Prose and Cons: Offender Auto/Biographies, Penal Reform and Probation Training

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Abstract: 'The life history approach is peculiarly ignored in teaching contexts' wrote Ken Plummer in 1983 (p. 74). Things may have changed on ordinary social science degrees, but offender/prisoner autobiographies – akin to the life story approach – are a still underused resource in the training of probation officers. The criminological importance of such autobiographies was recently affirmed by the late Steve Morgan (1999), adroitly re-therorised by Goodey (2000) and used constructively by Wilson and Reuss (2000) in a study of prison(er) education. This article describes, from experience, how they can be used at the beginning of a probation training programme, to develop a preliminary understanding of desistance, and to open up debate on what works with offenders and what doesn’t, in and out of prison. An historical background to British prisoner autobiographies is provided to ground this approach to teaching in a distinctive criminological discourse, to provide a resource for those who wish to take debate on prisoner autobiographies further, and to indicate the kind of impact that the best of this writing has had on the penal reform process. The article should be read both as a contribution to an overdue, and at present meagre, debate on how an academically sound and vocationally relevant curriculum for trainee probation officers can be constructed, and as an at least partial substantiation of the deeper argument that probation training can draw productively on traditions of penal reform which it has hitherto neglected.

I have written this book about the eight months I spent as a prisoner in England in 1982 because I cannot rest until I have added my voice to that small but growing number of voices which are telling us as a society that all is not well with our system of justice, with our penal system. (Peckham 1985, p. 239)

Writing about my prison experiences has also helped me to sort out some things about my past, though it is never easy to use one’s private pain to inform a public issue. (Josie O’Dwyer, quoted in Carlen 1985, p. 181)

Without the fundamental principles of justice which underlie a democratic society I would most likely now be dead. I have come to respect these principles and the many people who defend them against those who would undermine them for short-term political gain. I am now released under licence for the rest of my life. I have someone somewhere to thank for signing the release papers and giving me a second chance of life. I hope this book pays tribute to the many people who showed fairness, understanding and good will – it wasn’t an easy task. . . . Finally, William Mooney: I would rather he were alive today than the existence of this book. (Collins 1997, p. I)
Autobiography offers an opportunity to experiment with becoming a person. (Gilmore 2001, p. 103)

How does one introduce criminology to people who may never have studied it before? How does one encourage new trainee probation officers – who may initially be intimidated by overtly academic texts – to take up reading? How does one introduce trainees to the perspectives of offenders’ and, vicariously, to a criminal milieu with which they themselves may be wholly unfamiliar? How does one first get them thinking about what it takes for offenders to give up crime? Over the past three years, in the foundation phase of the Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS) at the University of Birmingham I have found using ‘offender autobiographies’ (often called ‘prisoner autobiographies’) and related materials – offender biographies by journalists and anthologies of offender voices – to be a useful way of addressing all these issues. Contemporary probation trainees vary considerably in age, life experience, educational and occupational background; some have wide probation experience, some have worked in prisons, or drug rehabilitation programmes, or mental health projects. Some are entering university for the first time, others may already possess bachelors or even masters degrees. A tiny minority have criminal records. In my experience, there is no category of trainee who will not benefit in some way from reading and reflecting on an offender’s account of how they became involved in and/or how they got out of criminal activity.

The assignment at the end of the ‘Introduction to Criminal Justice’ module has thus far required trainees either to write a 1,000 to 1,500 word review of an offender autobiography, or biography, or – with the newest cohort of trainees – to comment specifically on the factors which seemingly led to particular offenders’ desistance from crime, which is the underlying focus of the module. The depth of understanding that trainees bring to this assignment varies according to their own experience of offenders and the amount and type of material they have already read. Over the years I have read many wise and thoughtful assignments but also many naive ones, expressing views which I hope that trainees will have transcended or modified by the end of the two year diploma, by dint of having read more widely, become more criminologically sophisticated and encountered many more offenders ‘in practice’. Nonetheless, I remain convinced that reading offender autobiographies can be both an intellectually rich and practically useful experience for would-be probation officers, firstly because they enable trainees ‘to sway to and fro between life’s specifics and theory’s generalities’ (Plummer 1983, p. 75), and secondly, because the best of them etch themselves so vividly in one’s memory that they can be drawn on for insight and inspiration years after first encountering them.

My confidence that this sort of approach would be an effective, legitimate and desirable way of contributing to probation officer training has a number of sources. Firstly, reading Jimmy Boyle’s A Sense of Freedom played a part, in 1977, in persuading me to stay in social work with young offenders (and involve myself in penal reform) rather than resume an intended career as a geography teacher. Secondly, a steadily growing familiarity with Tony
Parker’s work further imbued me with a sense of the humanity of offenders, and the limitations of a penal system, which either disregarded or could not even see this. Years later, these personal experiences were augmented by five things that I simply chanced upon in the course of criminological reading, and remembered whilst ruminating on how probation training might be improved. Firstly, discovering that Clifford Shaw 1, a Chicago School sociologist who adapted the ‘life story’ both as a method of criminological research and as the basis of therapeutic intervention, had been a probation officer, anchored and legitimated the educational use of offender autobiographies in probation – albeit American probation – history. Secondly, learning that a book in which prisoners themselves gave vivid accounts of confinement and made critical comments on criminal justice had helped win public support for the penal minimalism of the Utrecht School in the 1950s Netherlands, and thereby contributed to the liberal ethos which pervaded the Dutch penal system for a further generation (Downes 1988, p. 96)3. Thirdly, noting that French researchers Cusson and Pinsoneault (1986) used offender autobiographies as sources of knowledge about the neglected and little understood process of desistance. Fourthly, becoming aware that in the emerging ‘user perspectives’ movement in social work generally4 the voices of offenders were relatively absent. Fifthly, accepting Ken Plummer’s (1983, pp. 74–7) suggestion that life histories can make a distinctive contribution to the teaching of any social science, presumably including criminology.

Lastly – to return to a personal point – the ethical and political desirability of using autobiographies in probation training has derived very strongly from my sense of wanting to support such ex-offenders as Jimmy Boyle, Mark Leech, Bob Turney, Hugh Collins, Trevor Hercules and Chris Tchaikovsky in ensuring that some public and private good results from their experiences, from the suffering in their own lives and the lives of their various victims. Unless that knowledge is passed on, and picked up by people who can use it to make a difference, whether policy makers or practitioners, the books will simply have less influence than they might otherwise have, however iconic they may occasionally become in literary and media circles. Even Graef’s (1993) dedication in his interview-based study of the lads passing through Sherborne House Probation Centre – ‘to young burglars and their victims. I hope this book will help resolve their problems’ – would be quite forlorn if people like probation officers did not read it.

British Prisoner Autobiography: A Brief History

In the western world, prisoners have written, and had published, accounts of their imprisonment since the beginnings of the institution itself, and the literary genre of prisoners’ autobiographies has antecedents preceding even that (Carnochan 1995). The motives for writing them have been mixed, many and various; to justify the offender to himself (more rarely herself) and the world; to help the writer come to terms with the traumatic experience of confinement; to expose prison conditions and prompt debate on penal (and/or wider social) reform; to make money where the stigma of
imprisonment makes gainful employment difficult after release; and for purely literary reasons – to evoke, describe and explain a world all too often hidden from, and ignored by the public. Some books have been written by political prisoners who cannot be regarded as criminals in the usual sense, and some by the wrongly convicted to protest against the ‘corrupt’ system that condemned them7 – the recent writings of the Birmingham Six and the Maguire Seven (Conlon 1990; Callaghan 1993; Maguire 1994) fall into both these categories, and is part of a long, bitter tradition of Irish prisoner writing produced in and about British jails (Markievicz 1934). Worldwide, some prisoner autobiographies, occasionally recast as novels8, have justly been canonised as classics of literature or political writing (Dostoevsky, Serge, Genet, Solzhenitny, Keenan – see Davies (1990) for a socio-literary study of prison writing), embedding in culture and language metaphors and motifs about imprisonment which permeate all our understanding of the institution, and on which ‘lesser’ prison writers have repeatedly drawn to make sense of their experience. Unsurprisingly, officialdom – occasional champions notwithstanding – has often been resistant to allowing prisoners a voice in public – limiting what prisoners can write while inside, confiscating manuscripts, dismissing and discrediting those accounts which get published by casting doubt on the ‘inherent’ untrustworthiness of ex-prisoners9. But, as Phillip Priestly9 has suggested, although there may well be distortions, deceptions and misperceptions in any one particular prisoner autobiography (as indeed in any autobiography per se):

the whole corpus of work presents a picture in which the main outlines are clearly confirmed from many sources. The picture they present is an horrific one: an inhuman system, inhumanely administered; great mental and physical suffering redeemed by tiny glimpses of essential goodness from fellow prisoners and some members of the prison staffs. Running through the pages of the prisoner’s tales, whether they are religiously, politically or financially motivated, there is an obvious desire to understand and explain a bizarre social experience and to publicise the details of an otherwise concealed world. And perhaps most importantly of all, they constitute an attempt on the part of their various authors to redeem the years of lost time and to make them count for something – not least the reform of the system under which the authors suffered. (Priestly 1989, p. 12)

Over the course of the 20th century, quite large numbers of prisoner autobiographies, of variable literary quality, did get published, as often by small, relatively unknown publishers as by prestigious ones, making no impact whatsoever on penal debate. Many needed the support of a ‘mentor’, usually a public figure or respected professional, who would write an introduction and vouch for the writer’s integrity and credibility10. Public and professional interest in even the better and more influential autobiographies has tended to be short-lived, lodging only in the memories of aficionados of the genre and penal historians, while the writers themselves fade rapidly into anonymity. This is partly because they may only have had the one book in them, partly because their account was relevant only to a specific historical moment (and of no lasting literary merit) and partly because many of the offenders themselves wish to move on beyond the status of ‘ex-prisoner’, even ‘reformed ex-prisoner’, and develop new lives.

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Even prison writers who did develop literary careers have eventually been forgotten, most notably Jim Phelan (1940), whose impressive *Jail Journey* was praised by George Orwell and other significant literary figures, although it has to be acknowledged that his later output dwindled in quality (see Nellis 1994). Similarly, few now remember Mark Benney (1936, p. 1948), whom Orwell knew personally, who made his name with *Low Company* and went on to write for the Howard League and eventually to become a professional sociologist. An historical anthology such as Priestly (1989) tends to be the only way in which the work of such forgotten writers remain accessible.

I am primarily concerned here, very schematically, with post-war British prison writing that has at least been recognised as a *contribution to debate on penal reform* by the liberal intelligentsia, even if it has not been acted upon. More narrowly still I am mostly concerned with prison writing that has appeared in the last 30 years, in which the genre has grown to encompass not only the middle class offenders who have traditionally dominated it, but also working class offenders – some professionally involved in crime, some not – speaking ‘in their own words’. As a preliminary, at least, it is useful to accept the distinction Steve Morgan (1999) made between ‘cons’ and ‘straights’ in prison writing, the former authors being habitual or professional criminals, well versed in prison lore, the latter, typically, being literate middle class offenders imprisoned for a first offence, lacking prior knowledge of criminal culture and shocked at what they find prison to be like.

The 1950s were dominated by straight accounts, which tended to be exposés of prison conditions, and of discrepancies between official ideals and institutional realities. Two deserve special mention. Firstly, Joan Henry’s (1952) *Who Lie in Gaol* was in effect the first women’s prison autobiography to appear since the Suffragettes had written of their experiences (for example, Lytton 1914). First serialised in a newspaper, it cast aspersions on HMP Holloway, contrasting it most unfavourably with the newly established HMP Askham Grange, the first open prison for women. Its criticism of Holloway antagonised even the Howard League, which did not take kindly to ‘free-lance’ reformers usurping their role. Undeterred, and backed by her influential publisher, Victor Gollancz, a man with a keen and longstanding interest in penal affairs, Henry toured the country a year later with the movie that had been made from her book, speaking to journalists about penal reform in the cinemas where it showed (see Nellis 1993a). Secondly, Peter Wildeblood was one of several defendants sentenced in 1954 for homosexual offences in the *cause celebre* of ‘the Montagu affair’, which prompted the then government, finally, to establish an enquiry into homosexual law reform. Wildeblood’s (1955) book, *Against The Law*, accessibly published by Penguin, added significant momentum to the campaign for this, (see Higgins 1997; Parris 1999), but by indicting conditions in HMP Wormwood Scrubs, also contributed to penal debate. Books like this were the main independent means of informing the public about imprisonment during this period; the first BBC television documentary to be filmed in prison was not broadcast until 1957.

The 1960s saw a shift in the genre towards authentic working class writing, and was dominated by former thief Frank Norman (1958, 1970), in a
series of books which cruelly mocked the official rehabilitative ideals of the period, celebrated the life of the ‘wide boy’ and in passing made contributions to debate on penal reform. Norman reformed largely by discovering a talent for writing, and a circle of artistic friends, but he maintained a hard-drinking lifestyle and died relatively young. Thief, fraudster and reprieved murderer Jimmy O’Connor wrote in realist vein for television in this period, penning the first of the BBCs renowned Wednesday Plays – plus twelve others – all drawing on his own experience. According to his obituary, these plays, ‘opened up to popular culture the shadowy universe of crime, prison and policing’ for the first time (The Guardian, 3 October 2001). O’Connor’s (1976) autobiography appeared the following decade but like Norman, he was an essentially 1960s figure. Life by the pseudonymous Zeno (1968), a former soldier who served nine years for murder was recognised at the time as a work of superior literary quality, winning a Koestler Award, and remains one of the landmarks of British prison writing. So too are prison visitor/journalist Tony Parker’s (1962, 1963, 1965, 1967) early books, all based on interviews with offenders, to whom pseudonyms are given. The first memorably allowed a successful professional criminal ‘Robert Allerton’ to describe and justify his way of life. The second gave the same opportunity to ‘Charlie Smith’, a melancholy, petty, persistent offender; the third to a compilation of five women offenders, and the fourth to an elderly white collar offender, ‘Norman Edwards’.

The 1970s were dominated by books of considerable literary and sociological stature by three violent men from disadvantaged backgrounds who had already gained notoriety as public enemies before emerging as prison writers, John McVicar, Wally Probyn and Jimmy Boyle. McVicar’s (1974) book was in part an attempt to apply sociological analysis to his own criminal life, having acquired a taste for the discipline when criminologists Stan Cohen and Laurie Taylor (1972) had been his teachers in HMP Durham, prior to his and Probyn’s escape attempt. Following further experiences of prison education (after recapture), McVicar has had a successful career as a journalist since his release and in order to sustain his credibility on criminal justice matters in the media, has never fully repudiated the identity of ‘reformed ex-con’. His fellow (unsuccessful) escapee, Wally Probyn (1977), has had a more chequered life, subsequently returning to prison, evidence, if such were needed, that prison authorship, even with a prestigious mentor like Cohen, is not necessarily a turning point in a criminal career.

Jimmy Boyle was a beneficiary of both therapy and education in the Scottish prison system, having first been a victim/survivor of its most brutal excesses. Via his book A Sense of Freedom (Boyle 1977) he became the best known – but not the only (see Steele 1992) – success story from the Barlinnie Special Unit, living proof, to many, that the worst of men could be reformed in humane, therapeutically-run prisons. He grew up in Glasgow’s Gorbals, with an ineffectual but much loved mother, was expected to fail in school, and to be like his father, a local hardman, (who died when Boyle was five). Delinquency was inevitable, and by his early adulthood he was running protection rackets, enforcing them, and fending off rivals with savage violence, having more or less realised his ambition to be the hardest man
around. A life sentence for the murder of another criminal, Babs Rooney – Boyle admits to slashing but not killing the man – leaves him with nothing to lose, and exposes him to excessive brutality from prison officers, against which he responds in kind. The Barlinnie Special Unit, created by Scottish prison officials as a last ditch attempt to deal with violent prisoners like him proves to be his salvation, showed him the importance of responsibility, trust and kindness, giving him an education and developing a talent for sculpting. *A Sense of Freedom* documents this transformation, but also seeks to warn others against the path that Boyle chose: royalties from the book went into a Trust Fund to help disadvantaged young people in the west of Scotland. Upon release Boyle has pursued a prestigious career as a sculptor, and has sought to live down the legend of his survival and transformation in Scottish prisons; he nonetheless remains an important, if now occasional, penal commentator (see Boyle 1994).

If there is distinctive theme in the prisoner autobiographies of the 1980s, it is the consolidation of the view that even very violent men can be reformed. The emphasis on exposing prison conditions for its own sake had lessened, without being wholly absent. The fact that the decade opened with an impressive ten-part BBC documentary series on HMP Strangeways was indicative of how much sources of public knowledge about imprisonment had changed since the 1950s. McVicar and Boyle remained prominent because of their journalism, and because of films that were made about their lives, the former (in 1980) as a glamorous but rueful action movie, for cinema release, the latter (in 1981) in social realist vein for Channel 4 television, followed by a studio debate about the issues it raised\textsuperscript{12}. Robert Bradshaw pursued a career of petty crime to fund a serious gambling habit, finally addressing his addiction in the Annexe, the special unit at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, and winning a Koestler Award for his autobiography (Bradshaw 1986). John Healy (1988), Irish-born in London, became a Skid Row alcoholic and petty criminal, in and out of prison. During one spell inside he discovered a talent for chess, which he pursued on the outside, playing in some significant tournaments with major players, and ending his book discovering Indian mysticism. He credits his probation officer, Clive Soley, (later an MP) with significant help. Extracts from the book were published in *The Guardian* (8 October 1988) and the BBC filmed it. Drawing directly on the Chicago ‘life story’ tradition, Pat Carlen (1985) edited the stories of four *Criminal Women* – Josie O’Dwyer, Diana Christina, Chris Tchaikovsky (who founded the radical pressure group, Women in Prison) and Jenny Hicks (who co-founded the women ex-prisoners’ theatre group, Clean Break). A dozen more women ex-prisoners, including several Black women, were given the opportunity to speak by a former probation officer and a former prison teacher, both active in penal reform (Padel and Stevenson 1988). Trevor Hercules (1989) produced the first full-length book by a Black prisoner. Vividly written, and well received (it was extracted in *The Observer*) it was concerned as much with his discovery of Black consciousness whilst in HMPs Albany and Garthree as with the roots of his criminal activity and his confrontations with prison authorities. It gave national prominence to a Black perspective on prison writing in Britain for the first time, but ‘his
central message – that prison fails as a means of rehabilitation’ (Davis 1989, p. 36) affirmed what many prison writers had said before.

The 1990s produced a number of memorable offender autobiographies – including a notable straight one, a professional golfer’s account of his imprisonment for causing death by drunken driving (Hoskison 1998) – and three by cons who benefited from time spent in prison therapeutic communities. Car thief and fraudster Mark Leech (1993) recounts an institutionalised life, abuse in the child-care system, many imprisonments in England and Scotland, eventual transformation – if not immediate reform – in HMP Grendon Underwood, finally discovering that he is HIV positive. Whilst in prison he studied law, won a Koestler Award for TV scriptwriting, had a radio play produced, wrote a handbook for prisoners (Leech 1993) and went on to co-found Unlock, a pressure group comprised of ex-prisoners, with Bob Turney (1997), an alcoholic ex-offender who had also written a well-received autobiography. Turney is particularly interesting because after years of drink-related offending, spells in prison and psychiatric hospitals, and feeling suicidal; he sorted out his life and trained as a probation officer. He credits the efforts of AA, the promptings of religious faith and the perseverance of his own probation officer, Hilary Coleman, as the sources of his determination to change.

Of gypsy background, Frank Cook (Cook and Wilkinson 1999) served many sentences for violent offences. His reform began first in HMP Grendon, and continued in another therapeutic unit at HMP Hull; both he and Leech credit the same Grendon staff member, Joe Chapman, with having particular influence on them, and like Jimmy Boyle (who visited the Hull unit) Cook has found some salvation in sculpting. Another ex-inmate of the Barlinnie Special Unit, Hugh Collins (1997) – mentored there by Jimmy Boyle – wrote the 1990s’ most remarkable, and self-consciously literary prisoner autobiography (and a sequel about life after prison (Collins 2000)), which, perhaps even more than A Sense of Freedom, may one day transcend its genre of origin, and be adjudged an outstanding contribution to Scottish literature. Collins grew up in Glasgow, in the shadow of his oft-imprisoned hardman father, and was fed many lies by his father’s friends about the kind of man he believed that he was, a Robin Hood figure to whom he should look up. His mother abandoned him, his Grannie brought him up, but in a man’s world where she had little influence. After an apprenticeship in violent gangs, being introduced to amphetamines by his father, girlfriends who admired his capacity for violence or who carried knives for him, and a borstal sentence (which introduced him to LSD), he murdered Willie Mooney, a man much like himself. He served ten years of a life sentence, excelling himself in violence, hooked on heroin, before beginning five years in the Barlinnie Special Unit where, painfully and reluctantly, he comes to understand the part his father has played in the making of him. ‘Robin Hood?’ he writes, ‘He is a drunk, pouncing money from a burnt out prostitute half his age. He is not the man I wanted to be. What I wanted to be has been a lie. It didn’t exist. But just look at what the lie has created’ (Collins 1997, p. 84). Apart from Boyle, two other people help him – prison officer Malky McKenzie, and Caroline McNairn, an artist, whom he marries. Acute
self-doubt remains; Collins ruminates hard on what change means, and doubts if it applies to him: ‘Change is a word that troubles me, I’m reluctant to use it in my case. It conjures up a new identity’ (p.167).

In view of Collins’s undoubted literary flair, it is perhaps ironic that the 1990s also saw a significant blurring of the boundaries between serious prisoner autobiographies and certain elements of the true crime genre – that is, the emphasis on celebrity and, later, the emphasis on unrepentance. The book which most obviously straddled the boundary was the memoir of a former train robber (Reynolds 1995), well reviewed by sociologist Laurie Taylor in The Times, although it in no way matched the literary or sociological insights of Leech or Collins. This blurring of the boundaries between serious prison writing and true crime is a complex cultural and economic process, beyond the scope of this article, which warrants examination in its own right. There is certainly more to it than the discovery by corporate publishers – most recently, Virgin – that there was a larger market for true crime than hitherto; it seems also to have been recognised by ageing ex-criminals themselves that recasting themselves as entertainers, recycling their earlier notoriety, capitalising on both nostalgia for a bygone age of criminal activity and a coarsening of public taste, could be a significant source of new income (Hobbs 1995, p.4). Although public fascination with the Kray twins was originally crystallised by a serious journalistic study of them, (Pearson 1972), which the twins themselves disliked until they realised the celebrity it had given them, the development of a Kray mythology, from the late 1980s on, was largely their own work, orchestrated from within prison (Pearson 2001). Significantly, it encompassed a movie as well as a number of books by them, (often ghosted by sympathetic journalists), endlessly telling it ‘their way’ (Kray 1988; Kray 1988; Kray 1990; R. Kray 2000). Former friends and associates with varying degrees of distance from ‘the Firm’ (Fraser 1994; Foreman 1996), as well as wives (for example, K. Kray 2000), (married while in prison), have contributed to the mythology and to the burgeoning ‘unrepentant hardman’ sub-genre of prison writing which has grown up in its wake – and also been extended beyond books into tabloid-style television documentaries. It is at least arguable that even those who have sought to debunk the Kray myth simply help to sustain and intensify the fascination with London’s 1960s gangland (Webb 1993; Donoghue 1995); it is certainly that fascination on which publishers are capitalising.

This ‘unrepentant hardman’ sub-genre now encompasses a younger generation of writers with only tangential connections to the Krays, and its emergence requires a refinement of Steve Morgan’s distinction between ‘straights’ and ‘cons’. ‘Cons’ autobiographies need subdividing into the classically familiar ‘stories of reform and redemption’ and ‘stories of celebration’ (the latter usually by self-proclaimed ‘lovable rogues’ who tendentially claim only ever to have inflicted violence within their own criminal milieu, or who only fleeced the rich, in an idiom which some cultural commentators have recently dubbed ‘geezer chic’). Dave Courtney (1999), a putative former gangland enforcer now involved in management in the music business (a longstanding crossover point with the criminal underworld), is its current doyen. I have a definite preference for using stories of
reform and redemption with probation trainees, because of the light they shed on desistance as well as on the penal system, but if the module were longer, and if trainees had more time, I would encourage wider reading. Somewhat reluctantly, I would even recommend Dave Courtney’s first book, not because of any literary, or even morally, redeeming qualities, but because Courtney’s understanding of ‘going straight’ involves neither the development of a conscience nor reparation to society, but simply finding, or creating, a more prudent location on the continuum of legality and illegality, an outlet for lucrative, aggressive hedonism which attracts minimal police attention. Dick Hobbs’s (1995) excellent study, Bad Business, heavily reliant on ‘life stories’, amply confirms that Courtney’s entrepreneurial, nihilistic mentality is widespread among professional and semi-professional criminals, while a trio of novels by a London-based probation officer Jeremy Cameron (see typically, the first, Cameron 1995) suggests that probation officers do encounter it, and will deceive only themselves if they think it is easily susceptible to individualised cognitive behavioural interventions.

**British Prison Autobiography: Issues of Race and Gender**

In order to encompass the fullest range of auto/biographical material, and to maximise the number of Black prisoners and women prisoners whose voices can be heard, it helps to broaden the meaning of ‘prisoner autobiography’. The term usually conjures up a full length book, but there are a variety of other prose forms in which the offender’s voice finds expression, all of which are in principle accessible, and useful to trainees. Prime among these are the testimonies gathered by journalist Tony Parker, sometimes in book length accounts of individual offenders, sometimes as anthologies containing several ‘case studies’ based on common offence histories, common sentencing or a common penal location. Parker’s often-melancholy work was hugely influential in Britain, contributing very effectively to a more fully human image of offenders, and some of his best writing has fortunately been posthumously anthologised by Soothill (2000). Several journalists have subsequently emulated Parker; Campbell (1987) in a study of prisoners in HMP Lewes, Graef (1993) in a study of Sherborne House Probation Centre and Hulme (2000) in study of a lifers’ football team in HMP Kingston. A prison literacy teacher (Roberts 1968) famously incorporated prisoners’ voices in an account of his work, and prison-based writers-in-residence have produced valuable anthologies (Smith 1993). Ball (1977) edited an anthology for secondary school children. Prison visitors have recorded exchanges of correspondence with prisoners (Shannon and Morgan 1997) – and co-written books with the prisoners with whom they fell in love (Adams and Adams 1982). Two probation officers created an outlet for prisoners’ prose and poetry, first with a journal, Prison Writing, then in the form of an annual book (Broadhead and Kerr 2000). An ex-offender-turned-probation officer recently teamed up with a journalist (Devlin and Turney 2000) to produce Going Straight, an anthology of 23 ex-offenders, 17 men and six women, specifically to illustrate the process of desistance among relatively ordinary, non-celebrity offenders (although Collins, Leech
and Cook each have chapters in it). This book is particularly useful to probation officers, and is recommended reading on my ‘Introduction to Criminal Justice’ module. Lastly, at least two serving prisoners, Peter Wayne and Erwin James, have been reasonably regular columnists for newspapers and magazines.\(^{19}\)

Broadening out the definition of prisoner autobiography overcomes, to an extent, the relative scarcity of such works, in book form, written by Black British or Asian people, although Black and Asian voices are to be found in some of the anthologies, for example, Michael Fraser and Laureal Lawrence in Devlin and Turney (2000) and Adaku in Padel and Stephenson (1988). The first Black offender autobiographer in post-war Britain, Ernest Marke (1975), whilst covering his many encounters with the police, skips over his periods of imprisonment (for firearms offences)\(^{20}\). Political activist Michael X (Malik 1968, p. 113), imprisoned for theft, and actor Norman Beaton (1986, pp. 24–6), imprisoned for fraud in 1967, are almost as brief. Trevor Hercules’s (1989) autobiography covers conventional ground, a childhood in public care, and involvement in youth crime, culminating in an eight-year sentence for armed robbery. Autobiographical accounts by John Williams (1994), Robert Smith (1996) and Rocky Carr (1998) follow a similar trajectory to that of Hercules, but concentrate more on time spent on crime than time spent inside, and without the politicisation. Williams’s eventual rehabilitation was greatly enhanced by doing an Open University degree. The fact that The Ballad of the Lazy 'L' by Suri Krishnamma (1994), a versatile, self-educated, entrepreneur imprisoned for cannabis smuggling, won a Koestler Award is indicative of its literary quality, but although it is rich in picaresque prison details it is less concerned with personal change on Krishnamma’s part, and therefore less valuable in terms of what I want probation trainees, at this point in the programme, to gain from reading such autobiographies.

Such full-length books as there are by women prisoners in the 20th century tend to be by middle class political protesters, first as Suffragettes, later as anti-nuclear campaigners. Two of the latter (Buxton and Turner 1962) authored a book based, not on actual letters they had written to each other from prison, but on the letters they would have liked to write had it not been for prison censorship. Their royalties were donated to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. A seasoned and eight-times imprisoned peace protester, Pat Arrowsmith (1974), wrote a prison novel, which drew on her personal experience of women’s prisons. Reference has already been made to Joan Henry (1952), whose work was very influential in focusing debate on women’s imprisonment in the 1950s. Rosie Johnson (1990), a middle class woman imprisoned for drug offences in Holloway for nine months in 1986/87, was shocked by what she saw of the penal system, and involved herself in voluntary work with offenders upon release, concluding her book, as so many prison writers have done with the hope that ‘if by illustrating some of the problems in the women’s prison system, I can stimulate debate and so contribute to the process of reform, then I will know that my own sentence was to some extent worthwhile’ (p. 318). Deputy headmistress Audrey Peckham’s (1985) remand in HMP Pucklechurch and brief sentence in HMP Styal was a classically straight account,
combining elements of astute observation, social outrage and self-discovery. Academic Pat Carlen (1985) mentored the stories of four ‘criminal women’, and along with several accounts – some clear and some ambiguous on the question of reform – in Padel and Stevenson (1988) and the six in Devlin and Turney, these remain the most useful books about desistance in women offenders.

In teaching terms it has to be admitted that the relative dearth of Black or Asian British, or British women, prison writers is a problem, though it may still be argued that in view of the preponderance of white males on probation caseloads that a bias towards their books still introduces trainees to outlooks and standpoints with which they themselves are deeply unfamiliar, and about which all trainees need to know if they are to work effectively with such people. The best remedy for this lacunae in prisoner autobiographies is in any case to supplement the reading of such work with more conventional forms of qualitative – interview-based, focus group or ethnographic – research in which prisoner, or ex-prisoner, voices are given especial prominence (for example, Eaton 1993; Chigwada-Bailey 1997; Lyon et al. 2000), and I will argue later that the use of this material would be the ideal way in which to further develop autobiography-based teaching.

Probation Training and Prisoner Autobiographies

It seems reasonable to assume that there have always been probation officers who read offender autobiographies, but there is no real way of knowing how prominently they have been used on training courses. One earlier generation of probation trainer, criminologist and former Home Office researcher Martin Davies (1974, pp. 126–7), was certainly aware of them. He cautiously recommended them as source material on the experience and subsequent effect of imprisonment, effectively countering the still prevalent view that prisoners could not have ‘valid opinions about their own circumstances’:

The weakness of these accounts for research purposes is not that they are necessarily untruthful or slanted, but that each represents only one person’s view of a restricted range of prison establishments, and that, in sum, they represent the views of ex-prisoners who are themselves especially literate or who have access to a ghost-writer of some kind. But the net effect of reading a number of such volumes is to minimise the first of these problems, and to suggest that the second is not as important as it might seem at first sight. For although some of the authors went to prison as famous or notorious men, others were quite unknown at the time of their sentence, and their experience of the reality of imprisonment is likely to have been relatively normal. . . . Moreover, although the writer-prisoner is undeniably atypical, (by virtue of the fact that he does set his experiences down on paper), there is sufficient variety among the authors to overcome any feeling that the evidence presented will be biassed in exactly the same way in every book; there may be sections of the prison population markedly under-represented among the autobiographies, but a reading of say, twenty such books, gives a wider range of experience than might at first be anticipated. (p.126)

Years later, Davies (1989) undertook a survey of the books which probation officers had read in the preceding two years and which they had found useful for practice. This suggested that some newly qualified officers had
read Boyle’s (1977) *A Sense of Freedom*, Peckham’s (1985) *A Woman in Custody* and Carlen’s (1985) *Criminal Women*. Older officers cited Carlen too, but also Tony Parker’s (1970) study of sex-offenders and Brian Masters’s (1985) account of serial killer Denis Nilsen. My guess is that, periodically, sensible probation officers and social workers have always read prisoner autobiographies and that all I have done on the Birmingham programme is to introduce a little formality into the process, by expanding the definition of autobiography to include anthologies compiled by others (which more readily permits the multiplicity of perspectives encouraged by Davies), and by requiring a written assignment.

The remainder of this article will draw extensively on comments made by trainees in the assignments, in order to show what can be learned from them. It is important for more criminologically sophisticated readers to remember that the quotations used come from sometimes young, and sometimes – though not necessarily – inexperienced trainees at the very beginning of their course. Occasionally, their comments may appear naive or morally simplistic, or even disdainful and superior, but, as noted earlier, I would hope that by the end of their training programme, the accumulation of learning will ensure that these attitudes will have been modified. The point of using the autobiographies at the beginning of the course is precisely that they are highly readable – more so than more conventionally academic books – and because they ensure that the course commences on a note of realism rather than theoretical abstraction. I do want the trainees to find the books practically useful, but not simply to cull them for professional insight in a crudely utilitarian fashion: I am hoping that the trainees will see the person behind the offence, and pick up the commitment to penal reform. Before focusing specifically on what trainees learn from reading the autobiographies, four general points about their use need be made here.

Firstly – unsurprisingly – trainees’ preferences and preconceptions do emerge in the course of reading (and doing the assignment), sometimes so strongly that they eclipse what is there in the book. One declined to review Collins’s book, disliking its lack of a linear chronology, and preferring Bob Turney’s because it had ‘a more positive conclusion’. Another used Collins’s accounts of himself as raw material for a rigorous risk assessment, and predictably drew rather gloomy conclusions. He was dismissive of Collins’s ‘subjectivity’, but oblivious to his own. Most readers, I think would find it hard not to understand how life in the Gorbals shaped Boyle’s behaviour, how it imbued him with masculine, violent ideals. But one trainee, clearly enamoured of family rather than subculture-based theories of criminality, wrote thus:

One fails to understand how he became so violent and notorious, coming from the caring mother he had. They did not appear to have had much, but his poor mother seems to have worked her hands to the bone enabling the apparent stability of her family. Jimmy to me was just ‘bad’, and appeared to enjoy the life of crime during his teenage years, or he would have tried to change his ways, if not for himself, for his dear mother.

Most comment on Boyle, I hasten to add, was not in this vein, but the quote does point up the obvious importance of not relying solely on prisoner...
autobiographies to convey a rounded understanding of criminality, of never assuming that they always ‘speak for themselves’. The obvious corollary of this is that criminological theory must also be taught which broadens and deepens trainees’ understanding of the ‘causes’ of crime, which balances biographical, domestic, communal, subcultural, ideological and structural factors.

Secondly, trainees in the main recognise that there are problems with reliability, validity (truthfulness, memory) and artifice in prisoner autobiographies, and although they are not encouraged in the assignment to explore the processes by which the narratives are constructed, they do not read them uncritically. Nonetheless, allowing for the essential subjectivity of the writer, they can still see what the books offer them, as future probation officers. Of Boyle and Collins it was written:

As with any autobiography, Boyle could be cynically accused of bias in his account, over dramatizing events or even disregarding key details. However, even if Boyle is guilty of this, at worst the book could be seen as a defence of some criminal’s lifestyle, and consequently, still valid reading.

But whether we believe his [Collins] whole account to be true, these remain his feelings, the way he experienced his life. And one way to start relating to him, (and working with him) would be to start from his perception of reality. At least that is what the staff in the Barlinnie Unit seems to have done.

Thirdly, trainees were mindful, too, that offender accounts should not be seen in isolation. One who wrote with deep appreciation of Tony Parker’s (1990) Life after Life: Interviews with Twelve Murderers, still said that ‘when reading this text it is prudent to consider the differing perspectives that could be offered by both the victims of the crimes and the professionals involved in the aftercare of the offenders’. The absence of such viewpoints here does not of course invalidate the book – victim perspectives are addressed elsewhere on the DipPS – and this reader acknowledged that Life after Life ‘offer[ed] the novice reader a rare opportunity to hear first hand the experiences of a lifer’, and claimed confidently that ‘the frankness with which the motivations to offend are divulged undoubtedly provides a foundation on which to encourage desistance’.

To some trainees, the incompleteness of the autobiographies is part of what makes them interesting. One trainee wrote of Collins: ‘the questions he leaves unanswered – about masculinity, socialisation, deterrence and education – are questions at the very heart of work with offenders’, admitting, nonetheless, at the end of the assignment, that while it is ‘frustrating’ to have the questions unanswered, it is ‘intellectually stimulating’ to be invited to continue thinking about them.

Fourthly, trainees do make allowance for the dated element in the autobiographies, for the time lapse between the events described and the later recollection of them by the reformed offender. Many of the autobiographies read for this assignment refer to events several decades old, and the milieu in which contemporary offenders operate, and in which probation officers meet them, will have changed substantially, if not completely, since then. By and large, trainees are adept at judging what remains relevant now and what
has changed over time; they understand that what they learn is provisional, tentative, to be tested out in a new environment. Some, incidentally, draw harsh lessons about earlier forms of probation practice:

By reading *A Sense of Freedom*, today’s probation officers can gain an insight into how little help from their own Service and the state in general was available when Boyle was growing up. The lack of involvement from the Probation Service in those formative years may have led indirectly to the horrors of Boyle’s prison experiences. Boyle’s story eloquently tells ‘how not to do it’ for the Probation Service. The fact that the Probation Service hardly gets a mention in this book speaks volumes.

This is not quite – and certainly not the only – historical message I would want trainees to get from *A Sense of Freedom* – it is based on too little evidence of what past probation was like in Scotland, and, arguably, on a rather uncritical appraisal of the new probation developments in England and Wales (compared, say, to what the Barlinnie Special Unit demonstrably achieved). Nonetheless, whilst not doubting the importance of showing humanity to offenders, I would never encourage a romanticised view of probation’s ‘social work’ past, and I warm to this trainee’s emerging belief that probation could and should do more to keep offenders out of prison.

**What do Trainees Learn?**

*Insight into a Different World*

Even if they have a criminal conviction, or come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, most trainees will have little or no first hand experience of the milieux in which serious offenders are formed – though some might. The autobiographies address the cultural divide. Of Boyle and Collins it was written, (by a mix of male and female trainees):

*Autobiography of a Murderer* is a record of a life that many would find repulsive . . . This is an alien world to most – nothing that we have experienced ourselves will be of an extreme enough nature for us to even begin to understand how a person can live this way.

As a trainee probation officer Collins has enabled me to get to grips with a life very different from my own, giving me insights, which I believe, will enhance my practice when dealing with offenders. In a nutshell, Collins sheds light on what Morgan (1999, p. 337) calls a ‘social experience normally hidden from public view’.

Without convicted criminals such as Boyle having the ability or opportunity to write and have a book published, my perception of serious offenders and their motives would be limited.

The reader gains insight into how it feels to commit crimes, and also the power the marginalised of society can feel by creating their own rules and culture.

As a trainee probation officer, the book gave me an insight into the importance of keeping an open mind, rather than being horrified when confronted with issues such as violence or other terrible crimes, which are outside of my life experience.

It is important, though, that the ‘social experience normally hidden from view’ is not so remote as to be unreachable by probation officers, for offenders to be
seen as wholly Other, utterly unlike ‘us’. Through a combination of choice and circumstance, Jimmy Boyle eventually became exceptional, but as one trainee realised, once, he was merely ordinary.

[A Sense of Freedom] shows how easy the path of crime is to take. I found myself relating to the early feelings that Boyle describes of wanting recognition from peers. The book is useful for everyone to see how his or her lives could have taken a different turn.

Most trainees recognised that the more exceptional people who wrote prisoner autobiographies were atypical of offenders generally, and that those interviewed by Roger Graef (1993) in his study of the life skills programme at a probation day centre ‘are much more typical of the clients that probation officers meet on an everyday basis’. But even here there are differences of perspective of which to take note. Graef’s study was complimented for the way ‘it actually draws you in such a way that you can understand the world in a slightly different way – the way a criminal sees things’.

The Complexity of Change and Desistance

Trainees write of the way in which autobiographies enable them to see the person behind the offence, to judge the respective contributions of different factors in the birth of a criminal career, to weigh up where responsibility lies, to understand the sheer difficulty of changing. Soothill’s anthology of Parker’s work was appreciated because it contained both accounts by people who had changed for the better, but also ‘some people, who, despite all the effort of the systems in place at a particular time still do not do so’. One trainee wrote that after reading Devlin and Turney’s book they understood the factors, which enabled the transition to law-abidingness, and were in a better position to ‘work more effectively in supporting this transition’. Of Boyle, one wrote: ‘if a persistent offender like him can change, then there is always hope that others can do the same. The challenge for us (as probation officers) is to create the conditions and opportunity to make such change not only a probability but also a possibility’. Another concluded from Boyle’s story that ‘even apparent hopeless cases can be salvaged, through perseverance’ adding:

I believe there are a number of stages within this book where a probation officer can recognise crucial points for intervention that may have assisted in cutting his criminal career short. . . . Perhaps if his own probation officer had worked closely with him and offered the human contact that I feel he was devoid of, then maybe he would have seen the error of his ways sooner rather than later. Perhaps, someone listening to his thoughts, feelings and opinions, valuing him as a human being and working constructively with them may have had a far-reaching effect on the direction that his life would take.

This quote underplays the importance of directly challenging criminal attitudes – something which McVicar (1974) made clear was necessary when dealing with committed offenders long before the probation service discovered cognitive behaviourism – but no reader of A Sense of Freedom could deny that respecting an offender’s humanity was also vital to constructive change. Trainees in all four cohorts have been divided about the nature of Hugh
Collins’s rehabilitation, Some think he has reformed, some not: ‘there is little sense of real remorse or developed conscience’ is a typical comment from many, far removed from the chief probation officer who reviewed the book in a professional journal and discerned in Collins’s painful ownership of his guilt ‘a humanity . . . that is once telling and powerful’ (Harding 1999, p. 249). Some trainees seem to demand impossibly high expectations of what rehabilitation might mean, and an unequivocal expression of remorse is one sign of it. One, who was severely critical of Collins for still believing ‘that violence is still an option’, and for saying that in certain circumstances ‘I know that I’d do it again’ (Collins 1997, p. 192) said:

In order for Collins to ever completely overcome his violent past, he must forget the only life he has ever known and therefore deny the man he is.

This is, of course, deeply contrary to what Collins feels inclined to do. Perhaps only life experience will teach this trainee that such fundamental repudiations of the past are rare, and are unnecessary for many people to give up crime. Even if the potential for violence remains, the actuality may never (again) be realised. A more considered response to Collins came from a trainee who engaged more fully with what Collins had to say about the complexity, and meaning of change:

I think what stands out most is [the nature of] the process of change that Collins undergoes. What it shows is that change is a difficult and challenging path to take and that we need to be aware of its complexities. What struck me were the undeniable changes he had made, particularly in learning better ways of communication, although his potential to be violent is still present.

Collins himself reflects on the possibility of forgiveness for what he has done, and one trainee picked up interestingly on that, possibly giving expression to her own spiritual beliefs:

Hugh must on some level be able to forgive others for the numerous wrongs they have inflicted on him. He does mention forgiveness in his book, in the context of forgiveness for himself. However, to know full forgiveness one needs to be able to forgive others and it does not appear through what he writes that Hugh has made that connection. Another part of forgiveness is acknowledgement that wrong has been done and although that wrong has been done and although Hugh seems to feel very remorseful about the murder of Mooney, this attitude is not evident about the other crimes he has committed.

The importance of choice and commitment to change on the offender’s part is most vividly brought out in Devlin and Turney’s (2000) collection of desistance stories. Chris Sheridan (like Turney himself, an ex-offender turned probation officer) attributes his own change to nothing more than a personal decision and willpower, but perhaps underplays the help and support he got from others, the existence of opportunities and the relative absence of impediments. Several trainees drew upon Mark Leech’s description of how a prison officer mapped out the options for him, and then left it to him: ‘I had the free power, the free will, to make a choice: Crime was one option. But it wasn’t the only one – there were others’ (quoted in Devlin and Turney 2000, p. 227). As commonly quoted was Devlin and Turney’s
(2000, p. 34) own summary: ‘Personal determination is ultimately the single most important agent for change, whatever other individual, situational or chance factors come into play’. One attentive reader of their book recognised that choice was not, however, made in a vacuum, that personal responsibility emerged best where relationships with others were made and sustained, and where another interest and a sense of achievement replaced the pride and pleasure that had once been taken in crime. He quoted from Boyle (1994, p. 128) to argue that there was more to personal change than just the exertion of willpower: ‘it may not be obvious to most people, but being responsible is a learned skill’.

Engaging with Emotion and Violence

Emotion, often of an extreme kind, is expressed in or evoked by many of these autobiographies, to a far greater extent than in academic criminology books. Reading them may be the first time that some trainees will have considered that they themselves might meet offenders who have committed acts of violence, which, even if they fall short of murder, are still sordid. Many do find the ‘graphic details, mindless violence and obscene language’ in Autobiography of a Murderer, for example, ‘distressing and repellant’ – ‘a good read for someone who enjoys blood and gore’. The view that emotion can neither be fully factored out of public discourse on crime (Frieberg 2001), nor expunged from one’s personal response to particular acts, pervades the module, and is reinforced in other parts of the curriculum. Working with emotion, their own, the offender’s and the victim’s, is something trainees need to do – offender autobiographies can trigger that insight. Once the reasons behind Jonah’s (in Hulme 2000) explosive anger are grasped, for example, his appalling description of his rape and murder of a 16-year-old girl, when he was 18, becomes marginally easier to bear – and points up a broader issue, of great relevance to probation officers:

When you read this story you are aware that the crime he committed was extremely horrific, but I could not help but feel sympathy for him, and wonder how many more eighteen year old men there are out there feeling very similar, like ticking time bombs

Hugh Collins, whose visceral prose conveys the squalor and the exhilaration of violence more directly than any other prison writer, forces trainees to consider where they stand in relation to men who do what he did:

Overall I have mixed reactions at reading Hugh Collins autobiography. Personally I was shocked and sickened by the mindless violence of the book. Collins rarely mentions the harm and distress his actions have caused to the victims and if at all remorseful does not show it. However, this is not to say I did not enjoy the book. I found it informative, descriptive and an eye opener. It is encouraging that Collins appears to have at least learnt to control his anger.

Ambivalence can run deeper than this, and not all trainees understand Collins’s descriptions of violence as ‘sensationalism’, recognising, at least in part, what he is trying to convey. Some almost identify with Collins, given the situation he found himself in and the treatment he received in some prisons. One female trainee, appreciative of Collins’s engrossing, disturbing prose, wrote:
Collins involves the reader to such an extent that he or she may find themselves going beyond feelings of empathy, silently egging him on as he describes his acts of violence against prison officers.

Some writers are valued precisely for avoiding descriptions of violence, the implication often being that this makes the account more considered and reliable, for example, Parker’s *Life After Life*. ‘Graphic details are avoided’ (one trainee wrote, with apparent relief) of the murders these lifers had committed, whilst warming, as a generation of previous readers have done, to the stoic and melancholy tone of so many of Parker’s respondents. Even Boyle’s book – written ‘in a very clear and informative manner’ was said to avoid sensationalism, although one trainee still believed that writing it must have been ‘a cathartic exercise for the author’.

*The Variable Reality of Imprisonment*

There is much to be learned about the experience of imprisonment in prisoner autobiographies, and contrary, perhaps, to conventional wisdom it is not all bad. Certainly the tilt in the genre as a whole is critical, a catalogue of lost opportunities, petty hostility, bureaucratic ineptitude and – sometimes – extreme violence practised by prisoners on prisoners, officers on prisoners and vice versa. If prisoners reform, it is all too often despite the system than because of it, or merely because of the example and commitment of one or more staff rather than the regime as a whole. It is important, in penal reform terms, that this critical message is conveyed to probation trainees, and that they become aware of how easily prisons can become destructive environments. Reflecting on the lessons of several autobiographies one trainee did indeed draw this conclusion: ‘in our culture the feeling that ‘prison works’ seems to be more important than the reality that more often than not it doesn’t’.

But it is not the only message that trainees need, and a more rounded view can indeed be acquired from these books. Some offenders testify unequivocally to the personal benefits of imprisonment. Peter Cameron writes: ‘I used my time in prison. Prison came along at the right time for me’ (quoted in Devlin and Turney 2000, p. 263). It is not only in the therapeutic community prisons like Grendon and the Barlinnie and Hull Special Units that offenders realise their need to change their lives and acquire the understanding to do so, although these tend to provide the most spectacular examples. The contrast between these kinds of environment, many of which are being learned about for the first time, is not lost on trainees. One wrote of Boyle’s experiences that it gave him ‘insight into how easily power can be abused’; another wrote of Collins’s book that it showed them ‘the potential of prison to be both brutal and redemptive’ and concluded that the Barlinnie Unit ‘was clearly a lesson in effective practice for probation officers’. One trainee captured the essence of the difference between it and prisons like Inverness and Peterhead: ‘Put simply, one resulted in hatred, violence and hopelessness, the other led to a feeling of hope for the future and to the development of “a reasonable sort of person” ’ (Collins 1997, p. 171). She also noted the significance of prison officer Malky MacKenzie,
who cut through Collins’s erstwhile hostility to ‘screws’: ‘For me this shows that a professional relationship that has integrity can make a difference’. Other trainees picked up the significance of Ken Murray to Jimmy Boyle, and of Joe Chapman to both Mark Leech and Frank Cook. One wrote of Nigel Wheeler, the prison officer who managed the football team in HMP Kingston:

It is clear that he has a great deal of respect for them, and this is obviously reciprocated. I appreciate as a trainee probation officer that this is a valuable lesson to learn when working with offenders.

Trainees’ very variable experiences of prison at this initial point in the programme inevitably frame their judgment of the autobiographies. One trainee, admitting she had never been inside a prison, simply liked Chris Hulme’s (2000, p. 2) scene setting in Kingston – ‘concrete landings stacked up on one another, like a hotel from hell’. Another, with twelve years experience as a prison officer, and experience of football with inmates, was happy to ‘authenticate some parts of the book’ and conceded that ‘it illustrated some of the positive consequences [of football] that I had not considered’, highlighting the way in which reading facilitates reflective practice, deepening understanding of what is already known from experience. Hulme’s book was also useful for the insights it gave into the work of probation officers in prison:

The book provides a valuable insight into offending behaviour programmes in prison – how the probation officers go about conducting and running them, and to me most interestingly, how the prisoners feel about the impact they have had on their attitude to offending. Jonah, of all the prisoners we meet in the book seems to have come to terms with his crime, and his description of his probation officer helping him to understand his anger is particularly moving.

Imprisonment is a significant reference point for probation officers – keeping offenders out of it wherever possible, threatening it as a punishment for non-compliance, working in it, resettling offenders after it – and it is essential that both the intellectual and practical aspects of training develop an understanding of both its limitations and its potential. The mix of contemplation and denunciation that typically characterise prisoner autobiographies can initiate this, exactly as many of their writers had hoped.

The Value of Probation Officers

Probation officers don’t figure much in offender autobiographies, and among those who do, many were working several decades ago. Nonetheless, trainees can still pick up important information about the way in which probation officers were perceived and valued by offenders, and appraise its relevance for contemporary practice. One trainee dismisses the officer who supervised the juvenile Jimmy Boyle, as someone who ‘worked very much on a welfare basis [and] merely exacerbated Boyle’s lack of insight and understanding of the gravity or consequences of his offending behaviour’. Even later probation officers are not spared criticism; reviewing Graef, one trainee was chastened by field officers’ neglect of the offenders attending Sherborne House – and also ruminated thoughtfully on whether Graef
became too involved in offering practical help to the young people he was studying. Bad practice can be learned from.

But not all probation officers do fare badly in prisoner autobiographies, particularly the more recent ones. Judith Ward (1993, p. 60) reports that in the 1980s in HMP Durham, prisoners generally were fairly dismissive of both ‘home town’ and ‘resident’ probation officers, who were regarded as out of touch with what was happening in the prisons. Most inmates, she thought, regarded them as part of the ‘establishment’, though later she met one, Peter Hodkinson who ‘as a friend and mentor . . . was invaluable’, directing her towards education. Hugh Callaghan (1993), also thanks a probation officer who helped him with the appeal process as ‘a good man’ (pp.143–67). One trainee, with an explicit political bent herself, drew from Ward’s account of probation’s lack of interest in political prisoners a reminder of the importance of a fully rounded anti-discriminatory practice. Of Ward’s experience she wrote:

The probation officer who made a difference to Ward did not do so in the formal rehabilitative sense, but by engaging with the person. He was able to see beyond the classifications (Cat A, political) and this intervention empowered her.

Imprisoned for burglary, John Williams (1994, p. 105) describes how a prison probation officer, Mr Mottram, ‘helped me to take a less harsh attitude towards my sexuality’ and, later, appreciates support from his Open University tutors. Looking back on a childhood suffused with racism, Trevor Hercules (1989, p. 25) recalls his social worker, Bill Logey: ‘I had nothing but respect and admiration for that man, because he had proved to me that although he was white, he was a humanitarian, and lived his life accordingly’. Several of the ex-offenders in Devlin and Turney’s (2000) book speak along similar lines about their ‘significant others’. Anita O’Connell, victim of a deeply problematic childhood, on probation for arson is clear: ‘The one person that really made me change my life was my Probation Officer, who had a lot of time for me’ (p. 43). Bob Cummines benefited from the counsel of a prison probation officer, one of several people whom he believes helped him reform. John Bower, once a professional burglar, with 15 years inside behind him, mentions a counsellor in HMP Channings Wood, a teacher and the director of New Bridge as people who helped him. Mish, a cocaine smuggler was moved by a prison governor who apologised to him for having lost his temper; this signalled respect and altered Mish’s attitude to authority. All of these encounters point up the importance of staff – inside and outside prisons – who treat offenders with dignity, who listen patiently, and who respond constructively to emotional distress – in essence, staff who exhibit genuineness, warmth and empathy. As one trainee recognised, Josie O’Dwyer’s appreciation of the probation hostel staff who withstood her testing behaviour immediately after release from prison sums this up:

My hostel wardens Paul, Lynn, Colin and Liz took time out for me, made no demands on me and in time trust began to grow. My probation officer Dee did not patronise me. She just let me find myself and get through all the hurting I had suffered and all the walls and defences I had erected over the years. I talked to Dee every week and came to rely more and more on our talks. (quoted in Carlen 1985, pp. 179–80)
Contemporary probation practice is increasingly dominated by cognitive behavioural programmes and strict enforcement procedures. Showing humanity to offenders, in a way that they themselves find meaningful, seems no longer to be officially valued in the probation service, whatever officers may feel or believe. Not the least of the merits of prisoner autobiographies is that many of them show clearly that offenders actually find humanity indispensable if, and when, they themselves wish to change.23

**Conclusion: Taking This Forward**

As indicated at the outset, the prisoner autobiographies are intended to contribute to the start of a learning process. Experience tells me that whilst such autobiographies, in themselves, can make a lasting and powerful impression on trainees, they can also be used to lay the foundations for other sorts of knowledge, which are pursued more deeply in other modules, elsewhere on the curriculum. There are rather obvious ways in which autobiographies can contribute to the understanding of criminality (further explored in ‘Psychology’ and the ‘Community Safety’ modules); desistance (further explored in ‘Effective Practice’) and the experience of imprisonment and its consequences (further explored in ‘Penal Policy’). Autobiographies condense what has elsewhere been called ‘underpinning’ and ‘overarching’ knowledge – respectively, the specific knowledge that enables practical work to be done with offenders and the broader knowledge of the culture, institutional framework and policy-context in which practice occurs (Nellis 2001a). Beyond this, there are quite probably many minor idiosyncratic ways in which, at various times during training (and in their subsequent careers) memories of prisoner autobiographies trigger useful thoughts and hunches, depending on situations in which trainees and officers find themselves, and on the particular offenders they encounter. All this alone would be sufficient to justify the use of prisoner autobiographies in the way described here. Add to it the deliberate homage being paid to Clifford Shaw’s pioneering ‘life story’ work, and the calculated attempt on my part to ensure that good – in the form of more thoughtful and better informed probation officers – does come from the wrenching experiences of people like Leech, Boyle and Collins, and their victims, then the case for using prisoner autobiographies in probation officer training becomes ethically unassailable.

One way in which the work with offender autobiographies described here could be taken forward is via a module called, perhaps, ‘Offending in Context’. This would start with such autobiographies, in the variety of formats and idioms described above, move outwards into the criminal milieu documented in ethnographies and conclude with consumer studies of offenders’ experiences of the probation service. The more criminologically interpretive accounts of offenders (Worrall 1990; Colton and Vanstone 1996) could be brought into this, and used, firstly, as the basis for analysing the criminological theories which inform the interpretation, and secondly, as Goodey (2000) suggests, as a means of refining and enriching the theories themselves, restoring nuances to what are otherwise abstractions. A
deeper analysis of autobiographies as a literary form could also be introduced, more sensitive to the idiosyncrasies of their construction than I have been here (Denzin 1989), recognising that Foucault’s insight ‘one writes to become other than what one is’ (quoted in Gilmore 2001, p. 103) is particularly apt for reform-minded offenders who write autobiographies. The processes by which offenders in different organisational settings are encouraged to reconstruct their identities, and develop life-narratives which ostensibly help them to change for the better certainly has subversive implications for cognitive behavioural work (Fox 2001). Lastly, as Clifford Shaw argued, individual life-stories need to be contextualised within studies of the communities in which they are lived if they are to be properly appreciated. Yet ethnographies – despite the repeated claim that probation officers often lack knowledge of the milieu and networks in which offenders live (Northumbria Probation Service 1992) – seem never to have figured prominently in probation training. There are certainly riches to be tapped (Foster 1990; Hobbs 1995). These in turn could be augmented by more formal studies of criminal networks, and both could inform discussions about the significance of ‘communitarianism’ for criminal justice policy. All this seems to me to be a perfectly respectable way to teach criminology generally – Plummer (1983) appears to have done this with his sociology students many years ago – but one which could be uniquely advantageous to probation officers. Such a module might stimulate interest among trainees in undertaking their own life-story work for dissertations, or in the potential of therapeutic writing with offenders under probation supervision (Brough 2000; Morgan 2000).

To conclude: this article has sought to combine what might usually be considered two quite distinct subjects, (i) a schematic history of British prisoner autobiographies and (ii) an approach to training probation officers, which are matters of interest to two equally distinct criminological and professional audiences. But, as I indicated at the outset, my guiding belief in this article has been that while prisoner autobiographies should never be read uncritically, the best of them should be helped to have the constructive effect that their writers usually wish for, sifted, pondered and – where necessary and if possible – used to serve the interests of penal reform. Encouraging probation officers to read them is one way of doing this. Autobiographies are not the only means by which prisoner voices can be heard in contemporary society – offenders are consulted by official enquiries, in prison inspections, in research projects and in television documentaries, in addition to which, prisoners and probationers also have an ombudsman to whom they can complain – but they are in the main important affirmations of against-the-odds transformation, and should be attended to. There are, quite probably, a wide variety of readers and constituencies, which already make haphazard and idiosyncratic use of them – commercially minded publishers obviously think so, or the books would not appear. Introducing such books to probation trainees on a DipPS programme, using them as the foundation on which a deeper, more abstract and wide-ranging understanding can be built, is one specific way of assuring
their influence. They are in themselves no substitute for a thorough, criminologically focused, skill-based professional training, but they are a very valuable way of beginning that process.

Notes

1 There are definitional issues here which must be acknowledged, although I do not wish to go as far as Denzin (1989) in delineating a multiplicity of different forms of written self-expression. It is often imprisonment that prompts the desire, as well as creating the opportunity, to write, but many autobiographies understandably cover the events, which led to the imprisonment – the offending career as well as the incarceration. Hence the ambivalent, tentative distinction between ‘offender’ and ‘prisoner’ autobiographies. For some writers, explaining how they became involved in crime is as important as exposing – or celebrating – particular prison regimes. Strictly speaking some of what are called autobiographies are more accurately called memoirs, because they deal only with a particular moment or aspect of life experience, what Denzin (1989) calls an ‘epiphany’. I am mindful too of the putative differences between an ‘autobiography’ written solo, untutored, and a ‘life history’ guided and gathered by a sociologist, the latter being ostensibly more rigorous and comprehensive than the subjective, selective approach of the former. Howard Becker (1966) makes much of this distinction in his defence of Shaw’s (1930) book *The Jackroller*, and there is clearly truth in what he says. But I incline to the view that there are fewer differences between the two narrative modes than he appreciates; some prisoner autobiographies do aspire to a scrupulous comprehensiveness, and with the best will in the world no sociologist can guarantee that life-story subjects always tell all, without deceit, denial or embellishment. More speculatively, I would suggest that since the mid-1970s, particularly with offenders who have acquired a sociological understanding, that some prisoner autobiographies have actually begun to resemble the format and idiom of *The Jackroller*. I am wholly persuaded by Ken Plummer’s (1983) view that proper autobiographies, and indeed biographies, can be used to teach the value of life histories, and can have a similar impact on students as more self-consciously sociological accounts. But I also accept Clifford Shaw’s (1930) point, that life stories are ideally used as one of several sources of mutually corroborative evidence, rather than in isolation. (For up-to-date overviews of ‘biographical method’, see Smith 1994; Goodey 2000; Roberts 2002.)

2 The life-history method was an integral and established element of the urban sociology practised and taught at the University of Chicago before Clifford Shaw (1895 to 1957) joined it in 1919. He took time out from his studies between 1921 and 1926 to work in a juvenile training school and as a probation officer during which time he first met some of the individual offenders whose stories he was later to elicit. Shaw’s originality was to use life histories – he preferred the term ‘own story’ (in three books, of which *The Jackroller* is the most famous, Shaw 1930) ‘in an unprecedently complete and concentrated form to . . . study . . . delinquency, believing in addition, the person’s “own story” may be a useful first step in devising a plan of treatment’ (Bennett 1981, p. 185). Though based in a university he remained an activist on criminal justice matters throughout his life, founding the Chicago Area Project to help remedy the environmental factors, which create, and shape delinquency.

3 The book was *Meningen van Gedetineerden over de Strafrechts-pleging* (Rijksen 1958). Its title translates into English as *Prisoners Speak Out*. It took the form of letters written by prisoners, compiled and edited by Rijksen, and was deeply critical of
prosecutors, judges, lawyers and probation workers. 'The result was a storm of public indignation; the different functionaries were, for the first time, confronted with the implications of their own actions, and for a while their self-confidence seemed to be shaken' (Kelk 1983, p. 158). Interest and impact were increased by the Ministry of Justice’s unsuccessful attempts to suppress the book – a second edition was published in 1961. Researching Dutch penal policy years later, Downes (1988, p. 96) discovered serving judges who cited the book as having been a significant influence upon their sentencing practice and their attitudes to reform, and concludes that its publication was ‘clearly an event of major importance in the history of Dutch post-war criminal justice’.

4 Social work in Britain has paid attention to the words of service users for three reasons; as source material for professional diagnosis, as customer feedback and as a means of empowering the unheard. Ideas about empowerment, of clients wresting control from discriminatory and oppressive professionals, mushroomed in the 1980s, and although not without influence in probation, were clearly more dissonant in work with offenders – where control was the point of the professional relationship – than in work with disabled, mentally ill or old people. As both punitive and managerial pressures on the probation service grew, user perspectives emphasising only feedback on services received, often gathered ‘in house’, began to predominate over more sophisticated accounts of desistance and reintegration (Maruna 2000). The criminological ‘life-story’ tradition has long been neglected in probation, despite, paradoxically, having begun there.

5 Innocent people do receive prison sentences (Brandon and Davies 1973), and some write autobiographies. Although they are obviously of no use in the study of desistance, they can be informative about the operation of the criminal justice system in ways that probation officers should still find useful. Leaving aside recent books by Irishmen and women wrongly convicted of terrorist offences, Kevin Callan’s (1997) account of how he fought to overturn a conviction for child murder and Devlin and Devlin’s (1998) biography of Sheila Bowler, wrongly convicted of murdering her aunt, are arguably the most useful. The latter exemplified a long tradition of dogged journalistic intervention in miscarriages of justice, of which Ludovic Kennedy and Paul Foot are the ageing champions in Britain. Insofar as he denies responsibility for the murder, which got him his life sentence, Jimmy Boyle’s A Sense of Freedom could technically be regarded as an innocent’s account, but this would be stretching the definition a bit far. Boyle himself never makes much of his ‘innocence’, refuses to grass on the real murderer, accepts that there was much on which the courts could have convicted him, and crucially, accepts his need to reform.

6 The use of autobiographical material in fiction, embellished and altered to a greater or lesser degree, is a long established practice in novel writing. I therefore regard it as legitimate here to include fictionalised prison autobiography, not least because it is sometimes hard to know when elements of autobiography itself have been fictionalised. Many writers routinely change the names of some people in ‘their story’ to preserve anonymity and spare embarrassment (Zeno 1968; Smith 1996), and prudence may dictate the omission or reworking of certain episodes. Writing of the true crime genre, criminologist Dick Hobbs (1995, p. 3) coldly warns us ‘criminals do lie’, but ‘false memoir syndrome’, as Gladwell (2001) has archly called it, is a commonplace failing among autobiography writers, by no means unique to offenders. My acceptance of ‘autobiographical fiction’ does raise the question whether novels about imprisonment should be included – of great verisimilitude perhaps, but which are not based on personal experience. I have excluded them here in order to maintain a focus on auto/biography.
but prison novels, like prison movies, would be a fruitful area of study in their own right, and do play a part in the cultural politics of penal reform.

7 See Nellis (1988, p. 26) for Prison Commissioner Alec Paterson’s involvement in this. In addition, magistrate Leo Page, a prominent commentator on criminal justice in the 1930s, eloquently portrayed all prisoner autobiographies as suspect; his words were endorsed more than 30 years later by Sally Trotter (1969), in the foreword to her book about her work as a prison welfare officer:

There has . . . descended on the public of recent years a veritable spate of books written by ex-prisoners newly released from jail. It is sometimes difficult to understand how even the most credulous of the community can be carried to the length of apparently unquestioning acceptance of what are for the most part grotesquely distorted pictures of prison life in this country. Men are listened to with grave attention when, emerging from an imprisonment which in itself has been merited by an offence of fraud or cheating, without a vestige of evidence they make the most serious allegations against the character of officers and the administration of prisons. (Page 1932, p. 12)

8 Phillip Priesty will be better known to probation readers of this article as a contributor to the development of effective probation practice and as the originator of the current One-to-One programme. He is far less recognised than he should be as a penal reformer in his own right, as the initiator of the first local victim support scheme in Britain, as a pioneer of victim-offender mediation, and as a maker of documentary films on criminal justice themes.

9 Mentors – a term I use loosely to mean established public figures who help a prison writer by one means or another (for example, finding a publisher, writing a foreword) to be taken seriously – have been many and various. Compton McKenzie, an established novelist and former commanding officer of Wilfred McCartney (1936) prefixed and added commentaries throughout McCartney’s famous and influential Walls Have Mouths. Rupert Croft-Cooke (1955, 1959), a novelist who had himself been imprisoned for homosexual offences, allowed professional criminal Paul Lund to tell his story in the manner later made famous by Tony Parker (1962), with ‘Robert Allerton’. Lord Longford was mentor to numerous writers in his early years as a penal reformer (for example, Norman Hignet 1956; Peter Baker 1961). Crime novelist Raymond Chandler championed and recommended Frank Norman (1958). Michael Young mentored Victor Carasov (1971). Sociologist Stan Cohen edited, advised and wrote an introduction and endpiece to Wally Probyn’s (1977) autobiography. MP Goronwy Rees mentored John McVicar’s (1974). Crime novelist Raymond Chandler championed and recommended Frank Norman (1958). Michael Young mentored Victor Carasov (1971). Sociologist Stan Cohen edited, advised and wrote an introduction and endpiece to Wally Probyn’s (1977) autobiography. MP Goronwy Rees mentored John McVicar’s (1974). The practice of mentoring seems to have declined somewhat since the 1970s, suggesting perhaps that most offenders can now gain a hearing without the aid or endorsement of a respectable spokesperson, but lifer Norman Parker’s (1994) first book bucked the trend, sporting a foreword by Tom Mangold, a TV journalist and author, as did Mark Leech’s (1993), with a foreword by controversial retired judge James Pickles. All of the above examples are, to a greater or lesser degree, variants of the coaching and mentoring undertaken by Clifford Shaw in respect of his life story work at the University of Chicago. Not all modern mentors seek to bestow specifically sociological credibility on the prison writer; as often their words are a plea for recognition of the simple human interest of the story, and of the writer’s hard-won experience, and for their views to at least be considered by penal policy makers, reformers and the reading public. In a reversal of the usual relationship an introduction by the now reformed John McVicar (1980) validated a reprint of Cohen and Taylor’s study of Durham E wing, where the three had first met.

10 North America – both the USA and Canada – has a fine tradition of prison writing – and my only reason for not (usually) including North American examples
in the sample offered to trainees is that they inevitably deal with milieux, if not always experiences, which are remote from those of British probation officers—and it is essentially the British penal scene that I most want them to learn about.

The two exceptions that I once made to this, at trainee request, using a biography of imprisoned boxer Hurricane Carter and the death row writing of Mumia Abu Jamal did not produce wholly successful pieces of work. But, intellectually and politically, riches are lost by excluding American material—particularly African-American material—and I can only hope that trainees will be inspired enough by what they do read from Britain to seek out American books, most notably, I hope, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (Haley 1966), a world class book whose accumulated political stature in the years since first publication has rendered its designation as offender or prisoner autobiography more than a little inadequate.

11 Frank Norman (1930–1980) was a London celebrity in the permissive 1960s, whose disarming humour helped bring into the open long established intimacies between certain sections of the theatre, the cinema and criminal fraternities. He contributed to an enduring stereotype of the ‘wide boy’, the cleverer-than-he-looks-underdog who nearly always manages to put one over authority, and might reasonably be regarded as a precursor of ‘geezer chic’ (see note 16), although the latter is, perhaps more realistically, more callous. Norman contributed a storyline to a poor quality, quickly forgotten comedy prison movie, ‘In the Nick’ (d. Ken Hughes 1960) but the essentials of his character and demeanour were picked up by actor Peter Sellers in a more reputable prison comedy, ‘Two Way Stretch’ (d. Robert Day 1960), with which Norman was not directly associated. Aspects of the Norman persona were immortalised in a long running and much repeated BBC prison comedy TV series in the 1970s and 1980s, ‘Porridge’, whose central character, an artful survivor and manipulator of life on the wings, played to perfection by actor Ronnie Barker, was not for nothing called Norman Fletcher. Fletcher still remains an icon in popular culture, a recognisable (if imaginary?) prison-type, a figure who invites sympathy for the underdog, admiration for his ingenuity and outrage at his cheek in equal measure; most recently his image was used in a mainstream newspaper article about prison food (see Guardian Society, 19 December 2001). The BBC began re-repeating the original 1974 series in January 2002.

12 In terms of the cultural representation of crime and punishment there is clearly now an interplay between writing, television, cinema, video and drama, and prison writers can now make their presence felt through a variety of media, including video games and the internet. I do not want to imply that prison writing is the only means by which criminology can be introduced to students and probation trainees—simply that it is accessible and that its potential has been neglected—or that books are the only medium in which a penal reform message can be conveyed. Some prison films have long been made in this spirit (Nellis 1988), and, in Britain, ‘A Sense of Freedom’ (d. John McKenzie 1981), is the best of the genre. (For the use of crime films, including prison films, in criminology teaching, see Rafter 2000.)

13 The Koestler Award Scheme (now Trust) was established in 1962 by Arthur Koestler (1905–1983) and promotes the self-respect and reformation of prisoners through creative activity, for which prizes in various categories—painting, craft, writing, music, photography—are given annually. Koestler knew from experience the pains of confinement, having been imprisoned and sentenced to death during the Spanish Civil War, placed in a concentration camp in Vichy, France and briefly interned as an alien in England (HMP Pentonville). Spanish Testament (Koestler 1957) is a classic study of imprisonment; his novel, Darkness at Noon (Koestler 1940), set in prison, was a pioneering study of the totalitarian mentality. The Trust
has always enjoyed high-level support, and has had prestigious chairs, most recently former Chief Inspector of Prison, Sir Stephen Tumin. (For an early account of the Trust’s work, and some examples of prison writing, see Brandreth 1972.)

14 Other prisoners before Leech have produced handbooks rather than autobiographies, albeit in a more humorous, and somewhat trivial vein compared to The Prisoner’s Handbook. Marshall (1974) produced a prison survival guide, having been the first ex-prisoner to be elected (in 1973) to the council of the Howard League for Penal Reform. Hardwick (1986) published a survival guide for the wives and families of prisoners whilst still in prison. It is unclear if the authors of The Good Jail Guide (Oversby and Hill 1970) were ex-prisoners; one presumes from their detailed knowledge, and their irreverence, that they were.

15 As the accounts in Devlin and Turney (2000) show, there is a significant sub-genre of prisoner autobiography which places a strong emphasis on religious (that is, Christian) conversion, and which, theologically, tends towards the evangelical. A number of full-length books also attest to this occurrence, for example Jackson (1981) petty offender turned ordained minister; Greenaway (1982, 1985), a former Hell’s Angel, often imprisoned, who subsequently returned to prison as a spiritual counsellor, and Lambrianou (1995), a former Kray associate who, after conversion to Christianity and eventual release worked for the Ley Community, rehabilitating drug abusers. Anthologies by lay prison workers (McKay and Purvis 1993) and (Davies 1994) add to the testimonies. The fact that desistance is frequently and persistently articulated in religious terms has received little criminological – and no probation – attention, perhaps because of the secular preconceptions of both fields. Conversions into non-Christian religious traditions are even less attended to or understood, but became briefly topical because of claims that Muslim Imams may have been teaching extreme versions of Islam in British prisons, which possibly encouraged and inspired terrorism (The Guardian, 28 December 2001).

16 As a piece of style-jargon ‘geezer chic’ – which seems to have supplanted ‘gangster chic’ to encompass the lads-about-town who are on the fringes of crime rather than at the heart of it – is associated with the cynical – but popular – crime caper movie ‘Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels’ (d. Guy Ritchie 1998). A character allegedly based on Dave Courtney was portrayed in it. Several other London-based crime films and a television series emulated it. They celebrate aggressive, hedonistic working class masculinity – although not all the exponents of ‘geezer chic’ are working classes. The term itself functions as a ‘technique of neutralisation’, to minimise harm done and to sanitise dog-eat-dog materialism, greed and violence by suffusing it with humour.

17 The restriction to prose requires justification, because the offender voice can be expressed in poetry and dramatic writing, which are both excluded from consideration here. Oscar Wilde’s (1898/1977) ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’ had conscience-stirring ambitions no less serious than any of the better prisoner autobiographies referred to in this article and selected lines or verses from it provided titles or texts for prisoner autobiographies and works of penology throughout the 20th century, from Joan Henry’s (1952) Who Lie in Gaol to Vivian Stern’s (1987) Bricks of Shame. There are also modern poets who deal with criminality and criminal justice, notably Simon Armitage (a former probation officer) and Benjamin Zephaniah (a former offender). The journal Prison Writing regularly contained poetry. The Koestler Prize has a poetry category. Tony Parker was influenced by W. H. Auden’s poetic sensibility – all his books were to an extent a tribute to Auden’s, marginalised, overlooked ‘unknown citizen’, although only one was
called such (Parker 1963). There is probably much to be learned from poetry by and about offenders, but unlike autobiography, poetic expression has not been encompassed by the ‘literary turn’ in ethnography.

There are plays and screenplays written by offenders (for theatre and radio and or television, for example, Leech 1993), and offenders who have become writer-actors, for example, Jenny Hick and Josie O’Dwyer (Carlen 1985), and Williams (1994). Mention is made in the text of Jimmy O’Connor (1976). John McVicar co-wrote the screenplay for the movie about him. Jimmy Boyle co-wrote an autobiographical play before writing A Sense of Freedom (Boyle and McGrath 1977). Prisoner-turned playwright Simon Bennett had his initial interest in literature kindled by reading A Sense of Freedom whilst inside (Lane 1999). Moving Theatre, a company founded to create work which would reflect the contradictions and problems of the time we live in’ staged two short works back to back, an adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s (1905/1973) De Profundis, and Jim Robinson’s (1999) own depiction of key moments in his 18-year sentence as one of the wrongly convicted Bridgewater Four. That acting as well as writing – has therapeutic and rehabilitative potential is apparent from the success of Clean Break (formed in 1979), and the work of the Geese Theatre Company. Any comprehensive study of cultural representations of crime and punishment would explore these forms, as well as prison writing. The touchstone criminal justice play in terms of influence on policy remains John Galsworthy’s ‘Justice’ (Nellig 1993a), whose authenticity resulted in part from testimony gathered by Galsworthy from serving prisoners.

18 The Writers-in-Residence in Prison Scheme seeks to place established writers in prisons to encourage creative writing among prisoners. It was initiated informally by the Arts Council of England (ACE) in the 1980s, formalised in conjunction with the Home Office in 1992, and funded on a partnerships basis between ACE, the Home Office, Regional Arts Boards and individual prisons. In 1997/98 it became an independently run organisation, renamed the Writers-in-Prison Network (personal communication from Clive Hopwood, 20 January 2002). (See Hopwood 2002 for details of the scheme, and Webb (1994) for an early evaluation of it by a probation trainee.)

19 Thief and drug abuser Peter Wayne wrote a highly literate column, called ‘The Prisoner’ about his life inside for the monthly current affairs and arts journal Prospect between 1998 and 2001 and was encouraged to continue work as a journalist upon release. Unfortunately he returned to drug use almost immediately, went on the run and was rather lax in sending in the copy that Prospect expected of him. Once back inside, he resumed the column for a brief period. Erwin James, a lifer, writes an occasional column called ‘A Life Inside’ for The Guardian, (see typically, 29 November 2001) about his experiences on the wings of various prisons. The paper always emphasises that his fee is paid to charity.

20 Ernest Marke (1902–1995), born in Freetown, West Africa was a truly remarkable man, whose modestly written, but undoubtedly adventurous autobiography scarcely does him justice. A beautiful obituary, aptly entitled ‘Witness to the Wild Side’ (The Guardian, 16 September 1995) serves him better. His life in Britain, from the 1930s on, was lived on the edge of the criminal underworld, mostly running gambling clubs, but he was also a significant political activist on behalf of – to use his term – ‘coloured people’, his racial consciousness, and his hatred of inequality having been formed by experience of the 1919 racial attacks in Liverpool. His obituarist notes that although ‘he accepted the justice of his past prison sentences for weapons offences, [he] refused to be criminalised for [gambling,] something he considered a normal human pursuit’.

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Among audiences of Black Britons he remained in demand as a respected speaker until his death.

21 There are certain celebrity offenders, imprisoned for heinous crimes, for whom it would be considered bad taste to publish an autobiography, or indeed any book, and about whom there would be public outrage if they received remuneration for it. ‘Moor’s murderer’ Ian Brady’s (2001) study of serial killers was published in Los Angeles and initially banned in Britain, although it is now available here. Nilsen, a multiple killer, had his autobiography successfully smuggled out of a maximum-security prison, but the High Court ruled that prison authorities did have a right to view it (*The Guardian*, 20 March 2002): it has yet to be published. Even when serious journalists like Masters take up serial killer stories, the enterprise can seem morally dubious, still catering to the more morbid end of the true crime market. English GP Theodore Dalrymple (1995) has produced a Swiftian satire on the self-justifying demeanour of some multiple killers. More chillingly, American crime writer James Ellroy (1986, p. 7) has convincingly imagined a serial killer, newly captured, literate, contemplating an autobiography, wondering whether ‘to seize this narrative opportunity and bend it towards the manipulation of the mental health profession and the liberal legal establishment – people susceptible to cheap visions of redemption’.

22 Offenders are not the only ‘prison people’ to have written autobiographies (or memoirs), but whereas their genre has outlasted the 20th century, and is still vibrant, there have been no memoirs by prison governors (a species of public service autobiography), which were once quite common, for a quarter century: Miller (1976) is the most recent. Such autobiographies belong to an era, before criminology was widespread in British universities, when (mostly male) governors, chief constables, star detectives, magistrates, judges and lawyers were the main public commentators on crime, in newspaper feature articles, letters columns and books. Some chief constables, some senior judges and some senior lawyers remain important, but most have lost authority in a welter of expert voices; star detectives have mostly been subsumed within true crime writing. Of all these groups, serving or retired prison governors nowadays write the least, unless it is to produce books or articles on criminology or prison management for specialised audiences, rather than the public in general. There are only two memoirs by (male) British prison officers (Merrow-Smith 1962; Cronin 1967), and, leaving aside the original writings of the police court missionaries, only three by probation officers (Stokes 1950; Todd 1964; Mott 1992). Trotter’s (1969) account of her time as senior prison welfare officer at HMP Wormwood Scrubs in the early 1960s is a mix of memoir and professional handbook, cast explicitly as a counter to books written by ex-offenders, and, interestingly, by male prison staff.

23 Over and above comments in the assignments themselves, these reasonably typical comments on the module evaluation form (from the most recent trainees) further suggest that reading the autobiographies was valuable. ‘I enjoyed being introduced to prisoner/offender biographies, especially the work of Jimmy Boyle and Tony Parker’; ‘Looking at desistance and offender biographies was very useful and interesting’. These comments were made in the context of a general recognition that the module had conveyed an adequate understanding of criminological theory, and been oriented towards the realities of probation practice. Penal issues that are first raised in this module, and elsewhere on the foundation programme, are taken forward later, in a specific module on ‘Penal Policy’, part of which concentrates on prison therapeutic communities (Nellis 2001b).

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