
A HISTORY OF BRIXTON PRISON

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Christopher Impey. *The House on the Hill: Brixton: London's Oldest Prison*. Foreword by Raphael Rowe. London: Tangerine P., 2019. Pp. 223. £14.00. ISBN: 978-1-910691-42-7.

*I*mpey is a Senior Producer of the Intelligence Podcast under the auspices of *The Economist* and the Managing Editor of National Prison Radio. He has written a popular book on Brixton Prison to draw attention to the many issues of imprisonment. He wants to attract as many readers as possible. His chapters are short and snappy with intriguing titles like “The Oyster Eater” and “A Kiss by Waterloo Bridge”. Raphael Rowe, who was wrongly imprisoned in Brixton for twelve years for a crime he did not commit, introduces the book. Let out in July 2000, he now serves as a BBC investigative journalist and the host of a Netflix series on prisons.

The book is arranged chronologically in five sections covering the period 1819 to 2019. He takes the reader through the various lives of the prison. First it held men and was notorious for its introduction and use of the treadmill upon which prisoners toiled all day, creating power to grind wheat (Part 1). Scheduled to close, it was saved by becoming a women’s prison in 1853 and was actually run by a woman, Emma Martin. It changed again in 1870, reopening as a men’s prison. It was now a public works prison holding men who were unfit for heavy labour. Instead they manufactured and repaired items like uniforms and mail bags. In 1882 it was turned into a military prison for those with sentences two years and under (Part 2). It was closed in 1897 but then reopened in 1902 as a remand prison; that is, one holding men awaiting trial. It had been rebuilt and expanded with new land acquired. In addition to those on remand, it also housed a few debtors, juveniles, and convicts (Part 3). Impey does not stint on providing details of crowding as well as the wet and cold conditions prisoners had to endure.

By 1904 well-furnished private cells could be rented. Other inmates could be hired as cleaners and food could be sent in. An outside barber cost threepence. One letter could be written every day on prison letterhead (pp. 119–20). The quota on letters is far higher than what Russell was allowed in 1918. Russell’s first imprisonment is covered in the chapter “Spies and Pacifists”. He shares this chapter with Anton Kuepferle who was a spy and committed suicide. Another spy was taken from Brixton to the Tower of London

and executed three years before Russell arrived (p. 122). Impey provides several Russell quotations about his time in Brixton. None of them are footnoted (this is not an academic book). His only Russell source is Ray Monk, but most of the quotations are from the *Autobiography*.

Also, in Part 3 Impey writes that smoking was banned in 2018, but before that it had been allowed in the cells. A 1932 experiment had even allowed it in the exercise yard (p. 132). This treatment of tobacco conflicts with the smoking-ban Russell faced in 1918 and which Impey notes (p. 123).

Russell's return in 1961 is covered in the chapter "The Sixties". Mick Jagger also features in this chapter. Again, Impey provides a few quotations from Russell. They are not from Monk, who barely mentions this imprisonment,¹ nor are they from the *Autobiography*.

Brixton remains a remand prison but the "threat of closure still looms" (p. 202). Why Impey calls this a threat is not clear as he is working toward reducing the population in prisons (p. 208). One of his aims in writing this book was to engender more empathy in the public at large towards the imprisoned.

WORKS CITED

- MONK, RAY. *Bertrand Russell: the Spirit of Madness*. London: Cape, 2000.
Solitude. London: Cape, 1996. RUSSELL, BERTRAND. *Auto*. 2, 3.
—. *Bertrand Russell, 1921-70: the Ghost of*

¹ Monk, *Bertrand Russell, 1921-70*, p. 420.