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Free to Write: a Case Study in the Impact of Cultural History Research and Creative Writing Practice

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This study introduces a recent research and writing project called ‘Free to Write’ and situates it within a long tradition of exploring the role that creative writing can play in prisons and for ex-offenders. Grounded in a combination of the research of cultural historians and of creative writers at Liverpool John Moores University, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation-funded ‘Free to Write’ project ran from 2004-2007 and explored the potential of creative writing in prisons, and in probation hostels, to reduce recidivism. After this initial stage, it continued with further research being carried out into the work of other creative writing organizations across the UK, and their roles in the provision of creative writing practice in prisons. An anthology comprising two essays by cultural historians, one essay offering a snapshot of creative writing practice in prisons, and a series of creative pieces was published and disseminated to institutions and groups, for use and to offer feedback, in 2013.

The experience of the ‘Free to Write’ team suggests, and this article will argue, that collaborative, cross-disciplinary research and practices in the academy may fruitfully support work in the prison service and raises questions about how creative writers and prison service practitioners may work together to raise the profile in the public arena of effective writing in prisons. Historical and current research reveals the ways in which creative writing provision relates (and has always related) to evolving public policy, particularly as regards recidivism and reoffending, but also rehabilitation and public perceptions of punishment.

The *Free to Write* anthology includes a series of pieces written by individuals currently within the prison system or recently on release. These pieces – poems and prose on a variety of topics – are at the heart of the project, revealing the writers’ mental and

emotional journeys, observed by researchers and tutors, from considering their past and present to envisaging a different future. This pattern, not shared by all, but common to many, suggests that writing is a valuable way of encouraging prisoners to develop new ways of responding to their situations and environment. The editors of the anthology decided not to identify the individual writers by full name, but rather to use first names and institutions. While many writers seek recognition for their efforts, to be identified in this volume might have unintended consequences for prisoners in the future, or, indeed, for anyone affected by their crimes; it may also have ramifications for an individual writer's future rehabilitation. The team's discussion of the issue of anonymity was informed by the research carried out by cultural historians and stands as one example here of how the dialogue between cultural history and creative practice has informed this project. The issue of anonymity was one which was considered by the leaders of another project championing writing in prisons and the research of one of the 'Free to Write' team revealed their fascinating, and embattled, history which raises questions still pertinent today.

In 1908, a poem was submitted to the *Star of Hope*, a newspaper written, printed, and published for and by prisoners in the New York State prison system. The poem was a scathing commentary on conditions in the Dannemora State Hospital, an institution for men who had been certified insane as prisoners, and was signed 'Mountain Bughouse 216'.¹ The poem was not accepted for publication and it is not hard to see why. *The Star of Hope* had achieved international coverage as an example of positive behaviour and achievement by prisoners at a time when the majority of headlines, except in liberal-leaning newspapers, focused on the negative or sensational. In the Australian *Daily News* in 1904, a story about

¹ 'Mountain Bughouse 216' was Oliver Curtis Perry, whose life is the subject of Spargo, T. (2004) *Wanted Man: The Forgotten story of an American Outlaw* London: Bloomsbury, based on research in the archives of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century New York State correctional system.

the journal suggested that it could only have been started in ‘such a strenuous country as America’ and noted not only the range and standard of the contributions but also that a number of prisoners involved had found work in newspapers since leaving prison.

The founding and success of the journal seem, in retrospect, a considerable achievement, especially when it is still customary today for those involved in writing schemes in prisons to feel the need to justify their work.² At the start of the twentieth century, campaigns in the United States, and in New York State, for prison reform – on the basis of the possibility of rehabilitation for at least some prisoners, rather than containment and punishment for all – were gradually gaining ground. The *Star of Hope* had been founded in 1899 in a rare act of co-operation between two often opposed groups in the penal world: the Warden (Omar Van Leuven Sage) and a reformist campaigner (Maud Ballington Booth).³

Many Wardens in this period were conservative, maintaining traditional practices designed to contain and control convicts, and suspicious of the campaigners who were arguing that the closed worlds of the prisons degraded and debased prisoners and keepers alike. Sage, in contrast, espoused some of the ideas of the Progressive Movement within the penal system which attempted to use rational, scientific principles to engage prisoners in productive, improving activities.⁴ This progressive rationalism differed from the Christian

² *The Daily News* (Perth, Western Australia), 16 December 1904.

³ The title of the paper was a tribute to Maud Ballington Booth, an English-born evangelical campaigner who had started a religious League of Hope among prisoners there in 1896 and whose belief in rehabilitation was summarised in her 1903 book *After Prison- What?* (New York: H. Revell). For an account of Booth’s place in reform debates see Myrick, A. (2004) ‘Escape from the Carceral: Writing by American Prisoners, 1895-1916’, *Surveillance & Society* 2.1, 93-109.

⁴ *New York Times*, April 21, 1899. On Warden Sage and the reforms of the period, see McLennan, R.M. (2008) *The Crisis of Imprisonment: Protest, Politics, and the Making of the American Penal State, 1776-1941* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 224-248.

underpinning of Ballington Booth's reformist mission but both shared a conviction that rehabilitation was a fundamental role of the prison system and that practical, creative activity was key to that process. The imperative to foster rehabilitation and so reduce recidivism could now be seen as a shared goal for conservatives and liberals alike, an ethos that informed the 'Free to Write' project which hoped, and hopes, to bypass unhelpful assumptions about 'soft options' mitigating rather than building on the justice system's punitive elements.

In the *Star of Hope*, which included writing by, and was distributed to, inmates first from Sing Sing alone, and later from the other major adult prisons of Auburn, Clinton and the Eastern New York Reformatory, prisoners could express and exchange views. It is hard, at this distance, to grasp how radical a departure from the normal regime which isolated and silenced inmates this was. But as debates within the paper itself showed, its writers needed to be careful about the impression they gave.⁵ If prisoners were to be promoted as rational and thoughtful, capable of either redemption or reform, there were evidently limits to the type of writing, to the subjects and tone that could be included. Mountain Bughouse 216's submission exceeded those limits. In selecting creative pieces for *Free to Write* a hundred years later the editors were not faced with any 'difficult' material in these terms, but the question of censorship was ever-present in a volume intended for a readership including prison service professionals, tutors, ex-offenders and policy makers.

Earlier in 1908, on 18 July, the *Star of Hope* had published a poem by the same prisoner under his prison identification, 'Dannemora State Hospital 216'.⁶ 'Independence Day' was a stirring call to support the nation's fighting men, written in the form of an acrostic, with the first letters of each line spelling out 'JULY FOURTH NINETEEN

⁵ See Myrick, 'Escape from the Carceral', 106.

⁶ The journal would not accept anonymous contributions but published only the writer's prison number.

HUNDRED AND EIGHT'. It was a poem that aligned the prisoner with values of courage and patriotism and connected them with the need for social justice, making it an ideal example of the impression reformers wanted to give: as the poem's opening lines declare 'Justice sails on every breeze/Under our soldiers' flag.'⁷ In common with other contributions to the paper, it invited readers outside the system to see those within it as sharing a belief in common virtues and values, whatever mistakes had been made in the past, and as deserving to have those principles demonstrated within the prison system as well as in wider society.

The Star of Hope is rightly acknowledged as a significant early example of prisoners' writing having a positive impact on debates outside and inside the prison system about the benefits of practical, creative activity.⁸ But as a public document it does not give us access to how the *process* of writing may help a prisoner. In some of the archival research that informed the 'Free to Write' project, the case of Mountain Bughouse 216 proved unexpectedly revealing.

Inmate 216 at the Dannemora State Hospital was far removed from the ideal of the rational prisoner demonstrating a capacity for rehabilitation. After a childhood marked by poverty and neglect, Oliver Perry had been abused in his first institution, the Western House of Refuge, where he was confined for stealing a suit to sell to pay for lodgings. As an adult he worked on the railroads, where he sustained a serious head injury that cost him his job, and was eventually sentenced to nearly 50 years hard labour for a headline-grabbing single-handed train robbery. On the run and awaiting trial he became a celebrity figure in the press, exploiting public suspicion of detectives as well as interest in the romantic anti-hero image he cultivated. Once in Auburn, and subject to the sustained use of sensory deprivation in the punishment block (which was still in operation and exposed in 1912 by Thomas Mott

⁷ *Star of Hope* (Sing Sing, New York State), 18 July, 1908 (copy in Perry's Dannemora State Hospital file).

⁸ See Myrick, 'Escape from the Carceral', 105, and McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 224.

Osborne, reformer and later Sing Sing Warden), Perry's mental health collapsed. After rallying enough to organise a mass outbreak from his first State Hospital and to publicise the need for prison reform, he was declared sane but returned to Auburn. There, after another spell in the punishment block, he eventually blinded himself and was sent to the Dannemora State Hospital within the grounds of Clinton prison, known as 'Little Siberia'. This double isolation was, predictably, described by one newspaper as 'his living tomb'.⁹

Perry died there after serving 38 years of his sentence, 35 blind and nearly 30 on intermittent hunger strike, being force-fed through the nose and refusing to wear prison clothing. His was, in any terms, a troubled and tragic life. But it is the place of writing in his life that intrigued members of the 'Free to Write' team as they explored the possibilities of creative writing in prison.

Perry was first encouraged to write poetry, rather than protest letters, in the 1890s by a Christian-reformist friend and supporter. Some were published in newspapers with positive editorial comments, but after his self-blinding Perry's image in the press swiftly changed. His story continued to appear, intermittently, in the newspapers until his death but the persuasive, rational prisoner mutated into the raving madman as stories about him moved from the front page to the brief and curious items sections. Perry's own attitude to writing also changed. Initially his letters and poems were clearly intended to attract publicity and sympathy, to protest about conditions. In his later years, Perry, aided by sighted prisoners, still composed and dictated letters to officials and reformers, although most were intercepted by the prison authorities, who also regularly confiscated his poetry. He also wrote poems and narratives that explored his past and imagined a future. It is impossible to 'diagnose' Perry's mental condition but in his later writings and in correspondence about them, it is possible to see a more reflective understanding of his past and of a possible life beyond the prison. His files

⁹ *Utica Saturday Globe*, February 1917.

reveal that the process of writing had a positive impact not on his *public* standing, or on his campaign for better conditions, but on his ability to imagine a life beyond both his prison and the attitudes, significantly including his own, that had contributed to his crimes. Perry's condition meant that he would never be released, and his refusal, or inability to conform to the publicly acceptable model of the reformable prisoner, justified his necessary exclusion from *The Star of Hope* in 1908. But his written record suggests that even the most apparently 'hopeless' case might respond to the process of writing.

Over a hundred years later the examples of *The Star of Hope* and of the apparently hopeless case of Oliver Perry might seem to be simply historical curiosities, but both raise questions that are still being debated today. This research, together with that of other cultural historians, suggested historical evidence for the value of writing in prisons and the challenge of making a public case for such work, and they reinforced the experience of creative writers who had been, individually and as part of national initiatives and networks, working as Writers in Residence at a number of institutions. Through their dialogue a cross-disciplinary project emerged to explore the impact of creative writing in prisons and probation service facilities.

The final stage of this project is an anthology, and this publication returns us, in many ways, to the questions relating to prisoners' writing raised by *The Star of Hope* at the beginning of the twentieth century. As in the case of the earlier publication, the *Free to Write* anthology addressed issues about prisoner welfare and rehabilitation, but also about public perceptions of prison life and prisoners' writing.

As suggested, early twentieth-century prison reformers viewed 'productive, improving activities' as being a cornerstone of rehabilitation; the creation of *The Star of Hope*, a forum in which prisoners were able to share writing (often with a view to exploring and expressing a desire for personal reform) reveals a belief that writing itself might be one

such ‘productive, improving activity’. Moreover, as we move through the twentieth century, we see writing, and the arts in general, becoming viewed as, not just a possible activity, but a *unique* opportunity for productive and improving activity. In 1962, Arthur Koestler founded an award scheme for prisoner writing and artwork. Originally planned as an award for essay writing, the Koestler awards were intended to reward creative, productive activity. Himself a former political prisoner, Koestler was a firm believer in the positive impact of mental stimulation on a prisoner’s wellbeing and rehabilitation.¹⁰ Moving closer to the present project, Michael Crowley – one of the writers-in-residence who submitted work to the *Free to Write* anthology on behalf of prisoners – argues that ‘for rehabilitative purposes, it is important that prisoners are presented with the opportunity to paint, dance and especially write’.¹¹

In developing the anthology, researchers from the ‘Free to Write’ team interviewed numerous people currently working with creative writing within the prison system, including Writers in Residence, prison librarians and Education Officers. Though each person described individual experiences and opinions concerning the role of creative writing in prisons, some common ground emerged. The questions of hope, ambition, self-esteem and ‘rehumanisation’ were frequently discussed, and these are specifically and directly related to the issues of individual reform and rehabilitation.¹² Moreover, creative writing is often posited as a peculiarly potent medium through which these questions can be addressed,

¹⁰ We are grateful to Tim Robertson, Chief Executive of the Koestler Trust, for his valuable assistance with regards to Arthur Koestler’s work and legacy. See also Scammell, M. (2009) *Koestler: The Indispensable Intellectual* London: Faber and Faber.

¹¹ Crowley, M. (2012) ‘Editor’s Note’, in *Time of Death: Fiction, Poetry and Memoir From HM YOI Lancaster Farms*, 1.

¹² See Priest, H. (2013) ‘Free to Write: Prison Voices’, in Creer, G., Priest, H. and Spargo, T. (eds) *Free to Write: Prison Voices Past and Present*, Liverpool: Headland.

offering, as it does, space for imagining possible futures, examining self and self-identity, and exploring levels of empathy. The creative section of the anthology, which includes a commentary by Adam Creed, draws attention to this potency and its significance to an individual journey from ‘beginning’ to ‘a world beyond’.

Nevertheless, writing can also offer a forum of communication between prisoners, beyond everyday interactions, fulfilling an educative purpose which is, again, linked to reform and rehabilitation. Like the early twentieth-century *Star of Hope*, many creative writing projects today focus on the significance of prisoner writing for other prisoners. Publication of work is often disseminated first and foremost within the prison system. A number of projects have sought to use prisoners’ writing as a means of helping new or young prisoners come to terms with the reality of their circumstances, with life-writing, poetry and prose being used as tools for providing advice and mentoring. Internal prisoner-authored newspapers – like, for example, *Roast*, the newspaper run by inmates at HM YOI Glen Parva during Gareth Creer’s writer-residency – can be valuable sources of practical information, encouragement, sympathy and solidarity. By drawing on both the traditions identified by cultural historians and the ‘best practice’ noted by creative writers, the ‘Free to Write’ project was able to position the final anthology alongside other examples of prisoner writing and, as such, recognise the importance of its free availability to prison libraries throughout the United Kingdom.

Nevertheless, the project research – both historical and practice-based – revealed another set of concerns that arise when dealing with creative writing by prisoners. As the research into *The Star of Hope* demonstrated, this early (and radical) journal was originally intended to be written for and by prisoners. However, the case of Mountain Bughouse 216 reveals the journal’s other, more public-facing, role. The assumption that the journal would be read by individuals outside the prison walls links *The Star of Hope*, again, to the work of

the Koestler awards scheme, as well as to that of the Writers in Prisons Network and other contemporary organisations. Prisoners' art (and writing in particular) is often collected, displayed and disseminated to an audience outside the prison system, and its function in this respect is also significant.

Publication of prisoners' work to a wider audience outside the prison walls fulfils a number of purposes. For example, creative writing by prisoners can and is used with young people at risk of offending, serving as life lessons from individuals whose authority and voice are, perhaps, more likely to be taken seriously. In a broader context, prisoners' writing can be used to 'rehumanise' offenders in the eyes of the general public. It has been argued by a number of organisations, not least the Koestler Trust, that this 'rehumanisation' can play an important role in shaping and informing public views (and, potentially, public policy) on punishment and rehabilitation. In recent years – or, perhaps more accurately, in recent discourse building on a foundation laid after the abolition of hanging – this question of rehabilitation and its role in the prevention of reoffending has been at the forefront of debates about offender education and arts projects in the UK.

The idea that prisoner writing can shape and inform public perception and policy returns us to the historical examples of *The Star of Hope* and Mountain Bughouse 216, as well as resonating with contemporary practice and theory. Throughout the history of prison writing – which is also the history of prisons – memoirs and life-writing have been used as tools of reform. Or, if not reform *per se*, public education about the reality and conditions of prisons. As can be seen in the story of Oliver Perry, poetry and letter writing have long been utilised by prisoners determined to bring their circumstances to the attention of a wider audience and, in some cases, to attempt to effect change. Prisoner writing is also offered as a means through which society's views of imprisonment can be confronted and, potentially, changed. In 1995 Clive Hopwood of the (now) Writers in Prisons Network wrote of the need

to address public perceptions of prisoners, and the role that creative writing might play in this: ‘perhaps if we listened a little more to what they have to say [...] we might understand a little better and judge more wisely’.¹³ This aspect of creative writing, and of the arts generally, as a tool of radical commentary and potential systemic reform, is one that might bear further scrutiny in contemporary debate. *The Star of Hope*, and the various prisoner writing projects that have followed it, remind us that writing can be (and is frequently) utilised as a tool for change – be it in terms of the individual prisoner or of public perceptions – but also as a means of engagement with public policy. Again, the ‘Free to Write’ project sought to engage with this discourse, and the researchers felt that it was important that the anthology be made available to academics, practitioners and members of the public *outside* the prison walls, just as it was circulated within those walls.

This article has offered the interdisciplinary work of the ‘Free to Write’ project as a case study in the dialogues that are on-going between cultural historians and creative writers. As well as presenting some insights into the project itself, we have also indicated some of the ways in which collaboration between academic and practice-based researchers might be used to explore the role of prisoners’ writing for the prison and the public.

¹³ Hopwood, C. (1995) ‘Foreword’, in *All Men are Equalish: The View From Inside Prison (HMP Swansea)*

Clwyd: I*D Books, 7.