

## **Probation: Key Readings**

*George Mair and Judith Rumgay (eds)., (2014)*

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Let's face it, this big book is history. History both in the flippant sense of being finished, gone, over and done, passé, and also in the more serious sense of being an official record of events, crises, hopes, regrets and turning points – in this instance, an anthology of important and/or influential articles and documents about and by the probation service over the course of its existence in England and Wales, from 1907 up to 2010. Even at the time the collection was being put together (in mid-2012) there were no remaining grounds for optimism about the survival of the probation service as a recognizable “social work” entity. By the time this review was being written (late 2014) 70% of the service was being buried alive in a commercial coffin, packaged up and sold off to “community rehabilitation companies”, while the remaining 30% - still called the “national probation service”, but hardly a legacy organization – was being sucked more deeply into the central state and tasked with the care-free control of higher risk offenders. Editors Mair and Rumgay, I'm sure, must have known they were erecting a monument and a memorial, maybe even a tombstone, rather than making one last attempt to pit probation service traditions against the settled will of the Ministry of Justice to scour them once and for all from the face of criminal justice. By 2012, that option had ceased to be.

The monument, however, is deserved and necessary, because with the demise of the Anglo-Welsh probation service something valuable has been lost and what it did and stood for should not be forgotten. Over and above its immediate memorial function, the collection will endure as a resource to help future researchers understand what the post-WW2 probation service was, what its roots were, how it grew and changed, or didn't change, and what it eventually came up against, politically. It complements rather than displaces the histories of probation that appeared to celebrate the centenary of the service, and may over time become more important than them, because the work assembled here represents history in “first draft”, things as they seemed “in the day”, rather than history as a reflective, retrospective narrative. Future historians may want to tell the later history of probation differently from the way it has been told up to now, and come at the old-time raw materials with fresh eyes. For them, for all its partiality and minor omissions, this book will be indispensable.

To be sure, *Probation: Key Readings* constructs its own normative narrative in the very choice of the articles selected, as well as in the excellent, contextualizing commentaries which Mair and Rumgay provide. Both elements make perfect sense to anyone who, like the editors

themselves, began their association with the probation service in the 1970s, when it was arguably at its most professionally autonomous, and when there was a markedly radical edge to internal discussions about its future. The book contains 76 articles and documents (or rather, edited extracts thereof) arranged in six sections which cover the evolution of policy, organizational development, theorizing the service's work, changing practice developments, diversity, and conceptions of effectiveness. It is these sections which are each arranged chronologically, not the book as a whole. Most of the articles are post-1960s, although the first one begins with an extract from the Probation of Offenders Act 1907 and some committee reports from the pre-WW2 era, and the second one includes important observations from the pre-academic, and often forgotten probation writers, Cecil Leeson (1914), Sewell Stokes (1950) and Margery Todd (1964).

To seasoned readers of probation history, there are many familiar articles here, which can be revisited like old friends, from Albert Hunt's (1962) *Enforcement in Probation Practice*, through David Bale's (1987) *Using a "Risk of Custody" Scale* to Michael Sheath's (1990) "Confrontative" work with sex offenders: legitimised nonce-bashing?, all by way of several renowned contributions from Bill McWilliams. Something of the flavour of debates about the origins of community service, the use of antabuse, the case for "going local", the emergence of "socialist probation practice", the perceived threat to the direction of the service posed by the Kent Control Unit and the straightjacket that insistent calls for "evidence-based practice" became, can all be gleaned in these pages. There is ample incentive here to stand back and rethink received wisdom on the political strategies that segments of the service either developed on their own or in reaction to real or perceived antagonism from the government. Mair and Rumgay rightly comment that David Haxby's (1978) once "notorious" call for probation to become a "community corrections service" does not seem as far now from acceptable social work practices with offenders as it seemed at the time, but still fall short, in my view, of crediting him with a clearer-eyed view of progress and possibility than many of his contemporaries had.

The articles assembled here on "diversity" (as we call it now) arguably reflect the best that was thought and said at the time about anti-discriminatory, and particularly anti-racist practice, and document a necessary and hard-won struggle. None of them really acknowledge how divisive and destructive a certain version of "identity politics" became for a short season in probation's history, as a result of *bad theory* being taken too seriously. Outside of probation, radical black intellectual Paul Gilroy (1990) acknowledged and condemned this as counterproductive to genuine anti-racism, but as no contemporary probation article on it ever saw the light of day, that awkward moment cannot be reflected in an anthology of this kind. Pat Carlen's (1989) urgent call for a "women-wise penology" – a soupcon of *good theory* – was not, sadly, particularly influential in practice, but its vigour and vision remain undimmed.

Though usually no more than a minor footnote in most probation histories, maverick London probation officer Geoffrey Parkinson's (1970) admission of how he steadily weaned his caseload of offenders from more serious to less serious crime (*I Give Them Money*), which almost got him sacked, earns its place here as something which helped overthrow the more ludicrous psychoanalytic nostrums that still lingered in probation at the time. It ought to have been from this point, rather than several decades later, that probation began hard thinking about supporting desistance – Parkinson inchoately understood it – and Mair and Rumgay, I guess, don't share my view that it was the pervasive, unreflective influence of *generic* social work ideals, on social work training courses and in the service itself, that, like a bad habitus, held back the development of a specialized, critical, applied penological practice, in and for

probation. If such a thing had become embedded early enough in the probation service, it may not have been as vulnerable to later political attack as its defensive insistence on a nostalgic, unfocussed social work identity patently made it. History *might* have been different from what it was.

The one notable omission from this anthology, in terms of influence, is Fergus McNeill's (2006) *A Desistance Paradigm for Offender Management*, which seemed attractively backward-looking to old school practitioners (inviting a welcome return to relational, user-friendly, social work-based practice) and – over time - impressively forward looking to a rising generation of neoliberal penal policymakers, who shamelessly co-opted the spirit if not the letter of it. *They* liked the playing down of *professional* interventions, the evidence that the current service did not “do” desistance well and the emphasis on user-driven change. Crucially, *they* saw in the argument for a decisive paradigm shift an irresistible way of helping to legitimate the devastating transformational change they had in mind for the service, which would ultimately transform it out of existence. None of the “desistance school” (who are not adequately represented in the anthology, given their influence by 2012) wanted this or saw it coming, but pushing for a full paradigm shift to dislodge the “cognitive behavioural/what works” orthodoxies from official practice was politically misjudged, and strategically more than desistance required to win professional credibility. Pitched the way it was, it empowered those at the top, in government, more than those at the bottom, and by then, those at the top in England and Wales were a malign lot.

The article I was most pleased to see here was the late Stan Cohen's (1975) *It's Alright for You to Talk*. I may be wrong, but I don't recall it being *widely* influential, then or later, but it was definitely influential on me, (as presumably it was on Mair and Rungay), and it remained important enough for me to continue recommending it to new generations of probation trainees at the University of Birmingham, 1997-2003. Cohen adapts interesting ideas about the relationship of theory to practice, intellectuals and practitioners and the ever -“unfinished” nature of tactical and strategic change from Thomas Mathiesen's (1974) magisterial revisioning of penal reform, *The Politics of Abolition*. Cohen's article is a plea for, and endorsement of, informed practitioner activism which at their best, probation officers did sometimes exhibit, although Cohen's subtleties were signally uninfluential on some of Napo's more ardent radicals, who wildly overestimated the leverage the service had to work in isolation from other criminal justice agencies. Cohen himself presumed a level of individual and collective practitioner discretion to ignore and subvert agency dictates, and to avoid co-optation, that was long ago expunged from the more managerially-regulated organisations in which probation officers came to work under New Labour. His subtext, however, was change, activism and political responsibility more generally, and the article can still be re-read with profit now: his (and Mathiesen's) belief that the pursuit of justice and the good is never finished, only set back temporarily, is still worth clinging to in these “dark times”, even as the state-sponsored market dismembers and disorients the fine and somewhat embattled organization that is commemorated in this timely, absorbing and elegiac book.

## REFERENCES

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