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Book Review

A Glasgow Gang Observed

By James Patrick

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I came across this book in the early '80s, working as an impressionable, unqualified, residential childcare officer in a List D school (formally known as an 'approved school')[1], just outside Glasgow. It was the first time I had read something which really chimed with my own work experience and, on reflection, it stands the test of time and remains an accurate and honest depiction of disaffected youth in late 1960s Scotland.

In October 1966, a young, middle-class teacher working at an approved school in Maryhill, Glasgow, decided to become a member of a Glasgow gang. He wanted to find out, first hand, what life was really like for the children he taught. 'It is a descriptive account […] my aim has been unashamedly exploratory to present a brief glimpse of the reality which engages Glasgow gang boys' (Patrick, 1973, p.xi). To achieve this, he joined one of his pupils when they went on home leave, in the guise of a 'friend'. Given his youthful looks and ability to mimic the behaviour of gang members, Patrick was accepted by the group, and this allowed him to carry out fieldwork and study the boys' behaviour at close quarters over a four-month period. Although written for the general reader, the book is based on research carried out for a higher degree, using the ethnographic methodology of a participant observer. The author

[1] 'Approved schools' and 'List D schools' were a form of residential school in Scotland for children and young people who had committed offences. They ceased operation through the 1980s.

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acknowledges Stan Cohen for providing professional advice, which is not surprising given the similarities in their approach. It is worth noting that Cohen carried out similar fieldwork for his own classic text, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, on the south coast of England, at the very same time as Patrick was carrying out his fieldwork in Glasgow (Cohen, 1972).

James Patrick is the pseudonym adopted by the author to protect his personal safety. Intriguingly, despite two republications, the identity of the author remains known only to a few. To avoid compromising members of the gang, their identities were also anonymised, and publication was delayed until 1973.

The book was eventually published to a clamour of media interest that would delight present-day researchers. Reviews were strongly polarised and readers seemed simultaneously fascinated and appalled by the graphic content. In London, the Evening News reported 'a sickening account of life at its most brutal and vicious. Its only redeeming feature is the loyalty shown by members of the gang to each other' (Wainwright, 1973, p.11). Owing to the great interest stimulated by the serialisation of the book in *The Observer*, the publisher brought the publication date forward by a month. Even the central figure, 'Tim', who befriended the author, was reported in a local Glasgow newspaper as responding angrily, saying, 'he conned me for a sucker. Most of what he has just written just isn't true' (Airs, 1973, p.15).

Eventually, Patrick aroused too much suspicion in the gang by never carrying a weapon and hanging back in fights. He left the gang claiming to be going to London.

Patrick recalls grappling with the ethical dilemmas that arose through becoming a participant observer. On reflection, I think perhaps he did rather underestimate the level of deception he had to employ in order to become an 'insider'. It's unlikely the research would meet the requirements of a current-day ethics committee.

Two small cameos described in the book vividly reminded me about what life was like in the List D setting. The first related to what I often thought was the most constructive experience for the boys: the extremely positive bond they were often able to develop with workshop instructors. These were often the members of staff that the boys would have liked to have had as their own fathers.

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> The staffing problem was so acute that even people like myself, with irrelevant qualifications in classics were welcomed. The boys made it clear that neither the teachers nor the social welfare officers could act as role-models or objects of emulation because they considered our work a 'doss'. They could only identify with members of staff like the farmer and the bricklayer who were seen to do a hard 'manly' job (Patrick, 1973, p.189).

The second memory replicates precisely my own painful experience, when I was asked to referee a game of football between staff and boys. I still smile uncomfortably at my dismal performance and inability to exert any control whatsoever:

> The game began with 22 players, and 22 referees. I had played both with and against Tim at the approved school and so was familiar with his inability to accept decisions given against him or his team. He brooked no criticism of his play or of his general conduct. Time after time at school he had attempted to dominate the field by intimidating opponents with crushing tackles or murmured threats and time after time he had been sent off for ungentlemanly conduct (Patrick, 1973, p.46).

Throughout the book there are abundant insights into the boys' views about various aspects of 'straight society'. Sometimes these are enlightening, often they are disturbing, but usually, they reveal a genuine understanding of how these boys feel about themselves and how they see others.

Fast forward to the present day and, given the radical changes in technology and culture that have affected youth crime since the '60s, direct comparisons and simple lessons learned are not neatly available. Flawed as some of the findings in this book inevitably are, it remains more than just an interesting historical account. Given the difficulty we face in obtaining the true experience of people who have lived lives like the boys in Patrick's book, despite its imperfections, perhaps we still have something to learn from the participant observer. The rich narrative it provides can be a corrective to the prosaic evidence sometimes generated by the 'co-production' model.

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Oh, I almost forgot. Recently, to my delight, I discovered the real identity of the author. However, in honour of the great man, I will continue to abide by the 'no grassing' rule.

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About the review author

The review author trained as a social worker in the 1980s. He spent most of his career in residential social work and youth justice. He is semi-retired and currently works with homeless young people.

The review author was reviewing their own copy of this book.

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