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# scottish justice ' matters



## HEALTH AND (IN)JUSTICE

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# THE ARTS AND IMPRISONMENT

## SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE BARLINNIE SPECIAL UNIT

**Mike Nellis**



**THE BARLINNIE SPECIAL UNIT** never fully came of age. It was terminated by the Scottish Prison Service in its twenty first year, 1994, at which point few in Scotland were aware it still existed. In its first decade it had rarely been out of the news, particularly the tabloids, and the closure announcement briefly rekindled their interest, reminding readers more of past scandals than analysing the pros and cons of shutting it down. Nowadays, to the extent that the Special Unit is remembered at all in Scottish public life, it is still in terms of the media controversy that suffused its early years and in particular the persona of Jimmy Boyle, the convicted murderer who made the most of the Unit's distinct artistic opportunities and became its most spectacular success.

There is no official or unofficial history of the Unit. Several people who were associated with its inception and early years, psychiatrist Peter Whatmore and prison officer Ken Murray, wrote about it at the time. Art therapist Joyce Laing, who was crucial to the direction the Unit took, wrote of its "evolution through art". Psychologist-researcher David Cooke provided statistical evidence that confirmed practitioner experience that the Unit's regime massively reduced its residents' proclivity for violence and confrontation with authority. The later years of the Unit are only really documented in inspectorate reports, in the evaluation produced by penologists Keith Bottomley, Alison Liebling and Richard Sparks, and the response of the Scottish Prison Service, which made significant use of it, against the authors' expectations and intentions, to justify closure.

Richard Sparks's (2002) subsequent exploration of his inadvertent complicity in the closure remains by far the best academic analysis of what the Unit was, and why its original therapeutic ethos, admittedly somewhat diminished in 1992, when he was researching there, deserved to be revitalised. Nonetheless, it underplays the distinctive role that artistic endeavour, particularly sculpture and painting, played in the reform of violent offenders, in media debates about the unacceptable privileges being given to Unit prisoners, and in mobilising an unprecedented degree of support for the Unit among significant players in Scotland's creative professions.

Sparks plausibly argues that the Unit's relative longevity was because it served a useful practical purpose in Scotland, keeping seriously disruptive prisoners out of mainstream prisons. The witheringly negative publicity, and the political embarrassment this caused, could easily have induced closure before its first decade was up: sheer need outweighed this. Sparks cites a prison governor who appreciated that the Unit's existence made his own work easier, and did not care much how it was done. This betrays a certain cynicism towards what was actually done, and towards the people who made it possible. The activities which actually wrought the Unit's early success with its prisoners should not be written out of the story as if they were epiphenomenal. Sparks recollection that "there was something numinous there – something about sculpture, something about psychiatry" (p563) reflects the hazy

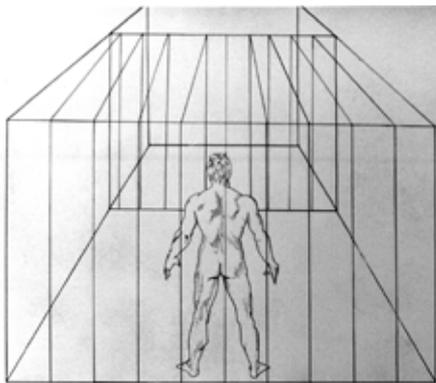
*Solitary – Inverness. Jimmy Boyle. Wood, metal and plaster, 1974. (Image from Joyce Laing's archive: permissions sought).*

myths and legends that had grown up about the Unit by 2002, but at the time these activities were actually being pursued, in the 1970s, they seemed materially tangible and intellectually intelligible: exciting and novel, yes, but not especially numinous.

I have written elsewhere of the role creative arts played in both the regime and the public image of the Unit's early years, and hence also the media controversies surrounding it (Nellis 2010). I sought specifically to retrieve the importance of art therapist Joyce Laing, without whose chance arrival and guiding influence, once the prisoners (led by Jimmy Boyle) began to show interest in clay modelling and sculpture, the regime and reputation of the Unit may have been very different. Undoubtedly, a somewhat loose vision of a therapeutic community underpinned the relatively relaxed and informal relationship between prisoners and the specially trained staff, the resolution of difficulties through regular communal meetings and the centrality of "talk" to the milieu that was being created, but unlike purer models of therapeutic communities, no thought had been given to the work around which daily routines could be structured. To a significant extent, creative arts (and the sense of purpose and achievement they gave) came to occupy this place and worked alongside the other therapeutic features of the Unit in bringing about a reduction in violent and confrontational behaviour.

Through Joyce Laing, Scots artist and influential arts impresario Richard Demarco became acquainted with the Unit, resulting in a steady stream of artists, inspired and impressed with the work, becoming regular visitors and sometime teachers there. The Unit acquired a constituency of passionate and mostly respectable supporters that no other penal facility in Scotland, Britain or maybe anywhere, had ever had before. When Jimmy Boyle began going on day release to Demarco's gallery he was introduced to renowned German artist Joseph Beuys: the two men found some surprising affinities and Beuys played a part in shaping and consolidating Boyle's growing sense of himself as an artist.

Beuys was fascinated by the use of creative arts in the Special Unit: it reinforced his grand belief that artistic talent was universal and that the art



Pen and ink drawing, Hugh Collins. (Image from Joyce Laing's archive: permissions sought).

being created there, by the kind of men of whom it might never have been expected, could be a catalyst for social and political change. Beuys cared enough to lecture on Jimmy Boyle and, towards the end of Boyle's imprisonment, when he was transferred from the Unit to a conventional prison, Beuys (and others) took the Scottish Office to court for denying Boyle art materials and cutting him off from fellow artists.

The Boyle-Beuys-Demarco relationship, and this kind of activism, went way beyond what a conventional penal-therapeutic community might have been expected to achieve and was understandably a public talking point. Sparks's footnoted observation that "the lionizing of some prisoners by the chattering classes of Glasgow and Edinburgh was too much for many prison officers [in the Unit] and indeed no small number of other prisoners to bear" (p579), is too dismissive of the value of middle class, media-savvy support for a contentious penal initiative, which acted as a counterweight to the derision shown the Unit by the tabloids. It was simultaneously embarrassing and useful to the prison authorities to have voices from Scotland's artistic elite supporting their Unit, however much it had become something different, and a little out of control, from what they had intended. True, some resentment existed among staff and prisoners about Boyle's celebrity, and towards some of the Unit's middle class supporters, but that was a rift which, in the longer term interests of creating publics who are supportive of rehabilitative initiatives, needed to be politically bridged rather than accepted in a partisan fashion. Cross-class dialogue of that kind was never going to be easy,

the prison authorities were never likely to foster it, but liminal characters like Beuys, Demarco and Boyle himself were the kind of people who could have created it, and indeed, tried to.

The Unit's later years, after Boyle and Ken Murray left, were somewhat diminished in comparison. The Prison Service re-established control, but lessons had been learned and incidents of violence and confrontation remained negligible. Creative arts teachers continued to be brought in, but the once defining artistic ethos became more subdued and later generations of staff showed less commitment to it. For reasons which are unclear, the arts community's own interest lessened, and as the Unit became less unorthodox, so did that of the tabloid press. Kirsteen Bunting (1992), an undergraduate from the Glasgow School of Art who did a placement in the Unit in the same year as Sparks did his research, sensed both that the Unit was losing its way, but also that there was a tentative official appetite for rekindling the energies that had made it so transformative for some earlier prisoners.

That, as Sparks so brutally found, was not to be. One lesson to be drawn from this dispiriting experience might be that "evaluation" was conceived too narrowly here, too penologically: that liberal penal reform interests are not always best served by an evaluative model in which academics gather data to discreetly present to a seemingly benign authority. Granted, no one really saw closure coming. If they had, and if the Unit was to have been saved and revitalised at that point, someone somewhere needed to re-mobilise the arts community which had once helped to sustain a serious public debate about *what a prison should be*, that penology as an academic discipline has never quite managed to do on its own.

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