

Book Review

Maurice Vanstone (2004)
Supervising Offenders in the Community:
A History of Probation Theory and Practice.
Aldershot: Ashgate.

ISBN: 0-7546-4190-2, 208 pages, H/B, S£45.00.

This excellent book, which is an adaptation of a PhD thesis, uses what the author describes (pp.viii-ix, citing Thompson, 1978; 5-7) as 'evidence from the underside' using '... the analogy of mud on someone's shoes' to piece together a new and original account of the history of probation work, from the nineteenth century up to the present. Numerous histories of British probation have been written. Vanstone, in the preface (p.ix), suggests that his work does not deny 'the validity of previous accounts... Rather, it is an attempt to tell the full story.' In that aim, he succeeds in significant measure. In fact, Vanstone brings a freshness to the accepted (and indeed respected) accounts of commentators such as McWilliams and others, and adds further layers of understanding to them, while exposing an increased level of complexity and nuance to the previously received history. At the same time, his historical analysis never lowers its standards of scholarly objectivity, which are applied even-handedly throughout. The development of probation practice and its struggle for professional acceptance are discussed through the various stages of the hundred years of probation's development, right up to consideration of 'What Works?' and the 'rise to dominance of effective practice.' Although primarily focused on the British experience, some comparison with the USA is made.

As the centenary of the founding 1907 probation legislation approaches, this is a timely review, in the deepest sense, of the history of probation in these islands. It is not only a history of the organisation of the service per se, but in addition traces the development of underlying ideologies, values, principles and methods of practice. This publication is one in the 'Welfare and Society' series from the University of Wales Swansea, School of Social Sciences, in conjunction with Ashgate. Concluding that those of us working in probation have now arrived 'back to where we started,' Vanstone (pp.157-158) draws out some interesting lessons, including that:

'...probation practice... has survived largely because of faith: faith that it was justified morally, helpful, welcomed by its recipients and effective in reducing offending... It has undergone a number of transformations: ... Those changes have made the Service vulnerable to diverse influences... [but] the most consistent factor amidst the conflict and change has been a focus on the individual as the main target of influence... the individual offender has been the object of help conditional upon submission to official authority and control.'

Vanstone goes on to point out (pp.159-160) that probation 'does know how to "manage" offenders in the community but by offering tangible help to deal with problems associated with offending rather than unthinking control' and that the service needs self-belief now more than ever, to progress further, with a 'commitment to effectiveness in its fullest sense.'

This book is well written and easily read, although it seemed to this reviewer that every page and paragraph was filled with points worth re-reading and pondering over and over. One complaint - a number (albeit small) of 'typos' that this reviewer encountered were somewhat irritating in a production that is otherwise difficult to fault. Apart from the substantive chapters, there are some very interesting appendices, including training material from the early decades of the twentieth century: the Police Court Training Scheme, 1914 guidelines on 'The Content of an Ideal Court Report' and probation officer training curricula from the 1930s and '40s. Referencing and indexation are comprehensive. This book is highly recommended and will be of interest to students of probation work, as well as probation practitioners, managers and anyone with an interest in this field.

Thompson, P. (1978) *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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