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Richard Sparks
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Out of the ‘Digger’
The warrior’s honour and the guilty observer

Richard Sparks
Keele University, UK

ABSTRACT
Inside prisons, situations of intractable conflict between certain prisoners and correctional authorities arise. The choices available to either party in escaping the sometimes desperate consequences of these battles are usually severely limited. One effect, desire for which is usually disclaimed by the authorities, can be the creation of a yet deeper level of incarceration for the most recalcitrant. Recalling fieldwork experiences in Scotland in the early 1990s, this article describes both this situation and a notable attempt to discover a route out of it. That route lay through the Barlinnie Special Unit, once one of the most internationally celebrated penal innovations of its day. However, the fieldwork immediately preceded, and was marginally and unintentionally implicated in, a decision to close the Special Unit. The article attempts, first and foremost, to recover what was once special about the Special Unit and, second, to discuss the factors and conditions surrounding its elimination. The latter include the uneasy question of the researcher’s own involvement and the uses made of aspects of the research by the authorities and the media. While affirming that field research in prisons is unavoidably important, it sounds a note of caution concerning the terms under which it is undertaken.

KEY WORDS
prisons, control, segregation, special units, honour, ambivalence, Scotland
Two main concerns are braided together throughout this article. The first, and in terms of the claims that prisons urge upon our attention as social scientists, as citizens and as political actors, ineffably the more important, has to do with certain ironic and intractable dynamics of long-term imprisonment. The matter can be stated abruptly, though its outworkings need to be unwound more patiently. In almost all penal systems that we know currently or can envisage, some people spend a large fraction of their adult life in confinement. The number of such people can vary and so can the completeness of their sequestration from the public gaze. In the contemporary societies of the west, most exorbitantly in the US but not just there, the tendency of recent times has been for this condition to be both magnified and intensified - that is, for the number of such people, and the duration of their confinement and the completeness of their separation from the outer world all to increase simultaneously. Some of the contours of this movement and its origins in political culture have been well described elsewhere and I make no attempt to rehearse these here. Simply put, the phenomenon that I call here ‘deep incarceration’ has lately become a more entrenched and apparently immoveable aspect of contemporary penality. Not all prisoners respond to this condition equally compliantly; neither do all penal institutions produce non-compliance equally nor respond to its occurrence exactly alike. Nevertheless, the basic prison situation constrains the repertoire of possibilities that are open to both keeper and kept. The custodians face certain limited choices, which some of them at times find unpalatable, about where and under what conditions to keep their most resistant captives. The prisoner, generally, continually confronts an even more reduced horizon of decision as between continued defiance and submission, or perhaps at best negotiated surrender.

The sequence of events that I discuss in what follows happened a decade and more ago in Scotland. In their more optimistic aspect they place the predicament of deep incarceration in sharper relief by outlining what was a determined and conscious attempt to break with the repressions, retaliations and deprivations that usually script transactions between non-compliant prisoners and prison authorities. It is at least salutary to recall now, in an era when such terms as ‘lockdown’ and ‘supermax’ have become part of common speech, that at some time, somewhere, it has been deemed sensible and possible to try to do otherwise. In their more dismal dimension, however, these events also bespeak the weightiness of the world of the prison and the gravitational forces that eventually pulled the escape attempt back towards the depths.

The second, and more subsidiary, thread here concerns my own uneasy and perhaps ultimately untenable position as observer, recorder and marginal participant in a setting where I had limited standing and of which, as seems ever more uncomfortably apparent to me, I had severely limited
understanding too. I do not wish to dwell unduly on this point. Self-absorption in this case seems ethically dubious and of peripheral relevance, and is anyway usually a failure of good taste. Nevertheless I was there: and it would be too simple, and too consoling, to pretend that my being there was of no consequence at all. Far from rushing into confessional disclosure, for too long my own unease about the viability of my role has inhibited me from public discussion of these matters but such reticence needs eventually to be put aside if either the substantive topic or the dilemmas of the researcher’s position are to be open to debate. Suffice to note that if we wish to claim some civic and intellectual importance for first-hand observational research in prisons we may also need to accept that there is no entirely innocuous position from which to speak. I will therefore allow the unsettled question of the researcher’s participation to emerge as and when it seems necessary and return to it passingly by way of some kind of conclusion.

The ‘digger’ is the name given by prisoners in Scotland to a prison’s segregation unit. In England the equivalent is known as ‘the block’ or ‘chokey’; in America as ‘the hole’ and doubtless numberless other names. ‘Diggers’ may be anywhere, but throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s the Digger meant the segregation unit at Peterhead prison. Peterhead is a lonely granite fortress, high on a craggy outcrop above the seething North Sea. Peterhead prison is miles and miles from anywhere, except the spartan fishing town of Peterhead itself, its harbour long ago excavated by prisoners. Peterhead is the gothic ideal-type of a prison, a cinematic prison.

I have been in Peterhead digger only once and have never wished to return. It was not there but far away in Glasgow at the Special Unit in Barlinnie prison that I carried out the work – the work that caused me the trouble and which I have written so little about until now. The work was in the Special Unit, but nothing that happened in the Special Unit can fully be understood without also knowing about the Digger. Peterhead prison and Barlinnie prison still stand but neither of the two institutions that are central to this account – the Digger and the Special Unit – exist any more in quite the same form. They existed, and ceased to exist, in a special relationship with one another. I shall say something about that relationship and its cessation and my small, ambiguous, peripheral part in it.

Scotland, as any venturesome tourist knows, is a big place but a small country. Unlike the US or even England with their extensive and arcane complicated penal systems, anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with Scottish prisons could soon memorize their names. A well-travelled prison official might easily visit them all, and perhaps have worked in most, in the course of a career. In their years of service such an official would also meet certain prisoners again and again. We who document the travails of prison systems (their scale and shape, their recurrent crises and reform agendas) too easily miss their personal side (those who make TV dramas generally
misunderstand them the opposite way). But in a place like Scotland the narratives of an official’s career and a lengthy convict career can intersect at many points. In a small country the keepers and the kept can believe they know each other; and the effects of those beliefs and reputations (the relationships of antagonism, persecution, respect and even wary friendship) can echo down the years. A prominent convict, one with a reputation for making trouble or escaping or taking hostages, can be notorious in a highly consequential way. A notable place, a site of conflict and defiance for example, can hold a place of special infamy in the common memory. In their time (which here means until the early 1990s) the Digger and the Special Unit were probably the two places of greatest symbolic significance within the Scottish prison system, as well as in the individual prison biographies of prisoners whom I met in the Barlinnie Special Unit. They were two poles of a single axis. One orbited the other. It was only later that I realized that I had been on the satellite and not the planet.

Deep play

The less local point, the one that escaped the gravitational pull of Scotland at the turn of the 1990s, the point of intractability and hence of theoretical consequence, concerns the recurrent capacity of prison systems to develop deepest places – ends-of-the-line; holes; termini. At the lowest point on an ostensibly rational system of incentives and sanctions (token economies, career plans, staged systems of security decategorization) one often finds such a terminus. Those who reside there are generally deemed not mad but merely incorrigibly perverse. The perversity consists in having repudiated the system of incentives and disincentives. The most forceful negative incentives thus necessarily fall on those known to be most committed to resisting them. The lowest place in the compliance structure then is the one precisely premised upon the inmate’s non-compliance, his persistent refusal of the very offers that work to keep the others in hand.

Despite repeated counsel to avoid this tendency (see, for example, King and McDermott, 1990; King, 1994; Sparks, 2001), many prison systems seem unable to resist this impasse as if for reasons of consistency; the creation of the terminus is logically (or ideologically) entailed. What outcomes can there be from the game-space thus created? For the custodians, to maintain the terminus without sacrificing their professional self-esteem it is necessary to keep making offers that can only be refused; but the consolation that holding the most perverse ones in the terminus saves trouble for their colleagues elsewhere is always to hand. The official account of the terminus is thus couched in the utilitarian diction of the greater good. It emphasizes the necessity of separation (to forestall the destabilization of
the whole prison, or even system), the protection of staff and other prisoners from the unamenable few, and speaks only secondarily, if at all, of aversion and punishment. From the prisoner’s perspective the aim of such units is to intimidate, retaliate and subdue.

Yet in candid moments it becomes clear that the custodians’ understanding of what it is that keeps their captives stuck where they are runs deeper than the official discourse permits them to say openly. The hook on which the man is caught is honour - the fateful commitment to a course of action irrespective of its cost. He could come out if only he could come out unvanquished. But why is this too high a price for the system to tolerate? Is some part of the institution’s honour sacrificed in allowing him this petty victory? At the same time the existence of the terminus is attended by ethical discomfort. Prisons after all yearn for, depend upon and often partially achieve the quiescent acknowledgement of their inmates. Yet termini are places which fall beyond or outside the routines and expectations of the negotiated order of penal normality. They are reserved to those prisoners reckoned impervious to accommodation, compromise or self-control and on whom neither the carrot, nor the stick, nor yet the habitual prison transactions that Sykes (1958) calls the ‘claims of reciprocity’ appear to have any moderating effect. In this regard these more radical forms of isolation and deprivation are penal environments which uniquely lie outwith legitimacy. The Digger was such a terminus. In it, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, men’s cells were unlocked only when four officers in full riot dress were present. Witnessing this scene one could not help but wonder at the remarkable choreography of the procedure, repeated several times each day for each of the 12 men there. How could this continue? How could any of them sustain it? How could it not continue? How could anything interrupt it?

I do not dwell on this mainly in order to castigate the prison authorities. Certainly in Scotland by the end of the 1980s the continued existence of such measures (and the ‘legitimacy deficit’ which they imply (Beetham, 1991)) had come to be acknowledged as embarrassing and unwelcome within practitioners’ aspirations (Coyle, 1987, 1991) and official discourse (Scottish Prison Service, 1990). Neither is it my intention to heroize those who had in some sense made the Digger their home. Nevertheless, what externally seems so perverse is indeed the case - namely that the prisoner...
who commits himself to a trajectory that leads to prolonged confinement in the terminus derives some sense of fulfillment from his position, even if he also longs to be free of it. Equally ironic, therefore, is the fact that those who undertake some of the most extreme forms of violence (as in hostage-taking for example) or of apparent self-abasement (‘dirty protests’, hunger strikes) are precisely those most likely to see their own actions in a chivalric language of honour and integrity. It is very difficult for us (and how much more so for the guards who can actually smell these consequences of their own regime and who, moreover, know that it is an act of hostility against them) to contemplate the prospect of a man smeared in his own faeces as an assertion of self-esteem. But I think it can only really be so understood. It is perhaps simply this which makes such cycles of opposition so intractable, namely that the prisoner regards himself – his self – as under attack.

Two further points can also be made. Prisoners speak, at least retrospectively, of the elemental simplicity of life in the Digger. Lines of battle are clear. The complexities of the outside world are far away. It is described at times in terms of something close to serenity. The other is that isolation, paradoxically, of course creates solidarities. Whereas ordinary prison locations tend to be factious, competitive and ridden with cliques and jealousies, prisoners undergoing the shared deprivation of the Digger can see themselves as a crew, an embattled platoon, a literal ‘dirty dozen’. It is a sense of shared identity that can have an ecstatic effect and one that may sustain a stance of opposition long after it has come to seem irrational and self-defeating.

But what was also notably and perhaps unrepeatably creative in the Scottish case was that for at least some part of the 21 years of its existence (from 1973 to 1994) the Special Unit represented a feasible way out, one which enhanced and did not break the honour of the combatant. By definition, for a prisoner to come to the Special Unit from the Digger required that he had first been in an extreme and abject situation. The Special Unit, from the prisoner’s point of view, before it was anything else, and contrary to the myth-making claims that surrounded its alleged capacity for psychological transformation, was a route out of the Digger. The genius of the Scottish solution was to have created a place beyond the terminus – a place of resort beyond the last resort of permanent segregation. It is a long way geographically from Peterhead to Barlinnie as anyone who has made that weary journey knows; but emotionally it was much, much further. To move from one to the other was in some sense to have escaped, yet to remain in prison. But in order to achieve this trick the Special Unit had to be wildly, and in the end unassimilably, different. And in the end the difference did it in. Here begins my obituary for something that was once quite remarkable and whose demise I helped inadvertently to facilitate.
Submersion in the field

The Barlinnie Special Unit (ever afterwards known by its admirers and detractors alike simply as ‘the Special Unit’) had been opened in the early 1970s in an atmosphere characterized on the one hand by the afterglow of the rehabilitative optimism of the post-war period and on the other by a series of anxieties about the prison-level consequences of the abolition of capital punishment. One of the besetting worries of the time had been that the cessation of executions would coincide with the development of a hard core of irreconcilables serving ultra-long sentences, habituated to the use of extreme violence and with, proverbially, ‘nothing to lose’. That some kind of special provision was invented to cater to this fear was to this extent unsurprising. Nonetheless, the form it assumed in the case of the Special Unit was less obvious and expected. Other previous and contemporaneous attempts at the special handling of the most troublesome in both Scotland (for example, the so-called ‘cages’ at Inverness) and England (the notorious Wakefield ‘control units’) had been austere and depriving and founded, if on any developed penological principle at all, on the crude aversiveness of behaviourism. The Barlinnie Unit, by contrast, was to be consciously non-punitive and based on a presumption of enhanced levels of trust and internal self-government. That this ‘experiment’ (as it continued to be styled throughout the 21 years of its existence) ever came into being at all was certainly testament to the fear aroused by some of its inhabitants but also to the minor but tenacious and fiercely principled strain of progressive thinking in the professional culture of Scottish penal practice. It was, in retrospect, an experiment of a very strange description indeed – never replicated, yet not (until much later) abandoned, nor even systematically evaluated. It was, in truth, more a brilliant improvisation than a so-called proper experiment. Yet the ‘experimental’ tag conditioned so much of what subsequently transpired. It allowed a level of autonomy and innovation and eccentricity that was inconceivable elsewhere in the system; but it also meant that the more radical and challenging implications of what went on in the unit could be channelled out and neutralized rather than confronted or assimilated. Ultimately, as I show below, ‘experimental’ meant ‘impermanent’ and ‘provisional’. However long it might exist, and it probably lasted longer than anyone ever really expected, the experimental component of the system was precisely one to which no fundamental commitment had been made – it would continue for so long and in so far as was convenient.

By the time I went there in the uncharacteristically (for Glasgow) long, hot summer of 1992 the Special Unit had long been a famous place. It had been memorialized in television documentaries and in the widely read autobiographies of its most famous graduates (Boyle, 1977, 1984; Steele, 1992). Books had been written about the transformative effects on its troubled...
denizens of involvement in artistic production. Jimmy Boyle, the most charismatic of them all, had become a noted sculptor, married a psychiatrist and gone on after his release to make a small fortune in the champagne importing business. There was, it might be admitted, something cultic about its, and especially his, celebrity. In the classic manner of liberal reformist penology, the Special Unit’s small history of hard-won and fragile successes had been elevated to the status of magic. There was something numinous there – something about sculpture, something about psychiatry. The Scottish Prison Service, and the City of Glasgow, enjoyed showing off their special place. No visiting dignitary’s tour of the city was complete without the obligatory stop at the Special Unit. Yet Scotland had never unambiguously loved its most famous penal innovation. The taint of their former notoriety still hung about the prisoners, past and present. Perhaps their prominence was too keen a reminder of incompletely healed wounds - gang wars, prison riots, alleged miscarriages of justice. The press had always played it both ways - pictures of Jimmy Boyle with TV personalities one day, rumours of pampering and ill-doing in ‘The Nutcracker Suite’ the next. There were snide stories of fashionable hostesses vying with each other to have former Special Unit prisoners at their tables. The vaunted difference, the specialness of the Special Unit, occasioned pride and embarrassment, adulation and resentment, in an unstable cocktail.

Within the Scottish Prison Service too there was ambivalence. These men were after all the same ones who had resisted, refused, rebelled, threatened, taken to rooftops and taken hostages. Some had shitted-up on ‘dirty protest’, been on hunger strike and spent months or years in mute defiance of the prison authorities. In a small country these are hard things to forget. Moreover, because the unit had been established on principles derived from the therapeutic communities movement of the late 1960s, its internal organization was marked by a high degree of participation and democratic involvement (see, for example, Jones, 1968). That meant these same people, in the name of learning responsibility and non-violent problem-solving, had been given an unusual degree of control over their little, special place. The chief vehicle of this self-governance, the celebrated Tuesday ‘community meeting’, was said at various times to have become unbearably contentious; to have been hi-jacked by cliques of the most forceful or articulate; to have become a weapon whereby unit members (and not just prisoners but also their allies among the clinical and even the discipline staff) continually pressed for more autonomy, more difference, more specialness. Later, when a colleague and I dug into the scrappy and previously uninspected archive of papers at Scottish Prison Service Headquarters, we found page after page of memoranda, letters, transcripts of Parliamentary questions and debates, some worried, some outrightly hostile. The prisoners had become ‘an elite self-selecting group’, abusing their power of veto over new entrants, puffed
up by their status among a credulous coterie of groupies, chatterers and dilettantes. The Special Unit was not special – just a ‘small prison with perks’. The unit was ‘rewarding bad behaviour’. The last allegation was the most recurrent and the hardest to shake off. It gave the unit’s detractors a point of attack that chimed forcefully with the intuitive egalitarianism of Scottish political culture. Were not the least eligible getting the best things? What about the ordinary convict, the one who just did his sentence and went home?

There was always something slightly bizarre about at least some of these attacks. Although it certainly had its ‘perks’ and little luxuries, the Special Unit was never luxurious. It was not even purpose built. It had been converted from the tiny women’s quarters of the immense and rambling Barlinnie prison. The prison stood (and stands) surrounded by the glum tenements and high-rises of Riddrie and Easterhouse in Glasgow’s desolate east end – the ‘prisons wi’ windows’ as Billy Connolly once called them. The unit consisted only of 10 cells on two galleried floors, a small kitchen, a back room with some weights and a treadmill, a poorly decorated main room with a snooker table, a small TV room, two tiny offices (one for the unit Governor and one used as an interview room by the psychiatric and social work staff, and me) and a tatty little garden with a falling-down greenhouse. The whole thing was surrounded by a high sandstone wall and felt beleaguered and claustrophobic. Whatever the press diction around it, it was never physical comfort that differentiated it from other prisons. Rather, it was its variance from other aspects of what constituted the public sense of penal rectitude and propriety – the unstructured use of time, the lack of compulsory work or other characteristic demands and elements of regime structure, the fact that prisoners wore their own clothes, saw their visitors where and when they chose, kept pigeons, sat around chatting, and generally behaved much as they might do at home (as indeed in a certain sense they were). It was an anomaly, within a prison system that was still in many respects rigorous, masculinist, hierarchical and austere. It was vulnerable from both sides – from those who thought it was a haven of unacceptable privilege and those who thought it was a messy little slum, and from some who entertained both opinions. The cultivated informality and closeness of its staff-prisoner relations, the vaunted source of its special ability to pacify some exceptionally tough, resistant and sometimes unpredictable people, was also a point wide open to attack. Staff (and of course researchers) who over-identified with the unit could be said to have ‘gone native’ there and to have been hoodwinked by manipulative and plausible convicts. They too might ultimately have to be taught a lesson in loyalty and compliance.

I entered this stew of antipathies and suspicions at a late point and in a blithe condition of unknowingness. The scene had been further complicated by the recent foundation of a second unit, 20 miles or so away at Shotts.
The Shotts Unit, unlike the Special Unit, had been purpose built. Its physical plant and facilities were infinitely superior - lighter, more spacious, better equipped and appointed. Moreover, the ground-rules for the operation of the Shotts Unit had been specifically designed to obviate some of the controversies and embarrassments associated with Barlinnie. Visits were to be taken in a designated area away from the living accommodation and at specified (albeit still relatively generous) times. Hence, the persistent scandalous rumour that prisoners were having sex with their visitors and sharing intoxicants with them in the Special Unit would be avoided. The powers of the Shotts community meeting were to be more clearly circumscribed. Prisoners would be consulted, helped, allowed a degree of personal space but would have to agree to participate in structured therapeutic or educational activity. The terms of the prisoner’s presence there would be more contractual, more conditional. The Governor was to be allowed to govern. Now that it had these two rather different units among its long-term estate, the Scottish Prison Service wanted an evaluation; and it wanted English academics with little prior association with the tortuous intimacies of the Scottish history to do it. Our presence, or at least mine in Barlinnie, was subject to the consent of the prisoners and staff, like most things there. We would meet. They would vote. Once admitted I would have unrestricted access to the unit at any hour.

At a community meeting I sat in the celebrated ‘hot seat’ and was, in effect, interviewed for the job. Yes, I would show examples of my previous work. Yes, I would have a list of questions and yes, everyone could see it. Yes, I would tape-record interviews, subject to consent. Only I would have access to the tapes. No, I was not aware of any hidden agenda to close the unit down or change it out of recognition. No, I had not at this time been to Shotts and I had no view on the relative merits of the two places. No, I had not yet been to Peterhead but promised that I would go. Yes, I would come back with a draft of my report and read it out to everyone. How would I work? I would do what I always did. I would sit around and talk to people; talk the sun from the sky. If anyone did not want to talk to me I would go away. It was the longest and most rigorous interview I have had, the one in which the interviewers had the most at stake. Their correct premise was that the Prison Service would make decisions about the unit, whether or not they let me in. They might have more to gain than lose by talking to me. I might be as good an intermediary as they would get. I would do therefore. I could act, if no more than this, as a messenger – one who could take their views to the seats of power with some expectation of a polite hearing. I am not sure to this day whether my credibility ever rose above this modest level. (And, as we know, the lot of go-betweens is not always happy.) Of course, from my own point of view, the offer was unrefusable. Despite having been in existence for some 20 years, and having retained the label ‘experimental’
for the whole of that time, and for all that had been written in and about it, the Special Unit had never been systematically researched by a non-participant observer. Though I had long seen myself as a student and explorer of prisons rather than an ‘evaluator’, I was ready enough to accept the brief as the price of admission and, perhaps, as an opportunity to make a constructive contribution. The trouble that came later reflected the unresolved tensions in my position as at once ethnographer and evaluator – but we can come to that.

When I returned to the unit some weeks later to begin my work proper, several prisoners and some of the staff were sitting together in the yard improving their suntans. I’m not sure if I ever made it indoors that day, and ever after I did much of my work on that same bench. This is my abiding memory of that summer – talking and talking about everything, sometimes desultorily, sometimes intensely, sometimes just one person, sometimes with a quite large group. Some people talked only about prison. Some people would talk about anything but. One prisoner had said he would not participate in the research, though we talked a lot on the bench. To my final attempt to get him to talk about prisons he said: ‘Nothing personal Richard, but talking about prisons bores me’. So after that we just talked. My talking lasted in all for about two months, almost every day, usually all day. For about the first half of that time I just talked, made some notes, and collected such scrappy and inconclusive documentary material as the great ‘experiment’ had ever generated. In the second month I taped about 20 long interviews with some of the prisoners (all who would commit their voices to tape – there were two who would not) and most of the staff, including the psychiatrists, social workers and priests. Strangely, and quite out of keeping with my other experiences of prison research, I remember the whole period as an oddly peaceful interlude, however exhausting and intense.

Talk in the end was what it was all about. In the Digger there was almost no talk. In the Special Unit there was almost nothing else. As I have noted above there was nothing special about the unit architecturally. Indeed it was in many respects at least physically more like the Digger than it was the open-plan comforts of Shotts. Neither, for much of its lifespan, and certainly in the latter years, was there much that was radically innovative about any formal programme of intervention or training that went on there. But it was a place that lent itself to talking and to coming and going. People (wives, girlfriends, children, grandchildren, social workers, psychiatrists, journalists, biographers, electricians, plumbers) came and went all the time. I came and went all the time too. Knowing almost no one else in Glasgow I would quite often come back in the evening, for want of anything else much to do, and talk and eat with the people that I did know. Since they did not lack for visitors, these men, unlike most prisoners, were not on the face of things obviously lonely, although some of them had spent long times in some
exceptionally lonely places. They simply had much to talk about, including both the loneliness and the comradeship that they once had encountered in their extraordinary prison journeys and their rascally, improvident, reckless lives.

Here then is my one great revelatory finding about the Special Unit. There was nothing really special about the Special Unit except talk. It was a place in which people talked so much that they sometimes nearly forgot that they were in prison. It was there that people who had been denied talk or foregone it in the uncanny, hostile silence of the Digger and other termini talked. Sometimes they did have structured, purposive talk with their social workers and psychiatrists but in the main they just talked. Much of that talk was low-key, meandering and tired. It was the talk of people who did not always want to talk about prisons, who had been in prison too long and were tired of it, weary of who they had been and wearied by what they had been through. By the time I came there the unit collectively was a tired place—tired but still talkative. With rare exceptions, such as my interview, the community meeting was no longer the crucible of ideological debate and crackling personal tensions that it reputedly once had been. There was little left either of the ferment of artistic creativity purportedly associated with the unit’s heyday in the 1970s. One prisoner told me he was tired of ‘the arty-farty stuff’. He wanted to talk about his pigeons. To the extent that this discursivity was by design, its genius lay in the unit’s mimicry of the mundane gossipsiness of everyday life and its studied avoidance of the more obvious trappings and routines that are customary in prisons. I return below to the significance of this point, and more particularly of its having been missed or rejected by those who were ultimately to decide the unit’s fate.

**Surfacing**

At length, and by various indirections, the talk would often revert to the prison journey—the journey that had led to the Digger or to other low and lonely places and at last here. Cohen and Taylor (1981: 51–69) write about prisons, and in particular the little, claustrophobic spaces of deep incarceration, using analogies with other forms of sequestration and close confinement alone or with very few others—sensory deprivation experiments, shipwrecks and so on. Prisoners also use such metaphors, though they know only too well that imprisonment is not quite like being in a submarine, nor yet an Antarctic expedition. One of the most common and more apt of such analogies for Special Unit prisoners in describing the journey out of the Digger was that of the depressurization process in deep-sea diving. Special Unit prisoners recognized here the implied notion of having been at depth and emerged somewhere much nearer the surface. Most would also go on
to affirm that they had not escaped the painful (sometimes fatal) complications which such emergence entails. All insisted that one could only comprehend their present situation by first understanding where they had previously been, and its legacies. Almost from its inception there is a record of unit prisoners experiencing powerfully mixed emotions at their partial liberation. Jimmy Boyle in *The Pain of Confinement* describes his world as having been ‘turned upside down’ in a way that was for him finally creative. But he speaks also of those who could not ultimately make the same transition.

Similarly, for some of the unit prisoners that I talked to there was a sense of relief and escape at having surfaced in the unit, but also of having undergone a series of rather drastic and as yet unassimilated experiences:

It’s not what the unit done for me, first of all . . . it’s what the prison done – damaged me very, very badly. You know. The anger. The pain. And I just couldn’t give a fuck what happened to me in there . . . I’ve destroyed myself in there. Right? Because everything was getting unbearable. Unbearable. But when I came here, in a sense it saved my life. What happened was I got a lifeline just in fucking time.

All those I spoke to drew a drastic distinction between their pre-unit experiences and their present situations. In each case their experience of ‘the mainstream’ was recounted in terms of conflict, mistrust and a sense of hopelessness:

A lot of people didn’t like me. I didn’t trust prison officers, I didn’t trust prisoners, I didn’t trust prison authorities and most of all I didn’t trust the Scottish Office . . . The prison authorities had adopted against me a war of attrition whereby they would just sit and wait and wait and wait for me to say ‘Look, I’ve had enough’, which was not what happened at all . . . There’s no doubt whatsoever that had I not been moved here I would have seriously injured somebody at [x] prison.

And on arrival at BSU:

I had a picture in my mind and my picture was just totally, totally wrong . . . I wasn’t disappointed. I was surprised, very surprised . . . It’s a different world. The way you would feel if you landed on Mars, you know. But when you met the Martians even after a couple of days you felt better. And it was like that. And it was a sense of disbelief that I was actually in something so different.

And again, another inmate comments:

Being suddenly given access to more of the norms of society, and more of the normal standards of society, from, from dungeons of dire despair, you know,
from that position into, you know, a small society but closer to the norms of society, entailed a degree of culture shock, disorientation and rapid readjustment, rapid readjustment.

These stories are typical of all those with whom I spoke. Each such account affirmed that coming into the unit represented a difficult and demanding transition but one that each speaker ultimately regarded as very positive. These stories are haunted by mingled fear and relief - fear at what might have happened had they stayed in their original situation, relief that this has been avoided. Prisoners stressed that living in the unit had its own peculiar difficulties and challenges. All their stories were marked by anxiety about the future and by a continuing mistrust of the larger prison system beyond the unit.

By implication these prisoners acknowledged that the unit had 'worked' in respect of its official aims - its contribution towards problem-solving for the system - inasmuch as it had provided some sort of resolution in their own particular cases. But their emphasis lay elsewhere - in a directly personal assessment of how being in the unit had altered their views, the course of their sentences, their relationships with their families and their orientation towards the future. The challenge for those whose earlier prison experience was mainly about conflict, antagonism, solitude and the Digger lay in accepting the greater complexity of a prison environment which in some ways replicates the troubling open-endedness of external normality:

Thus:

Over the last five years I've come a million miles . . . a million miles . . . Recently I've taken on board things, issues that I didn't give any thought. I've taken things on board and I'm working on it - why I do these things - and eventually I'm going to overcome them, like I've overcome a lot of other things. But basically the thing is to understand myself . . . So only I can think of the answer. It's my head, you know. I mean this place gives me time, it gives me an opportunity to in a sense experiment with myself. OK?

Another said:

Well the help that came from staff here was just by being and behaving as normal human beings. The staff here do behave differently from any other staff that I've known throughout the prison system. I mean they've behaved with normal human respect . . . with normal courtesy and not make you subject to every demand, or order, or command you know. They don't treat you as if you're some kind of lesser human being that must obey under any circumstances, without questioning their authority.

The Special Unit always had more than one kind of aim attributed to it, and though the prisoner's aims and the prison system's aims might coincide for
a time they were never identical. Having started life buoyed up on a wave of clinical-rehabilitative optimism, and as a show-case for those ambitions, it had become by 1990 little more than a convenient pragmatic device, useful to the extent that it absorbed these men's potentialities for violence and disruption and hence relieved pressure elsewhere in the system. As such it might also become redundant or no longer cost-effective. Prisoners' suspicions that key decision-makers were equivocal in their attitude to the unit fuelled their besetting anxiety, namely that in reality the unit was not part of the escape route but rather simply more prison (a 'small prison with perks'). Their fear, and the source of their weariness, was that they had been shunted into a siding and left there, but only for so long as it suited someone else's purposes to leave them. The bravery and commitment involved in the notion of 'experimenting with myself' was all too easily corroded by a continuing mistrust of the larger system's intentions towards them. As one put it when discussing with me a friend's prospects for forward movement and parole: 'But what if they're not planning to let him go? Have you considered that?'

Sinking

An unwelcome conclusion began to take shape in my mind. The prisoners' suspicions (shared it might be added by some of the staff) were not just the understandable product of their bitter experience – not just more 'prison paranoia' as everyone called it. They were not just biographically intelligible, they were right. As the sense of progression and advance necessary to sustain the grand personal projects ('experimenting with myself') began to dissipate, so the unstructured time of the unit began to revert to being just more prison time – an undifferentiated succession of days; time to be done.

In the absence of confidence in the future, prisoners ceased to be prepared to take the gamble of commitment to personal change. At least one, the man who told me that talking about prison bored him, had already foregone such hope. I recalled Larkin's view that:

Truly, though our element is time
We are not suited to the long perspectives,
Open at each instant of our lives.
They link us to our losses.

The talkers began to close down. They were all serving life sentences. At the time I arrived none of them had served less than 10 years and those years had been bitter and embattled. None of them had a parole date and the Prison Service had made it clear that they would not be considered for one until they agreed to move on from the unit. It had been declared that unit prisoners could only enter the parole process, however long that might take,
on condition that they submit to the ‘test’ of surviving in ordinary prison conditions without reverting to their former violent, oppositional ways. It might be that their time at the unit would be completely wasted and bring them no nearer to release. A second game was afoot, quieter and less brutal than the games played out in the Digger but not less fatal. The immovable object of eight men long-practised in obduracy had met the irresistible force of the Scottish parole system. The notion of the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ has long since been appropriated by game-theorists as a convenient image out of which to spin innumerable formulae, all connection to the materiality of prisons severed. But these were dilemmas of a sort too abrupt to interest the mathematicians. Remain in the safety of the unit (safe for as long as it remained open), growing older and getting no nearer to release. Move on and gamble that people whom you deeply mistrust will hold to a bargain whose terms they will not specify until you accede. The hard men were tired and very much afraid.

It was regarded as a problem that people remained ‘too long’ in the Special Unit and hence ‘clogged up’ the availability of places. In our report to the Scottish Prison Service (Bottomley et al., 1994) my colleagues and I argued that this was a systemic problem, one associated with the indeterminacy of the life sentence and the Scottish parole system and not something attributable merely to the recalcitrance of individual prisoners. Yet it reflected unfavourably on the perception of the unit. Here we argued, was a group of men doing, as one of them put it, ‘heavy, heavy, heavy porridge’ and finding little prospect for progress towards freedom and few incentives for moving on from the unit. Unit managers and staff felt exposed in having few viable options to offer prisoners. The prisoners themselves fretted incessantly about where they might be called upon to move to, when and under what conditions. Some on both sides knew that the external perception was of a growing sense of marking time, of standing still, even of ‘stagnation’ within the unit community. Both its prestige, as a place of innovation, experiment and transformation, and its pragmatic utility to Prison Service tacticians were in steep decline.

One of the unit’s managers expressed the problem to me clearly:

When we have long periods of relative calm and nothing is happening then we’ve got to motivate the fellows otherwise we move into a kind of becalmed situation and we lose . . . Trivia becomes important and then we will hit a difficult patch and they’re not geared to meet that . . . In a sense not only do we have to integrate special units with the rest of the service but we also have to integrate the Parole Board . . . These policies have got to interface well otherwise we can be managing an individual well and he’s behaving himself properly and the Parole Board say that’s all very well but . . . Now somehow all that has to be brought together, it has to be a fully integrated plan,
otherwise we lose the guy. Otherwise he says, 'Well, what are you doing with my life? You’re screwing me around. Here I have been satisfying everything that the prison service wanted and it is of no account'.

I tried to argue the case as positively as I could. I made free use of prisoners’ and staff members’ own eloquent testimonies. I tried to suggest that while the virtues of the Special Unit might no longer be obvious, nor its utility unarguable, it was still important and not beyond repair. One of the prisoners had said to me:

There are eight guys in here but at the end of the day we’re all eight individual guys and every one of us has got individual needs. So each one of us copes with his own individual need. But if there’s any one guy who is sinking and needs any other guy’s support well we are all there with that support, you know. As regards to a complete community on a daily basis, it would only work if there was a goal. If there was a goal the guys would then start gathering together and maybe talking more freely to people. At the end of the day, you give a little bit, Richard, you’ll get a little bit back. It’s not easy to spend time in the Special Unit. It’s not easy. I’ve found that.

So I suggested that because the unit sought to answer a range of individual needs there would be a limit upon how far one should seek to legislate for a ‘normal’ period within it, either in terms of length or of activity. I disputed the case for making the daily routine more ‘structured’, or more like that of a ‘normal’ prison. I asserted that the problems originated elsewhere, in the fact that individuals did not feel that their sentences as a whole (and hence in an important sense their lives) had any feeling of forward movement. Hence, I said, if the daily level of activity within the unit was now rather low it was because of uncertainties imposed by external conditions.

Drowning

I had not at this point grasped that the Special Unit might be about to be closed. I had not therefore considered the possibility that any remark of mine might feature in the process of its closure. Quite the contrary. I figured that the long-delayed decision to (at last!) attempt some kind of evaluation of this longstanding but never-studied ‘experiment’ indicated some kind of interest in its continuance, albeit perhaps in modified form. The fact that my collaborator Alison Liebling was simultaneously researching in the Shotts Unit suggested to us merely that the Scottish Prison Service understandably required some comparative appraisal of its (important, expensive, but far from uncontroversial) special unit strategy. To this day I do not know with
any certainty whether the closure decision predated my arrival at Barlinnie or not. Consequently I do not know whether my contribution tipped a decision that was still in the balance, or merely eased the presentation of one that had already been taken (or was substantially irrelevant). I knew that there was an historic ambivalence within the higher echelons of the Scottish Prison Service towards the unit, but I did not know with any clarity which faction was currently in the ascendant.

I did not see either that my voice had become contaminated and suspect by dint of what by training and inclination I took to be the defensible research practice of writing my report in the form of a naturalistic and appreciative commentary upon the voices of the prisoners and staff. I failed as a sociologist in not seeing that their stigma could be transferred to me. The failure does not lie in that my recommendations were rejected: that decision always lay within the prerogatives of those who had allowed me to be there. The failure lies in not having understood the nature of the game now being played and hence having played into others' hands. I did nothing that either conscience nor any ethics committee would rule impermissible. Yet if there was something like an ethical failure, or something that still feels like one, it resulted from a cognitive and theoretical inadequacy – an inadequate analysis of the situation. I failed to learn from my tutors in the Special Unit the habit of mistrust.

What I wrote at the time I wrote straight, in a spirit of unreflexive and unironic truth-telling, like a go-between. But the position from which I wrote had become untenable. I could tenably have written as a more distant and uninvolved kind of spectator, one to whom the truth but not the outcome mattered. I could, conversely, have written as a more thoroughgoing partisan, a more clued-up academic politician – an advocate rather than a mere observer. In the end I made neither choice with enough clarity or conviction. Some of the little I have written on this subject I have written for the benefit of the historical record, in order that something of consequence not be allowed to pass out of the world unremarked or remembered only through the slighting comments of those who determined that it had outlived its usefulness. What I write here I write in order that the profound fixes and intractabilities of deep incarceration be acknowledged, and as a cautionary tale for those who aspire both to write ethnography and to play the 'rationality game' (Pahl, 1977) of the hired researcher in a prison.

**About the endgame**

Eventually even I twigged that something was wrong. It was several months after my main summer fieldwork period and I had already drafted my report. I had returned in order to tell the people at Barlinnie what I intended to say.
I was also invited over to the Shotts Unit for Christmas dinner and to propose the non-alcoholic seasonal toast. The Governor introduced me as 'the man who went native in the Special Unit'. It was a remark whose jocund, knowing tone was to return to haunt me. Much as it may have endeared me a bit to the Shotts prisoners, and hence even have seemed mildly flattering at the time, in the end it positioned me as a dupe. Suddenly everyone seemed to know something that I did not. The Shotts prisoners certainly thought something was afoot; that 'they' had something in mind for the Special Unit.

Then there was a long pause. To the extent that I can reconstruct what happened next it went something like this. My colleagues and I eventually submitted our combined reports on Barlinnie and Shotts in the first weeks of January 1993. We heard little for several months other than that we would be permitted to make conference presentations on the work in July, provided the Scottish Prison Service had advance sight of the abstracts. Preparations for publication were said to be in hand. There was talk of a book bringing together a range of contributions on control problems in Scottish prisons. At some point in mid-1993 we learned that an internal Working Party had been convened to consider future plans for the units in the context of the Scottish long-term estate as a whole. It would consider our (as yet unpublished) work, among other evidence – though no invitation to appear in person before this group was ever forthcoming.

With no prior notice the text of our work was published unamended in August 1994 under a Scottish Prison Service imprint. Although accompanied only by a blandly factual press release, the following day every Scottish newspaper had located the one paragraph in a 70-page document that made reference to the private nature of visits in the Special Unit. I leave it to the reader to infer how the journalists so rapidly and unanimously found their way to the relevant passage. The headlines were blunt and require little elaboration:

- **Sex sessions behind bars** (Daily Express)
- **Inmates Getting it ‘Cushy’ in Barlinnie** (Evening Times)
- **Sex Behind Bars in the Nutcracker Suite** (Today)
- **RAGE AS PRISON BARS ALLOW CONS NOOKIE IN THE NICK** (The Sun)

The source of these remarks was variously cited as ‘an official report’, ‘a report by university researchers’ and ‘an authoritative report by English academics’. I now feel that the most plausible interpretation of these events is that in unwittingly supplying ‘authoritative’ confirmation of a long-simmering rumour, I made it easier for the authorities to accomplish closure.
With this sheaf of media denunciations to hand it was a simple matter to suggest that it was the unit, rather than the Prison Service generally, that had wavered from earlier principles and aspirations. The end could be achieved by news management rather than open rejection of those principles.

The coup de grace was not delivered immediately. It followed instead hard on the publication of the internal Working Party’s report that November (Scottish Prison Service, 1994). The Chief Executive of the Scottish Prison Service explained to the Evening Times: ‘It no longer meets our needs and cannot easily be fitted into the new structure in which personal responsibility within a suitably structured framework will be a guiding principle’.

Only a few shreds of significance remain to be distilled from this history. Ambivalence marked the history of the Special Unit throughout its 21 turbulent years. Created by the Scottish Prison System yet radically disparate from it – it was somehow unassimilable but also until now apparently unassailable. It presented a stark and at times embarrassing counter-point to other images of Scottish prisons: the ‘cages’ of Inverness, the isolated, strife-torn citadel of Peterhead and so on (Scraton et al., 1991). A number of factors seem to have combined to preserve the curious protected yet ‘semi-detached’ position of the Special Unit for much of its history. Principally, for as long as Peterhead, Perth and latterly Shotts prisons continued to experience intermittent but serious problems of disorder (with the subsidiary outcome of certain prisoners spending long periods in segregation – some of them on prolonged ‘dirty’ protest), the need for some form of ‘special handling’ appeared unarguable; and the Special Unit seemed able to absorb some of the most ‘difficult’ of those prisoners – including men whose resistance to the terms of their confinement had given them lengthy additional sentences on top of their original penalties – as nowhere else could. It unlocked problems that were otherwise intractable (and as one experienced Governor of one of those prisons put it to me, for as long as it had this palpable utility he didn’t particularly mind how it was done). Without ever gaining unqualified endorsement it was simply too useful to abandon. So it was that when the Shotts Unit was opened in 1990 (originally to replace the Special Unit and take its always cramped and poky physical facility out of commission), in the event the Barlinnie unit remained open too.

However, this survival was bought at a certain price. The unit’s unique working practices were permissible for as long as it remained ‘experimental’ and ‘special’. It need not be fully integrated into the Scottish prison system as a whole; neither (being ‘special’ and ‘experimental’) did any implication that its methods could be repeated elsewhere need to be considered too clearly. The more the BSU was allowed to become separate and apart, the fewer apparent exit routes were available to its occupants. Small wonder then if, as was now alleged as part of the reason for its closure, the regime
‘slipped’ and lost some of its former dynamism. But meanwhile, the rest of the system was indeed changing. From the late 1980s onwards the culture of its top management became noticeably more activist than that of its English counterparts. Peterhead (with the exception of a small group of men left stranded on ‘lockdown’ in the Digger) lost its historic function as the place of internal exile of the toughest and was given over entirely to vulnerable prisoners seeking protection. The confident tones of the new management orthodoxies (Scottish Prison Service, 1990), while still claiming a place for small units, proclaimed that the key to the orderly management of the system as a whole lay in revising the conditions of life of the many in the mainstream rather than in the special handling of the few. In parallel with – but in a more marked way than – developments in England and Wales, the Scottish system began to conduct surveys of its population, seeing them as the rational, if dependent, consumers of its services. Sorting out the Special Unit was the least of its priorities.

Ironically, then, the fate of the Special Unit seems to be a casualty of a series of changes that their sponsors regarded as progressive – it was the modernizers not the reactionaries who shut it down. Having for some years been regarded as increasingly marginal to the system’s concerns, it could now be represented as being in any case not a ‘good prison’. In the past, its capacity to absorb and reduce violence was taken to be its own justification. In the past too there was an acknowledgement – indeed this was a central part of the folk wisdom of the unit itself – that at least some of the difficulties encountered by people coming to the unit had systemic, institutional origins. If they had ‘failed’, the system had also failed (had indeed inflicted damage upon them) and that taking refuge in the unit was to some extent a legitimate recourse. Under the new dispensation this view ceased to be admissible. For the unit now to continue to house and shield a group of permanent refuseniks and irreconcilables was no longer on. Its very existence had become a reminder of former failures – a standing admonition of the very system that the reformers believed they had superseded.

In the mood music surrounding the closure, therefore, the unit was simply taken to lack those features which a progressive prison administrator could recognize as the tokens of a good prison regime. It was insufficiently rule-governed (or maybe worse, governed by rules that they did not formulate). Its prisoners were not bound by contractual agreements as to their ‘progress’ and conduct. It did not have enough in the way of ‘structure’ and ‘constructive regime activities’ or ‘planned programmes for personal development’. Worse, it had become ‘dominated by “visits”’, taken in private (and hence including the possibility of intimacy). It simply cannot be the case – according to the current vocational ideology of prison administration – that such time spent in intensive personal contact with outsiders (nor for that matter alone) can possibly be as good for prisoners as time spent in active
engagement with prison officers or psychologists, nor as time spent in the
disciplined cultivation of hobbies, crafts and skills. Therefore, in terms of
the official discourse, the Special Unit had simply become a place in which
‘nothing happened’. On reflection, its closure became quite unsurprising —
harder to explain is how it lasted as long as it did.

Time and change have done for the Special Unit and only a few veterans
still trouble to mourn or memorialize it. Even so there remain a few points
in its story that are still worth stating.

Although the Special Unit was roundly censured for the quiescence of its
latter days, the new (more ‘suitably structured’) system that replaced it
suggests a retreat from at least some of its former ambitions. That is, in the
face of an old dilemma as to whether ‘special’ units are mainly about preparing
for a future beyond the prison or mainly about reducing prison disruption
and encouraging adaptation to serving a sentence, the normalization of
the Scottish anomaly appears to give clear primacy to the latter. In this sense
the abolition of the Special Unit was a poignant moment in a wider tendency,
of international scope, for hopeful but risky wagers on change to be trumped
by the twin aces of security and control. Doubtless the Special Unit itself
always was caught up in confusion over this. Yet it remains worth recalling
just because it was a place in which some people were offered a chance of
reorienting themselves away from their vexed prison histories and towards
their place in the world they hoped one day to rejoin. One of the irrecon-
cilable stumbling blocks between the group of people finally ejected from
the Special Unit and their custodians was that they simply weren’t interested
in being good prisoners. They had the temerity to imagine that they could
become good citizens and to believe that this called on rather different
virtues. Yet it was precisely the ability to formulate this hope that enabled
them to desist from being such exceptionally bad prisoners.

The point, of course, is actually quite fundamental; and neither the small-
ness of the Scottish case, nor the oddness of the Special Unit, nor the increas-
ing forgetfulness about its existence warrant its being discounted. We began
by contrasting the Special Unit with the Digger. Not all facilities of the super-
max type, nor all varieties of special handling of difficult prisoners, have the
dungeon-like sense of abandonment of the Digger. They may be cleaner,
bigger, lighter, more systematically designed, more carefully supervised,
higher-tech and so on. Yet none of this prevents them from becoming
termini. Indeed the production of such termini is the default position in cases
of incarceration at depth. It is the avoidance of the reproduction of the fatal
game-space that takes imagination and daring.

Finally, but most pressingly for readers of this journal, all of this leaves
a number of questions about my involvement as a researcher, as it does for
all of us who try to play the ‘rationality game’ of policy-relevant field
research in contentious areas of public life. These extend well beyond the
vagaries of my own experience in Scotland and the abiding sense of unease that lingers long after of having been implicated unwarily in someone else's arcane and somewhat ruthless strategem. Prisons are even more apt than most other institutions to generate lines of conduct that from afar look bizarre, irrational, self-confounding. The rules of engagement that obtain within them are obdurately impenetrable other than by close and extended involvement at first hand. To the extent that they do yield some sense of the particularity of their moral order and emotional texture to observation, the justification, indeed the necessity, for ethnography in prison seems plain. Moreover, the grander their scale, the blanker and more secreted the faces they present to the world, the more entrenched and impervious their position in the self-images of the age, the more urgent the task of exploration becomes. In these respects any sense of withdrawal, or worse, of deliberate exclusion, of sociological interest in the inner life of prisons is deeply regrettable, indeed perverse. Yet the urgency of the need does not mean, in prison any more than anywhere else, that simply being there provides its own justification. Since one cannot be there without some form of negotiated permission, nor conduct research without giving an account of one's presence, the reflexive interrogation of the terms of admission is both ethically mandatory and intrinsic to producing a lucid account - the interests at stake are constitutive of the scene under investigation. These are also terms which make it necessary to terminate fieldwork at a given date, however rich the data. In the Scottish case I have ever afterwards laid allegations of credulity and naivety against myself and these have in the main, until now, proved paralysing to my attempts to write up the episode. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that the passions, antagonisms and aspirations embedded in the history of the Special Unit and its closure are quite revealing of the configured and constrained choices that imprisonment compels upon both captor and captive. Moreover, the record of the Scottish experiments points up rather sharply both the more brutal and the more humane poles of possibility that the dilemmas of deep incarceration produce.

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Notes

1 In 1992 there were some 5400 prisoners in Scotland, distributed between 19 establishments. This emphasizes the limited options open to the prison authorities in allocating high-risk prisoners, especially those presenting control problems. At least until the opening of Shotts Prison in the 1980s, Peterhead had been almost the only available site.

2 That is they are predicated on the prisoner’s denial of the legitimacy of his captors’ authority and hence the view that his co-operation cannot be relied upon. For a broader discussion of the relevance of the notion of legitimacy to the maintenance of order in prisons see Sparks and Bottoms (1995).

3 As we will later see, the entire period of existence of the Special Unit was attended by an undercurrent of hostility. This resulted in part from a sense of something morally awry taking place (the ‘baddest’ getting the best deal) and in part from a resentment about the inflated and somewhat fantasized claims made for its mysterious transformative power. There is certainly a distinguished body of autobiographical writing and some other artistic production that emerged from the unit, but the consequent lionizing of some prisoners by the chattering classes of Glasgow and Edinburgh was too much for many prison officers and indeed no small number of other prisoners to bear.

4 For all its apparent casualness I believe that the discursive informality of the Special Unit was indeed intended by its principal architect and guiding intellect, the psychiatrist Peter Whatmore. There is textual evidence for this view (Whatmore, 1987) and it was borne out in my conversations with him.

5 Here is the problematic paragraph in full. Note my hopeless misconception about the waning of media interest: ‘Naturally it is an open secret that one aspect of privacy is sex. For some staff and most prisoners this is in any case regarded as a benefit. For others if privacy is itself a value, so be it and since intimate contact is part of the process of reconstructing relationships this is inevitable. Besides, few feel that this alone has the centrality sometimes attributed to it in the prurient maunderings of the tabloid press (who have in all probability now largely lost interest in the unit). The challenge to central decision makers is to determine whether they feel there are really any arguments of principle against the unit’s visiting arrangements which are so important as to cancel their other benefits or to risk jeopardizing other aspects of its work – or else whether the real motor of misgivings has historically been the fear of short-term public embarrassment. The more important arguments from the point of view of this research concern disincentives to prisoners against leaving the unit. So far as visiting is concerned this means either (and more radically) ensuring that prisoners retain comparable visiting arrangements in their next prison, unit or hostel or making such options sufficiently attractive in other ways to compensate for their loss.’
References

RICHARD SPARKS teaches criminology at Keele University. He is the author of Television and the Drama of Crime (1992, with Tony Bottoms and Will Hay), Prisons and the Problem of Order (1996) and (with Evi Girling and Ian Loader) Crime and Social Change in Middle England (2000). He is currently Editor-in-Chief of Punishment & Society. His research interests are in the sociology of imprisonment, penal politics and public discourse about crime and punishment. Address: Department of Criminology, Keele University, Keele, Staffs, ST5 5BG, UK. [email: j.r.sparks@crim.keele.ac.uk]