

TURNER, MERFYN LLOYD (1915-1991), social reformer and author

Name: Merfyn Lloyd Turner
Date of birth: 1915
Date of death: 1991
Gender: Male
Occupation: social reformer and author
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Public and Social Service, Civil Administration
Author: Llion Wigley

Merfyn Turner was born in Penygraig, Rhondda on 20 October 1915 to Edward Godfrey Turner and his wife Lizzie Violet Turner (née Lloyd). He had one brother, Rhiwallon, and two sisters, Beryl and Corriswen. The family moved around Wales during his childhood due to his father's vocation as a Wesleyan minister, and he attended a number of different schools. He studied for an arts degree at Aberystwyth University between 1934 and 1937, and went on to gain a diploma in Education from Westminster College the following year. He worked as a teacher in Eastbourne for a short period before the Second World War intervened.

A committed pacifist, he went before the South Wales Tribunal, sitting in Aberystwyth in 1940 as a conscientious objector. He was refused recognition, and likewise by the Appellate Tribunal, and was then required to attend a medical examination preliminary to call-up. He refused to comply, entailing prosecution and sentence to three months imprisonment with hard labour, served at Swansea Prison. The sentence enabled him to return to the Appellate Tribunal, where he was now exempted from military service conditionally upon performing social relief work. He began his career as a social worker and reformer in Tiger Bay, Cardiff. He moved to London in 1944 to work with homeless men at Oxford House Settlement in Bethnal Green. He continued to work and live in London for the rest of his life, although he visited Wales regularly and wrote and broadcast widely in Welsh.

Appointed warden of the Webbe Boys Club in Bethnal Green in 1946, with his characteristic and innate sympathy towards social outsiders of all kinds, he worked particularly closely with the boys who failed to conform with the club's rules. With the support of a grant from the London Parochial Charities, he established a club for these 'unclubbable' boys on an old sailing barge called *Normanhurst* in the Wapping area of the river Thames. He acted as the warden for the first of his social experiments until 1952. Meanwhile, his passionate interest in prisoners and their welfare had been inspired by his own experience, and he began visiting them in a voluntary capacity in 1946, mainly at Pentonville Prison, and he continued to do so regularly for over forty years. He noticed how many of them left prison homeless and without any family to support them. He secured aid once again from the London Parochial Charities to establish a family home for around twelve ex-prisoners which would give them the opportunity to find work and friendship, rather than having to turn to the common lodging houses and reception centres which replicated the institutionalized environment of prison. He bought a substantial house in the Highbury area of north London, and Norman House opened in 1955 with Turner himself as its first warden. He married a volunteer called Shirley Davis (born 1932) who came to work at Norman House and they had five children - two boys and three girls (triplets). The idea for the venture was partly inspired by his regular visits to Scandinavian countries during the forties and fifties, where he witnessed first-hand methods used to treat and reform prisoners which were far less punitive than the traditional attitude towards them in Britain allowed.

Norman House was the first halfway house for former prisoners in Britain and its example was followed across the country in the late fifties and sixties, thus creating a new model for prisoner after-care. His experiment gained official approval in the sixties through government grants to establish halfway houses along similar lines. Sharing life as a family was the key to the success of Norman House, and the project's main goal was to offer a safe, secure environment for the men so that they could resettle within society. This reflected Turner's central belief that social, emotional and environmental deprivation led to the vast majority of crimes, rather than any kind of inherent evil: 'No man is born a criminal, and no man is only a criminal'. He consequently believed that captivity was unnecessary and unsuitable for the majority of prisoners, and that they would respond better and be far less likely to reoffend if other methods of reforming them within the community were developed and used. He outlined his alternative model to prison in his important pamphlet *Prisoners Progress*.

He became a well-known figure in the fifties through the radio and television programmes which he presented on the BBC about the experiences of prisoners, the homeless and the socially outcast. He even featured on *Desert Island Discs* in 1963. He believed strongly in the importance of learning and showing empathy and support through practical experience, and he spent three months living in a common lodging house in order to better understand the kind of grim environment which prisoners faced after they were released. He walked the back streets of London late at night recording the voices of homeless people for radio programmes about their problems, and he worked on a fairground in Hoxton one summer to learn more about two unruly gangs of youths who gathered there. His consistent willingness to put himself in situations which would have horrified others was part of his interpretation of Christianity in terms of everyday living, with the emphasis firmly on forgiveness and acceptance. He continued to work in Norman House and its two successors in London until his retirement in 1980. In his later years he worked very closely with prisoners at Broadmoor who were written off by most as being beyond help, and with prisoners from foreign countries who faced deportation, often for political reasons.

He was a tall, lithe figure of extremely patient and amiable temperament; a talented footballer (he played left-back for Cardiff City for a period) and a teetotaler, he smoked a pipe constantly, partly because he believed this helped gain the trust of prisoners whom he visited. The ability to listen empathetically and offer unconditional acceptance to the prisoners were the most important attributes he developed in this role. His work with prisoners in general was remarkably enlightened, sympathetic and modern, and he was certainly one of the most important pioneers of the second half of the twentieth century within his field. His compassionate ideas were respected by a number of judges, lawyers and politicians, in Britain and overseas, and his work had a profound and lasting influence on reform and after-care of former prisoners.

He wrote six important books which describe his social experiments and his experiences as a prison visitor: four in English, *Ship without Sails* (1953), *Forgotten Men* (1960), *Safe Lodging* (1961), and *A Pretty Sort of Prison* (1964); and two in Welsh, *O Ryfedd Ryw* (1970) and *Trwy'r Drws ac Allan* (1987).

He died of cancer in the Royal Free Hospital, London on 6 August 1991 and was cremated at St Marylebone crematorium.

Author

Llion Wigley

Sources

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Merfyn Turner, *O Ryfedd Ryw* (1970)

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Y Faner, 23 August 1991

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Merfyn Turner](#)

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