
Women Behind Bars

In 1959, when she was 20 years old, Sandra Willson shot a stranger dead. She was acquitted of murder on grounds of insanity, and confined to a psychiatric hospital at the Governor's Pleasure. In 1971 a panel of psychiatrists determined that she was sane, and she was transferred from hospital to jail.

The average time spent in jail by persons sentenced to life after conviction for murder in NSW is 13 years. Sandra has been confined for over 17 years – longer than any other woman in Australia – although she has applied for release in every year since she was judged sane.

Sandra Willson should be released immediately
In the opinion of psychiatry, Sandra was not criminally responsible for murder. Her sentence is already disproportionate for someone convicted of that crime. Psychiatry has judged that the mental state that accompanied her act has ceased.

Why then is she still in jail?

To free Sandra Willson it is necessary for us to understand the circumstances of her case, to rebut the arguments of her jailers, and to organise realistic support for her – and for others in her position – so that they can live in the community.

Like George Jackson, the Three Marias and countless other political prisoners, the fact is that Sandra Willson is still in jail less for what she has done than for who she is.

Those with a full appreciation of her case, and of the wilful refusal of her jailers to compassionately consider her release, know that Sandra is still in jail for two reasons: she has survived every means used to crush her will, and she is an unrepentant lesbian.

Both of these factors have been used against her in reports to the Parole Board, the body that has power to recommend her release, and Parole Board members themselves seem enthralled by the arguments contained in those reports.

Her early life

Since she was very young Sandra has suffered societal prejudice and punishment because of her sexual non-conformity. Her schoolgirl crushes on teachers and other students were ridiculed or rejected. At age 15 she was placed in a psychiatric hospital and given aversion therapy to try and 'cure' her. When she was 17 she moved into a flat with a girl who did accept her and began what she describes as a very happy relationship.

The police, urged to the flat by another girl's mother, arrested them and charged them with being in moral danger. Sandra was seen as the seducer, since hers was the 'butch' role, and the younger girl was promised leniency if she gave evidence.

The Children's Court heard the intimate details of their sexual relationship, and Sandra was sentenced to Parramatta Girls' Home.

For the two years after her release from the Girls' Home, Sandra had a number of short-term jobs, a couple of short relationships with women, and a lot of restlessness and unhappiness.

Her parents had separated when she was young and she did not see her father again. Her mother moved through rooming-houses and seemed uninterested in her daughter. In her attitudes to herself, Sandra veered from feelings of rejection and paranoia, to confident assertions of her brilliance and her ability to survive in the world.

She often wore 'drag', and was dismissed from an office job she held for coming to work in men's clothes. She maintained that she had been born a lesbian, that she was happy to be one, and that since female homosexuality has never been illegal in this country, she could see no reason why she should not advertise her love for women.

She had, in the late 1950s, no other model of homosexual relations than the stereotyped 'butch' and 'femme' roles which parodied a heterosexual couple. She was male-identified inasmuch as she adopted a protective and dominant attitude towards the women she loved, and she tried to emulate masculine toughness. She learned to handle a gun.

Why she committed murder

In 1959, when she was 20, Sandra commenced training to be a psychiatric nurse at Rydalmere Hospital in Sydney. There she fell in love with another trainee and they began a passionate affair. It was noticed disapprovingly by senior staff, and



pressure was put on the other girl to break up the relationship. She rejected Sandra, saying that she now considered their relationship to be unnatural and perverted.

Sandra has described her reaction:

“Upon those words, ‘I can never see you again’, I went into a state of shock – and after begging her to see me since I was close by, I went to the hospital and heard her tell me about the pressure being applied to her by the night staff. I felt like killing myself on the spot . . . By a long train of events I decided that killing myself alone was no good – people would be glad to see me gone – so if I killed one of

'them'/society, someone would cry and possibly be sorry that they had interfered in my life and my right to live.'

On April 29, 1959, Sandra Willson murdered a Sydney taxi-driver. Her victim was chosen at random: she had decided that she wanted to kill someone unknown to her and she, quite arbitrarily, determined to kill the first taxi-driver who picked her up that night. Two cabs would not stop for her. The third driven by a young man, picked her up. Sandra asked to be driven to Kurnell. When they arrived there Sandra, who was sitting in the back seat, shot him.

She has described the event:

"I chose my victim by accident but felt that, although he had to die in my grief-stricken mind, I could not hurt him by letting him see the gun and feel for those last seconds of his life, the terror of dying."

She had planned to drive the taxi back to town, to hold up a bank and, hopefully, to be killed herself in a shoot-out with the police. But she had never driven a car. The taxi stalled. She had to hitch-hike back to town.

The several people who saw her in the vicinity of the murder-place took her to be a boy because of her short hair and men's clothing. The police launched an Australia-wide search for a young man.

Sandra wandered round Sydney for six days, in some kind of daze, and uncertain about what to do. Then, she wrote, she decided: "Prison was the best punishment -- a time of living death when each day I would remember her and grieve over losing her. I gave myself up to the police".

At first the police did not believe her. She was asked sarcastically which murder she had committed, and was read a list of several dozen unsolved murders. Finally she convinced them.

Awaiting the Governor's Pleasure

After a short court hearing at which she neither asked for or was given bail, she was sent to the women's jail which was then part of the Long Bay complex of prisons. On July 3, 1959 the City Coroner found she had a case to answer and committed her for trial at the Central Criminal Court on August 24, 1959.

While awaiting trial Sandra attempted suicide. After examination by prison psychiatrists she was judged unfit to stand trial.

Under the provision of the NSW Mental Health Act she was transferred to a psychiatric hospital and proceedings against her were dropped. The provisions allow however, that if at any stage in the future she was judged fit to plead then proceedings

against her would be resumed.

More than a year later she was found fit to plead and on November 15, 1960 her trial began. She pleaded Not Guilty to the charge of murder.

The trial lasted only one day. The sole defence witness, government psychiatrist, Dr J. McGeorge, testified that Sandra was certifiably insane and was incapable of reasoning that her offence was wrong. After a five minute retirement the jury reached its verdict: Not Guilty on the grounds that she was insane at the time.

Under NSW law, a judge has only one sentencing option when a jury delivers this verdict, and he sentenced Sandra to be detained in strict custody to await the Governor's Pleasure. She was sent to Parramatta Psychiatric Hospital where she was placed in a locked ward for the criminally insane.

The implicit reasoning behind a Governor's Pleasure (GP from now on) sentence is that it recognises diminished responsibility for criminal liability because a person is temporarily or permanently insane and it acquits the person for these reasons. It further provides an indeterminate sentence, generally within a psychiatric institution, so that the person can have the opportunity to regain their sanity.

The presumption is that if at some future time the person is judged to be sane and to no longer constitute a danger to the community, they will be released.

In practice, however, the GP is often treated as if they had been convicted and, therefore, as if they were responsible for their actions. Instead of treatment, or in addition to it, they are punished. This is what has happened with Sandra Willson who, having been declared sane in 1971, instead of being released from the psychiatric hospital was sent to prison where she remains today.

A Catch-22 Situation

She is in a classic Catch-22 situation. If she is meek and subservient and takes her pills, they argue that she is institutionalised and incapable of surviving in the world outside. If she demonstrates her grasp on reality by demonstrating anger or resentment of the petty violence which is the currency of prison relationships, she is judged to be incapable of suppressing her violent urges.

It is ultimately though her jailers, rather than Sandra herself, who are responsible for her still being in prison. They

reason she must be a danger to society – or otherwise she would have been released long ago. And the longer she stays in jail, the more this conviction is strengthened. It then becomes the thing Sandra must struggle against; yet the more she struggles, the stronger their conviction becomes.

To understand this it is necessary to look at how prisons function – and what they require of those who are locked inside them. Although prisons profess to be rehabilitative – or ‘corrective’ as it is called in NSW – very little in their routines is geared towards assisting prisoners to adapt to reality. Therefore, the preconditions for rehabilitation do not exist.

Women and Prisons

Prisons above all are institutions and, like all institutions, their first priority is to maintain themselves. Even prisoners recognise this and the majority of inmates cooperate in the smooth running of the institution. (An example of this occurs whenever prison officers go on strike: the superintendent can usually rely on a number of ‘trusty’ prisoners to dish out meals and other work usually done by screws, thereby alleviating the effects of the strike.) Those who run prisons also have fixed ideas about what constitutes criminal behaviour and, even what are criminal ‘types’. When it comes to women these ideas are informed by sexist attitudes. They apply to women prisoners stereotyped attitudes of what women should be like: to the jailers the ‘normal’ woman is docile, passive and conformist. Any woman who is not these things is seen as deviant, not just a deviant prisoner but a deviant woman. In Sandra’s case the bind is manifold. She is imprisoned because of a violent crime, and such violence is counter to ‘normal’ female behaviour; but also Sandra is a strongly individualistic person who likes to form her own opinions and will not automatically accept the views of her jailers. She is not passive and conformist and is therefore judged to be deviant – both as a prisoner and as a woman.

Her seventeen years in custody have taught Sandra that to survive – and to retain the ability to function again in the outside world – she had to struggle constantly against her jailers. To refuse to succumb to **their** definitions of who she is and what she should be.

She Has ‘Paid’ for Her Crime

She is repentant of her crime but she refuses to be contrite and cowed – the only signs of repentance which prison officials will recognise. Her form of repentance has been to

endure punishment and to start reshaping her relationship to herself and the world so that she will never again find herself in the situation which led her to murder.

She feels that she has been made to suffer and that she has, in this way 'paid' for her crime. She has described some of the time she spent at Parramatta Hospital:

"You realise, of course, that you must suffer for what you did, but this suffering must be in proportion to the crime. You haven't starved. I mean, literally starved. You haven't been locked up in a room for 3 years, having only two hours a day (and if the staff were short — and they often were) three-quarters of an hour, out in the open air. You haven't eaten off tin plates for 3 years with just the most meagre rations till you cried with hunger.

"You are still locked away. Every time a doctor thinks you are well enough to be released, he leaves. Every time a 'big brass' comes out to examine you, something goes wrong. Kevin Simmons escapes. The jail security tightens. You are not returned. Your hopes build up; they are let down. Have you ever reached the point of such complete indifference, when a doctor says, 'You are sane', you don't care?

"You have never reached the point where you believe in nothing. For every time they say you are sane, the nurses still believe you must be mad. Otherwise, why are you there? And the less mental you are, the more afraid they are. There must be something wrong with you, but what? Some terrifying thing that will burst out one day, so unexpectedly, that they live in constant fear of you."

For virtually her entire time in the psychiatric hospital and in prison, Sandra has been prescribed heavy medication. She became addicted to the anti-depressant Tryptanol. A year ago she tried to withdraw from the drug but found she could not cope without it. Since then, Sandra has changed in several important ways.

She has attracted the sympathy and support of a wide group of women who feel that her continued imprisonment is unjustified. These people have assured her that they will fight for her release. But they have stressed that she must, as far as is possible within a jail environment, start to equip herself for life outside.

Already Sandra has accomplished a good deal. With the encouragement of her new friends she gradually reduced her dosage of Tryptanol until she could face prison life without it. Now (February 1977) she has been totally off the drug for

four months. She has received a large and varied number of visitors, a confusing experience for someone who for 12 years has had only occasional visits from a relative and from a former teacher. She has learned to respond to different people, to feel relaxed in a group, to not feel anxious that she is about to be betrayed.

What Prison Has Done For Sandra

The Department of Corrective Services has not done as much for Sandra as she has done for herself. Last year her probation officer applied for Sandra to join the day release program. Under this program prisoners can leave the jail, always accompanied by an officer, and attend a nominated form of entertainment. Sandra loves classical music and asked to go to the opera. Eventually the Department approved her request, and notified her that she could attend. The notification came three days after the opera had finished. It has not yet given her permission to attend anything else. Yet such a step would enable her to gradually become reinducted to the ways of society. To learn again to cope with crowds, noise, confusion, colours — all of the things that a drab prison existence deprives its inmates of.

Two years ago Sandra enrolled in an external university course in Ancient History. Her correspondence assignments were, from all accounts, very good. But to complete the course requirements and gain a result she had to attend a residential course. The Department refused her permission.

What Sandra Has Done for Herself

Most people would probably feel so discouraged that they would throw away any ideas of self-improvement. Sandra has enrolled in another correspondence course, in short-story writing. While in prison she has educated herself, read widely, listened to talks programs on the ABC and read those newspapers which prison authorities will permit to be circulated. She takes an avid interest in what is happening in the world, and during visits will discuss current political and other events.

Her reading has also brought about many changes in ideas. She has become very influenced by Eastern religions and considers herself now to be a pacifist. In a prison where physical fights between inmates are common-place, she has become non-violent.

The Authorities Want 'Proof'

Her problem is that she cannot 'prove' to the authorities that she will not kill again. The example of another woman prisoner is used against her. In 1970 this woman was committed to the Governor's Pleasure for murdering a child. After 18 months she was released. Three years later she killed her new-born child. The Minister for Services, Ron Mulock, said recently on a 2JJ program that he fears public reaction if another GP is released.

The Minister, the Parole Board and the Department of Corrective Services all demand watertight guarantees that Sandra will never kill again.

How can such proof be given? Sandra herself is convinced that her violence in the past was the result of a confusion about her sexual and social identity, of the continual rejection she experienced, of her immaturity and her too-ready propensity to solve conflict with violence. She is certain that she now has the maturity and the wisdom to reject such behaviour. She has tried to demonstrate this while in prison. But, just as none of us can provide detailed charters of what we will do at some future stage in our lives, she cannot 'prove' her pacificism.

How to Prevent Murder

The only way to guarantee that Sandra — or anyone else for that matter — will never engage in a violent act is to keep them imprisoned. (And even that is not a guarantee since there is plenty of violence in prisons.) Our society's method for curbing violence is very imperfect. We cannot lock up the whole population, so we cannot prevent murder. What we do is to lock up those who have killed in the past. We assume that a person who has killed once may do it again.

Yet there is little evidence to support this assumption. Most murders are family-murders, so-called 'crimes of passion' where a husband kills his wife or vice versa. It is exceptionally rare for such a person to kill again. The kinds of people who kill more than once are generally either hired killers, ie professional 'hit' men, or deranged people who have a compulsion to kill. There are numbers of people in each of these categories inside NSW Prisons. However we do not believe that Sandra Willson fits into any of them.

The evidence gained from studying Sandra's history, especially her time in jail, suggests that in 1959 she was incapable of handling rejection in any but a violent way



But her recent prison record, and our personal acquaintance with her, suggests that she has learned to cope with rejection and conflict non-violently. We feel that it is most unlikely that she would resort to murder again.

How We Will Help Sandra

But instead of leaving this to chance — as the Department does when it grants parole or licence to convicted murderers — we are taking steps to ensure, as far as is humanly possible, that Sandra will never again find herself in the situation that led to murder.

Attitudes to homosexuality have changed greatly while Sandra has been in prison, and the chances of her experiencing the kind of rejection and condemnation of her sexuality that led to murder are greatly reduced. There are now homosexual communities in most large cities, places where women and men can live without fear of persecution or ridicule. Many of the women who are visiting Sandra are lesbians. They are acquainting her with the changes that have taken place. Partly as a result of their influence, and partly through reading feminist literature, Sandra now rejects her former 'butch' self-image. She no longer tries to pretend she is a man.

We recognise that when she is released, Sandra will experience a kind of shock. Seventeen years is a very long time to be away from society, especially from a world whose physical appearance and social mores change so rapidly. We recognise that any person dumped into the world after a long period of confinement will have problems of adjustment. We recognise this and we intend to ease that shock as much as possible.

We have formed a strong support group of women who have committed themselves to being around to help Sandra readjust to society. We have arranged accommodation for her. We have got her a job. That part is easy, but it is more than the Department does for most of the prisoners it releases onto the streets.

The hard part is being there to offer practical advice, emotional reassurance, to counter her likely anxiety and even resentment as she tries to find her way in the world again. We know that in all probability this means us being available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We know there will be problems for Sandra and there will be problems for us: we will not always agree with each other, there is a fair chance of misunderstanding, misplaced good intentions, even hostility. We know this but we are prepared to see it as a challenge. We think our attitude is realistic.

An Alternative to Prisons

We take the view that societal problems cannot be solved by locking up people, or by pretending that those problems do not exist. We are interested in Sandra Willson the person because we have met her and we consider her to be a brave, intelligent, creative woman who has a lot to offer the world.

But we are also interested in trying to solve the wider problem of how to reintegrate into our world someone who has transgressed one of its most hallowed laws. Ultimately we are interested in a world without prisons, a world where transgressors are seen as a problem for everyone and not as pariahs to be handed over to an archaic institution for removal from the sight and concern of the public.

Today the utility of prisons is being questioned more and more. It has been demonstrated that it is usually only the poor who go to prison, although people from all classes commit crimes. Nor are prisons effectual in their stated aim of rehabilitation: the recidivism rate in NSW is over 50 per cent. We think there should be alternatives to containing and preventing crime. We would like to demonstrate that if a small group is prepared to create a social and emotional environment that 'rehabilitation' is possible. We don't like that word much but it is one that most people recognise as meaning that a formerly anti-social person has changed their ways. We think that Sandra has changed her ways already. The Department of Corrective Services will not consider that possibility. She has been there so long that they seem to regard her as some kind of pet, or a permanent prison prop.