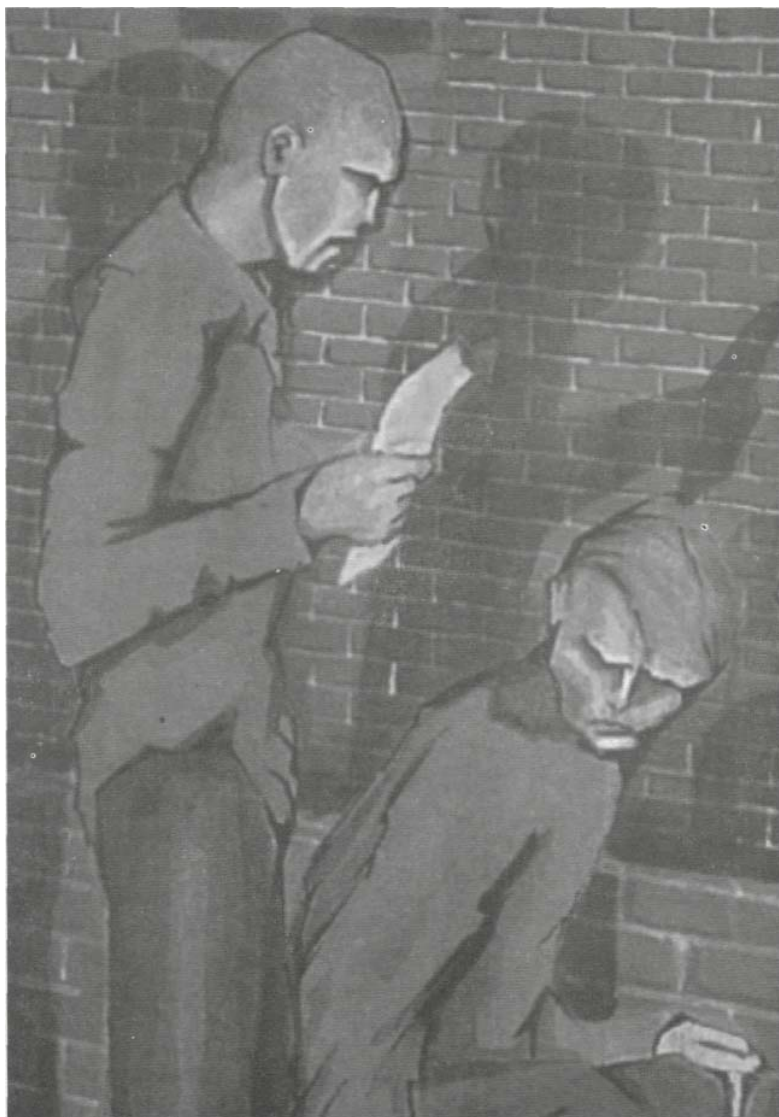
'Prison officers like to get up and go to work telling themselves that their lives are at risk and that they are brave. This sounds better than to say, 'Here goes another day of handing out towels in a locker room!'

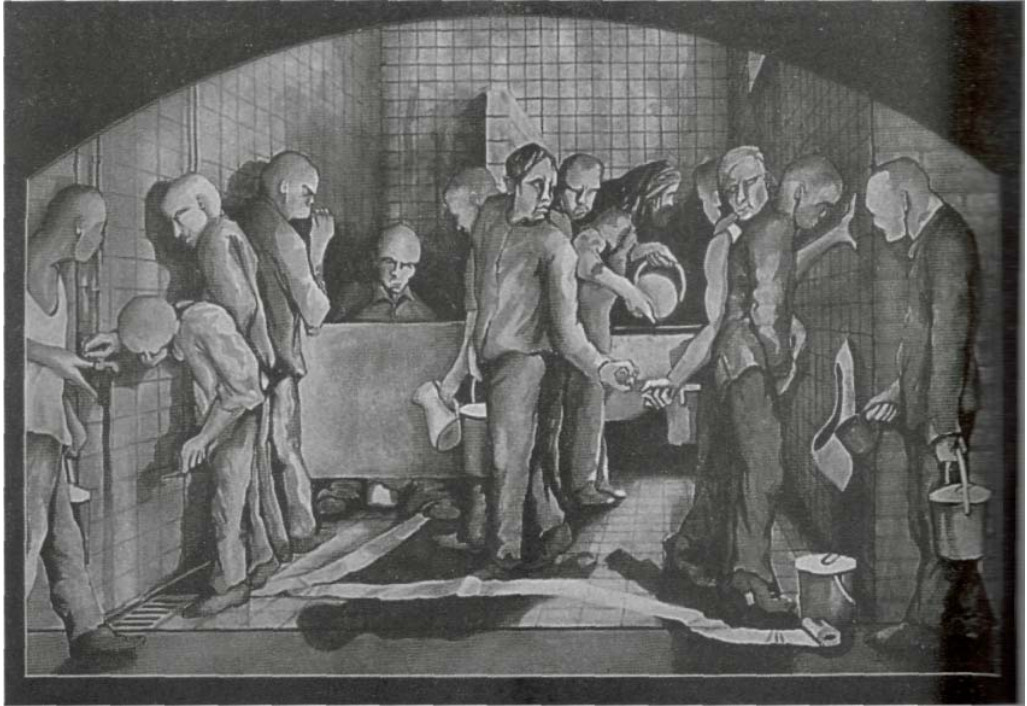
But as all 'real men' — and 'real women' know, the way in which towels are handed out may make the difference between order and disorder in prison. It may also make the difference between an entrenched and a reformed criminal •

References

- Carlen, P.** (1983) *Women's Imprisonment*, Routledge and Kegan Paul. **Carlen, P.** (1994) 'Why study women's imprisonment? or anyone else's?' *The British Journal of Criminology*, Vol 34, Special Issue. **Cohen, S. and Taylor, L.** (1972) *Psychological Survival*, Penguin. **Clemmer, D.** (1940) *The Prison Community*, Holt, Rhinehart and Winston. **Eaton, M.** (1993) *Women alter prison*, Open University Press. **Foucault, M.** (1977) *Discipline and Punish*, Penguin. **Genders, E. and Player, E.** (1987) 'Women in prison: the treatment, the control and the experience' in Carlen, P. and Worrall, A. (eds.) *Gender, Crime and Justice*, Open University Press.
- Giallombardo, R.** (1966) *Society or Women*, Wiley. **Goffman, E.** (1961) *Asylums*, Penguin. **King, R.** (1995) 'Woodcock and after', *Prison Service Journal*, No 102, November. **Liebling, A.** (1991) 'Where are the women in WoolF?', *Prison Report* Issue 15. **Macartney, W. F. R.** (1936) *Walls have mouths*, Victor Gollancz Ltd. **Mitford, J.** (1974) *The American Prison Business*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd. **NACRO** (1994) *Community Prisons*, NACRO. **Sparks, R.** (1995) 'The carceral society', *Prison Service Journal*, No 102, November. **Sparks, R., Bottoms, A. and Hay, W.** (1996) *Prisons and the Problem of Order*, Oxford, Clarendon Press. **Sykes, G. M.** (1958) *The Society of Captives*, Princeton. **Toch, H.** (1994) 'Prison violence in perspective' in E. A. Stanko (ed) *Perspectives on Violence*, Quartet Books. **Ward, D. A. and Kassebaum, G. G.** (196S) *Women's Prison*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Section from
'Dear John' by
Peter Cameron





Peter Cameron

When I was sentenced to nine years and the gates of HMP Walton closed ominously behind me, one of the many things I said to myself was 'What am I going to do with all this time I've been given?' In a pique of positivism I focussed on the 'time I had been given ...' slant of affairs and insisted to myself that I'd do something I had flirted with but never had the time to indulge in. I'd never painted before — I liked the art class run by the now acclaimed cartoonist Steve Best — there was no academic pre-requisite to affect energy and enthusiasm, unlike the Spanish class where I rubbed academic shoulders with a Columbian coke dealer, who joined the class to learn Prison English, an intelligent illiterate who was convinced that '¿Como te llamas?' meant 'How are you fixed for llamas?'

My pictures in prison were mostly about the time warp of Victorian atmospheres, bricks, doors, uniforms in a setting which takes one back a century, made more bizarre by being within sight and sound of the more real and modern world. Only the light bulbs seem to have changed. By painting the clichés and events of prison life in an objective and unsympathetic way I was able to confront the Victorian appropria of slop outs, short spells of exercise, shit parcels, no plants and very little sky. I could in this way turn my screams to poetry and, ironically, dwell on what most people did their best to avoid: I just turned it into

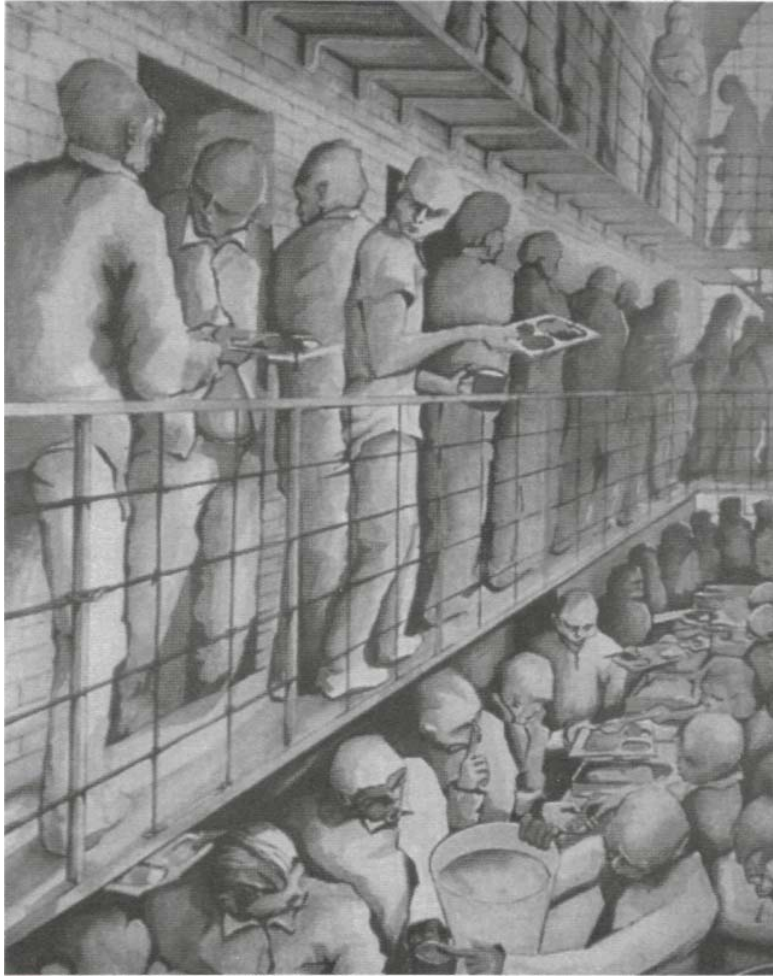
art. I became aware that although my paintings were 'of another era' they were modern in their context. *The Last Slop Out* factual until April this year.

Painting for me was like yoga, and time spent doing it was, to my way of thinking, knocks; my sentence — it provided a mental ruled by events, forged in shape and colour, in prison was one of the easiest things I've bar do; worse events were taking place outside.

Eventually the prison doors ominously in front of me and I said to 'What am I going to do with all the time 'now?'

This was the most vulnerable time, need for myself, but for most people leaving prison, facing reality with no money. I always thru^H recidivism would be far less if the wage sv in prison catered for this, the critical mnnv-rr release. My support came from the Koestler 7 which opens doors for those serious pursue art on the outside by encouraging • on the inside, and enabling them to exhihr realise worth from their work. I don't think is any pursuit in prison which gets this lets support. Slowly this is being recognised, an; i 'more prophylactic minded governors, sizr 'teachers in prisons support the arts as thr ;care of time in prison firstly and lay a SCTTI of, at least, realistic hope for some later on, i art can help change people's percepti. currency •

'A La Carte'
by Peter Cameron



Prison culture

Heather Mills,
Home Affairs Editor,
The Independent

Introduction

First let me thank you for the 'dubious' pleasure of joining the ranks of the Perrie lecturers — this year on prison culture.

I say dubious because I am sure there are a lot of you out there who believe the media — newspapers and television — are to blame for the public's perception or misperception — of prison life or prison culture.

Readers of the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail* might be forgiven for believing that all prisoners live a life of luxury — consuming lobster take-aways while enjoying their favourite television programmes in their en-suite bedrooms. Readers of the *Independent* and the *Guardian* may be forgiven with the impression that prisoners are shackled to the walls in Victorian hell-holes and that watching that gripping soap *'The Governor'* might belie the fact that all prisons suffer helicopter escapes, suicide-

f

riots, on a daily basis.

We know that neither presents the true picture of most of our jails or our prisoners. But the plain fact about prisons is that they are a constant source of 'good copy', and for as long as humanity retains its morbid fascination for crime and criminals, they always will be — just look at the recent explosion in cops and crime dramas, films and documentaries.

This inch-thick bundle of newspaper cuttings is just one week's output on prison and crime related stories. For those who are not widely read they range from stories like 'Exposed — jail girls strip show' from the *News of the World*, about officers from The Mount prison; or how Lord Longford set out to make Dennis Nilsen the mass killer, into a pop star from the *Sunday Express*.

Escapes, riots, drugs, sex and notorious offenders like Myra Hindley, Rosemary West, and Peter Sutcliffe are always going to grab headlines. So too in the heavy end of the newspaper market are reports of squalor, neglect, inhumane treatment — and some avoidable suicides like the dreadful story of Claire Bosley, in Holloway prison.

But crucially from the perspective of newspapers like my own is that prisons are now firmly on the political agenda. We have a Home Secretary who has 'prison works' as the cornerstone of his criminal justice policy and we have a range of practitioners — including Lord Taylor, the Lord Chief Justice - - who are questioning this policy. We also have Tony Blair, who I believe coined his phrase 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' here at the Perrie Lectures, pursuing more punitive measures. And we in the media, of course, want to know who is right and what works in terms of cutting crime and ending recidivism.

That means prisons and the people in them staff and inmates alike are going to remain the focus of attention — mostly unwanted and often unfavourable. The very differing cultures of individual establishments and their achievements, which we have heard about today will be lost to most of the general public — and indeed to some sections of the media.

Culture

But let me say straight away that the very word 'culture', when used by the newspapers in relation to jails is usually a derogatory term. And we have Judge Stephen Tumim the chief inspector of Prisons — and former thorn in Michael Howard's side — to thank for that. It was from his

'culture' of violence in Doncaster — or 'Doncatraz' as it is now known. We had the macho 'culture' of Strangeways before the 1989 riots where prisoners picked on their more vulnerable colleagues. And of course we have had the more literal 'cultures' of rats, cockroaches and headlice in Holloway and its staff culture of 'over-zealous security'.

Of course I accept that the media must bear some responsibility for this negative view of all prisons regardless of their individual merits or faults. But let me say now — that I also think Ministers, the Prison Service itself and those working in it must also share the blame. Journalists are there to inform, to expose, to question and to explain. But they can only paint as much of the picture as they can see. Because Ministers and the Prison Service operate largely in a culture of secrecy — taking a defensive stance — I believe they only have themselves to blame if part of the picture is obscured. Many of you I know will argue that it might be better in the public interest if some things about prison life are not published — although I as a journalist can think of hardly anything beyond details of prison security, that should remain secret.

But there is no-one better than Sir Norman Fowler — the former Tory party chairman, who once had my job as Home Affairs correspondent, but on *The Times* — to illustrate the consequences of not publishing. Put simply, by keeping a security issue at Dartmoor secret, he blames himself for the killing of Frankie Mitchell, the mad axeman.

In September 1966 he had travelled to darkest Dartmoor as part of a series on Britain's jails and who did he see walking alone on the moor outside the prison perimeter but Mad Frankie himself. Staff begged him not to include that gem in his feature for fear it would provoke a public outcry and hamper their efforts at rehabilitating the gangland robber. In Sir Norman's words: 'I had a straight choice I could write a piece on how a convicted armed robber was working unsupervised on the moor with the certain result that the story would be followed by the rest of Fleet Street and Mitchell would be put back behind the prison walls, or I could trust the judgement of the prison authorities who knew him best. Their view was that unless he was released soon there was a severe danger he would become institutionalised and never be able to cope with outside life again. I chose not to write the story'.

But ten weeks later Mitchell escaped and disappeared. His body was never found. Ronnie and Reggie, the Kray twins, and others stood trial

Sir Norman now thinks perhaps he should have written the story about Mitchell working outside the jail. 'According to what I had been told it would have wrecked years of careful work at Dartmoor. Had I published, however, Mitchell would probably still be alive today.' The moral I see in this little tale is that if the Prison Service had been up front about its rehabilitation policies — explaining and defending its policies — instead of hiding behind its veil of secrecy, then Sir Norman would not have had a potential front page story in the first place.

And if you relate that to today and 20 years later. If the Service — and indeed Ministers — were up front about what is going on in our jails you have to ask if the same stories would have the same impact. Look at the documents leaked last week to the *Independent* and the *Guardian* about Michael Howard's plans to withdraw television from cells.

What gave the story added bite was that the documents were all marked confidential — and contained a note saying that Mr Howard did not intend to announce the changes until after they had taken place.

And how about the delays and question marks hanging over the implementation of the recommendations of the Learmont inquiry into the Parkhurst escapes. Why doesn't the government come clean and say they haven't got the money to carry out his proposals for changes like a supermax jail and a control jail?

And look at what has happened in Holloway recently. Not only did it attract, quite rightly, the adverse publicity triggered by the walk-out by the new Chief Inspector of Prisons, Sir David Ramsbotham. Because of the decision to keep the media out of jail, even though things have improved — we are told — Holloway has come under attack twice more, once when the Board of Visitors released its annual report and again at the inquest into Claire Bosley's death.

Contrast that with the way Andrew Coyle handled the disasters that hit Brixton in the 80s — its notorious psychiatric F Wing and the escape of two IRA men, made it as bad as the Whitemoor's, Parkhurst's and Holloway's of today. He invited the media in to see for themselves the difficulties Brixton was facing and explained how he was dealing with them. He got a fairly sympathetic ride and Brixton rarely makes the news these days. The message is simple — more openness leads to a better understanding and less damaging headlines.

occasion cover the 'good news' stories coming out of jails: the Holloway job clubs, the irreparable rehabilitation record at Latchmere House, the self-help and drug treatment programmes at places like Grendon and Blantyre House. I even did a three-day stint in Hull, like Sir Norman before me, not simply to portray prison life as it was, good and bad, mostly grim. But it enabled the governing staff and inmates to help me fill in the real picture. But for this we are dependent upon prison governors, prepared to speak out and to take some risks about allowing media access.

My perception — and it may be wrong — that perhaps for fear of scapegoating, government may not feel less able to tell it as it is than we were. I was surprised recently that the Prison Governors Association felt unable to condemn widespread use of shackles — particularly on sick and pregnant women — and unable to demand more discretion over when and on whom to use them. Without the courage to speak out and demand more discretion how can some of us hope to change the culture of their institution?

Talking of Prison Cultures, I look forward to the next issue today and am surprised and pleased to see so many women, but there are woefully few men — surely the Prison Service needs a cultural make-up to serve a multi-cultural society. So my message to the Prison Service is this: don't simply blame the messenger. Get on the ground, shake off the veil of secrecy and open the doors to public scrutiny and get more women and men into the service.

'Dear John' by Peter Cameron
Section from

