

Book Review

Redemption, Rehabilitation and Risk Management: A History of Probation George Mair and Lol Burke, Routledge (2011); 216pp, ISBN: 9781843922490

Those currently working for the probation service in England and Wales are likely to be well accustomed, even numb, to a feeling of foreboding about what the future might hold. For anyone wanting to contextualise the current situation, I can think of no better way than reading George Mair and Lol Burke's excellent history of probation. The book allows its reader to understand how probation has arrived at the present, equipping them to make grounded contributions to current debates about the future. What these authors do particularly skilfully is provide a detailed linear history of probation's genesis, whilst also weaving in the themes that have recurred throughout the last century. A sense of crisis, and of an organisation distrusted by government and grappling to define its own core purpose, may seem to be exclusively modern, but reading this history it becomes clear that current struggles have their roots in previous decades. In charting the highs and lows of probation's history a new vantage point is offered; many of the strengths and challenges of the service can be seen as a product of the friction, sometimes creative, sometimes destructive, between a social work ethos and a criminal justice context.

The authors divide probation's history into eight chronological sections, each having their own chapter: Origins, The first decade, Consolidation, A major part of our penal system?, 1950-62: A golden age?, From Morison to Martinson: 1962-74, Alternatives to custody, and finally, The end of the road?. Throughout each section the history is detailed, the writing accessible, and the tone balanced. We learn that probation's roots lie very much with the notion of a benevolent individual of higher social status 'saving' those deemed to be in need of redemption. Exploring ideas of social control, the authors bring this era vividly to life with well-selected extracts from the documents of the time, for example:

Often without friends of their own, more often with friends only of a degraded type, out of touch with any civilising influence, the probation officer comes to them from a different level of society, giving a helping hand to lift them out of the groove that leads to serious crime. (p32)

Comparing the language of this Home Office publication with the policy documents of more recent times the progress made is clear, although we might wonder how the language of 'offender management' will sound in a century's time. The 'probation officer' cuts an interesting figure throughout the text, and it is fascinating to discover how the role has shifted from its original incarnation as a religious volunteer. In describing the probation officers of previous eras, the

authors turn not only to policy documents, but also to first person accounts, and media representations, thus ensuring that complexities and nuances are drawn out. The different ways the practitioner has been conceptualised tell us much about the shifting skill-base of officers, and the prevalent frameworks for understanding offending behaviour. The reflections of the authors on the professionalism (or not) of workers, and the deskilling of more recent times, provide substantial food for thought.

However, this comprehensive history does not focus exclusively on the development of practice, and the lens expands to include the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO), governments and, more widely, the social shifts of the twentieth century. Two world wars, fluctuating crime rates and the rise of a punitive-minded press are all shown to impact on probation – largely through the changes that resulted in what sentencers, governments and the public demanded it deliver. Something that the authors give consistent attention to is the struggle that probation has had in proving its effectiveness. They link this to the fact that probation has often been required to redefine its core activity in accordance with political headwinds. For example, shifting from rehabilitation to fulfilling the demand that it act as a means of reducing an ever-expanding prison population, becoming more punitive in the process. Statistics and research are analysed in a sophisticated and insightful way, raising questions, but never dictating a correct interpretation. And the authors cast a keen critical eye, lending their support of probation validity, as they demonstrate that they are attuned to its faults. Theirs is not a polemic, but a balanced appraisal, and as such it is a history that deserves to be listened to, and learnt from.

Where the beginning of the book is engrossing in the rich detail it provides of probation's past, the latter sections come alive with debate about the present and prospects for the future. Again, the balanced position of the authors serves the book well, as does their engagement with the micro details of front-line work and the implications this has for innovations, such as those around the desistance literature. They focus in particular on the rise of probation service officers and fast delivery reports, as well as the risks that increased competition hold. It must be said that their outlook is bleak, and the text takes on something of the tone of an obituary. Mair and Burke go so far as to suggest that the probation service may have lost its 'roots, its traditions, its culture, its professionalism' and, possibly, its future (p192). And with the weight of their knowledge and analysis, one feels hard-pressed to disagree. Although, if we can sustain the level of reflective debate attained in this book and use it to promote what we know probation excels at, it can be hoped that all is not lost.

Eleanor Fellowes
London Probation Trust
Eleanor.fellowes@london.probation.gsi.gov.uk