



PRISON WRITINGS IN EARLY MODERN BRITAIN
A CREMS conference held at the King's Manor, University of York
23 - 24 JULY 2007

**Conference Directors: Professor William Sheils (York) and
Professor William Sherman (York)**

Thirty scholars working chiefly in Literature or History departments in Great Britain, USA, Japan and Ireland met to discuss how their respective disciplines might engage with the massive body of writing produced by those in prison during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Delegates were given an insight into the variety of physical and geographical conditions in which many prisoners were held by a walking tour of places of confinement in York, on the evening prior to the conference.

The conference itself opened with a keynote address from Dr Rivkah Zim from King's London which moved from Boethius to Bunyan in which we were reminded of how much prison writing involved 'constructed autobiography' and of the importance of the aesthetic and fictive elements in rhetorical prison writing. In conclusion four main points were identified as key features of such writing: the defence and promotion of ideas and values in the enforced absence of the author, the defence of ideas and reputation in public, the sustenance and reconciliation of the author to his or her circumstances, and the comfort of a body of readers who were friends or family.

This last feature was particularly true of the papers in the following session. Firstly Ruth Roberts from Cambridge used John Frith's prison writings from the tower to demonstrate how he placed himself at the centre of a textual community which offered him and his co-religionistas social space transcending the prison walls. It was to a similarly 'imagined community of the godly' that Bunyan addressed *Grace Abounding* in the 1660s, and by placing that text alongside the court records of his trial and public arguments about the Clarendon Code, Kathleen Lynch, from the Folger Shakespeare Library opened up the porous nature of prison, textually and topographically,

and the ways in which a minister could communicate with his immediate congregation, the book trade, and the wider dissenting public.

The next session on politics in prison looked at a rather different characteristic of prison writing, that is to say those literary devices designed to get the prisoner released from his cell: letters to patrons, public statements, reports on fellow inmates. William Herle found himself in the Marshalsea in 1571, from where he continued his services as an intelligencer, intercepting on behalf of Burghley letters between fellow prisoners involved in the Ridolfi Plot. His own surviving letters detail the shifting relationships that existed within the prison, between prisoners and the authorities, and among prisoners themselves. As Robyn Adams (Queen Mary, London) reminded us, the letters reveal both the porous nature of prison life and the ruthless nature of Elizabethan policy. A defender of that ruthlessness was Thomas Norton, whose outspoken opposition to the Anjou match landed him in the Tower in 1581. Whilst in prison Norton continued to work for Walsingham, producing public writings on affairs of state, which proposed further reform of the universities, the Inns of Court, and the Established Church, placing these in a providential frame of British history. As Anthony Martin (Waseda University) demonstrated, these attempts to write his way out of prison fell on deaf ears as his vision of the godly commonwealth no longer commanded widespread support. Finally Philip Crispin (University of Hull) spoke on catholic writers in the Tower, contrasting the despair of Chidlock Tichborne with the devotional writing of Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel. In addition to their manuscript writings he also drew attention to the graffiti produced by them, and the ways in which that could be used by Catholics to construct a history of persecution for themselves and their community.

In the final plenary of the day Penry Williams (New College, Oxford) used the case of Walter Raleigh to demonstrate how little reference to prison there was in his writings undertaken there. Viewing the Cynthia poems as an elegy addressed to himself and not as a petition to others, Raleigh's circumstances make his writing 'in prison' rather than 'prison writing' and this was especially true of his History of the World, which was made possible in part by the otium imposed upon him, and reminded us of another way of 'getting through' the experience, by writing a monumental work. This was an undertaking appropriate to one whose length of time in prison was uncertain, but likely to be lengthy.

In the opening plenary of the second day Molly Murray, Columbia University, NY, asked 'why poetry?' suggesting in her paper that the otium provided the opportunity for experimentation and reworking of material, that the portability of verse, and its capacity for being memorised made it an excellent

vehicle for communication with the imagined audience beyond the prison, and finally, that the determination to achieve some good from ill was a strong incentive. Her paper called for a wider vocabulary than prison writing, given the vastly differing circumstances in which people were held, and the extent to which, among the political classes in a period of rapid political changes, some form of incarceration or restriction was experienced. In that sense 'prison' was not marginal.

The conference then turned to two cases of scientists in prison and firstly looked beyond Britain to early seventeenth century Italy. Alexander Marr (St Andrews) described how Mutio Oddi of Urbino felt deracinated by his imprisonment by his patron, the lord of Urbino. Using his technical skills to produce paper, pen and ink he set about recovering his sense of social identity by a series of architectural plans for the rebuilding of his native city, and also to explore the mysteries of Euclidian mathematics, through which he could escape his confined circumstances through the ideal nature of geometrical speculation. Bill Sherman (York) in reconstructing the biography of Simon Sturtevant, the inventor, reminded us of how common imprisonment was for debt, and how long it could last. Sturtevant continued his experimentation in prison, hoping that one of his devices might attract the patronage of someone able to secure his release.

Female prisoners made their appearance in the penultimate session with studies of the English nun Mary Ward who, as Julie Hirst (York) reminded us was not really in prison, but imprisoned within a convent cloister. This paper again showed the imaginative way in which those held in prison could communicate with their friends outside, in this case with members of her religious order. Catie Gill (Loughborough) discussed the case of Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers, two Quakers who found themselves imprisoned on Malta by the Inquisition and produced an account of their experience set in a martyrological prose rooted in the bible, and which offered a moving account of female resilience to the suffering which was such a part of early Quaker identity.

In the final plenary Jerome de Groot (Manchester) suggested that the Civil wars complicated and confused any sense of genre to such an extent that we need to redraw the boundaries of the term. Focusing on royalist texts he suggested that they engaged with multiple discourses, not merely poetic ones, and worked through drama, law, performance and religion in seeking to understand how 'loyalty' had led them to the circumstances in which they found themselves. Faced with such a variety of models the category of 'prison writing' itself was open to question.

In a final round table led by Adam Smyth (Reading), Tom Freeman (Sheffield) and Bill Sheils (York) the case for a more systematic study of prisons, and especially those outside the capital, was made in order to provide a stronger contextualisation of the material. It was also noted that the vast majority of prisoners at this time remained voiceless and that their experience might best be recovered by these physical remains, and also by the artefacts which many of them produced. In this sense the boundary between say prison and workhouse needed to be thought through also.

Recurring issues: porosity, imagined audiences/communities, attitudes of those outside to the incarceration of their friends, the value of otium for reflective thought and writing, the uncertainty of time which hung over many prisoners, and the extent to which the experience permeated society at all levels, indicated that this is a fruitful line of enquiry into the cultural history of the period, and that the conference had provided a lively start to what, it is hoped, may continue in other places.

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