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Article:

Behan, C.M. (2014) Review of 'Her Majesty's Philosophers' by Alan Smith. *Probation Journal*, 61 (1). pp. 91-96. ISSN 0264-5505

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0264550513519547>

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Her Majesty's Philosophers

Alan Smith

Hampshire: Waterside Press; 2013; pp.214, ISBN: 978-1-904380-95-5 pbk

Reviewed by Cormac Behan, Lecturer in Criminology, Centre for Criminological Research, University of Sheffield.

Alan Smith taught philosophy in prison for 14 years and this book recounts his experiences, observations and commentary on teaching inside. Building on his regular reports in the *Guardian*, this book, however, is about much more than teaching philosophy behind bars. It examines prison regimes, penal power, desistance, and the potential for change in coercive institutions; subjects that would interest all those seeking to understand prison life and the lives of prisoners.

From his first day teaching in prison, Smith tells us that he made up his mind to be positive about the people he met: 'in prison some men achieve much that is to be celebrated and admired' (p.10) and after having heard about prisoners' experiences he was adamant how absurd was 'any talk about the softness of the system: the populist suburban rubbish about holiday camps and criminals doing better than ordinary hard-working people and so on' (p.17). His philosophy classes traversed into literature, art, politics and history. He taught subjects such as Epistemology and Philosophy of Mind, and using the Socratic Method, he and his class dialogued on Rousseau, Kant, Bentham, Mill and Marx.

While Smith is a passionate advocate of education, he is also realistic and observes that even with the best education, programmes and support in prison, from some, the challenges on release remain almost surmountable. He describes how Luke told him that on leaving prison, he was so worried about going for an interview for a college course that he couldn't sleep the night before. 'I've only just worked out why I was so scared. Every other interview in my life had been with the police; so you could say I was a bit

defensive' (p.109). Luke began the course, but soon after, his health deteriorated as a result of previous drug use and his life fell apart. He left university and the next time Smith saw Luke was in handcuffs on the local news. He eventually made his way back to the philosophy class after five years of freedom, the longest period of his adult life. He was now nearly fifty years of age and serving his twelfth period of imprisonment. Luke said to him: "I've just got to have the walls around me." Smith lamented: 'It made my heart sink. Now he is free once more, but he will need some walls around him and I don't see where they will come from' (p.110). However, there were success stories. In the same philosophy class as Luke was Gerard. His achievement, like that of so many others who turn their lives around, was largely due to the determination of the student, but also down to institutions and individuals willing to give former prisoners another chance. Colleg Harlech in Wales is one such institution. After completing the induction year, Gerard was offered a university place and was last heard of successfully undertaking a degree in art.

Smith rails against the managerialism that is permeating all areas of education, and especially the politicians and policy makers who want to offer students in prison only training and subjects that will increase employability skills. He explains how, for the 'fluffy subjects' (such as philosophy, literature, creative writing and art) to survive in the current climate, teachers must be creative. To fulfil his objectives on paper, he referred to philosophy as Advanced Thinking Skills. 'Not a lie and yet it gives the impression that I might be doing something psychological, something therapeutic. I might well be' (p.71). Smith was told by Debbie, the cookery teacher that in contrast to her previous positions (cooking for millionaires and on the Royal Train), the budget for the cookery class at 60 pence per head was somewhat more modest. He reflected on his visit to the cookery room which was 'the most calm and domestic environment. There is, anyway, something human and comforting about food but the juxtaposition of the kitchen and the often oppressive maleness of the prison made cookery a place to breathe more easily.' Soon after, the cookery class was ended.

‘Somebody, somewhere on a big fat salary I suppose, couldn’t see the point of it, didn’t think that the 59 pence was well spent’ (p.124).

Smith recounts the mundane, the bizarre and the surreal that permeates prison life, astutely observed by a remarkable story-teller. In one class, the subject turns to the legend of Christ visiting England and this exchange between two students encapsulates the seriousness of the subject and the small ways individuals survive imprisonment (pp. 89-90).

‘Oh yeah,’ said Ted, ‘imagine him at immigration? “Nationality?” “Palestinian.” “Reason for the visit?” “Building Jerusalem.” “Profession?” “Son of God.” Think they’d let him in? ‘They’d jog him on straightaway.’

Brian, though is not put off. He starts to sing. ‘And did those feet in ancient times...’ and we join in. In the middle of the walls and the razor wire and the gates and the lock, bolts and bars, signing Jerusalem.

Having taught ‘fluffy subjects’ in prison for over ten years, this book reminded me of the resilience, determination and humour necessary to ameliorate the harshness of prison life for those sentenced to serve time inside. Smith also reminds us of the potential for education in coercive institutions and how prison schools can provide a haven, while abating some of the damage done by these environments. More studies such as these, from those who work and especially those who serve time in prison will help shine a light into an institution that tends to stir the public imagination in times of crises or conflict and rarely during periods of routine so elegantly described in Smith’s book.