



Pit of Shame: The Real Ballad of Reading Gaol

Anthony Stokes

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'I know not whether Laws be right, Or whether Laws be wrong; All that we know who lie in gaol Is that the wall is strong; And that each day is like a year, A year whose days are long.' Oscar Wilde (The Ballad of Reading Gaol) This unique work looks closely at the life and times of Reading Gaol prison during the period that Oscar Wilde was a prisoner there. The book also contains a number of new insights concerning Wilde's classic poem, The Ballad of Reading Gaol, and offers fresh information about Oscar Wilde. Written by senior prison officer Anthony Stokes, Pit of Shame is based on upwards of ten years research and familiarity with the very fabric of Reading Gaol. It also tells of notorious and famous prisoners such as Thomas Jennings, Amelia Dyer (the 'Reading Baby Farmer') and actor Stacey Keach; examines the many hangings that took place at Reading over the years, including that of Trooper Charles Thomas Wooldridge – the 'C. T. W.' of Wilde's ballad; lists the chain of events that led to the rejection of capital punishment by the UK; and mentions the escapes, brutality, and corruption that took place. Anthony Stokes's compelling account outlines the rich and diverse history of this most famous of English prisons and tells of its many different and intriguing uses over the years, before Reading Gaol's modern-day reincarnation as an innovative and progressive young offender institution. There are chapters on internment in the wake of Ireland's Easter Rising, Reading's role as a local prison and borstal correctional center, and its use by the Canadian military for 'invisible prisoners.' All this is enhanced by fascinating period detail from archives, newspapers, and records. The appendices include a list of all executions at Reading Gaol, the historic Dietary Requirements, and Prison Rules. The 16 pages of illustrations include photographs and drawings of the prison and the handwritten entry in the Visiting Committee book concerning an ill-fated petition by Oscar Wilde to the Home Secretary; as well as that in the Execution Log for Charles Thomas Wooldridge.

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