

BOOK REVIEW

Orla Lynch, Yasmine Ahmed, Helen Russell and Kevin Hosford, Reflections on Irish Criminology: Conversations with Criminologists (Palgrave Macmillan 2020), xi+167pp. (hardcover), ISBN: 9783030605926

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This book aims to fill a gap in current knowledge by providing the reader with a critical insight into the origins of criminology as a discipline in Ireland. The authors utilise a key resource often untapped in research methodology – the experience and perspectives of the criminologists at the centre of the discipline – in order to chart the evolution of a fascinating area of study. From the earlier ad hoc, yet important, rumblings of multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary dialogue, to the establishment of the Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice in UCD and beyond, the authors highlight the significance of ‘community’ as a propelling force in the success and recognition of Irish criminology.

Prolific progress has been made in the past two decades in particular, with ‘significant growth in criminology modules and programmes in both Northern Ireland and the republic’.¹ With such development has come a greater (if not consistent) appreciation for the value of criminological expertise amongst state and non-state agencies working in the field of criminal justice. Of course it is the uniqueness of the Irish historical backdrop which has moulded much of the approach taken to criminal justice here. As the authors astutely note, ‘[f]orms of imprisonment, the treatment of women, the role of the church in social censure, the Troubles and preceding periods of political violence and the dual system of administration on the island have all contributed to how we think about and write about criminology’.² While history has generated the blueprint, diversity (among academic schools of thought) has nurtured and cultivated a rich tapestry of research that continues to thrive.

A central feature of this book is the idea that ‘criminology in Ireland is what it is and where it is because of the people’, a contention with which I would certainly agree.³ The book is divided into eleven chapters. Chapter one contextualises the narrative to come by setting out the terrain upon which criminology has grown into a recognised discipline in Ireland. The remaining chapters of the book chart the career paths of some notable Irish researchers in this area. Each has garnered the attention and admiration of scholars of their discipline for advancing the field and enhancing our understanding of criminological research. The fact that these individuals all hail from ‘different disciplines, different academic traditions and eras’⁴ is extremely significant as it emphasises that the Irish approach to criminology is premised upon inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary collegiality. No one researcher works alone or in isolation from the influences of others. There is a shared goal and it is this approach which has allowed criminology in Ireland to flourish as it has.

¹ Orla Lynch, Yasmine Ahmed, Helen Russell and Kevin Hosford, *Reflections on Irish Criminology: Conversations with Criminologists* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020) 4.

² *ibid* 5.

³ *ibid* 8.

⁴ *ibid*.

The dialogue begins with Professor Ian O'Donnell in Chapter 2. As the 'indisputable elder' of the 'criminology movement' in Ireland, Professor O'Donnell's work on 'prison, probation and the history of violence has filled a significant void in our knowledge of penology in Ireland, and his pioneering data collection and analysis has changed the way we think about imprisonment internationally'.⁵ Rather than providing a biographical narration of an interview, the authors have cleverly handed ownership of the 'story' to the subject, resulting in a more authentic and personable feel to the 'conversation'. The first person narrative draws us in and is effectively invoked throughout each successive chapter. The chapter provides a captivating insight into the career path of one of Ireland's most distinguished criminologists, but rather than recount his tale, I am resolved to leave the reader discover it for themselves. This sentiment I will also hold to for each of the academics that follow.

Chapter 3 traces the academic journey of Dr Deirdre Healy, from her early 'psychological origins' throughout her 'solution led approach' to prison and probation issues.⁶ Her work has challenged the often 'limited and inadequate conceptualisations' inherent in criminological scholarship and has witnessed the growth of a once controversial relationship between psychology and criminology into a stronger interdisciplinary approach benefiting from both expertise.⁷ Sociology informs the work of Professor Claire Hamilton, as detailed in Chapter 4, and her practical experience has undoubtedly helped to shape the educational landscape in Ireland, particularly with her involvement in the development of the first MA Criminology. She recounts her experience of researching topics such as human rights, counter terrorism and securitisation with beguiling candour. Chapter 5 introduces us to Dr Jennifer O'Mahoney, whose work highlights the need to 'ensure the authenticity of the voices of victims and survivors and reflects that considerations around culture and power, do not necessarily reflect the experience of the individuals in those systems'.⁸ I am immediately intrigued by Dr O'Mahoney's story and how her research has challenged the norms of victimology study by giving victims a voice, and exploring 'the experiences of victims of state and institutional abuse using a victims' centred approach'.⁹

In Chapter 6, Dr Cheryl Lawther takes us through her interdisciplinary approach to 'transitional justice and how societies adjust post-conflict in the context of mass human rights violations as well as on the process of truth recovery' in a compelling manner.¹⁰ Professor Shane Kilcommins recounts his voyage of academic discover in Chapter 7 and details how his 'theoretical approach to criminology and criminal justice were fostered through his interaction with colleagues in sociology departments and how his exposure to key social theorists changed his perspective from a purely legal standpoint, to a more multidisciplinary approach'.¹¹ This chapter provides the reader with a greater understanding how Professor Kilcommins navigated his way through the traditional legal discipline structure, to arrive at the criminological and penological approach for which he is well known. Another key academic, Professor Mary Rogan, converses with the reader in Chapter 8, bringing us through her discovery of criminology to her important work 'informing, reviewing and creating policy based on her own and others' research'.¹² As a champion for the 'lived

⁵ *ibid* 11–12.

⁶ *ibid* 27.

⁷ *ibid* 28.

⁸ *ibid* 55.

⁹ *ibid* 56.

¹⁰ *ibid* 68.

¹¹ *ibid* 81.

¹² *ibid* 95.

experience and penal policy', Professor Rogan reminds us of the importance of academic research and 'the potential for positive change that can come from such involvement.'¹³

In Chapter 9, Dr Diarmuid Griffin regales us with a fascinating account of how he began his career working in the USA's public defender system and how this led him from his legal training towards a career in criminal justice informed by criminological perspectives.¹⁴ Dr Griffin's research once again highlights the importance of 'informing public policy' which forms a recognizable thread line throughout the book. In Chapter 10, Professor Maggie O'Neill highlights her work in the area of 'theoretical advocacy in which narratives around art and participation are pivotal'.¹⁵ This profoundly forward-thinking researcher impresses upon the reader the need to challenge norms and invoke 'imaginative methods' in order to 'engage with marginalised populations'.¹⁶ Acquiring 'knowledge with purpose' is the enduring message in effecting real change. The book concludes with Professor Shadd Maruna's account of his career trajectory in Chapter 11. Professor Maruna's origins as a youth discovering a 'secret dungeon of ideas' in his local University library to his position as one of the most respected criminologists of recent times makes for captivating reading. Of course, those familiar with his work will know that his seminal text, *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives*, has altered the landscape of criminological thinking for generations to come, but Professor Maruna is not simply defined by this work alone. Throughout his career, there has been a notable emphasis on the voice of a central actor in the criminal justice system, the offender, generating fresh understanding of what works in assisting these individuals to desist from further criminal activity. What once was a discipline steeped in despair, is now viewed through the prism of hope – hope that reform is possible.

The authors believe that the uniqueness of criminology in Ireland lies in its eclecticism, insofar as academics from many different fields may find themselves drawn towards the gravitational pull of criminological research. One would tend to agree, having navigated through the career trajectories of the participants in this book. While one might have hoped for a greater understanding of the methodology, including how the data was collated and transposed, the book does not necessarily suffer in its absence. One might also question the necessity of some of the chapter abstracts, given their immediate repetition in the opening of the relevant chapter. Nonetheless, the book will make fascinating reading for students, academics and policy makers alike, as well as anyone interested in the topic of criminology generally. The discipline has indeed grown from being an absentee discipline to one that has been transformed and remade in the Irish image.

This book is a timely reminder that while much has been done, there is much still to do and the inspiration for augmenting future research in this field can be derived from a better understanding of its origins and the academics who have fostered and shaped it to date. As Andy Dufresne, the fictional character in *The Shawshank Redemption*, so eloquently articulated, '[h]ope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.' The work of the criminologists interviewed in this book inspires hope that a difference can be made to the criminal justice system through engagement with criminological research. In many ways the book is a tribute to the value of the author's collective contribution, and a fitting one at that. The authors have produced a thought-provoking manuscript which will

¹³ *ibid* 95.

¹⁴ *ibid* 109.

¹⁵ *ibid* 103.

¹⁶ *ibid* 124.

no doubt add to the ‘phenomenal interest in criminology’ that we are currently experiencing in Ireland.¹⁷

¹⁷ *ibid* 9.