

## THE DELINQUENT IN BORSTAL

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**T**HERE are at any one time about three thousand boys and young men in the Borstals of this country. They vary in age from sixteen to twenty-three years of age (for though a youth must be under twenty-one when he is sentenced, he can be nearly twenty-four when he leaves). They vary also considerably in the degree of their experience of crime. They are rarely first offenders: if a boy is sent to Borstal on his first appearance in Court, it signifies either that his offence was very grave, or that he had in fact been committing offences for some time before he was caught. Most have been on probation, often more than once; many have been to Home Office Approved Schools. They have almost certainly been in the habit of committing offences for not less than twelve or eighteen months, and may quite easily have been doing so for as much as ten or twelve years.

They come from all over England and Wales, and from all walks of life, though the vast proportion are from the big cities, and from the working-class homes of those cities. There are a small number from criminal homes, where father or mother are known to the police; but in most cases the families are sound enough, and no other member has been in trouble. The broken home produces its quota, the home, that is, where one parent is missing by reason of death, desertion, separation or divorce: but in view of the number of such homes nowadays this is not as significant as at first might appear. One would need to know the statistics of such homes as against normal homes, and the number of good, honest young men who had been brought up in them, before one could form a sound judgment.

Educationally they range from the boy not far removed from mental deficiency to the boy of superior intelligence, though the latter is only one or two per cent of the whole. Most fall under the head of 'average'. Brains are not a distinguishing mark of the criminal classes.

It will be seen that this is a very 'mixed bag', and not a very encouraging one at that. Obviously, classification and segregation are essential if any effective training is to be done. To this end,

each boy is sent immediately after conviction to one of two reception centres, where he is extensively 'vetted' for a period of eight weeks. His physical, mental and psychological condition; his educational standards and aptitudes; his vocational bent and capabilities; his home conditions and history; his character generally and the possible causes of his delinquency; all these are examined by an experienced staff of men and women. He is then allocated, with a dossier of information and recommendations, to one of the fourteen available training Borstals. These vary greatly in character. There are four walled institutions, where adequate security is available; the other ten are entirely 'open', but scarcely two alike—one was built by Borstal boys before the war, one is a converted mansion, several are huttred camps.

When the boy reaches his Borstal, he is given a very full and busy life adapted to his particular needs. If he is capable of benefitting from Trade Training there are courses which he can take—between sixty and seventy such courses are constantly in progress, teaching about a dozen trades. If he is illiterate or backward, he will be given formal education, and every effort is made to stimulate every boy educationally, to broaden his mind, and to give him fresh interests and hobbies. He will find plenty of healthy sport, and plenty of good books to read. He is assured of excellent medical attention, where necessary; and indeed the remedying, where possible, of physical defect is an important aspect of reclamation. His spiritual needs will be ministered to by a Chaplain of his own denomination—in the case of Catholics, the neighbouring parish priest.

As has been said, Borstals vary greatly in character, and not only in physical character. There are Borstals for the younger and for the older boy; for the more hopeful and for the more hardened; Borstals with dormitories and Borstals with rooms; there are two—one open, one walled—for the physically or mentally sub-normal; and so on. But in all one basic principle obtains, well-tried over forty years—the individual training of the boy in a 'House'. This is in charge of a Housemaster, assisted by a matron and two or three House Officers. The boy goes into this House on arrival and in it he will live and move and have his being until he leaves. From it he goes to work in the morning, and to it he returns in the evening. His Housemaster is to all intents 'in loco parentis', and he and his staff make it their business

to know the individual boy and his circumstances, and will direct the course of his training in all its aspects. The Housemaster is always at hand to help, encourage and advise, as also to reprove and correct as occasion may demand. And Borstal has always been more than fortunate in attracting to this exacting work men with a real sense of vocation. Certainly it is to them, and the staffs working with them, that Borstal owes its special character. All other aspects of the training have their place, their very important place; but just as the home is the focal point of normal civilised life, and all other activities centre round it, so the 'House' is the focal point of a Borstal boy's life. And though institutional life can never be a wholly normal thing, and is clearly only to be resorted to when other means have failed, the House system does its level best to bring normality into it, and to provide the stability, the sense of security, the kindly relationships, the ordered discipline without which the boy's personality cannot adjust and mature.

An all important matter in the training of the boy is the question of the moment he should leave the institution. The Borstal sentence is a flexible one. The boy is sentenced by the judge merely to 'Borstal Training'. This signifies that he is to be under supervision for four years, of which a minimum of nine months and a maximum of three years must be spent in a Borstal Institution: the remainder of the four years is spent in conditions of freedom under the supervision of the after-care association. It is of the essence of the sentence that this latter is of equal importance with the institutional treatment, and indeed it completes it. It will be seen that there is a wide discretion left as to when exactly the boy should pass from one to the other. The decision rests in practice largely with the people who know him, namely the institution officials, who constitute a board monthly for this purpose and make their recommendations. It is obvious that on this board, the boy's Housemaster has a vital part to play. In deciding the issue the question is not so much, 'How long has he done?', nor even merely, 'How has he behaved?', but, 'Is he fit to take his place in life once again? Has he changed his ideas of right and wrong? Has he shown the will to put his decisions into practice? Will he know how to live a happy and a useful life?'

Once chosen for release (which will take place about three

months later), the after-care association—already in touch with him and his home—goes into action and makes the final arrangements for his re-establishment in life. On leaving he will be in the care of a Borstal Associate, almost certainly a Probation Officer, in his home town, and will receive all possible assistance as and when he needs it.

What of results? Over the years the figures do not vary greatly, though they are naturally affected by conditions in the country. By and large, between six and seven out of ten boys never get into the hands of the police again. In those institutions catering for the better type, the figure is often over 80%; in those for the more hardened, as low as 50%. It must be remembered too that a proportion of those who re-offend, and are returned to Borstal for further training, make good afterwards. Though these figures give no ground for complacency, they are surely enough to justify Borstal as a method of reclaiming the delinquent.

I now propose to break into the personal pronoun to give my impressions of the Catholic boy in Borstal as I have known him over eighteen years. And I do so of set purpose, for what follows is the result of personal experience, and other Catholics working in Borstal may have different experiences, and may legitimately come to other conclusions. Nor am I so foolish in anything I may say as to imply any criticism of those who have had the handling of the boy before he comes to Borstal. We who work amongst them are too subject to criticism ourselves for our own failures to fall into that error; and we know only too well that the best of systems must fail sometimes. Nor do I belong to that school which thinks that the blame for sin must always be attributed to someone other than the sinner.

It remains that we cannot afford to neglect the painful fact that something over 20% of the population of Borstal are registered as Catholics. Whether that is an undue proportion it is impossible to tell without accurate statistics of the exact number of baptised Catholics (as opposed to practising ones) in the country, and without knowing how many of these are centred in the handful of large cities from which such a high percentage of Borstal boys are recruited. But whether or no it is a due proportion, it is one which a Catholic can only deplore. My hope is therefore that in what I have to say there may be something which may be of help to those who have to deal with Catholic children.

First, there are many boys who put their names down as Catholic, who have in fact never had any instruction whatever, have never attended a Catholic School, nor received any Sacrament except Baptism. They are of course almost always the product of homes where the parents have lapsed, or of mixed marriages where the Catholic partner has died or otherwise disappeared. It is interesting that they have almost invariably been baptised, and it is equally interesting that the boy on such a slender basis puts himself down as Catholic. If I were asked to hazard a guess at the number of these (and it is a guess), I would say not more than one in ten.

Secondly, the vast proportion of Catholic boys in Borstal have ceased to frequent the Sacraments for some time, and often since leaving school. It seems clear that the sudden impact of a pagan civilisation in factory, cinema, newspapers and so on has been, for them at least, overwhelming in its effect. It is not so much that they are thrown suddenly amongst temptations to sin (though that is true enough) as that they find themselves in a world where 'no sensible fellow' bothers about religion. Boys hate to be odd, and to be a practising Christian in England today is nothing if not odd. It is easy to say that a good Catholic boy should be able to stand up against this, but if one is fifteen, if one has been used to being amongst a churchful or a schoolful of Catholics, if one has not reached that point at which the unquestioning faith of the child has been fused with the intellectual convictions of the man, is it so surprising that the avalanche of ignorance and indifference and even hostility carries him away? I am well aware that this is not the only cause. Sometimes it is the other way round; the boy has abandoned the practice of his religion because it cannot be squared with his manner of life. But in most cases, I think, the religion is first dropped, the delinquency follows. Nor do I forget that there are often accompanying causes in the home, where the parents may have either given bad example, or failed to give any example at all. But there can be no denying the relevance of this problem. Great interest attaches therefore to present-day attempts to solve it, for anything which helps to carry the boy through this period and weld him into the life of the Church, strengthening his sense of membership and deepening his understanding of the Faith will also lessen the small, sad trickle into Borstal.

Allied to this is the question of his store of knowledge of the

Faith. Often this appears to be lamentably small, even when he has been to a Catholic school. There are of course the boys whose defective intelligence explains this; and there are those who know nothing because they never put themselves out to learn. But, for the most part, I am satisfied that it is not that the boy does not know, but that he has forgotten; and he has forgotten because he has ceased to assimilate his knowledge to the day to day realities of his life. It has ceased to affect his existence or to assist him in his daily cares; and knowledge which has no practical value soon becomes confused, and drops out of mind. A similar phenomenon is observable generally amongst Borstal boys in matters of ordinary education; the knowledge which has not been used has ebbed away startlingly. Though, therefore, there is nothing specially significant about the confused state of the Catholic's knowledge, it is of serious consequence, as it produces a vicious circle. Because he has given up the practice of his religion, his knowledge grows dim; because it grows dim he has less and less fuel with which to re-kindle his faith.

Though all this is not very cheering—and indeed one must not look for over-much cheer in this work—there is a brighter side to the picture which I have seen more and more with the years. Deep down in the soul of almost every one of them, the Faith is there. They believe. Bad they may have been and neglectful of their religious duties, but something remains—and an all-important something. They retain a certainty of God's existence, they acknowledge the claims upon them of the Church. They have an assurance of moral truth; they know that right and wrong exist, and they have a desire for better things, though they may be in rebellion against that very desire. They reach Borstal when arrest, trial and conviction have stripped them of pleasures, of liberty, of home. They are brought once again into contact with the Church and its Sacraments. In such matters one cannot count results; but certainly strange miracles of grace do occur. Some, as it were, take one look and plunge back into the Church like tired travellers into cool water. Others skirt the brink for months, wanting and yet not wanting, hoping and yet fearing, and at last they slip in. Even those who to all seeming stand aloof and un-caring have sometimes, I think, felt a distant longing, and who shall say if it may not find effect at last: