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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

WILLIAM F. BYRON [ED.]

A PURITAN OUTPOST, A History of the Town and People of Northfield, Mass. By *Herbert C. Parsons*. 546 pp. The Macmillan Company, New York, 1937. \$5.00.

Herbert C. Parsons, for seventeen years Commissioner of Probation for Massachusetts, and nationally known as a leader in matters penological and questions criminological, has written a book on his native town which should interest also those who know not him nor Northfield.

Town histories are traditionally dull as almanacs. Where they may escape the statistical, they can never omit the geneological; they thump the reader with community pride, and epitomize the most local kind of chauvinism.

This excellent book, though commissioned as an official town history, avoids all these excesses. The author has poured into it his knowledge of social problems, his accurate researches into the past, and some of the nostalgia which every man feels for the place where he was born and grew up.

Northfield has traditionally been too homogeneous and self-contained for crime. Except for the still unsolved Speer case, the records of the town are clear. A quotation from the book may show why:

"A town made up as this survey has shown Northfield to be was unified in every interest. Its

people knew each other to the last item of personality. They understood each other. Their differences in civic affairs were settled on a common basis of thrift and caution. Everybody worked. There were none very rich and few abjectly poor. The moderate fortunes, the fruit of slow accumulation, shrewd bargaining and honest labor, were snugly held, very snugly. There was an active social life, running to public entertainments, dramatic and musical, in which every spark of native talent was made to glow if it did not blaze, and to balls and dances, generally in the town hall, only looked upon askance by the fraction of the people who held to the old disapproval of such devices of the devil."

This was Northfield in 1870. The book tells the whole story of the small town through 270 years. Its rise and development parallel many another town, now flourishing, industriously, beside the railroad. Northfield's pre-eminence has never stemmed from its economic importance. King Philip made it his headquarters, but since then the industrial revolution and the railroad have passed it by.

It flourishes still because of its cultural and educational contributions to the life of its region and of the nation. It has escaped decadence by reason of the influx of new populations, and by reason of

the Northfield schools. It has given leaders of importance in many fields. One of them, with rare interest and readable style, has written this excellent book.

BENEDICT S. ALPER.

Massachusetts Child Council,
Boston.

PRISON LIFE IS DIFFERENT. By
Warden James A. Johnston, 337
pp. Houghton, Mifflin Company,
Boston, \$3.00.

This book is a quite realistic portrayal of progress in prison administrative improvement during the two decades of 1912 to 1932. Like most prison Administrators, Warden Johnston is most conscious of the changes in his own institution, and seems scarcely aware that the same processes were going on in most other prisons at the same time. As a matter of fact, this particular period perhaps witnessed greater changes everywhere than any other twenty years since John Howard.

Judging from the author's descriptions of what he found in Folsom prison in 1912, there was certainly crying need for change, unless Society intended men to be buried alive and destroyed for future usefulness. It is rather surprising that in a western pioneer State the same dark cells and drastic punishments should be perpetuated as had already been found futile in older eastern States and in Europe.

Justification for the title, "Prison Life is Different" is found not so much in the character of the population as in the restricted area and the abnormal contacts in which human beings there find themselves. Their morbid reactions are

shown to be not essentially different from what most other humans would exhibit under similar conditions.

Warden Johnston's ability to handle the problems he faced, better than his predecessors, was evidently due to two factors—his apparent personal fearlessness, and his superior understanding of human nature. His previous experience as Chairman of the State Parole Board had given him a wider knowledge of offenders, both before and after incarceration.

The experienced reader may find somewhat tiresome the Author's effort to describe in detail what he seems to think is unusual and sensational in prison types and characteristics. However, the familiar picture of what happens in the daily routine of a prison will be of informing interest to the general reader. There is at least evidence that this Warden took more pains than most to understand his charges by personal interviews and study, and to relate their experiences to the problems of life.

We are gratified to learn that many improvements were made in Folsom and San Quentin prisons during these twenty years in further schooling for illiterate and other inmates; in more active industry and some trade training, and in providing wholesome outside road camp work for many prisoners. The disconcerting thing is to realize that all this and more was not done in the Nineteenth Century, instead of the Twentieth.

Nevertheless it is clear that Warden Johnston was in advance of his time and his public, as shown by the opposition he encountered from hard boiled deputies and prison Boards of the old school,

and by the press and public sentiment. For example, in the matter of prison industry, he believed that a cardinal agency of reform for prisoners was work: "Just plain, honest-to-goodness work. The habit of work is what men most need."

Unfortunately that all-important panacea was not always adequately provided in California even before prison labor was restricted by law, and is now denied to half the prison population of the Country. However, this book was evidently conceived before that sad situation arose in the prisons.

It was written to describe inmates as they are, rather than as we might wish them to be. While it displays a fairly good knowledge of the psychology of human behavior, it does not undertake to go into the social causes of delinquency and crime or touch the implications of public responsibility.

The Author does, of course, advocate increased measures for the prevention of crime, as he says "Prisons are monuments of neglected youth." For this reason, too, he favors greater attention to individual prisoners, rather than mass treatment. At present in charge of the United States prison for serious offenders at Alcatraz, the Author commends the increasing use of Probation in the Federal Courts, and the higher standards found in the administration of the Parole Law by the Government.

"Prison Life is Different" is not profound, and does not pretend to be the result of any comparative research study. As a recital of first-hand observation and experi-

ence in an enticing field, the book is well worth reading.

F. EMORY LYON.

Central Howard Association,
Chicago.

CHOKEY. Red Collar Man. Gollancz. 1937. Pp. 208. 6s.

"Chokey" in prison parlance means the punishment cells and the general character of this account of Parkhurst can be gauged by the title. The author was one of the trustees who worked in that part of the prison and it is with this side of prison life that he is concerned. He saw it, that is to say, at its most brutal. One gets a picture from this book that, horrible as it is, at least it has a certain dramatic quality. There is very little about the deadly monotony that goes to make up the greater part of prison existence, and it is the hysterical and often violent reaction from that slow suffocation of the spirit that leads to "Chokey." "Breaking up" is simply the cracking of nerves that can stand the utter lifelessness of life no longer. And it is not only the nerves of the prisoners that are over-taut. Valuable as "Chokey" may be as a means of waking public conscience it fails to make it clear that both the need of punishment cells and isolated acts of brutality are the inevitable outcome of a system that tries to reform by crushing every element of individuality and turning life into a never ending routine of nothingness.

Mr. Compton Mackenzie has contributed an introduction. He is pleased to disapprove of the Howard League though I do not see how the letter he quotes can be

given the very ungenerous interpretation that he places on it.

From *The Penal Reformer*,
January, 1938.

THE CRIMINALS WE DESERVE. By
Henry T. F. Rhodes. Methuen.
1937. Pp. 257. 7s. 6d.

Mr. Rhodes was formerly an assistant in the Laboratory of Technical Police and is now at the Institute of Criminology of Lyons. He writes, that is to say, with first-hand knowledge of the methods of criminals and the methods of the police. In his first paragraph he says "we mass-produce criminals." In his last paragraph he says "punishments in which force is ousted by reason will come to be accepted as the only ones practicable or useful." Our present system "creates many more criminals than it cures, by confirming in them that anti-sociality which is an amplified function of its own defects and failure." Between these two profoundly true remarks is to be found a mass of information with regard to modern crime and modern criminals, some of it general in form, some dealing with well known cases, all written from a somewhat unusual angle.

From *The Penal Reformer*
(London), January, 1938.

PUNISHMENT: ITS ORIGIN, PURPOSE
AND PSYCHOLOGY. By *Hans von Hentig*. Hodge. 1937. Pp. 239.
12s. 6d.

The publication of this book in English makes us realize how much we lose by having no chair of criminology in the country, assuming that is to say it were held by someone like Professor von Hentig. It is full of learning, but never of the learning that is aloof from life. Professor von Hentig has the gift of making old ideas take on a fresh life and no one could read this book without realizing vividly how unreasoning is most of the common view of punishment and how rooted in superstition. When once the magical and religious foundations on which punishments rest have been grasped they give, he says, not only "an explanation of the form and contents of many means of punishment, but they help us to understand the tremendous tenacity with which capital, corporal, and many derogatory punishments defend themselves in our emotional life against any rationalization." Professor von Hentig forces that rationalization on his readers and if his book were read and inwardly digested by those who make and those who administer and those who uphold our laws, we might yet see them cleared of brutality and degradation.

From *The Penal Reformer*
(London), January, 1938.