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Rehabilitation

Creative Arts and the Cultural Politics of Penal Reform: the early years of the Barlinnie Special Unit, 1973-1981

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Introduction

The Special Unit which was operational in Glasgow's Barlinnie prison between 1973 and 1996 was and remains a significant milestone in Scottish penal policy, which has been ambivalently remembered. To some it was a legendary institution, which, through the use of creative arts enabled the rehabilitation of some of Scotland's most violent prisoners, particularly Jimmy Boyle, but which, after his departure in 1980, became a mere shadow of its former self, and a lost opportunity to reform the wider penal system. To others its early years represented a moment when penal authority was inadvertently ceded to critical and manipulative prisoners – Boyle especially - and their unduly liberal champions in the social work and arts communities, which was fortunately retrieved, never allowed to happen again and considered best forgotten. In between, some late-in-the-day comment and research quietly accepted that the Unit had brought about a useful reduction in the erstwhile violent behaviour of its inmates, but mostly without capturing what was truly "special" about it (Whatmore 1987, 1990; Stephen 1988; Cooke 1997). Thus to many, perhaps most, contemporary practitioners in the Scottish penal system the Special Unit has faded from memory, and may never even have been known to them. This paper is simultaneously an exposition and celebration of the Special Unit's extraordinary early achievements, a conscious act of remembrance and a demand that it be given a due, informed and prominent place in the Scottish penal heritage.

If the Special Unit's story is known at all, it is more through the testimony of prisoners who experienced it (Boyle 1977; 1985; Collins 1997; 2000) than through any official (or professional) account. Important and influential as the prisoner testimonies have been, they do not entirely explain how the creative arts came to underpin and sustain the Unit in its controversial early period and their take on the penal and political context in which this occurred, while never less than astute, is necessarily subjective. A more rounded, but still essentially corroborative, view is better achieved by the book which a Glasgow art gallery director and an art therapist (Carrell and Laing 1982) edited to celebrate the first eight years of the Unit's "evolution though its art". It contained thoughtful comment from a wide range of people involved, including prisoners – although the Scottish Office shortsightedly forbade contributions from some serving prison staff – as well as vividly depicting some of the art work produced there. The book is as unique as the Unit itself, a landmark in Scottish 'penological' writing which ought to have been – and, alongside the offender accounts, ought still to be - required reading for all subsequent generations of prison staff and criminal justice social workers.

This paper draws extensively on that book, focusing on the same formative period in the Unit's history, and seeks to show (again) how creative arts briefly but spectacularly became integral to the concept of offender rehabilitation and, by dint of that, to the always "cultural" politics of penal reform in Scotland – a politics inseparable from the fixed and shifting senses of what a country thinks it is, what its people are like and what they aspire to be.

Creating The Barlinnnie Special Unit

In Scotland, in the aftermath of the abolition of capital punishment, "special units" developed to deal with particularly intractable prisoners, mostly long-sentence lifers perceived as having little or nothing to lose by violence towards staff – but in two very different ways (Coyle 1987). The Scottish Home and Health Department (1971) Working