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Journalism on the Inside

Peter Wayne

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Inside story

Peter Wayne

When an enlightened tutor gave me a copy of Jean Genet's *Thief's Journal* in the early 1980s to read and review during a particularly isolated year I spent in Barlinnie, "The Big Hoose" Prison in Glasgow, for a wallet-full of stolen credit cards, I vowed I'd create something worthwhile and long-lasting from my increasingly regular periods of incarceration. I was only 23 at the time. For a decade or more, after this almost damascene realisation, I learnt to use the painful experience of confinement to my own and society's advantage. Taking Genet as my inspiration, I began to listen carefully and watch closely, memorising all that I heard and saw, then recording it (sometimes I'd scribble it down on toilet paper) for the benefit of posterity.

Paper, pencils and pens became my best friends and by far the most precious commodity in this microcosmic world. My "Journals", as I began to call them, a set of cathartic repositories arranged to catch the endless stream of consciousness that issued forth from my troubled breast after they slammed the cell door in my face night after night, year after year, grew in volume and ambition to almost unmanageable proportions. I dragged them from one prison to another during sentences, and from flat to flat during the short breaks of freedom in between. Not that I made much use of my observations for many more years. I did, though, gain something of a reputation among my peers as a bit of an eccentric – an intellectual oddity at creative loggerheads with the dystopian chaos of my surroundings – and one who, for the want of real understanding, was probably best left alone to his strange devices.

It wasn't that I lacked belief in the value of my secret nocturnal exertions. Far from it. I only wished I could find a conduit to transcend the more obvious physical obstacles, such as fences, walls and the office of the prison censor, and find a way to market. In the end it was one of my literary heroes, *Times* columnist Matthew Parris, who gave me my first serious "break". For years I had been a fan of his parliamentary sketch, to which I

would turn daily and roar with laughter. At the beginning of the 1990s, something he wrote about having the courage of one's own convictions – I think he was discussing his sexuality – nudged me to write to him with examples of my work. Rather cheekily perhaps, given my predicament, I asked whether he might be able to find suitable outlets for the backlog of quite polished pieces of prison prose I had ready and available for publication. When, to my utmost surprise, I received a handwritten reply full of useful tips and recommendations, I could hardly believe it was real. Men of such stature didn't waste their time writing to prisoners. I was even more astounded to read that Matthew hoped I wouldn't mind that he had "taken the liberty" of "writing with copies of your work to several editors of my acquaintance". Matthew Parris hoped I wouldn't mind? My God, I was over the wall and far away with excitement.

The upshot of all this was yet another letter delivered through the door to my cell in Brixton Prison: this one from eminent man of letters the late Auberon Waugh, editor of the prestigious *Literary Review*, asking if I'd be willing to write a series of three articles on a rather unusual project I was involved in at the time – *Hamlet*, which was being produced in Brixton by the National Theatre, using cons in all the principal roles and yours truly as deputy stage manager.

Waiting to be paid

It was Heaven in Hell. Does that make any sense at all? For the first time in my prison life – even at such an early stage I was into double-figures years served – I felt like a man on a mission with a real story to file. The resultant articles (being the *Literary Review*, Waugh always referred to them as "letters") were, to my great relief, well received, although an early indication of gubernatorial unease about my activities became uncomfortably apparent after a conversation I had on *Hamlet's* "press night" – the governor himself using this production as a convenient PR opportunity – with a hack from the *Evening Standard*. During our chat I had casually mentioned that, although my articles had appeared in the magazine, I was still waiting to be paid in duty-free cigarettes – more useful than money to a chain-smoking recidivistic writer like myself – which Waugh's secretary was supposed to be bringing back from her next trip abroad. The intrepid reporter, seeing at once the comic potential of such an unlikely scenario, published his piece not about the heroic efforts of the NT and their cast of convict players, but (with a nod

to the famous cigar advert) about the untoward delay in receiving my remuneration, headed: “Unhappiness is an unpaid Hamlet fee”.

Needless to say, my transfer out of Brixton was expedited and I found myself (imagining it to be my first foreign posting) dispatched to Blundeston, a “training” (for what goodness only knows) prison perched on a lonely promontory on the Suffolk coastline and with a troubled reputation for violence and racial tension. On the journalistic front, word had travelled faster than the charabanc that had carried me there. I had taken on board Matthew’s advice about cashing in on what he called my “natural advantages over the rest of us”. In other words, when it came to crime and punishment I was “on the spot”. No matter how well researched or wonderfully written an article on the English penal system might be, there was no doubting I had the edge because of my first-hand experience. Use it, Matthew had urged. And I had. Slowly my efforts began to pay dividends. Once the *Hamlet* pieces had done the rounds, editors began to sit up and take notice: Dominic Lawson, then at *The Spectator*, Peter Wilby at the helm of *New Statesman*, Ferdinand Mount at the *TLS*, Andy Marr, still in control at *The Independent* – these were just a few of those who swallowed my bait. From prison architecture to prison food, from cellular confinement to cellular suicide, I covered subjects as diverse as they were sometimes contentious: education, escape, the drug culture, the gay culture, violence and venality, love and hate.

As my project grew – one article would generate perhaps three – in such a self-propagating way, so too did my outlook. In one particular avalanche of global networking, I sent off a single batch of cold-call letters to several leading American papers, including *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Baltimore Sun*, not expecting any serious interest. Yet in a letter from Henry Finder, then literary editor of *The New Yorker*, I read in amazement the details of what amounted to the chance of a journalistic lifetime. I’ve always been a great believer in aiming straight for the top, so that any subsequent directions are passed down for actioning. This was what happened here after my initial letter to the then editor, Tina Brown. In what amounted to a great stroke of transatlantic luck I found myself reviewing *The Oxford History of Prisons* at a dollar a word. There I was serving 13 years, swanning about the prison making damn sure that *The New Yorker* logo was always on show to any interested passers-by in a pose (which I fear may have caused my almost fatal undoing) particular to a Pulitzer Prize winner.

One day in the education department, after setting up the computer for

the smaller-sized paper the American job demanded, I found an interloper at my station and, I guess, in retrospect, made my annoyance just a mite too clear. Before I could say “hold the front page” the argument about seats had escalated, and the man – a psychotic individual, I later learnt, suffering from paranoid schizophrenia – had pulled out a “chiv” fashioned out of an elongated triangle of window pane and, after cutting off half my right ear, embedded the instrument deep into the sinews of my neck. My commitment to my craft had become such that although as I lay in a pool of fast-spreading blood believing I might never recover, my dominant thoughts were concerned with writing it all down.

“Paper. Pencil,” I managed to enunciate with extreme difficulty to a crowd now gathered around me like the famous tableau of surgeons and officers surrounding a fatally wounded Admiral Lord Nelson on HMS Victory. “Got to remember it. Mustn’t forget the details,” I whispered before the ambulance arrived, wondering which magazine would pay most for a story of such dramatic proportions. As things worked out, Rosie Boycott at *Esquire* snapped up first serialisation rights for my highest fee to date. Just as well actually, because nobody was ever convicted of that wholly unprovoked and murderous attack. Without such a conviction, the Criminal Injuries Board won’t pay a penny in compensation.

Remuneration enough?

At about this time, Reggie Kray was nearing the end of his sentence, and, as it turned out, his life. Dominic Lawson had the bright idea that as I was in the same prison, an interview with this fast-declining old gangster would be just the thing to liven up the then rather dreary and predictably conservative pages of *The Spectator*. That was thanks to the literary editor and gentleman-about-Bloomsbury Mark Amory, since just after the success of the *Hamlet* stories I had been writing book reviews for the magazine. And I loved it. Still do. I think I’ve seen off five editors since my first critique of *The Prisoners’ Guide to English Prisons*. Alas, the Reggie Kray scoops-that-might-have-been sank without a trace because poorly (and permanently pissed) though the 60s racketeer might have been, the first thing he wanted to know when I approached him was how much he was likely to pocket himself. Try as I did to explain that the public exposure he would get was considered remuneration enough, and that it was only the interviewer who got paid in situations like this, Reggie wasn’t having any of it. As far as he was concerned he wouldn’t

open his mouth for a penny less than a thousand pounds. Lawson of course refused point blank to cough up a sou to such a disreputable old rogue. And so this world and all its hangers-on lost out as Mr Kray went to his grave taking his secrets with him.

Throughout my strange career as a writer in confinement, I have always tried to follow the dictum that you should never write anything you cannot, or would prefer not to, show to the person it's about. Within these walls we live in a world of Chinese whispers. One wrong word passed on to one wrong man could lead to potentially disastrous results. So whenever I do mention any of my peers, I make a point of reading the text to them before I file a story, and of asking whether they would prefer their names to be changed. This is where celeb-con Jeffrey Archer went so wrong and got himself into all sorts of trouble by publishing, while still inside himself, the first instalment of his prison diaries. He named names – Ronnie Biggs was the best known – and so contravened an obscure prison rule, not the law of the land, about identifying fellow prisoners. This led, in Archer's case, to an internal adjudication and perfunctory slap on the wrist. But nobody, so far as I was aware, had ever been disciplined for putting a name to a member of staff in any article on the penal system, which emboldened me in a short sketch I wrote on the internal punishment system to describe one specific governor as "bursting out of an ill-fitting, shit-brown, two-piece suit".

All hell broke loose after the governor, who even at this late stage had better remain anonymous, had the article in that organ of über intellectualism, *Prospect* magazine, pointed out to him by some obsequious self-seeking underling who happened to be on censor duty on the day my copy of the piece arrived in the prison by post. I was summoned to the governor's bunker, over whose parapet its occupants rarely raised their heads, to receive... well... I could only tremble in fearful anticipation.

"You will not be writing another word for publication while you remain in this prison," my overweight adversary declared without any preamble. "In fact, I have placed a double C-notice [C stood for censored] on both your incoming and outgoing mail to ensure that articles like this...[I could see the relevant passage highlighted in fluorescent yellow] will not be appearing in the future. You *will* remember that *you* are the prisoner and *I* am the governor. As such you will obey my orders or spend the rest of your time in segregation. Do I make myself clear? Um? DO... I... MAKE... MYSELF... CLEAR?"

Oh yes. He'd made himself perfectly clear. But he might as well have waved a red flag at a bull. This was freedom of speech, specifically *my* freedom

of speech he was talking about and, disenfranchised prisoner or not, I wasn't going to lose it or, at least, go down without a fight. So I shot straight back at him, seething with righteous indignation: "Let me tell *you* something governor [to hell with discretion and the better part of valour]. I have spent many years in the prison system, sewing mailbags, painting garden gnomes and the like. Finally, through my own efforts I have discovered something through which it is possible to make a success of my life. Try what you like, but neither you nor your masters in Whitehall are going to stop me writing whatever I want to write as long as it's an accurate and true reflection of what I have seen or heard." Hitting my stride, I continued: "What do you think the readers of *The Times* correspondence column would make of a letter about one man's fight to rehabilitate himself through his writing, only to be rebuffed by selfish, blinkered puppets of officialdom? Am I to be told I can no longer continue building up my portfolio of published work, which I was hoping to use as a stepping stone to a law-abiding life? Or shall I go back to robbing banks? Think about that one, governor, before you start taking personal offence at a touch of literary licence. Today's papers are tomorrow's fish and chip wrappers. And let's face it, with a circulation of less than 20,000, *Prospect* magazine is hardly the *News of the World*."

My extreme embarrassment

I thought it politic not to mention that those 20,000 known readers of *Prospect* included the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Foreign and Home Secretaries. In the end the governor decided not to risk such a pyrrhic victory by monitoring every word I wrote. I did, however, notice that the tight-fitting "shit-brown suit" of my journalistic imagination gave way to a more generously-cut charcoal grey number. All was well that ended well, but I soon realised it's not always the most comfortable feeling in the world to read about one's "faults", as I found out to my own extreme embarrassment in the only private prison in which I served.

Because I was unusual in so many respects – a bank robber meeting literary deadlines – I drew a great deal of curiosity from other journalists in the outside world in search of that out-of-the-ordinary tale. To my utter bewilderment, profiles about me began appearing in several of our best-known broadsheets. I played host to Andrew Anthony of *The Observer*; Mary Riddell, writing for the *New Statesman*; Joanne Gibbon for *The Independent* and, most significantly, Jason Cowley who wrote a full page article which appeared

in *The Times* of all places, under the memorable headline: “Born to be Bad” and with a colour photograph of me smiling bravely through the tungsten steel bars of Blakenhurst prison.

The problems began during Cowley’s interview in the visiting room, when he asked me quite bluntly whether I was homosexual. On the streets outside, I wouldn’t have given two hoots who knew which way I batted. Besides, I was trying to attract a potential publisher for a novel I’d recently completed, which just so happened to feature a pair of criminal gay protagonists. What better opportunity could I have asked for than to advertise just how clued up I really was on my subject matter than “outing” myself on the op-ed pages of *The Times*? Perhaps a little naively, bearing in mind the eventual outcome of my honest response, I waxed lyrical about some of the “electrifying relationships” I’d enjoyed throughout my two-and-a-half decades inside.

The Times is not the most popular paper among prison inmates. It was doubtful whether it would have been seen, let alone read, by any of my neighbours along the landing. What I hadn’t bargained for was those in the education department in Blakenhurst who, quite rightly, took it upon themselves to provide quality daily newspapers for their students. Knowing what was afoot, and the actual date of planned publication of Cowley’s piece, I thought I would try to pre-empt any possible “misunderstandings”, approach the head of education to explain the circumstances, then ask if he would be kind enough to keep the particular edition out of general circulation. Much to my consternation, he told me that what I had said to the paper had been said in the full knowledge it was heading for the public domain and that, anyway, I should know better than anybody that it was impossible and indeed undesirable to “gag the press” in any way whatsoever. I swallowed. Even before lunch had been served on the day the article finally appeared, all 60 inmates on full-time education were wholly cognisant with my sexual predilections.

Not good. Prisoners are an old fashioned bunch. “Y’fuckin turd burglar!” a fellow who only two days earlier had been seeking my advice – “You’re a clever geezer, Peter” – on the subtleties of his forthcoming court appearance, spat at me the moment I walked into the crowded recess for my mid-morning roll-up. His clarion call was taken up by the mob, strength-in-numbers style. I felt like Oscar Wilde on Clapham Station. Judging an immediate counter-attack to be the best form of defence, I turned on my young accuser with: “Listen to me, sonny. Yes I’m queer... [sniggers all round]... but I was doing

time when you were still in kindergarten. I'm in here now doing a 13 stretch for armed robbery and I don't need pricks like you [more giggles, a touch less sure this time] telling me how to live my life inside or out. If you've got a problem with that, fair enough. We'll sort it out now. Here. Get someone to watch the door."

It was Oscar-worthy. Just as well really, given the room was packed with would-be antagonists. If the boy had decided to call my bluff, I'd have been done for. As it was, despite a galloping heart and a hyperventilating set of lungs, I had reason to believe that I'd pulled it off. "Tchh. No, you're all right mate. We was only 'avin' a laugh. Whassamatta? Can't you take a joke, Pete?" And all around there were murmurs of assent and half embarrassed laughter. Truth was, of course, he'd meant what he said – every vindictive word of it. Only when the doors to our cells are closed at night does "the love that dares not speak its name" move among the disinherited. Tender the nights may become, but woe betide the man who recalls it in the morning. As it happened, that passing cloud had a silver lining. The interview in the paper was read at length by an editor at Fourth Estate and an agent who later negotiated a huge advance on my behalf. But it was a close call I could well have done without.

My ignoble criminal career

It was a moment to make me consider there are perhaps times when it might be far safer to use the convenience of a pseudonym. I've written on so many sensitive subjects, and no matter how many precautions I take, there's always somebody, on either side of the prison door, ready to take offence.

For some time after my "outing" I had been wanting to write the story of a "successful" escape I had made from a prison on the edge of Dartmoor, much earlier in my long and ignoble criminal career when I was still foolish (and fit) enough to undertake such swashbuckling misadventures. Regardless of the moral rights and wrongs of this caper, there was never any doubt in my mind that it made a damn good story. *Esquire* magazine agreed to pay £450 for a 1,000 words, so I set forth with a vengeance under the strict condition that, for fear of institutional retribution, it would appear under a nom de plume. The one disadvantage of this protective shield was that none of my friends believed I was the hero of what was, admittedly, quite a far-fetched story.

It was the same with my drugs exposé, picked up by both *Arena* magazine

and *The Sunday Telegraph*. Reprisals were far more likely to come from my side of the locked gates and to have taken a far more physical form. The drugs lords still rule the roost inside regardless of the ever more effective initiatives being taken to stamp out the lucrative trade in narcotics. With thousands of pounds at stake each week, these criminal suzerains will protect their empires with whatever it takes. Life in prison is as cheap as the few bags of heroin a junkie would take to carry out any contract on offer. So in that case Peter Wayne became Michael Pallence (borrowed from a character in a novel by J B Priestley). It was blood-curdling to listen to what some of the “faces” affected by my revelations were going to do if ever they identified my journalistic alter ego.

Meanwhile, I’m still inside, quite a well-known name these days if the feedback I get from potential editors I approach for commissions is anything to go by. Yet sadly, paradoxically, I appear to have become a victim of my own literary ambitions, of far more value to them inside prison than I ever could be in the outside world. Along the way there have been some incredible highs: the first time I ever saw my byline; the arrival of that coveted all-dollar cheque from *The New Yorker* (although I was still displaying a hastily stitched-up hole in my neck); “fan” letters from strangers, readers from all over the world who, in one way or another, have been affected by something I’ve conceived in my tiny prison cell; an analogy (published in that infamous *Times* profile) drawn between me and (really) Fyodr Dostoevsky of all people – and some heartbreakingly desperate lows which I won’t list here. What has remained constant throughout the vicissitudes of a quarter of a century has been the happy realisation that this crazy vocation has somehow kept me alive and kicking in an environment which has defeated and seen off so many of my friends (and enemies) along the way.

Even having “celebrated” my 50th birthday – a gargoyle of a milestone on anybody’s journey of life – I’m still bursting with new ideas and stuff I desperately need to say. Indeed this continual stream of consciousness has put me at variance with a host of space-obsessed editors who never feel able to allocate me enough of it.

So here I am, “back in the boob” – as they call it – again, having come full circle, writing this article from Wandsworth, the biggest prison in Europe, with three years to serve. Since my return I’ve picked up the reins where I left off and am back among the contributors of *The Spectator* and *The Observer*, whose Pendennis diary recently revealed me to have been, through my earlier review on troublesome teenagers, the true source of inspiration behind Tory

leader David Cameron's controversial call to "hug a hoodie". You see, I don't just report the news these days. I actually create it.

And hey, I've still got lots to say, desperate and determined to write that weekly column I've coveted for so long. Was that why I spent a whole week writing and re-writing this piece? Hoping to hook in an imaginative editor with the courage of my convictions? I have the inside story, yet throughout this summer, week-by-week, editors with the power of patronage seem quite content to allow soi-disant commentators to pontificate on a penal system they have never visited, let alone served in. I'd like future generations of social historians to be able to look back over my prison writings sure in the knowledge that what they read was the real deal on life inside at the turn of the 21st century. Think of the advantages of letting me loose with a weekly column. Prison will be one of the hottest topics of the next decade. What about "Cell Life: NX8804's Anatomy of Incarceration" from penal ground zero? I'll be here for the next 18 months or so. All reasonable offers considered.

Peter Wayne was born in Bolton, Lancashire, in 1955. He has served a total of 24 years and nine months in 35 English and Scottish prisons. Released on licence, shortly before Christmas last year he stole an overcoat containing a pair of gloves and a wallet containing cash and credit cards. He was, he says, drunk at the time, but also observes: "It was difficult out there." He is currently working on the screenplay of his novel, April Fools.