

## BOOK REVIEW

*Vivien Miller*<sup>1</sup>

**David Wilson, *Pain and Retribution: A Short History of British Prisons, 1066 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 240pp + 35 illustrations. £20.00. ISBN 978 1 78023 2380 6**

In *Pain and Retribution* former prison governor-criminologist-media commentator David Wilson offers a largely narrative, light-touch historiographical and theoretical analysis, and an accessibly written account of different aspects of the long history of confinement/imprisonment largely in England and Wales, with a few references to Scottish practices, that is clearly aimed at the general reader rather than an academic one. Further, in the introduction, Wilson acknowledges that the main focus of his short history is England and Wales rather than Britain and the 150 years from 1877 through to the present. Imprisonment and prisons in Ireland are not mentioned, and aside from some discussion of transportation to British Colonial North America and Australia, the larger British colonial history of imprisonment and its relationship to domestic policy and treatment (that is gradually being uncovered) are also not addressed here. Wilson uses a contemporary criminological idea that 'prisons' have to acknowledge and satisfy the demands of three key estates: the public including politicians, media commentators, and the general person (defined on p.191 as 'standing at bus stops, discussing the weather, or drinking in pubs and clubs, and watching television on a Saturday night,'); prison staff; and prisoners. He argues that it is the failure of the prison as institution, and of individual prisons, to simultaneously satisfy all three groups that produces notions of and a language that emphasises failure and crisis.

Chapter 1 covers over 700 years of imprisonment and notes the array of different buildings utilised to confine offenders, by spotlighting grand castles, thieves holes, tollbooths, the not very secure Tower of London, all largely for noble, elite or political offenders, and Newgate Gaol which housed a very different prison population. The emphasis on keepers' revenue generation from inmates is a theme that Wilson returns to later in his book. This first chapter links the discussion of Newgate's origins, purpose and conditions to the frequency of executions in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century London, and then to the motivations and important contributions to English prison reform of familiar figures such as Elizabeth Fry and John Howard. The chapter is peppered with vignettes that feature different

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prisoners, their offences, and their (mis)treatment, and in several cases - such as that of Alice Tankerville, for example, who escaped from the Tower in 1534, but was subsequently caught and executed by drowning in chains (along with her husband John Wolfe who is not mentioned), as was the guard who helped her escape, by being hung, drawn and left to die – some additional information on offenders and context would be useful.

The story of Millbank prison, drawing heavily on Arthur Griffith's 1875 memoir, and Pentonville prison in London, Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon and Charles Dickens' discourses on the failings of imprisonment are highlighted in Chapter 2, which focuses on prisons prior to 1877. These failings are illustrated further by more detailed discussions of inadequate food provision at Millbank, repeated prison disturbances there, and the sad stories of prison suicide, all in the second half of the chapter. Wilson concludes that Millbank was a doomed prison for a range of reasons, not just because of architectural or operational deficiencies, but that it also clearly failed to convince the public, prison staff, and prisoners that it could operate successfully. In Chapter 2 and elsewhere, Wilson comments on the absence of inmate voices from traditional scholarship on prisons in all locations and time periods, and while very true, the last decade or so has seen criminal justice and prison historians make increasingly innovative use of different methodologies and source material to give voice to these men, women and children. These processes that have been greatly aided by a range of digitisation projects of court records, the release of official records into the public domain, and scholars actively exploring the enormous volume of materials created by national and colonial penal bureaucracies that emerged from the nineteenth century, as well as local and national newspaper databases.

Chapter 3 highlights the impact of the centralising Prisons Acts of 1877, one for England, and a separate one for Scotland, on institutions (particularly Reading Gaol), staff, and prisoners (such as Oscar Wilde), along with the earlier 1865 Act, and ends with the recommendations of the 1895 Gladstone Report, and implementation of the Prison Act 1898. It links state centralisation to broader developing penological ideas, including the removal of punishment and indeed executions to within the prison walls and buildings, as well as more specifically to the end of transportation and the ticket-of-leave men and garrotting moral panics of the 1860s and 1870s. Despite references to Edinburgh's Tollbooth and discussion of William Brebner's impact on early nineteenth century Scottish prisons, and the discourse on Wilde and Reading Gaol, the first three chapters which focus on the pre-twentieth century history of 'British' prisons are really mainly concerned with London prisons. This is rather a shame given that there is a growing literature, including PhD work, on offenders and their prison experiences in the English regions for example.

By Chapter 4, the story has reached the early twentieth century. It begins with Winston Churchill's oft-quoted statement on a nation's treatment of crime and criminals and notions of civilisation, and focuses on the long period of decarceration in England and Wales from c.1908 through to 1939, in which prison numbers dropped by 50 percent, prisons were closed, and new custodial and diversionary alternatives emerged, including borstals, probation and remission, and the therapeutic community at HMP Grendon. Similar declines in prisoner numbers and numbers of institutions were evident in Scotland also. Wilson links changing attitudes toward the treatment of offenders to imprisoned suffragettes, conscientious objectors, the need to divert youthful offenders away from crime as a career, and increasing official beliefs in and emphasis on offenders' capacity for reform. This last strand is linked back to the Gladstone Committee and 1898 legislation discussed in the previous chapter, and rather oddly, the same exact passage from the Committee report is included on both p.65 and p.95. To demonstrate the ongoing tensions between prison commissioners, specifically Dr. W. Norwood East and Alexander Patterson, as well as guards, chaplains, and others over the appropriate treatment or punishment of offenders in this period, Wilson uses one select case study of one Welsh sexual sadist and killer Harold Jones.

Briefly addressing the story of British prisons during World War II, Wilson begins Chapter 5 with the 1948 Criminal Justice Act that abolished penal servitude, whipping and hard labour, and highlights the rhetoric of reform, welfare and rehabilitation that infused the modern era. Evidence for the disjunction between the rhetoric and the continued realities of custodialism, brutalities and indignities, and dreadful food is drawn from four key sources: former HMP Wormwood Scrubs governor Major Benjamin Grew's autobiography, and the recollections of three former prisoners, including two who had been convicted of homosexuality offences and served sentences at Wormwood Scrubs. Themes of poor prison management and failure to provide the tools for meaningful inmate rehabilitation emerge clearly. Again, there are occasional discussions of Durham, Peterhead and other prisons here and in other chapters, but the focus is largely on London, yet the reader probably needs more context to be able to discern whether London prisons were typical or exceptional institutions within the wider national estate. Further, the sources utilised and Wilson's critique thereof show that key themes of masculinity, sexuality, 'prisonisation,' accommodation and resistance are central to understanding the competing discourses and institutional dynamics and it would have been useful/fruitful to have developed these in greater depth. Similar observations can be made as to essential issues of race and ethnicity, particularly as Irish, Chinese immigrant, and Black British prisoners are the subject of several current studies. Aside from the early

discussion of Elizabeth Fry, the histories of female prisoners, women's prisons and reformatories, and acknowledgement of the ways in which the categories of 'adult' and 'child' in relation to prisons and prisoner categorisations have changed over time are also all rather underdeveloped here. The need for more attention to race, ethnicity, gender, and indeed religion, is very obvious as Wilson's story reaches the later twentieth century, not least because the bus queue and the pub crowd - like the prison population- can be quite varied as to demographics, political views and many other factors.

Chapters 6 and 7 are concerned with Britain, prisons, and late modernity. Chapter 6 discusses the system of dispersal and highlights the unchanging security categorisations from the 1969 Mountbatten review, conducted in the wake of serious prison riots. It also includes case studies of HMP Gartree to underline the fractious nature and ongoing tensions between custodial staff and increasingly dissatisfied inmates in the 1970s and the innovative Special Unit at HMP Barlinnie with its own controversial therapeutic programme and community. Wilson goes on to critique four recent autobiographies by former prison guards – one group that has been continuously overlooked in prison history – before returning to prisoner disorder and riots in the early 1990s, including the infamous riot at HMP Strangeways (referred to as Manchester in a very recent television documentary on its prisoners) which was also a tipping point in relation to the physical conditions endured by inmates in an aging prison estate with dehumanising regimes, as noted by Lord Woolf.

Chapter 7 begins with the infamous 1993 murder in Liverpool of two-year-old James Bulger by two ten-year-old boys, which Wilson considers to be the 'tipping point in penal sensibilities' and the catalyst for the emergence of more punitive political rhetoric and prison regimes. Wilson reminds us that prison policy came to be dictated largely by populist newspapers whose ability to intimidate government officials was aided by public ignorance of prisons and prisoners, largely a consequence of a pervasive wall of secrecy that has surrounded these institutions for decades. The chapter then turns to consider the role of mainstream television programmes, specifically *Bad Girls* and *Porridge*, in stimulating public concerns and in reinforcing stereotypes of prison life and caricatures of guards and prisoners, before going on to provide a detailed selection of media commentaries on a reality-TV series *Banged Up* that Wilson was directly involved in. From Wilson's description of the participants' attitudes and several production compromises, it is clear that the version of prison 'reality' that was presented was as problematic as that provided in the fictional series. The discussion then focuses on prison privatization and the gap between the political rhetoric of privatization and efficiency and the reality of privatization and lack of efficiency.

Similarly, the final chapter travels through different issues and themes, some addressed previously such as the disappearance of the prison from public scrutiny, and some new including accounts of Wilson's recent visits as part of his work with the Howard League for Penal Reform, and important policy initiatives. The interventionist, diversionary and desistance work of the Red Hook Community Justice Center in greater New York City is highlighted here. There are other examples of innovative prison practices in many places, including Brazil's Resocialisation Centres (*Centros de Ressocialização* - CRs) in São Paulo state and the APAC (*Associação de Proteção e Assistência ao Condenado* - Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts/the Condemned) prisons in Minas Gerais state both of which offer very different approaches to administration and rehabilitation. An integrated study that brings together such examples from the UK as well as overseas would offer a valuable contribution to ongoing debates over prisons and prisoners, particularly as prisons are likely to be a fixture for the foreseeable future in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and in danger of recycling the same problems and shortcomings that have dogged the past 150 years.