

***Holloway Prison: An Inside Story*, Hilary Beauchamp, Waterside Press,
Hook, Hampshire, 2010 (ISBN 978-1-90438-056-6)**

Prisons throw into high relief the values implicit in the societies that create them. For prisoners themselves, 'doing time' in these stratified, hierarchical complexes can mean many different things. Not only the duration of their sentences but also their degrees of restriction and opportunity will be determined by the nature of their offences, their progress through rehabilitative programs, and their moves between levels of classification. In addition to the formal rules governing the main coordinates of the prison day, time 'inside' will also be framed by constraints of the inmates' own making: the fluid codes, both overt and silent, of group identity, personal will and obligation. Prison life thus can be a contradictory, multi-layered experience, marked by tensions between order and transition, structure and ambiguity, social interaction and isolation.

Compounding this multiplicity is the frequency of change within the institutions themselves. Whether due to new management regimes or more fundamental reforms in criminal justice, changes imposed on the prison environment are often immediate and dramatic. In recent decades many prisons—especially the larger, older gaols whose cellblocks reflect superseded systems of incarceration—have been subject to considerable adaptation to meet new needs. What happens inside them can be far more dynamic and case-oriented than the popular notion of 'throwing away the key' suggests. But even in the most humane settings there is no denying that a prison's primary function—the limitation of liberty—remains one of our most testing social challenges. How a prison operates is the moral measure of the culture itself.

In the media, prisons are always topical, but the portrayals are often prurient and voyeuristic, if not caricatured. In contrast to them is the carefully moderated voice of government reports and other such documents. Occupying a different ground altogether is the highly detailed picture of prison life presented in personal memoirs based on first-hand experience. A recent contribution to that comparatively rare field is Hilary Beauchamp's *Holloway Prison: An Inside Story*, a remarkably frank account of the many years the author spent working inside one of Britain's best-known prisons for women and young offenders.

Hilary Beauchamp is a London-based artist whose teaching at Holloway has been well acknowledged in the United Kingdom. While Beauchamp's dedication to inmate education and personal development is clear, her book is not a self-aggrandising 'feel-good' testimony to the value of art in prisons. Beauchamp's experiences gave her more than enough insight to know that, in an institution ostensibly committed to reform, positive ideals do not always prevail in practice. Her book may be described as a social realist, off-the-record account. She does not shy away from the subjective authenticity of her own voice, even when it exposes her own weaknesses and the frailties of the whole system. To ensure the book's integrity and independence, and to ward off any potential conflict, the author reportedly resigned her position at Holloway not long before its publication.

The book is of wider interest than its main thread of art in custody. For students of applied criminology, the contextual descriptions of the successive forms of prison management that accompanied Holloway's transformation from a traditional gaol to a modern redbrick organisation are particularly revealing. Beauchamp's story begins in the final years of Holloway's old accommodation and traces the period of change that followed the rebuilding program of the 1970-80s. While Holloway's name still resonates because of

its history as a Victorian-era mixed prison that became a 20th century prison for women, the institution in its rebuilt form remains as significant and contentious as its antecedent. Today it is Europe's largest women's prison, with a recent history of problems that have been documented in the public domain. Beauchamp's account leaves the reader with no doubt that programs for inmates continue to face considerable obstacles.

With many of its pages taken up with the contradictory, unexpected events that Beauchamp witnessed—at once fascinating, bizarre and heart-wrenching—the book is an amalgam of personal interactions bound together by a graphic texture that conveys the look, feel, smell and sound of the prison—a place where every seemingly random noise translates into a meaning. The opening chapter is a vivid introduction to the old gaol, a multi-tiered 1852 radial prison whose external Gothic Revival pretensions belied the abject conditions within; a veritable Dickensian relic whose punitive function was firmly inscribed on the main entrance: 'Let this place be a terror to evil doers' (Beauchamp 2010:14).

Anyone with a working knowledge of similar radial plan prisons derived from British models (such as that at Long Bay in Sydney, now a men's prison but originally the State Reformatory for Women) will be familiar with the principles of classification and accommodation practised at Holloway. There, writes Beauchamp, the top floor was given to the lifers. 'A relatively stable group, they knew their fate and mostly rolled up their sleeves and got on with it' (Beauchamp 2010:15). Below them were the remand inmates 'rattled, angry and loud' (Beauchamp 2010:15). Further down were the teenagers—the "borstal brats" as they were called—then a Hospital Wing, while 'deep in the bowels' were inmates whose offences required their segregation from the main groups: 'Holloway was a self-contained city, a bit like the Vatican, only less holy ... a women's world dominated by female staff, with a few male workers dotted about here and there' (Beauchamp 2010:15-16).

When she first took up her appointment, Beauchamp was put in no doubt that her fringe role as a visiting contract teacher conferred on her an outsider status. She felt daunted and restricted by the routines of control exercised with time-hardened authority by the uniformed staff. Her stories reflect her flailing attempts to come to terms with the people and processes around her, from the complex mind games with both inmates and staff to the appalling lack of proper sanitation in the wings. Over time, however, Beauchamp turned her sideline position to her own advantage, for it facilitated her role as an observer, albeit one who was far from detached.

While the personalities might at times seem beyond credulity, it is the pen-portraits of the women who came into Holloway that give Beauchamp's account its penetrating edge. Again, anyone with experience of other prisons will find a lot here that is tragically familiar. The description of an ageing recidivist with a body scarred by her compulsion to swallow metal objects has its equivalent in the lives and deaths of other self-harmers behind bars. Another sad episode concerns a deeply troubled young woman who died of burns after setting herself alight in her cell. The author saw enough dysfunction in the gaol to fill whole chapters on sickness and violence, raising questions about how these matters were dealt with on a daily basis and whether prison was the right place for many of the women.

Against this backdrop art was a kind of balm, but for Beauchamp the teaching process had its own inherent difficulties. One of her first encounters was with an emotionally disturbed teenager she identifies as Lisa, who improvised figurative sculptures that she kept hidden under her bed and manipulated like characters in a play before dismembering and

discarding them. The young woman's genderless figures immediately impressed her teacher—they had the imaginative, innovative appeal of art that comes out of such raw sites of production. But as Beauchamp describes these works, two documentary limitations of her book become apparent: there are no images to support the author's interpretations of individual inmates' artworks and the discussion of their work is nearly always secondary to the social narrative.

In Lisa's case, we learn more about the self-doubts felt by her teacher as she grappled with the ethical dilemmas provoked by their brief contact. Beauchamp admits her mistake in committing to an empty promise to exhibit Lisa's artworks in return for keeping them. She praises her art as 'truthful representations of a life directly interpreted' (Beauchamp 2010:42) but fails to take the opportunity of this book to reproduce and share it with due acknowledgement to the artist. Surely the convention that prison artists remain nameless (and in this instance their work kept invisible) is one of the forms of institutional 'concealment' that a book of this kind could have challenged. In other jurisdictions such as New South Wales, prisoners at mainstream gaols have long been identified without controversy in inmate exhibitions and publications. The inclusion of a pictorial supplement with Beauchamp's own artwork based on her prison experience only highlights the disappointing absence of the women's work.

Perhaps this issue is a residue of the kind of place where Beauchamp started out. By any standard the old Holloway Prison was an anachronistic fossil thoroughly set in its ways. There were dispiriting battles with custodial staff when Beauchamp first tried to display an inmate's work inside the gaol. She began to overcome this internal resistance when she became aware of the annual competitive exhibition sponsored by the Arthur Koestler Trust to showcase creative arts by inmates in prisons, psychiatric units and other secure centres. Submitting the prisoners' work to this competition was, she says, 'one way of letting a small breeze into this airless institution' (Beauchamp 2010:45). Art helped to make prison life a bit more transparent.

Beauchamp's main chance to implement change came when the prison population was transferred from the archaic cellblocks to the 'modern-day university campus-style lookalike' (Beauchamp 2010:105). Initially, she says, the shift was accompanied by a genuine will 'to promote educational opportunities designed specifically for Holloway and its unique population of women ... There was a feeling of growth and newness and of embarking on something important' (Beauchamp 2010:109). However, the prison's administration soon curtailed this pioneering spirit: the women were kept locked up for most of the day and education was downsized to a wire-netted caravan in the grounds.

The situation improved with the arrival of a new Governor whose openness 'humanised and civilised the place' (Beauchamp 2010:110). At his instigation, Beauchamp and her students undertook the decoration of a new Mother and Baby Wing. This project grew into a rainforest mural with each of the prisoners working in their own style on the wildlife. Beauchamp's description of the women's creative engagement as they painted side by side is a very appealing passage in the book. Everyone's pulse was quickened however by the inmate artists' illicit union with some male prisoners who were there on work duty—the kind of slippage that subverts all the assumptions about surveillance and authority. In this instance blind eyes were turned, and the completed mural gained credibility when it won an inter-prison award, encouraging similar projects in other parts of Holloway.

Running an art program for prisoners with different abilities, ethnicities and ages would never be straightforward, but Beauchamp did not lose sight of her guiding principles: 'it was more complicated than simply imbuing knowledge and skills, it was about accelerating maturity, addressing offending behaviour, creating a positive, safe environment and respecting other people' (Beauchamp 2010:147-48). Programs had to be flexible enough to accommodate the vitality of surprise. An example of what can happen in such environments is Beauchamp's description of Tango, a tough, dominating prisoner who in her painting revealed a penchant for cuddly animals: 'This anti-Establishment woman, leading the most chaotic of lives shocking the natural order with her lifestyle of breaking rules sought as subject matter the most comfortable of images, all gentle and sweet' (Beauchamp 2010:250).

Eventually an inmate-run shop was opened as a public outlet for Holloway's art and craft production. It helped to regulate the 'grey area' of the prison's unofficial exchange of goods, but more importantly, it gave further stimulus to a program that was allowing women with low self-esteem to develop creatively, while enabling others to re-evaluate unrealistic perceptions of their own abilities. For all its merits, the shop was later downsized and to Beauchamp's regret, the rainforest mural was eventually obliterated.

The book does not finish optimistically. The epilogue is an indictment of current prison education in an era of privatisation in the United Kingdom, where teachers are restricted by both their short-term contractual conditions and the obligation to focus on the most rudimentary attainments: 'How this can be reconciled with teaching as a profession, the special needs of prisoners and helping them to move on from criminality I never did quite understand' (Beauchamp 2010:273). Things deteriorated to the point where teachers felt their work had become 'fraudulent, a "con", sterile and soulless' (Beauchamp 2010:274).

Most of Beauchamp's readers would agree that the situation should not be that way. Her experiences highlight the need for a wider exchange of information about prison programs. Other centres have launched initiatives identical to the ones described in her book, but while there remains the sense that these projects are happening in isolation they risk repeating the same struggles. The subject of art in custody certainly warrants a well-documented, international study in its own right. Not only do funding sources need to be reminded of the benefits of art in gaols, but inmates themselves are encouraged when they see what their peers have achieved and what is possible.

Holloway had a rapid turnover of inmates (60% stayed for less than a month), which obviously influenced the type of programs Beauchamp developed. In other centres where prisoners stay for longer durations, there is more opportunity for full-time art programs encouraging serious creative ambition, in contrast to the occupational therapy 'drop-in' situations that too often prevail. Across all levels of classification a dedicated art studio is important, for the right environment has a proven impact on the way inmates feel and work together. For prisoners who know too well a life of fracture and restriction, the contemplative focus of the art room provides, as Beauchamp puts it, a 'sanctuary.'

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