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Book Review

**Canton, R. (2011). *Probation: Working With Offenders*. Routledge 263pp
ISBN: 978 1 84392 373**

“What an agency aspires to do and announces in its policies always bears an uncertain relationship to what it really does”. Canton makes this obvious, yet bold statement early on in this incredibly rewarding book. He goes on to investigate this declaration by exploring many aspects of probation practice and highlighting the discrepancies that occur between policy and practice. Fortunately for the reader, Canton has managed to create a text which is not simply descriptive, but thought provoking and stimulating. He even goes as far as encouraging the reader to disagree with its main thesis and he encourages self thought throughout the book. As a former Probation Officer himself, Canton’s personal experience seeps through and gives the book a personal dimension which is lacking in other similar texts. He states early on that “the value of probation consists above all in what it represents and stands for – especially the values of social inclusion and a belief in the possibility of personal change”, this is a premise that Canton refers back to continually and it is this ideology that makes this book so heartening to read.

The book begins by introducing the idea of probation and the four practice models; due process, crime control, treatment model and restorative justice. Canton then discusses the theoretical models; expressive, bureaucratic and power. Importantly, these models are not simply left here, but referred to throughout the book. It is a strength of the book that the author continually refers back to earlier points, neatly tying up loose ends as the text continues. Some important areas of probation practice are covered within the book in neat bite sized chapters. These include a brief background to probation whereby the author sets the scene and places current probation practice in context. Probation values are considered where Canton discusses how the Probation Service serves to express (or attempts to express) some of the characteristics of a “decent society”. Punishment and sentencing are considered taking into account retributive and reductive accounts. The supervision of offenders, including a discussion of the ‘What Works’ movement highlighting the importance of motivation in encouraging change is examined, and linked to this Canton reviews the impact of desistance and the good lives model currently taking prominence in probation work. An exploration of how risk is guiding policy and practice is included and Canton considers that some measures that probation use in attempts to reduce risk may conversely increase risk through heightened mistrust and even harassment of offenders. A discussion of the historical neglect of victims by the Criminal Justice System makes up a chapter and Canton puts forward the notion that a separate victim contact and support service would serve the needs of victims better than the current provisions.

This is a particularly accessible book, easy to read whilst at the same time encouraging the reader to have his or her own thoughts and opinions on the subject matter. Each chapter starts with an introduction and concludes with a summary of the key issues which serves to strengthen the reader's understanding of the subject. Each chapter also ends with a set of questions which provide the reader with an opportunity to think critically about what they have just read; this is followed by a useful section on further reading.

Each chapter within this book is valuable and gives space for important issues to be explored and placed in the forefront of the readers mind. An example of this is early on in the book where Canton highlights probation values, justice and diversity. This is an excellent chapter which Canton concludes by stating "perhaps a confident affirmation of probation's core belief in the possibility of change may be a powerful way of challenging punitiveness".

Statements such as this, is what makes this book worthwhile. Indeed, for anyone working within the Probation Service who may have 'lost their way' or forgotten why they joined the service, this chapter particularly, will remind them of why they chose to be part of such an incredibly difficult and challenging, but hugely important profession.

For those working in the wider Criminal Justice System, there are similarly useful chapters. To give an example, Canton's chapter on 'punishment, sentencing and probation' highlights the many considerations that go into deciding on a suitable sentence. As he helpfully acknowledges, "decisions are difficult because they depend on considerations that are often in conflict with one another and which are irreducibly moral". Throughout this book, Canton has a manner of making simple statements which provide food for thought for the reader.

Concluding with an afterword on probation's futures, Canton reiterates the importance of appreciating the "human character of interactions between probation staff and those with whom they work" and urges those working within and for the probation service to affirm its values and to promote confidently the kind of organisation that it wants to be.

This book is as inspiring as it is rewarding. It is a must read, not only for students of sociology, criminology and probation, but for others involved in the Criminal Justice System, from volunteers and mentors right through to High Court Judges and policy makers. Most of all however, this is a book that must be read by all those practitioners who have ever felt downhearted by the service, or wondered if the service has lost its way. This book will remind you that it takes a very special person with a particular value-commitment to be a probation practitioner.

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