

## DOING PORRIDGE

**While I was still at university there was a request that three students might volunteer to help tutor a young lad at Walton Prison. I became one of the three. My job was to try to get him through O-Level History. But why was this young lad in an adult prison and why had he been there since he was thirteen? Working in a prison you are not supposed to know much about how prisoners got there. Often what you 'know' is infected by gossip.**

We were told that at thirteen he killed his girlfriend. It was assumed that they had been playing rather vigorously but he was very strong and she died from strangulation. It was decided that he would be 'Detained at Her Majesty's Pleasure'. There is no time limit to that sentence. Someone, however, decided that he should have some education.

Walton is an old prison, very like the prison in Porridge with less humour. What television cannot give you is the smell that seems to emanate from the building itself. No amount of scrubbing and disinfectant can eradicate an unclean public toilet smell that has built up since, in this case, 1855. Add to that washing and toilet facilities of the most primitive. My wife Ada once brought into her school a man that I had taught who had been in prison. He stood in the hall in front of a bunch of sixteen year olds. When asked what it was like he picked out a really tough-looking boy, got hold of a tin waste paper basket and suggested that he sit on it in front of all the others and have a crap.

The lad we were trying to educate was moved to another prison and we heard from a prison visitor that when he was twenty six there were two given reasons why he was not being released. One was that the father of the girl was threatening to kill him. The other was that as it was now judged that he was homosexual he would be in danger if released. That sounded like a somewhat contrived reason to put it at its mildest.

A few years later, I was teaching in a school near the prison and got a job teaching night school there. This lasted for seven years. I enjoyed it. You do not have to be the greatest teacher in the world to please a class that has the choice of you or a cell. There was one problem moment. This was a time of national unrest in prisons. I had a new class. We did not know each other. One prisoner was rather forthright about how prisoners were treated. As was often my way I let him talk until he was contradicted by another prisoner. I did not take sides. A few days later I was sacked for encouraging criticism of the system. I took care over my letter in response. Then I got a call from the Deputy Governor who wanted to take me out for a drink and a meal. All was sweetness and light again. My understanding is that in order to get well in with the screws someone tried to stoolie on me. They made a false accusation. It did not stick. To stoolie effectively the accusation must have substance.

Screws, by the way, are prison officers, a stoolie is an informer and, also by the way, I never once heard the word 'Trusty'. They are called 'Red Bands'.

My enthusiasm was waning. It was made worse because after several requests to attend I eventually did go to the Christmas Carol Service. I did not enjoy the signs of segregation in what was supposed to be a collective act of worship but worse was the reception afterwards in a temporary hut where prisoners would serve us tins of cocoa or coffee or tea and mince pies. I could hardly look into their eyes. Even worse, coming out to go to my car and drive to my Christmas decorated house I looked up to see faces at every cell window. For me it was very depressing. Worse for them!

In those days almost the first thing that happened to a man when they went to prison was that they were put into prison uniform and given a short back and sides haircut. Their shirts were blue and white striped. So were the blouses of the girls I later taught and the headteacher never understood why they were unpopular. But that haircut. Every Thursday evening when I went in I would first spend a little time in the waiting room. It was painted pale blue as was most of the prison because it was one of those colours thought to have a calming effect. That waiting room would be full of women clutching their hand bags. The hand bags were full of money to pay debts. Although it was merely a civil offence if you did not make enough hire purchase payments you could be sent to a prison intended for criminals. Wives would then find the money somehow and go to the prison to pay and get their husbands released. Being released everyone would know that you had been in prison. The haircut!

It was, incidentally, far more difficult for people like me to get in than to get out. Getting in there were a number of checks. Getting out you simply stood next to a screw who had keys in his hand and was about to unlock a door. I hated the sound of jangling keys.

Many years later I went back a number of times. An overseas student of mine was sent there by an overzealous Stipendiary Magistrate. My student won his appeal on the last day of his sentence. The difference was stupendous. The screws had been so well trained. They could walk into a crowded room of anxious visitors and, talking quietly, calm everyone down. They barked at no-one. Now, I have no faith that profit-making privatised prisons bother to invest in the training of prison officers.

Cliff Jones 15th. March 2020

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