



Prisoners, Solitude, and Time

IAN O'DONNELL

Clarendon Studies in Criminology

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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First Edition published in 2014

Impression: 2

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014943572

ISBN 978-0-19-968448-9

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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PRISONERS, SOLITUDE, AND TIME

CLARENDON STUDIES IN CRIMINOLOGY

Published under the auspices of the Institute of Criminology,
University of Cambridge; the Mannheim Centre, London School of
Economics; and the Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford.

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General Editor's Introduction

Clarendon Studies in Criminology aims to provide a forum for outstanding empirical and theoretical work in all aspects of criminology and criminal justice, broadly understood. The Editors welcome submissions from established scholars, as well as excellent PhD work. The series was inaugurated in 1994, with Roger Hood as its first General Editor, following discussions between Oxford University Press and three criminology centres. It is edited under the auspices of these three centres: the Cambridge Institute of Criminology, the Mannheim Centre for Criminology at the London School of Economics, and the Centre for Criminology at the University of Oxford. Each supplies members of the Editorial Board and, in turn, the Series Editor.

Prisoners, Solitude, and Time by Ian O'Donnell is a major addition to the number of outstanding books on imprisonment already published in the *Clarendon Studies in Criminology* series. As the title indicates, its focus is on prisoners' experience of solitary confinement, their handling of time, and the interface between these. Professor O'Donnell brings to bear on these issues a wealth of academic expertise, primarily as a psychologist and historian, as well as experience in penal reform, prison visiting, and as a magistrate. The result is an immaculately written book that is not only scholarly but also thought-provoking, moving, and ultimately inspiring about the potential of human beings to somehow and sometimes transcend even the most cruel and unusual deprivations and pains.

Time is of the essence of prison as punishment, captured in the cliché 'if you can't do the time, don't do the crime'. Yet the vast criminological literature scarcely focuses on the subjective experience of 'doing time'. This was the inspiration for the project reported here, the evolution of which is described in the following way by the author:

My initial ponderings concerned the subjective experience of time passing in prison and how this might relate to rising sentence lengths, growing life expectancy, and an individual's ability to measure time intervals with increasing precision. Did one year in custody feel different to a prisoner in the nineteenth century who was likely to die before he reached the

age of 40, compared to his twenty-first century counterpart who could reasonably hope to achieve a lifespan of three score and ten? Are there particular pains associated with indefinite incarceration? And, more generally, what can we learn about the culture of prisons by studying the 'time work' engaged in by their inhabitants? These questions caused me to wonder about solitude and how a strategy for conquering time (or, at least, making it less abrasive) might involve psychological or social withdrawal. Such musings led to a consideration of silence and how it fits into the scheme of things. Solitude is not necessarily silent but, if it is, does it seem less bearable? (p. ix)

O'Donnell begins with an extensive review of the history of solitary confinement in prisons, from its origins with late eighteenth-century reformers (such as John Howard) who encouraged it with benevolent motives, intending to counteract the dangers and harms of the unregulated 'drunken rambunctiousness' (p. 1) of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century prisons. They were also concerned to foster reform through the severing of prisoners' contact with noxious influences, with exposure only to the supposedly soul-saving ministrations of pastoral workers and the opportunity to commune with one's conscience without external distractions. Whilst the initial intentions of advocates of penal isolation may have been benign, the effects were from the start widely condemned as cruelty amounting to torture. This applies *a fortiori* to the contemporary revival of solitary confinement, justified mainly by a pragmatic security rationale but without any even pretended concern for rehabilitation, with its apogee in the spread of the 'supermax' model. Contemporary solitary confinement raises issues beyond those of earlier centuries, partly because of the greater length of time often spent there (and isolation forces the most direct possible contemplation of the enormity of the problem of time), and partly because of the much more intense sociability and speed of life outside.

After the historical review of the development of solitary confinement, O'Donnell proceeds to analyse in great depth and with acute sensitivity its subjective experience, as recorded over the centuries in a variety of literary forms, including diaries, memoirs, poetry, and fiction. O'Donnell acknowledges this entails some methodological conundrums, although it offers the only windows into souls, especially in the past. In his words:

The first-person accounts which inform the analysis presented in subsequent chapters are by definition the preserve of the more articulate and more highly motivated former prisoners who survived the experience relatively

intact and possessed the wherewithal to get their thoughts into print. There are further problems with the fallibility of memory and the range of motivations that lie behind the construction of such narratives. Over-reliance on material of this nature would yield a partial perspective, although it must be acknowledged that these are precisely the kinds of studies in resilience that bring new light to bear on aspects of the captive experience that are central to this book. All prisoners must wrestle with the passage of time and all of those who are placed in solitary confinement must seek out a way to address the lack of human company. Not all are in a position to, or wish to, write about their experiences but study of a wide array of such accounts, written contemporaneously or with the benefit of hindsight, shows clear commonalities despite wide variation in author biographies in terms of age, gender, race, educational attainment, social class, reason for incarceration, duration and location of confinement. These commonalities suggest that what the authors have identified may have a more general relevance. (pp. 56–7)

The dangers of bias are alleviated by recourse to what other sources are available. 'To ensure balance, published prisoner accounts have been tested against newspaper reports, tracts written by prison chaplains and reformers, official publications, academic critiques, field visits, personal communications with prisoners, statistical data, and the documents produced by commissions of inquiry. By weaving together these diverse strands a more complete picture can be painted' (p. 57). O'Donnell also draws on evidence about other experiences of solitary confinement than those imprisoned for crimes: these range from the voluntary isolation of some monks or hermits, to prisoners of war, and explorers.

The book portrays the pains of solitary captivity vividly in disturbing detail. However, its main thrust is to try and identify how some exceptional individuals manage not only to get through the time somehow, but even to draw some positive enrichment. They draw on seven strategies distinguished alliteratively by O'Donnell as: Rescheduling, Removal, Reduction, Reorientation, Resistance, Raptness, and Reinterpretation. The techniques of preserving and perhaps even enhancing personal, ethical, and spiritual integrity are drawn perhaps disproportionality by those who have or find a cause that enables them to transcend the immediate pains they endure. O'Donnell encapsulates the spirit that can do this in a phrase drawn from the psychotherapist and concentration camp inmate, Viktor Frankl, which provides the book with an ultimately inspiring coda. Frankl defined 'tragic optimism' as:

the idea that meaning can be wrought from the direst circumstances and that persons who take responsibility for their decisions can strive to convert suffering into accomplishment. He suggested that the most powerful arguments in favour of this notion are those that can be made from individual cases. To this end, the methodology adopted for this book has been to present a wide range of accounts rather than to concentrate on a few. By a process of aggregation these personal testimonies of unlikely triumph over the least favourable conditions add weight to Frankl's idea. If some can achieve a demeanour of tragic optimism then why not others? Frankl's argument was not that suffering is essential to render life meaningful; far from it. His view was that if suffering could be avoided it should be and that it was only triumph over unavoidable suffering that was meaningful. (p. 278)

None of this of course offers an argument in favour of the acute pains inflicted by involuntary solitary confinement especially over prolonged periods. But it does inspire with the capacity of human spirits sometimes to survive such ordeals, and indeed put the pain to good effect. Perhaps the most celebrated recent example, drawn on several times here, was Nelson Mandela. O'Donnell's book adds much insight and inspiration to criminological studies of penal confinement, and is a most welcome addition to the *Clarendon Studies in Criminology* series.

Robert Reiner
London School of Economics
June 2014

Preface

This book has had a longer gestation period than anything else I have had the pleasure of working on. My first notes were scribbled on a compliments slip in a Barcelona hotel in August 2004. There followed several years of intermittent attention as a potential project began to take shape. During 2010 I drew together the relevant literatures and began to sharpen my focus. A period of research leave in 2011 allowed me to make significant progress with the task of writing and a first draft was completed two years later.

My initial ponderings concerned the subjective experience of time passing in prison and how this might relate to rising sentence lengths, growing life expectancy, and an individual's ability to measure time intervals with increasing precision. Did one year in custody feel different to a prisoner in the nineteenth century who was likely to die before he reached the age of 40 compared to his twenty-first-century counterpart who could reasonably hope to achieve a lifespan of three score and ten? Are there particular pains associated with indefinite incarceration? And, more generally, what can we learn about the culture of prisons by studying the 'time work' engaged in by their inhabitants? These questions caused me to wonder about solitude and how a strategy for conquering time (or, at least, making it less abrasive) might involve psychological or social withdrawal. Such musings led to a consideration of silence and how it fits into the scheme of things. Solitude is not necessarily silent but, if it is, does it seem less bearable?

There are personal reasons for my inquiry also. Having been appointed to the Board of Visitors of HMP Pentonville as it approached its sesquicentenary I have had a long-standing interest in this institution's role in penal history. My experiences as a magistrate in Oxford (which sometimes involved imposing prison sentences), as director of the Irish Penal Reform Trust (where my concern was to challenge the thoughtless expansion of the prison system), and as a professor of criminology (with a particular focus on coercive confinement), have consolidated this interest.

The process of distilling my thoughts into what appears between these covers has itself involved much time, solitude, and silence. It required an unusual degree of intellectual meandering and, occasionally, prolonged absences among academic thickets through which I had not previously hacked. Never before did I have the opportunity to consider what prisoners might have in common with Arctic explorers, what lessons the eremitical life might offer to students of penology, why the temporal dimension of imprisonment has been so neglected despite its critical importance, and the seductive appeal of timetables. If, dear reader, you wonder why anyone would devote so much of the time that is inexorably slipping away from them to a project that would appear to pose unanswerable questions then I will feel vindicated. If your curiosity is piqued and you wish to invest some of your time and intellectual resources in considering what I have to say, I will feel flattered to boot.

Academic life has become progressively more demanding for reasons that are too tedious to review here. The end result is that free thinking can be stifled and an obsession with demonstrating ‘impact’ can get in the way of chasing ideas wherever they may lead and remaining open to the possibilities offered by serendipity. Bureaucratic demands take on a smothering quality and scholars end up ploughing increasingly narrow furrows of specialization where the yield is poor and excites little interest. To have been able to carve out space in my schedule to write this book has required feats of workload management that would not have been attempted had the subject matter proved less alluring. Whether it has been worthwhile is for the reader to judge.

I have a number of debts to acknowledge. For her assistance in gathering materials that were widely scattered and sometimes deeply buried I am most grateful to Angela Ennis. The staff of the James Joyce Library in University College Dublin, especially the inter-library loans desk, dealt efficiently with my numerous requests. Multiple trips to the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the Cambridge University Library were hugely productive as well as being important reminders of the joys of a well-stocked library, even in a digital age.

I have made many visits over the years to prisons that were built as monuments to silence and separation, especially HMP Pentonville in London (opened in 1842) and Mountjoy in Dublin (opened in 1850). As part of my research for this book I wandered

along the tiers of Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, which received its first prisoners in 1829, was designated a national historic landmark in 1965, and was finally abandoned in 1971. The memories of some who served time there have been recorded and archived and I was fortunate to be allowed access to the transcripts of these reminiscences. The last prisoners at Eastern State were transferred to the State Correctional Institution at Graterford and the Pennsylvanian experiment with extreme segregation was resuscitated in restricted housing units at institutions such as SCI Greene and SCI Rockview. I am much obliged to Bill DiMascio who, during his tenure as executive director of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, enabled me to spend time behind the walls of Graterford, Greene, and Rockview. Auburn Correctional Facility in central New York (opened in 1817 and rebuilt in the 1930s), where prisoners left their cells to work, eat, and worship together but where the rule of silence was vigorously enforced with the whip, famously offered a model to rival the Pennsylvanian one. I am grateful to Harold Graham, superintendent of this institution, for allowing me to visit to see how it has been remodelled over almost 200 years of continuous usage. By walking in the footsteps of those who had served time at Eastern State and Auburn, I felt the ripples of experiments in penal reform that were begun in the early nineteenth century.

A select group of prisoners, including several on death row, who have endured periods of isolation measured in decades rather than years, were gracious enough to share some of their thoughts with me in person and through the exchange of letters. So too were a number of men and women living as hermits or as members of enclosed religious orders in the Christian tradition (such as the Carthusians, Cistercians, and Camaldolese) who have learned to find treasure in stillness. None rebuffed my attempts to communicate and all offered hard-won and valuable insights. I was also fortunate enough to correspond with an experienced Tibetan Buddhist about how joy can be found in isolation. A series of seminars with the Mountjoy Prison Lifers' Group gave me an opportunity to test my ideas against the experiences of those to whom they should relate. I am grateful to the participants for sharing their perspectives and hope that what follows does not lose sight of their concerns. I am also obliged to the Irish Prison Psychology Service for facilitating these meetings.

As part of my effort to understand the rewards that can accompany the rigours of a silent and solitary life—what Patrick Leigh Fermor described as ‘the slow and cumulative spell of healing quietness’—I availed of the hospitality offered by the Benedictine monks at Glenstal Abbey and the Cistercians (Trappists) at Mount Melleray Abbey. Indeed, a number of the ideas in this book were refashioned in the guest houses of these austere but edifying establishments which grace the Irish countryside in counties Limerick and Waterford, respectively. These sojourns deepened my appreciation of how life can be affected by a silent rhythm.

For their willingness to respond to my queries, query my responses, challenge my assumptions, strengthen my arguments, and engage with various drafts of my text, I am obliged to Jessica Bird, Mary Bosworth, Ben Crewe, David Doyle, Kimmet Edgar, Rosemary Gido, Barry Godfrey, Deirdre Healy, Tehching Hsieh, Erwin James, Yvonne Jewkes, Helen Johnston, Roy King, the late Norman Johnston, W. Paul Jones, Shane Kilcommis, Sara Maitland, Shadd Maruna, Dan Mears, Eoin O’Sullivan, Keramet Reiter, Lorna Rhodes, Sharon Shalev, Peter Scharff Smith, Hans Toch, and David Ward. Several of the foregoing cautioned against undue length and they will be relieved to find that the final version of the book is half its original size. It remains long but I hope it is less ponderous and meandering than it might otherwise have been. While engaged on this project I was alive to the possibility that a focus on individual resilience and redemptive solitude might be seized upon by proponents of extended solitary confinement to support a practice that should be condemned. I sincerely hope that by teasing out some of the (occasional) benefits I have not downplayed the (almost inevitable) burdens. Whatever else it may do this book does not make the case for penal isolation.

To everyone who helped me to reframe my understanding of time and isolation as they are manifest in prison, I extend my gratitude. To those who have not buckled under the weight of solitariness but have shown, in Brian Keenan’s words, ‘how in the most inhuman of circumstances men grow and deepen in humanity’, I offer my respect.

This book is dedicated to Kirsty Kirkwood with whom I am fortunate to share my time.

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