



# The Prisoner

Edited by Ben Crewe and Jamie Bennett



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First published 2012  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

The prisoner/edited by Ben Crewe and Jamie Bennett.

p. cm.

1. Prisoners--Great Britain. 2. Prisons--Great Britain. 3. Prison Psychology--Great Britain. I. Crewe, Ben. II. Bennett, Jamie.

HV9647.P747 2012

365/.60941--dc23

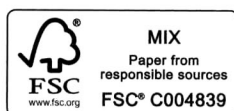
2011022925

ISBN: 978-0-415-66865-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-66866-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-15382-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by GCS, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire



Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

‘This very readable book provides a unique perspective on prison life through the ‘voice’ of prisoners themselves combined with insightful academic/practitioner commentary. It is an important addition to prison literature and will quickly become a ‘must read’ for anyone who wishes to understand the actual ‘reality’ of the prisoner experience’.

Michael Spurr, *Chief Executive Officer, National Offender Management Service,  
England & Wales*

‘Despite it having risen to become one of the major issues of public concern in the UK over the past twenty years or so the reality of prison life remains largely a mystery for most people in this country. Equally mysterious are the inhabitants of our prisons. Who are they? And more importantly what motivates them? With its sensitive balance of prisoner voices and expert analysis this timely, intelligent book does a peerless job of providing the answers.’

Erwin James, *Guardian columnist and former prisoner*

# The Prisoner

Little of what we know about prisons comes from the mouths of prisoners, and very few academic accounts manage to convey some of its most profound and important features: its daily pressures and frustrations, the culture of the wings and landings, and the relationships which shape the everyday experience of being imprisoned.

*The Prisoner* aims to redress this by foregrounding prisoners' own accounts of prison life in what is an original and penetrating edited collection. Each of its chapters explores a particular prisoner sub-group or an important aspect of prisoners' lives, and each is divided into two sections: extended extracts from interviews with prisoners, followed by academic commentary and analysis written by a leading scholar or practitioner. This structure allows prisoners' voices to speak for themselves, while situating what they say in a wider discussion of research, policy and practice. The result is a rich and evocative portrayal of the lived reality of imprisonment and a poignant insight into prisoners' lives.

The book aims to bring to life key penological issues and provide an accessible text for anyone interested in prisons, including students, practitioners and a general audience. It seeks to represent and humanise a group that is often silent in discussions of imprisonment, and to shine a light on a world that is generally hidden from view.

**Ben Crewe** is Deputy Director of the Prisons Research Centre at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge. He has published on various aspects of prison life, including staff–prisoner relationships, the drugs economy within prison, the ‘inmate code’ and public–private sector comparisons. His most recent book, *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation, and Social Life in an English Prison*, was published in 2009.

**Jamie Bennett** has worked for 15 years as a prison manager and has held senior positions including Governor of HMP Morton Hall. He is also Editor of *Prison Service Journal* and has written widely on criminal justice matters including prison management, the media representation of prisons, and the relationship between crime and inequality. He has published two previous books: *Understanding Prison Staff* (with Ben Crewe and Azrini Wahidin, 2008) and *Dictionary of Prisons and Punishment* (with Yvonne Jewkes, 2008).

# Contributors

**Steve Barlow** has worked in the field of education for over 30 years, including seven years as a teacher in a New South Wales prison. He has conducted research for the NSW Department of Corrective Services into educational initiatives within NSW prisons, as well as PhD research into how prisoners indicate their readiness for positive life change. Although no longer working full-time in prison education, Steve maintains an ongoing interest in helping ex-offenders reintegrate into the community.

**Jamie Bennett** is a prison governor and also Editor of *Prison Service Journal*. He has written widely on criminal justice issues including prison management, crime and inequality, and prisons in the media. He has published two previous books: *Understanding Prison Staff* (with Ben Crewe and Azrini Wahidin, 2008) and *Dictionary of Prisons and Punishment* (with Yvonne Jewkes, 2008).

**Rachel Condry** is a lecturer at the Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford, and a Fellow of St Hilda's College. She has previously been a lecturer in criminology and a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the London School of Economics, and a lecturer in criminology at the University of Surrey. Her research focuses broadly on the intersections between crime and the family. Her research interests include families of offenders and victims, family violence, the family in youth justice, secondary victimisation, narrative accounts, shame and stigma, and the state regulation of parenting and family life. She is the author of a book about the families of serious offenders, *Families Shamed: The Consequences of Crime for Relatives of Serious Offenders* (Willan, 2007), and is currently conducting two research projects. The first, funded by the ESRC, examines the problem of adolescent-to-parent violence and the second, funded by the British Academy, explores parenting expertise in youth justice.

**Andrew Coyle** is Emeritus Professor of Prison Studies in the University of London, Visiting Professor in the University of Essex and Director of the International Centre for Prison Studies. Previously he worked for 25 years at a senior level in the prison services of the United Kingdom where he governed several major prisons. He is a prisons adviser to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Latin American Institute, the Council of Europe,

including its Committee for the Prevention of Torture, and several national governments. He has a PhD in criminology from the Faculty of Law at the University of Edinburgh and is a Fellow of King's College London. In 2000 he was appointed an Honorary Professor in the Academy of Law and Management, Ryazan, Russia. His books include *The Prisons We Deserve*, *Managing Prisons in a Time of Change*, *A Human Rights Approach to Prison Management* (published in 16 languages), *Humanity in Prison* and *Understanding Prisons: Key Issues in Policy and Practice*. He was appointed a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George in 2003 for his contribution to international penal reform.

**Ben Crewe** is Deputy Director of the Prisons Research Centre at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge. He has published on various aspects of prison life, including staff–prisoner relationships, the drugs economy within prison, the ‘inmate code’ and public–private sector comparisons. His most recent book, *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison*, was published in 2009.

**Rod Earle** is a lecturer in the Department of Health and Social Care at the Open University. He is Academic Lead for the Youth Justice courses and a member of the International Centre for Comparative Criminological Research at the Open University. Working with Coretta Phillips, he recently conducted a two-year study of identity, ethnicity and social relations in two men's prisons in southern England. Before working as an academic Rod spent over ten years with Lambeth Social Services in south London trying to help children and young people in trouble with the law.

**Yvonne Jewkes** is Professor of Criminology at the University of Leicester. She has published several books on prisons and imprisonment including *Prisons and Punishment* (Sage, 2008), *Handbook on Prisons* (Willan, 2007), *Captive Audience: Media, Masculinity and Power in Prisons* (Willan, 2002) and, with Helen Johnston, *Prison Readings: A Critical Introduction to Prisons and Imprisonment* (Willan, 2006).

**Alison Liebling** is Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice and Director of the Prisons Research Centre at the University of Cambridge. She has carried out research on young offender throughcare, suicides in prison, staff–prisoner relationships, the work of prison officers, small units for difficult prisoners, incentives and earned privileges, prison privatisation, secure training centres, and measuring the quality of prison life. She has published several books, including *Suicides in Prison* (1992), *Prisons and their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality and Prison Life* (2004) and *The Effects of Imprisonment* (with Shadd Maruna, 2005). She is currently completing a repeat of a study she first conducted in 1998, of staff–prisoner relationships at Whitemoor prison. She has published widely in criminological journals, and is currently co-editor in chief (with Dirk van Zyl Smit) of *Punishment and Society: The International Journal of Penology*.



**Natalie Mann** is a criminology lecturer at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, having previously been a teaching fellow in the Sociology Department at the University of Essex, where she completed her PhD in 2008, entitled *Doing Harder Time? The Experiences of an Ageing Male Prison Population in England and Wales*. The research investigated the ways in which ageing men cope with imprisonment, and the unique problems they experience. Her more recent work has focused on ageing child sex offenders. She is currently writing a manuscript based on her PhD, to be published by Ashgate.

**Shadd Maruna** is Director of the Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Queen's University Belfast where he is also Professor of Justice Studies and Human Development. Previously, he has been a lecturer at the University of Cambridge and the State University of New York. His book *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives* (American Psychological Association, 2001) was named the 'Outstanding Contribution to Criminology' by the American Society of Criminology in 2001.

**Rod Morgan** is Professor Emeritus, University of Bristol and Visiting Professor at the LSE and Cardiff University. He is a Ministry of Justice appointed advisor to the five criminal justice inspectorates and was formerly Chairman of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (2004–7), HM Chief Inspector of Probation (2001–4) and Assessor to Lord Woolf's Inquiry into the 1990 Prison Disturbances. Among his many publications is his co-editorship of the *Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (OUP), the 5th edition of which is in preparation.

**Coretta Phillips** is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She has published widely in the field of ethnicities, racism and criminal justice, including *Racism, Crime and Justice* (with Ben Bowling, Longman, 2002). Most recently, her research interests have included examining the resettlement needs of black, Asian, and minority ethnic offenders, and she is also writing up the study on which her chapter is based for a book entitled *The Multicultural Prison*. Coretta is a member of the Independent Equalities Advisory Group for NOMS.

**Abigail Rowe** is Lecturer in Criminology at the Open University. She has worked on research projects on social exclusion, maximum-security men's imprisonment and conducted ethnographic research in women's prisons in England. She has published on various aspects of imprisonment, including private prisons and women's imprisonment.

**Sarah Tait** received her doctorate from the Institute of Criminology, Cambridge University in 2008. She has published on prison officer culture, gender and prison officer work, suicide and self-harm in prisons, and the role of care in staff-prisoner relationships. After completing an ESRC post-doctoral fellowship in 2010, she returned to Canada and has taught gender and work and the sociology of punishment at the University of Toronto and the University of Waterloo. She currently lives in Ottawa, Ontario.



**Jason Warr** has had an unusual pathway into academia. He was incarcerated between 1992 and 2004, during which time he studied in a haphazard fashion. He was eventually inspired to take his studying seriously by Alan Smith, his philosophy teacher at HMP Wellingborough. In April 2004, while awaiting release on life licence, he attended a conference at Cambridge where he met John Irwin, Shadd Maruna, Alison Liebling, Pat Carlen and Ben Crewe, all of whom encouraged him to pursue an academic path that he had never imagined would be open to him. Since his release he has completed a BSc in Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method at LSE, an MPhil in Criminological Research at the Institute of Criminology University of Cambridge and is currently in the final stages of his doctoral research. As well as working on his PhD and various articles and chapters for publication he is currently working on his autobiography – *There and Back Again: A Con's Tale*.

# Foreword

*Andrew Coyle*

In the world of prisons, terminology has a particular resonance and alternative terms are frequently used to soften the reality. Prisons have been described as jails, penitentiaries and correctional institutions. Over the years prison staff have been referred to as warders, guards, prison officers and correctional officers. Those who are held in prisons have been described variously as convicts, prisoners, detainees and inmates.

Part of the explanation for these variations lies in continuing uncertainty about what the law intends in deciding that some persons who have committed crimes should be sent to prison. Are they sent there merely to be detained (hence, jails and guards), or as punishment (penitentiaries), or in the expectation that they will be reformed by the experience (corrections)? The use of a particular term often denotes the priority that a jurisdiction accords to these places, a priority not necessarily reflected in what actually goes on within them on a day-to-day basis.

When considering these matters it is helpful to go back to first principles, which, in terms of imprisonment, are to be found in the criminal law. In England and Wales, the relevant law is to be found in Section 152(2) of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, which sets out ‘General restrictions on imposing discretionary custodial sentences’:

The court must not pass a custodial sentence unless it is of the opinion that the offence, or the combination of the offence and one or more offences associated with it, was so serious that neither a fine alone nor a community sentence can be justified for the offence.

Hence, the law leaves little doubt. Individuals are sent to prison because the court judges that the offence of which the person has been convicted is so serious that no other sentence can be justified. In other words, for persons who have been convicted, it is not a question of whether there are alternatives to imprisonment; rather, it is that imprisonment is the alternative when no other sentence can be justified. Imprisonment is the most serious punishment available to a court following a criminal conviction and the basis of that punishment is the

deprivation of liberty. This reality has always been understood by those who are sent to prison; they know that, however anyone else may describe them, they are prisoners. It has also been understood by prison officers.

Generally speaking, those who are responsible for the prison system in England and Wales have also understood and accepted this legal reality. For a short period in the second half of the last century there was an attempt to describe those held in prison as 'inmates', a term with medical overtones, but this was soon discarded. Similarly, at the turn of the century, there was an attempt to introduce the term 'corrections', with the government going so far as to appoint a Commissioner of Correctional Services; but this proved to be a transitory and short-lived diversion.

Clarity of terminology in the prison context is not simply a matter of pedantry or of legal nicety. It goes to the heart of how men and women held in prison are to be treated. They are not objects to be 'corrected', like crooked trees that need to be placed in splints until their direction of growth is corrected. Nor are they merely 'offenders', to be defined by one particular aspect of their behaviour, with all other aspects of their humanity to be viewed through the prism of 'offending behaviour'.

While people are held in prison they should be given every encouragement and incentive to maintain and to develop positive family relationships, to acquire skills that will help them to earn a living after release and to find employment in which they can use these skills, to ensure that they have somewhere to live when they leave prison, to change features of their lives, such as drug and alcohol abuse, and to get help for medical needs, not least mental health problems. At the same time, it is important always to be conscious of the fact that these aspects of personal development and maturity must be based on the choice and determination of the individual. They cannot be imposed from without.

To some extent it is an inevitable feature of prison life that prisoners are regarded, in the words of one author, as 'objects' rather than 'subjects':<sup>1</sup> things are to be done to them and for them, rather than *with* them and *by* them. The inevitability of that stems from the legal reality of prison, as described above. Prisons are primarily places of detention, in which the demands of security and good order will invariably trump all others. That is what Alexander Paterson meant by his famous dictum that people cannot be trained for freedom in conditions of captivity.<sup>2</sup> That is not to say that prisons should be places of despair and inhumanity. On the contrary, recent heads of the Prison Service of England and Wales have pursued with vigour the notion that prisons should be places of decency and humanity.

However, the ethos of prison remains one in which prisoners are treated as passive respondents rather than active participants. This philosophical foundation stone was never more clearly exposed than in the establishment of the National Offender Management Service.<sup>3</sup> This gave explicit articulation to the notion that those in prison were to be dealt with first and foremost as offenders and that they were to be 'managed'. This was to be done in a manner which was decent but which absolutely reinforced the notion of the prisoner as 'object', subjected to

'end-to-end management' delivered in a 'seamless' fashion. This was the logical conclusion to an approach that saw the prisoner as an object to be observed by criminologists, to be assessed according to a 'criminogenic'<sup>4</sup> template invented by psychologists, and to be managed within a world of key performance indicators and targets, with the measure of success to be a 'reduction in reoffending'.

The 'offender management' approach is based on an unsound premise. It acknowledges the need to recognise that prisoners are individual human beings while at the same time implying that their individual humanity is circumscribed by the fact that they are prisoners. One consequence of this dissonance is the assumption that this individual approach can be implemented within institutions which, to borrow a term from one of the Carter reports,<sup>5</sup> are increasingly titanic in size and are of necessity organised on a homogeneous and monolithic basis.

The significance of the chapters in this book lies in the fact that they attempt to portray those who are in prison as subjects rather than as objects. It gives them voices that underline their individuality as human beings. While not seeking to diminish the seriousness of the crimes that many of them have committed, it also opens a window on to who they are as persons and how their life experiences prior to imprisonment have been a factor in the path their lives have taken. The life stories that are recounted are each peculiar to the individual, yet in no case was it inevitable that the person would end up in prison. In our own experiences many of us will have come across people who have faced situations not dissimilar to those recounted in this book, yet who have reacted differently and more positively. In Chapter 1 Alan analyses his young life with a considerable degree of insight:

The way I see it, it was out of my control, because it was something that was confronted at me and I just made the wrong choice. I had two paths to take and I just took the wrong one every time. I just didn't learn from my mistakes.

Reading his story, it is not entirely surprising that he took the wrong path. Jeremiah in Chapter 6 describes how he tries to balance the need to do what is required of him in prison ('I've addressed everything that I'm supposed to address') with what is really important to him as he comes to the end of his sentence: the wish to become a full member of his family. He understands that his imprisonment is in some respects harder for his partner than it is for him:

...I've left her out there to struggle ... standing at the bus stop with my son late at night, and I phone her and she's crying and it's cold and she's waiting for the bus to come home ... I've left her to defend herself with a young child when she was young herself.

One wonders which box that ticked in his OASys (Offender Assessment System) form.<sup>6</sup> In the same chapter Luke also emphasises the importance of family relationships and the difficulty of maintaining them in prison, acknowledging that

his drug addiction further complicates his attempts to do so. He has spent much of his adult life in prison and comments without self-pity on the pointlessness of much of his daily life:

You should be able to work in prison and earn your keep, you know what I mean? ... You can't tell me that a prison couldn't set up a scheme where we are working within a prison, earning decent money, doing anything?

Many politicians and newspaper editors would echo that sentiment.

Most prisoners are adult males and in all countries prisons and prison systems are built and managed with the needs of the majority in mind, with little thought given to the different needs of other groups. One thinks back to the mid-1990s, when following high-profile escapes from male high security prisons the order went out that henceforth every prisoner being taken out of prison (for example, to hospital) should be handcuffed to an officer. The literal interpretation of that order led to the obscenity of pregnant women being shackled even in the labour suites of maternity hospitals. Chapters 7 to 10 of this book remind us of the different experiences of women and young people in prison, of the problems faced by the increasing number of old prisoners, and of those who are of a different culture or race from the majority. Kirsty's story is of a young drug addict who had suffered abuse at the hands of foster parents and was now coping with the distress of having her infant child taken away from her because others, including her mother, had decided that it was best that the baby should be looked after by her grandmother. This may well have been the correct decision but there seems to have been little attempt to assist Kirsty to cope with what she saw as a new failure, that of motherhood, on her part.

Wayne an 18-year-old of mixed race, describes how he feels safer inside prison than outside. He is virtually resigned to the inevitability of a life spent going through the revolving doorway of the prison, yet wanting to break out of this cycle:

My biggest concern about getting out of jail is coming back, that will always be number one. That feeling of letting everyone down, letting down everyone that has tried to help you again. It comes to a point where people walk away.

The overriding sense when reading this book is that although prisons may be homogenous, prisoners are not. They are individual human beings, each with his or her own story to tell, most of them seeking their own path to a life free of crime and of prison. The prison system we have today rarely helps the individual in that search, despite the best efforts of those who work within it.

It was an official publication from the Thatcher government which noted that when used inappropriately prison can be 'an expensive way of making bad people worse'.<sup>7</sup> Few people today dispute that, with 85,000 people in prison in England and Wales, it is often used inappropriately. It may be that instead of

repeatedly attempting to make prison more efficient, we should be looking not at alternatives to prison but to an alternative to the prison, an alternative that would more effectively divert people from a life of crime, that would increase public feelings of safety, and reduce the number of victims. It may be that in giving prisoners a voice in the way it does this book will encourage us to look for such an alternative.

## Notes

- 1 Duguid, S. (2000) *Can Prisons Work? The Prisoner as Object and Subject in Modern Corrections*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- 2 Ruck, S. (ed.) (1951) *Paterson on Prisons: Being the Collected Papers of Sir Alexander Paterson*. London: Frederick Muller Ltd.
- 3 Carter, P. (2003) *Managing Offenders, Reducing Crime: A New Approach*. London: Strategy Unit.
- 4 I am always reassured by the fact that on each occasion I type this word my computer spell check refuses to recognise it.
- 5 Carter, P. (2007) *Securing the Future: Proposals for the Efficient and Sustainable Use of Custody in England and Wales*. London: Ministry of Justice.
- 6 Offender Assessment System: A computer-based risk assessment tool used in prisons and probation services in England and Wales.
- 7 Home Office (1990) *Crime, Justice & Protecting the Public*. London: HMSO, Cmnd 965.

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the prisoners who have shared their lives with us and other researchers in order to make this book possible. Thanks are also due to the prison staff and managers who make research possible, when it might not always feel in their interests to do so.



# Introduction

*Ben Crewe and Jamie Bennett*

To get an inside picture one must first be convicted, and then of course, anything one has to say is valueless and is treated with the gravest suspicion.<sup>1</sup>

How does one get a feel for prison life, for its daily texture, or for what it is really like to be imprisoned? Many of the ‘classic studies’, conducted during the 1950s and the two subsequent decades, make very little use of direct quotations to illustrate their insight, muffling the voice of the prisoner behind their analysis. Surprisingly few academic texts manage to convey some of the most distinctive qualities of prisons – not just their sounds and smells, which, after all, are not easy to describe on paper, but their mundane frustrations, their emotional consistency, the daily dilemmas and demands that they generate, and the combination of misery and mirth that suffuses the environment.

Prisoner writings, such as diaries and autobiographies, often do a better job of capturing the everyday culture of the prison and the interior mental universe of the incarcerated. In recent years, accounts by Erwin James and Ruth Wyner, among others, have added to a long tradition of first-hand accounts of the prisoner experience.<sup>2</sup> By their nature, though, these are singular experiences of prison life, and they are imperfect guides to the general experience of imprisonment (inasmuch as one can talk in such terms). As Steve Morgan suggests, they tend to be written either by ‘straights’ – respectable citizens thrust into a world which to them is highly alien – or ‘cons’ – experienced criminals, serving very long sentences or having an extensive history of short sentences.<sup>3</sup> Some of the more sensational ‘con’ autobiographies, alongside a broader canon of ‘gangster-lit’, have, if anything, obscured some of the truths about prison life, or, at best, presented an extremely partial picture of crime and punishment.

Arguably, then, the voices of more ordinary prisoners are under-represented in this canon. One of the main aims of this book is to expand and fill this spectrum (however incompletely), both through the range of topics it tries to cover and the inclusion within each chapter of at least two different prisoner accounts. The chapters have been designed so that they combine first-hand narrative with academic commentary. Each is divided into two sections: the first

section comprises extended excerpts from interviews with prisoners,<sup>4</sup> while the second seeks to put the interviews in wider context, to highlight and discuss their key themes, and to note any salient issues that are missing from the interview extracts. By structuring each chapter in this way, we hope to offer richness of detail alongside a wider consideration of patterns, trends and explanations.

Our wider aims are manifold. First, we want to give value, exposure and intrinsic credibility to the inside account of the convict, whose thoughts are too often concealed or discounted, as Zeno notes in the epigraph at the start of this chapter. In doing so, we want especially to humanise prisoners, for we fear that the term ‘prisoner’ evokes in most people the sense of a categorically different species. As social inequalities grow, and social distance and ignorance become correspondingly greater, it is all the more likely that prisoners will be thought of only in terms of the acts they have committed rather than the lives they have led and the life experiences that provide a backdrop for their offending. As many of the testimonies in this book illustrate, violence, abuse and neglect are common in prisoners’ backgrounds; recurring themes of low self-esteem, guilt and both ‘respect’ and ‘disrespect’ point to deep-rooted emotional patterns and preoccupations. Prisoners rarely talk to prison staff or to their peers about these issues, and the prison environment provides only limited opportunities to deal with them. By framing prisoners’ experiences within a wider account of their lives, we want to widen the lens through which they are seen and perhaps reshape public perceptions of who prisoners are. We also hope to offer insight to staff who work with offenders and to practitioners who design the policies that affect them.

In the selection of prisoner extracts, there is likely to be some bias towards interviewees who are more than usually articulate. However, in our experience, very few prisoners struggle to depict their world and express their feelings. Even among prisoners who are deemed conventionally ineloquent, there is a clarity of expression, a directness in the use of language, and a raw descriptive quality that seems related to the extreme nature of the environment – its tendency to focus the mind on life’s existential priorities and to concentrate and crystallise all manner of social and emotional phenomena, from friendship to fear.

This edited collection is preceded by books with similar aims – collaborations between academics and prisoners,<sup>5</sup> and exchanges between prisoners and outsiders.<sup>6</sup> In terms of tone, though, we have been most influenced by work by neither prisoners nor academics: in particular, the documentary films of Rex Bloomstein,<sup>7</sup> notably *Strangeways* (1980), *Strangeways Re-Visited* (2001), *Lifer – Living With Murder* (2003) and *Kids Behind Bars* (2005), and the oral histories of Tony Parker, particularly *The Frying Pan: A Prison and its Prisoners*.<sup>8</sup> Both Bloomstein and Parker manage to place their audiences inside the prison, without manipulating them into taking up moral or political positions. Academics could learn much from their style and technique. Just as his preference for dispensing with evocative musical accompaniment renders his films more rather than less evocative, Bloomstein’s capacity to brave out silences and ask straightforward,