

Gordon Graham

Gordon Graham is Director of the Edinburgh Festival of the Sacred Arts and Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and the Arts at Princeton Theological Seminary. He has published extensively on a wide range of topics, and his most recent book is *The Hope of the Poor: Philosophy, Religion and Economic Development* (Imprint Academic, 2023).

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Kirstin Anderson, ed., *The Barlinnie Special Unit: Art, Punishment and Innovation* (Sherfield-on-Loddon: Waterside Press, 2024), pp. xxii + 294, ISBN 978-1914603464. £25.00

The GalGael Trust's boatbuilding and training workshop is in the hard-pressed Greater Govan area of Glasgow, close to Ibrox football stadium. We hold a simple community meal every Thursday evening, open to all. The fare varies. Thick lentil broth. Bean salads. Venison stew, humanely culled along the local motorway. We process it on-site, making a nourishing connection between city folks and the rural world.

The meal usually ends with everyone reciting the GalGael Grace. Secular, for common comfort: but a grace for a' that. The first verse will give a flavour:

We're cast into a crazy world
Wi' many a sore disgrace
Where greed o'er turns compassion
And respect is laid to waste

I was prompted to review this book on the erstwhile Special Unit in Glasgow's Barlinnie Prison by a fellow Quaker, the criminologist Professor Mike Nellis. How fitting, therefore, to have found myself huddled around a blazing brazier, on a chilly Thursday night in January, with some thirty of the GalGael; and I said: 'How would you like to hear some passages from Jimmy Boyle and Johnny Steele?'

Once two of Scotland's most notorious criminals, these are men born 'cast into a crazy world' from childhoods soaked in Glasgow's ruthless



gangland culture of the mid-twentieth century. They needed no introduction. Neither did the issues addressed in this book by Kirstin Anderson and her editorial team: Bill Beech, Claire Coia, the said Mike Nellis, Sara Trevelyan and Rupert Wolfe Murray.

Folks come to us at GalGael by referral from their GPs, probation officers and social services, or just wandering in. Most have wrestled with such compound issues as mental health, homelessness, addictions, sexual abuse (and spiritual abuse!), layers of trauma, spirals of violence, and poverty's so-many faces. We try to hold a space 'hospitable to the soul' where all are accepted and there's no need to hide anymore. Six of those around the fire that night mentioned that they'd served time. Sentences had ranged from a fortnight for robbery to an eight-year term that included a spell in the Scottish Prison Service's (SPS's) once infamous Cages. More later. But what a place to air and test a book review!

The editors here have curated a powerful, forward-looking historical appraisal of the groundbreaking Barlinnie Special Unit (BSU). They draw on multiple voices through essays, interviews and images. Their contributors include weighty academics, acclaimed artists, former prison staff up to the level of governors and, grippingly, onetime prisoners. This book stands as a testimony to what a redemptive approach to criminal justice can look like: how it came into being, the doubts and criticisms, the challenges and achievements, the raw humanity, the political insouciance that led to its closure in 1993, and its living legacy.

The BSU was an experiment that ran in a former women's wing of Glasgow's Barlinnie prison for nearly twenty years. Politically, the UK had suspended the death penalty in 1965 and terminated it four years later. It was a most unsettling time for the UK's creaking Victorian prison system, and in 1966, to try and clamp a lid on the pressure cooker, a special segregation unit was set up at Inverness prison nicknamed The Cages. Run with an 'iron fist' with iron bars from floor to ceiling, this 'Siberia' was a 'prison within a prison'. It deployed extreme austerity, isolation and degradation to try and break the spirits of men whose attacks on prison officers, excrement-smearing 'dirty protests', and incitements to riot meant they had nothing left to lose. Nothing, that is, except some inner spark of dignity for which, ironically, yet more violence on violence could be the last desperate gasp.

As Jimmy Boyle puts it in his chapter: 'I was [...] animalised. No other word for it' (p. 120).



Beset with such brute and brutalising realities, the Scottish Office set up a working party in 1970 chaired by an impressive civil servant, Alex Stephen. It took advice from psychiatrists. It studied fledgling units in some English prisons such as HMP Grendon, the current government web page for which describes its organisation ‘around a programme of group therapy called a “democratic therapeutic community”’.¹ In 1973 the findings led to opening the BSU. Surprisingly, political support in the early years was nudged along by a Tory prisons minister, Alick Buchanan-Smith. That warmly acknowledged, it ought to be noted that his successors, both Tory and Labour, were disappointingly less visionary.

For all the books, films and press articles down the years, the unit only ever held five to eight prisoners. But this was salt to the earth. The BSU was ‘a pattern and example’ – a theory of change and a case study of what that change could look like. It took a problem that had become very ‘stuck’, it pitched it to portray a wider framing, and found fresh openings of the way towards a deepening humanity.

As so often with trailblazing small units in any field, I was struck by the keystone roles of impressive individuals. Ken Murray was a prison nurse, appointed as the BSU’s Chief Officer until he was transferred in 1979. Doubling as the deputy chair of the Scottish Prison Officers’ Association, he was well-placed to fend off opposition. Boyle describes his ‘craggy warm face, his eyes always registering interest’ (p. 124). The former MP and journalist Brian Wilson reviewed this book for the *Stornoway Gazette*.² Murray hailed from Brevig, ironically the village right next door to Tong from which Donald Trump’s mother had emigrated in 1930. Wilson sums up Murray: ‘I have no doubt his gentle humanity and basic values were connected to these roots’, communitarian as they are. Again, the rural and the urban, in mutual fecundation.

The unit’s governors came and went for better or for worse. Mike Nellis draws an incredibly frank and humanising interview from Dan Gunn, in post from 1988 to 1991. ‘My successor,’ he says, ‘was certainly not a “volunteer” governor; his job was to wind it down’ (p. 145). Controversially, the prison visitor, medical doctor and psychotherapist Sara Trevelyan married Boyle in 1980 while he was still under detention.

¹ See <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/grendon-prison>.

² Brian Wilson, “Unusual son of Lewis who championed penal reform”, *Stornoway Gazette*, 26 October 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/4a9mye2v>.



It would have been hard, she writes, to interpret the unit's closure 'as anything other than an intent to curb the international acclaim and successes [... It] had become too much of a challenge for the more orthodox tradition bound bureaucracy to handle' (p. 145). Rehabilitation, like Christ's call to forgive not seven times, but seven times seventy, has never had an easy ride from those whose penchant is harsh punishment.

Apart from estimable people, what else accounted for the BSU's success? Three themes stood out for me: humanisation and communication, expressive arts and community meetings.

Prisoners were treated with respect as full human beings. As Johnny Steele writes, 'No violence could ever take place here as it meant instant removal for anyone, and that went for both prisoners and staff' (p. 114). That wasn't totally true. Boyle recounts a threatening incident towards a prison offer by a resident addled on prescription drugs. It was dealt with collectively, in a way that humanised. Bill Beech, who wrote the screenplay for *Silent Scream*, remarks that Ken Murray's 'great skill' was 'making a direct connection with people and bringing clarity and understanding to complex arguments' (p. 132). Trevelyan testifies to this, noting that many prisoners carry buried layers of trauma from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Her editorial colleagues, Kirstin Anderson and Claire Coia of Glasgow Museums, similarly stress 'the important role of talking, and prisoners having the ability to express their thoughts, feelings and concerns to each other and to prison staff.' It is difficult to underestimate how much this was, then, 'new territory' (p. 276).

Central to such lubrication between the inner psyche and the outer world, were the expressive arts. These were introduced early in the unit's history by the pioneering art therapist, Joyce Laing. David Cook, head of the Forensic Clinical Psychology Service in Glasgow, describes entering the unit only to be confronted by 'a long-haired, lean and muscular prisoner', stripped to the waist, who sweated, grunted and swore as he struck with a hammer and chisel at an eight-foot-high block of sandstone (p. 171). Slowly, from out of this, emerged the figure of Christ.³

³ Sara Trevelyan tells me: 'Sadly Hugh Collin's sculpture of the Christ was mysteriously lost at some point ... an enigma in the whole story! But perhaps symbolic' (pers. com., email, 9-II-2024).



In frequent mentions, Laing comes over as a quietly ministering angel behind the scenes. The media limelight fell more upon the arts impresario Richard Demarco who involved the German artist, Joseph Beuys, and his belief in ‘Social Sculpture’. Demarco quotes him (p. 89):

I believe that the role of the artist is to reshape society [and] you must understand that every 24 hours if you take the Lord’s prayer seriously, particularly “give us this day our daily bread”. Not the week, not the month, the day, because everything will go wrong in 24 hours.

Art was not for everyone’s redemptive path. The deepest wellspring of the unit’s quantifiable success in cutting violence, was *community*. This brought men of near abandoned hope and prison officers into mutually humanising relationships. David Croft, Principal Officer in the early 1980s, recalls that, ‘It was just like being in a community centre. [...] It was a community, a very close community, one in which everyone who lived, and most of them who worked within it, were anxious for it to succeed’ (pp. 97–98). Frequent community meetings allowed people to call one another to account. Part of the unit’s legacy was staff returning to the mainstream prison service, ‘and demonstrating their newly developed skills back in the system’ (p. 106). Ken Murray’s legacy, Croft concludes, could be summed up in one word: ‘Trust.’

Other legacies have included the Gateway Exchange, an Edinburgh rehabilitation project set up by Trevelyan and Boyle on his release. Ahead of its time, it connected poverty-related ACEs to violence and criminality. The royalties from this book go to the continuing Gateway Exchange Fund which supports ‘creating innovative solutions to situations which challenge the individual’s sense of worth and identity.’⁴ That brings me back around the brazier with the GalGael.

‘You don’t think of crime as anything wrong. You’re just born into it. It’s the way the world is. It’s survival’, said one of our people, amidst nodding heads. Another said he’d done two stints inside, one recently and one thirty years earlier. The decline in literacy distressed him. Prisoners used to read books and emerge better educated. Now, the system has

⁴ The Gateway Exchange Fund, *Foundation Scotland*, <https://tinyurl.com/4y8uww7u>.



improved (several people said the police are less corrupt because they're being watched!), but wider society offers less support. It's not so difficult, somebody remarked, to become an artist or a musician when you're inside, but without community support your resilience collapses once you're released: 'We should be providing mental health support, not building prisons!' And privatisation worries them. It will harm the rehabilitative ethos of the best prison officers. I mused that in all our near-thirty years of the GalGael Trust, I've heard criticisms of the SPS but never hatred, and even some pronounced appreciation.

I put these points to Andrew Thin, an Independent Prison Monitor, formerly chair of the Scottish Land Commission. It's true, he said:⁵

Lots of good people trying hard but totally inadequate resources. That is not going to change unless we explain to voters that rehab is about making them safer. No votes in being nice to prisoners when resources are so stretched elsewhere. Sadly, we still for the most part blame people for their social disadvantage rather than feeling apologetic about it and wanting to compensate.

If ACE awareness teaches anything, it is that violence is not just a personal failing. It is, as James Gilligan the former director of mental health in the Massachusetts' prison service puts it, 'a national epidemic', a public health issue.⁶

Aye ... and 'I was in prison and you visited me', said Christ the Everyman in Matthew's gospel (25:36–40). 'Inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me.'

Alastair McIntosh

Alastair McIntosh is a writer, honorary senior research fellow at Glasgow University and a founding trustee of the GalGael Trust.

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⁵ Andrew Thin, pers. com., 17 January 2025.

⁶ James Gilligan, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (Vintage, 1997).

