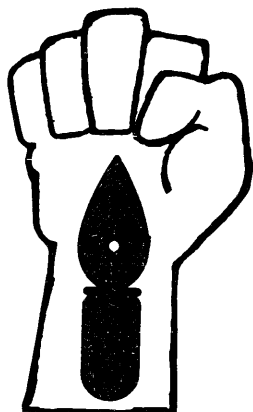


LETTERS



LETTER SMUGGLED FROM FREMANTLE PRISON. FIRST APPEARED IN PERTH FREE PRESS, VOL. 1 NO. 13 DECEMBER 1975.

BEHIND BARS

The American poet, Gregory Corso, described prison as "a breathing coffin". It is, in Australia as well as America, in Fremantle as well as Attica or Bathurst. As much as anyone can strip a person of individuality, you are so stripped upon entering Fremantle Prison.

In Fremantle Prison you will become more furtive, more paranoid, more repressed, more resentful. You will spend sixteen hours of each day alone in a 9' x 7' cell. You will find that you have no real or meaningful responsibility. That there are no realistic training facilities for a majority of the inmates. You will find yourself thrown together in tight confinement with men whose tastes, personality, and intelligence are in many cases as disparate as that of porpoise and galah. You will find that there are few active sports via which one might release pent-up sexual energy. You will find yourself committed, and ever increasingly committed, to florid fantasies as part of a psychic flight from the suffocating tomb of stone.

If you remain part of this abnormal environment for, let us say three years or more, you will find yourself less and less equipped to survive in the larger environment of the free community. More and more you will reflect the traits developed by the alien environment of prison.

One day "They" will open the gate for you.....and on that day, if you had any sense, you would run to the nearest "cerebral lobotomist" and say "I think I've become a Martian, make me a human again..." But you can't do that, a personality change by surgery being such an experimental thing..(no doubt the Authorities are hoping for improvement in that particular field). So there you are, on the threshold of a once familiar, now strange and perplexing world. There you are, underneath your momentary relief, furtive, paranoid, given to fantasy, and resentful.

Why should this be so? Well it is so, and you only need refer yourself to the high "recidivist rate" to understand that our prison system, (including far better prisons, than Fremantle) is NO deterrent. Worse still, you, the free citizens, are the most innocent victims of prisons like Fremantle - they breed future crimes (I'm getting sick of that phrase) and you ARE the victims.

Why should this be so...

The "breathing coffin" is at least part of the answer...you wake in the morning and you don't want to get out of bed because the day holds little more than self-negation, wasteful labour, frustration and resentment. You don't want to stay in bed because you are sick of being alone in your little cell. You get up...take your "fire-bucket" full of piss and shit out to the yard and tip it down an open cistern. You wait for your cell tier to be called... and in you go...eat your bowl of 'Wheaties'...dip your eating gear in bucket of cold water... wipe it clean with tea-towel, (if laundry has arrived that week - it often doesn't).

On the days go...watch men become homosexual...others turn to drugs...some develop psychosomatic illnesses...a few slash themselves...some fight...a lot play a lot of poker...all fantasise, all masturbate, masturbate as if penis, and ego with it, are in danger of imminent, perplexing disappearance.

Also perplexing are the 'rules'. At times there are as many interpretations of a single rule as there are penal warders committed to the idea that they are not here to enforce the 'power of the land', but to be the power (that should be capital "P"). This leads to a little confusion, one screw says "Do", another says "Don't!" Trouble is

you're the meat in the sandwich, and if you don't get cunning quick you're going to be a scape-goat-meat-sandwich!

You go to your cell of a night and bury yourself in book after book...when that pales you brood...when that twists your brain into a lovely purple knot you fantasise...when the lights go out you listen to the mice (place is infested with them) squealing and fighting in your rubbish bucket. Why, you ask yourself, have we not got realistic training facilities? Why do we not have a more normal social environment...if, here in this place we are expected to prepare ourselves for a normal life in a normal environment? Why do we have to spend so much time locked in a cell alone... (penitence?... history it seems has a one-track-blind-mind...this isolation turns to anger in the strong, and aimless misery in the weak). Why should there be so few ways in which we can be individuals (like having to sneak this letter-cum-ramble out)...if we had identity problems before they're worse now, unless we enjoy being faceless, featureless, non-entities without rights. Why are there so pitifully few outlets for creativity or constructive effort? No responsibility, and so no training in coping with responsibility, except for the "Don'ts". Why must we, in terms of architecture and hygiene, be part of the last century?

Because, despite the "Visiting Psychologists" and the so-called "Classification System" and the other ineffective particles of the patina of modernity, Fremantle Prison still reflects the values of yesteryear, they were not effective then, they are less so now. The focus of Fremantle tells its inmates in no uncertain terms that they are 'useless', irresponsible, and despicable! In terms of moral judgement this may have its logic. But as a means of initiating the confidence, the state of mind, and the facilities with which one can learn to be useful, responsible, and respected, it is a catastrophic failure...tell a man he has no legs, and then ask him to run.

Well, you can only shrug your shoulders and mumble, that's Free Prison...buried alive in a "breathing coffin". You know if a man goes out of here and stays out, he does so not because of Fremantle Prison, but in spite of it.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The following letter was received with a covering letter from the Director of the Department of Correctional Services, South Australia, which we also reproduced.

"Dear Ed.,

It's been brought to my attention that you've recently published a new pamphlet, "Alternative Criminology Journal". In it, I'm also told, you have quoted four poems by prisoners at this institution. (No, I'm not worried about that!) As the secretary of our now-defunct poetry group, I would very much appreciate it if you could forward me a copy (and any subsequent one, if finance permits) to furnish our "library" of prisoners' writings. Thankyou.

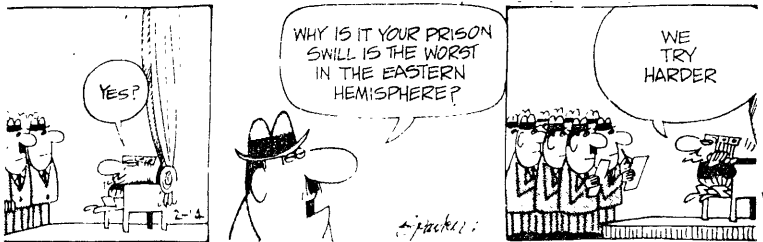
On a more general line, I'm indeed pleased that someone has taken the trouble to lift their academic posteriors off the campus for long enough to realise that all is NOT sweet and democratic "inside". I could rave on about that, I suppose, but I'll desist because I think there are far better ways of initiating enlightenment than by voicing bitterness. May I, though, feed you with a few suggestions? In South Australia we are fortunate enough to have a Government Reform Committee which is chaired by Justice Roma Mitchell. She also chairs the Parole Board and is, within the limits of Society's naive evaluations, fairly "progressive". In fact, she has already commended some of the guys here on their work. Perhaps a copy of the mag. would not go amiss if aimed in her general direction? We also have an A.L.P. government which, although it has plenty of faults, distinguishes itself by fulfilling its proposed reforms. I'll leave that in your court! Within the Prisons Dept. (euphemistically and optimistically renamed the Dept. of Correctional Services) we have a vast number of disillusioned workers - you probably realise this to be nation-wide. Perhaps, therefore, if they could be nudged out of their traditional inertia by the knowledge that the prisoners in THEIR prison were working for changes, they might do something? The Dept., itself, is another proposition. Suffice to say that it emits an aura of Victorian respectability and paternalism.

I'm aware that you've been working on various other aspects of our legal system. In fact, I've just completed a two-volume history of the prisons in this State and, in the researching, I came across some of your work. The opus is, at present, at the Premier's Dept. in Adelaide. Perhaps we might be able to arrange something, some time?

Regarding your magazine, though. It would be fantastic if you could operate some sort of correspondence section. The danger, there, is that so many chipped shoulders might show as to break your literary back. However, my research indicates that the "system" (in S.A. at least) has remained unchallenged because of bureaucratic myths and - the killer - public apathy; that smug self-righteousness which says, effectively, that your tail feathers aren't soiled if you bury your head in the sand. I'll freely admit that, in many ways, I'm conservative, but I think we really need to awaken the public conscience, somehow. Again, researching my history, I found that both the John Howard Society and the Civil Rights groups in S.A. were totally unconcerned about things in general. Perhaps, I muse, we owe much of this to Sir Thomas Playford, or perhaps it stems from the public myth, detectable since 1836, that all this State's "crims" hail from the East? Unfortunately, prisoners are very certainly gagged and the resultant frustration leads to undesirable side-effects. I don't think we're likely to experience a riot like the one at Bathurst and the circumstances surrounding the only riot we've ever had (1952) make it extremely unlikely that it will be repeated, BUT I wonder if the public, generally, realises precisely what an anti-social force it generates by its indifference. To phrase that another way, you're unlikely to find many radical voices, here.

Be that as it may, I would certainly like to participate in your venture and, if I can assist by contributing on any particular theme, don't hesitate to ask. Further, since problems arise in handling of my correspondence (due to rationing), you might like to contact the editor of "My Mind is not the Pruner's Property". They would, undoubtedly, be extremely pleased to co-operate with you and with considerably more freedom than I.

Meanwhile, we're trying to establish an internal newsletter at Yatala. For a veritable myriad of reasons, we're dogged with internal problems. However, if we ever manage to establish it, I have a few practical ideas which I hope to be able to cover in a manner which



will prove acceptable to all parties. If so, I'll keep you posted.

However, one word of caution. Whereas I believe that you're producing a document of social significance, I feel that you can do more damage to your cause than good if it becomes TOO radical. There is a dire need to maintain perspective and balance. This is a subject fraught with all sorts of complex arguments for it's almost impossible to distinguish between cause, effect, stimulus, reaction and feedback. If I take the poem, "Paranoid Society", for instance, is this a true analysis of society, per se; is it a comment on how the individual becomes embittered; does it suggest a hue of paranoia on the part of the author; or is it a not-too-subtle piece of self-justification? Who's to say?

Anyway, space is at a premium (classic understatement!) so I'll close by asking that you keep in touch, as and when time permits. All the lads here would like to pass on their congratulations and support for what you're doing and our only regret is that we don't have anybody with the necessary mettle or fibre to champion our cause, locally. Likewise, we can't do much about assissting you, financially, but we'll spread the word to our friends and relations and hope that sufficient seed falls on fertile ground to help replenish your coffers.

Kindest regards,

Clive

Letter from:
Department of Correctional Services South Australia to
Mr. David Brown.

'Dear Sir,

I enclose herewith a letter to you from prisoner C. HUMPHREY, which was referred to me for appropriate action in accordance with our regulations.

As you will gather, this department has no objection to this sort of criticism being made by prisoners as all people are entitled to an opinion. However, before taking up too many cudgels against the South Australian system, I think you should be made aware (if you are not already so) that in 1971 the Government set up a highly professional committee to examine the South Australian penal system. This committee visited all prisons and discussed many matters with administrators, Visiting Justices, Visiting Chaplains, prisoners' committees and voluntary bodies, and from these examinations produced a First Report, which is now in the process of implementation. You would appreciate that it is axiomatic that not all people at any level agree with the recommendations of such committees and prisoner Humphrey is one who emphatically disagrees with a number of the recommendations. This disagreement shows in the manuscript he submitted for the State competition. The department advised the Government of his disagreement and told prisoner Humphrey what we had done.

I understand that you are involved in an action group and the publication of a journal, although I have no idea of the aims and objectives of your organisation. Therefore I can only point out that whatever you say or do, the First Report of the Mitchell Committee is the South Australian Government's and the department's blueprint, and must remain so unless changed.

I think another thing should be pointed out and that is that the content of prisoner Humphrey's letter does not specify one item that in a prison setting is undemocratic but implies blandly that everything wrong lies with the staff and that it is the prisoners who are working for change. I think you will appreciate that this is a very dangerous generalisation which would not stand up to close inspection, bearing in mind my previous statements regarding implementation of the Mitchell Report.

I trust that these remarks will be of some use to you in considering a balanced reaction to the letter of prisoner Humphrey and

in other correspondence that you may receive from prisoners or ex-prisoners in South Australia.

Yours faithfully,

Director.

