

Dark Tourism and the Celebrity Prisoner: Front and Back Regions in Representations of an Australian Historical Prison

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Gossip magazines are notorious for their practice of sensationally revealing the mundane side of celebrities' lives, especially where it is seen to be incompatible with the celebrity's presentation of their public self. The celebrity's preoccupation with maintaining an appropriately splendid public image, and his/her concomitant preoccupation with concealing what goes on behind that façade, constitute a personal dichotomy innate to everyone — albeit writ large in the case of the celebrity or public figure. Social psychologist Erving Goffman explains this dichotomy in terms of a 'dramaturgical' model of the human self composed of internal 'regions' of self-construction.¹ These comprise 'front regions', in which are performed those activities the self considers acceptable for public consumption, and 'back regions', or 'backstage' areas, where the less acceptable activities occur. On the basis of this model, Goffman suggests that the functional public self involves a 'performance'.² It has been remarked that 'Goffman's work has no systematic relationship to abstract academic theory and provides no encouragement to attempts to advance such theory';³ his central aim, as an 'ethnographer of the self',⁴ was to characterise. In this capacity, his dramaturgical model has proved of enduring value, as it provides a metaphorical vocabulary with which to conceptually frame and illuminate the subject.

In this article, I intend to discuss two very different entities utilising Goffman's vocabulary of dramaturgy, and examine the links between the two. One entity is an institution: Pentridge Prison, the former maximum-security jail in Melbourne's northern suburbs. The other is a 'celebrity' whom, I will argue, a considerable portion of the general public has come to associate with Pentridge's evolving post-operational front region, and who is arguably its most famous living ex-inmate: the criminal-turned-writer Mark Brandon Read, universally known as 'Chopper'.

'Chopper' Read

'Chopper' Read (b 1954) acquired his evocative nickname as a child. The name was adopted from a cartoon character,⁵ but it later gained a certain appositeness, within his milieu, from his trademark use of a pair of bolt-cutters as a coercive weapon while earning his living as a young standover man.⁶ He first emerged from underworld anonymity in 1978, when he became briefly infamous for taking a Melbourne county court judge hostage at gunpoint in his own court, in an effort to 'spring' James Loughnan, a friend and partner-in-crime, from the Victorian criminal psychiatric prison 'J Ward'.⁷ Predictably, the attempt was futile, and Read served nine years in jail. Within months of his release in the mid-1980s he was convicted of further violent crimes and re-imprisoned for another five years.

The county court kidnapping that originally brought Read to notice was spectacular for its audacity, and may be seen, in hindsight, as signifying a personality with an inclination toward the overt gesture (as he puts it, ‘a bit of a show pony’). This proclivity was confirmed later in the same year when he razored off his own ears, with a cellmate’s help, an action calculated to effect his removal from ‘H Division’, Pentridge’s high-security punishment division.⁸ But the notoriety arising from such acts was ephemeral; during the bulk of his incarceration, the public largely forgot that Read existed.

Read re-emerged in public view in the early 1990s when he achieved a *bona fide*, if somewhat coarse-grained, celebrity status through an irreverent and candid autobiography, which he wrote while imprisoned. This book, which would be the first in a series, was compiled from over three hundred letters written from his Pentridge cell to a Melbourne crime journalist⁹ and published under the title *Chopper: From the Inside*. In it he recounted, in tones alternating rather chaotically between remorseful and brashly unrepentant, his and others’ crimes, and described a number of his underworld and prison associates, both friend and foe.

Ten years on, in a review article on Read’s oeuvre, Simon Caterson would borrow from Orwell to characterise *Chopper: From the Inside* as a ‘good bad book’, on the grounds of its combined qualities of memorable readability and complete lack of ‘literary pretension’.¹⁰ A defining trait of books fitting the ‘good-bad’ category is their robust and enduring popularity in the face of erudite criticism,¹¹ and Read’s literary debut was no exception. By virtue of the clearly authentic insights it afforded into criminal life (an authenticity undiminished by Read’s frequent admission that not everything he writes is strictly truthful), combined with a ‘disarmingly intimate and confessional prose style’,¹² *Chopper: From the Inside* became an instant best-seller, and at this writing is in its thirtieth print-run. A highly successful film adaptation was released in 2000.

Chopper: From the Inside neatly established Read’s persona as a darkly jocular perpetrator of violence both in and outside jail. He was widely feared and hated within the underworld as a ‘headhunter’, but one with an avowed ‘Robin Hood’ side, in that (as he stated then and maintains today) he only ever killed or maimed other criminals — especially drug dealers — thereby making society safer for ordinary citizens.¹³ In creating a public image centred on the ambiguous connotations of his nickname, Read presented himself as the embodiment of a kind of living myth. Caterson argues that the ‘Chopper’ myth is analogous to the iconic Australian outlaw myth surrounding Ned Kelly: ‘Like Kelly, Read seems to be regarded by many people as a “good criminal” ... but, more than this, he created an image that is larger than life and is the stuff of legend’.¹⁴ At the height of his career, Ned Kelly famously promulgated a lengthy and highly political manifesto-cum-apologia, the ‘Jerilderie letter’.¹⁵ Both Read and Kelly, Caterson says, ‘manifest an irrepressible urge for self-expression’ in their writings — an ‘urge’ originally expressed in the shared ‘flair for the dramatic’ that characterised certain of their criminal activities.¹⁶

Caterson might be thought by some to be going a bit far in drawing this parallel with any seriousness; the roots and motivations of Kelly’s and Read’s respective careers may well be too disparate to withstand the comparison. It should be noted

that Kelly became a 'legend' during his escapade, gaining wide contemporaneous renown within broad sections of the civilian community primarily through his transgressive acts (which always had a social-political dimension entirely lacking in Read's 'toe-cutting' adventures), rather than through witty literary self-reconstruction. Kelly's 'Jerilderie letter' and defiant speechifying at his trial served to consolidate for history an image already well established 'in the field'. Nevertheless, however incongruous the Kelly comparison might seem, for almost any ex-criminal who identifies to a significant extent with Australian cultural memory, the allure of a notional link with our iconic outlaw hero is almost irresistible. It is a fact that favourable, even reverential, verbal and graphic references to Ned Kelly may be found among graffiti in jail-cells literally across Australia. (I have observed this as far afield as Fremantle Gaol, almost 3,000 kilometres from the geographical theatre of Kelly's life and career.) Unsurprisingly, Read himself seems to have taken Catterson's idea to heart. Having in recent times extended his creative repertoire to painting, he held a sell-out exhibition in August 2003 that resulted in the State Library of Victoria buying a 'Chopper' self-portrait, *Tasteful Old Criminal* [sic], which in its visual design alludes directly to the iconic imagery of Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly series.¹⁷

Paradoxically, Read's 'good criminal' self-interpretation (clearly a front-region aspect) is bolstered by his escapade with the judge — or at least by his account of the event. Read's motivation in undertaking such a foolhardy and manifestly doomed venture was, it seems, derived from a sense of chivalrous honour toward his friend Loughnan and based on a long-ago promise that no reasonable person would have expected to be fulfilled. In recounting the episode, Read fosters this interpretation with two apparent aims: to justify his sense of grievance over the subsequent betrayal he suffered at Loughnan's hands (in 1979 Loughnan stabbed Read almost to death in jail);¹⁸ and, not insignificantly, to reinforce his desired image as one benignly disposed toward the innocents of civil society, even when he has palpably wronged them:

after [the kidnapping] was all over I wrote to Judge Martin [the victim] and said I was sorry and he wrote back to me ... He was very concerned for me and wished me all the very best for the future. I thought that was very nice of him. I had no ill will towards him. It was all to try to get Jimmy Loughnan out of J Ward.¹⁹

A countering facet of the Chopper myth, and one that Read has also explicitly fostered, is that of the harder-than-hard man — the man of implacably and utterly ruthless violence who will stop at nothing because, ultimately, he fears nothing. Read's auto-amputation of his ears highlights what is perhaps his most disturbing attribute: an extraordinary emotional resistance, almost imperviousness, to physical pain — his own and, one inevitably infers, other people's. This, along with his habitual perverse wit, presumably contributed to his underworld reputation as a 'psycho', which in turn facilitated his ascendance to power among prison populations wherever he was incarcerated. In his own words, 'there's nothing more frightening in jail than a psycho'.²⁰

In and out of prison for much of his adult life, Read has been free and apparently reformed since 1998. In 1995, while imprisoned in Tasmania's Risdon Prison for malicious wounding, he married Mary-Ann Hodge, a Tax Office employee who had been visiting him in prison. On his release, Read moved with

her to rural Tasmania, where he became a father and attempted to settle down to family and farming life. However, by his own admission, the marriage was, at least in part, a pragmatic undertaking motivated by his desire to get out of jail.²¹ Although he seems to have genuinely immersed himself for a time in domesticity,²² in the end the venture proved too alien to his nature and too much at odds with certain imperatives from his past.²³ Read returned to Melbourne in 2001, freshly divorced, and announced that he intended to marry his girlfriend of almost twenty years, Margaret Casser. The wedding duly took place in January 2003.

As noted above, in 2000 a cinematic adaptation of Read's story was released, entitled simply *Chopper*.²⁴ The film did very respectable business at the box office, both in Australia and internationally, won critical acclaim²⁵ and launched the international film career of comedian-cum-actor Eric Bana. Among the more striking of the film's promotional accoutrements was a poster image in which Bana adopted the armed-to-the-teeth pose of one of the more notorious illustrations in Read's first book, a black-and-white photograph of the author captioned 'Dressed to Kill'. In this picture, taken in Read's criminal heyday, he appears stripped to the waist and 'tooled up', as the argot has it, tattooed forearms crossed over his bare chest and sporting a large pistol in each upraised hand, plus two tucked into his waistband, a shoulder-holster, and a flick-knife hanging from a belt-loop.²⁶

A brief comparison between the Bana image and the prototype is instructive. The original photograph was taken at the height of Read's criminal career — well before he became an active publicity-seeker. In it, a clean-shaven, slightly pudgy and manifestly unsexy Read gazes at the camera with a flat, vaguely belligerent lack of expression. The picture is little more than a display of the tools of his trade, a snapshot presumably taken as a mere memento. By contrast, the image that graced cinema display cases has lost the drab banality of the original; Eric Bana's full-colour 'Chopper' is literally aglow with potency and threat, but now the danger emanates at least as much from the man as from his weapons. Bana-Chopper has taken on the sunglasses and the defiant, head-up posture of another of the book's black-and-white illustrations (which also graced the cover), added the flamboyant moustache that Read sported in later years, and combined these with the crossed-arms pose. All visible distractions from the flesh have been minimised. As far as representations of masculinity go, the Bana poster clearly is intended to combine danger and sexuality — not just a killer but also a sexually potent one.

To judge by Read's public support for the film — in particular for Eric Bana's portrayal of him²⁷ — and the fact that the Bana poster image featured prominently on what long stood as the closest Read had to an 'official' website (a somewhat confrontational site apparently posted on his behalf by friends), it is clear that the image was one of which he approved.²⁸ In the process of endorsing a radically 'Hollywoodised' representation of himself, Read effectively appropriated that representation as his own 'front region', or at least as a defining portion thereof. This appropriation has recently taken on a further dimension: Read has now taken responsibility for his own website,²⁹ and among the promotional 'memorabilia' offered through its 'products' page is a photographic collage that includes the

Bana image — but with Bana's head replaced by Read's, superimposed atop Bana's shoulders.³⁰

Read is nothing if not complex, and his self-presentation is not confined to the crude 'glamour' associated with displays of brute power; there are signs, too, that he has to a degree 'moved on' from his wholehearted endorsement of his film persona. His public career now includes regular tours with various show-business and/or former underworld associates,³¹ and he has embarked on a musical career, with a number of recordings to his credit. As noted above, he is at pains in his memoirs to leaven the 'headhunter' image with one of proper, if unorthodox, concern for society's 'civilian' (non-criminal) population. It may be inferred from various sentiments expressed in his writings that he has hopes for some degree of 'respectability' — some understanding and acknowledgement in the general community that, even given his proclivity for dark joking about his past career, he is a reformed character.³² His new website is markedly less lurid than its unofficial predecessor, more pragmatic in its promotional aspects, and rather more equivocal in his support for the film *Chopper*.³³

From the moment of the publication of his first book, with its apparent aspiration to public recognition and its sometimes sage reflections on the inherent futility of his radically deviant life-course, Read had the potential to become what J David Brown terms a 'professional ex-'. Such a person provides themselves (wittingly or otherwise) with a mode of 'exiting the deviant career' by taking up a role of service, or quasi-service, that depends on their deviant past for the core expertise/credentials necessary to fulfil that role.³⁴ In terms of front- and back-regions, the professional ex- is of some interest because of his/her propensity to re-present what were once personal and, crucially, reprehensible back-region features as front-region attributes. This re-presentation involves a process of simultaneous affirmation and disavowal of those features — a kind of self-othering, as it were, by which the rehabilitated (or 'recovering') deviant legitimates his/her new role.

Brown's discussion concerns itself primarily with the most common instance of the professional ex- phenomenon: alcohol-/drug-abuse counsellors.³⁵ However, there is no reason to limit the category to this group. His description of 'professional ex-' would certainly fit a former career criminal whose change of heart extended not merely to going straight but to constructing a whole new career, based on his former activities, as a public figure avowedly committed to law and order and the public good. Indeed, certain aspects of Read's public persona as it has evolved to the present are highly consistent with the 'professional ex-' model — not least the facts that he is often consulted by news media for his views on 'gangland' stories³⁶ and that he performed in a series of road safety television advertisements in which he explicitly invoked his prison experiences.³⁷

As mentioned above, consonant with his apparent quest for respectability, Read recently married his girlfriend of over two decades' standing. The event was attended by an assortment of minor celebrities, several law-enforcement and prison officers and, most importantly, a journalist and photographer from the gossip magazine *Woman's Day*. In keeping with occasional celebrity wedding practice of recent years, the groom and best man wore Scottish 'Highland' dress — kilts and sporrans.³⁸ Largely on the strength of this 'trendy' eccentricity,

Woman's Day flagged the wedding as 'outrageous' and 'wacky', but the report itself reverted to a more conventional populist agenda by focusing heavily on the bride and entitling the article 'Chopper Weds his First Sweetheart'.³⁹ The magazine's account encompasses the spectrum of social redemption necessary for the former violent criminal to qualify as a cheekily likeable rogue — or, to employ the peculiarly Australian catch-all for such masculine characters: he may now be regarded as a larrikin.⁴⁰

Pentridge Prison

The significance of the above will be discussed in due course; it is necessary at this point to consider the 'institutional' aspect of this examination. This concerns Pentridge Prison, where Read was incarcerated when he did away with his ears and while he wrote his first book. His connection with this particular prison may seem obvious and rather commonplace; however, I will suggest that it is rather different and of a more subtle variety than is at first apparent, and that this association is of some relevance to the present discussion.

Built in the mid-nineteenth century, Pentridge Prison served as Victoria's central maximum-security prison until its closure in 1996. Three years later, the state government sold the sixty-acre site to a development consortium. The bulk of the site has become a housing estate (utilising the existing six-metre-high bluestone perimeter wall as a selling-point for prospective buyers interested in living in a 'walled village');⁴¹ a few remaining acres, including a number of original buildings and the prison's iconic castellated facade, are slated in the near future to form a 'commercial precinct'.⁴² This development, which includes a piazza and diverse re-usages of certain cell-blocks, is intended in part to exploit the tourist potential of both the built fabric and a selection of narratives associated with the site's penal history.⁴³ From this proposed exploitation of the prison site, questions arise in relation to the nature of the front regions with which I am centrally concerned. Before discussing the presentational aspects of this exemplar of 'dark tourism',⁴⁴ however, it is appropriate to consider some aspects of the functional institution that preceded it.

It must be noted that operational maximum-security prisons, although they are physically located in public spaces, are among the few institutions that lack, to a large degree, any form of persona that makes the concept of front regions meaningful. This lack is, of course, deliberate. Unlike people, self-presentation is not the prison's primary business. In fact, its officials are likely to avoid such presentation as much as possible, leaving its visible image to remain a forbidding blank, in the form of emblematic high, featureless walls. This is not to say that Goffman's idea has no application here; rather, prisons should be viewed in terms of a gross imbalance toward 'back regions', with the front region radically minimised. The front-region manifestations resulting from such minimisation typically stand as exceptions that prove the rule, and a brief discussion of their characteristics is therefore worthwhile for the insights they afford into the operational prison and, by contrast, into the historical prison operating as a tourist site.

The presentations associated with the front regions constructed by operational prisons tend to be public expressions or performances of existing inmate activities

of the type Goffman characterises, in his study of ‘total institutions’, as ‘removal activities’.⁴⁵ These are the recreational or other diversionary pursuits — hobbies, team sports, and so on — undertaken primarily to gain relief or distraction from the experience of incarceration. To those engaging in them, such pursuits are unlikely to be intended (in the first instance, at least) to be contributions to an institutional front region; there is little reason for inmates to have any personal stake in providing a ‘storefront’ for the institution *per se*. They do, however, have reason to welcome opportunities to interact or simply make contact with members of the public, and this desire is open to exploitation by officials who are concerned with the institution’s image.

An abiding characteristic of such exploitation is that it imbues the inmates’ removal activities with implicit connotations of redemption — of the inmates’ notional fitness to resume some degree of participation in civil society. This in turn reflects favourably upon the prison itself, in terms of its rehabilitative role and as an exemplar of orderly prisoner management. Inmates, as individuals, have their own front regions, which in many cases encompass aspirational presentations as socially redeemed persons. A typical example would be for sporting events to be arranged against groups invited into the prison grounds from the surrounding neighbourhood. On such occasions, whatever the scale of the event, it is in the inmates’ interests not merely to compete but also to demonstrate a level of socialisation appropriate to the occasion.⁴⁶

In Pentridge in the latter decades of its operation, football matches were played on a semi-regular basis between inmates and teams of senior students from a nearby high school. George Thompson, a ‘veteran’ of one of those school teams, recalls that in 1977, as a ‘robust’ seventeen-year-old:

they chucked me into the footy side and we went in [to Pentridge’s grounds] and played a game on their oval ... We were all young sorts of blokes, we were pretty intimidated, but at the same time it was certainly our own little Gallipoli, it was a big adventure for us ... there was that curiosity element ... It went quite well. The guys [inmates] ... were pretty comical, they were big sorts of blokes, and they — they won.⁴⁷

Thompson’s recollection evokes an encounter conducted in a spirit of good humour and sportsmanship befitting the youth and relative innocence of the inmates’ opponents. As such, it affirms the success of the exercise, from the institution’s point of view, as a front-region performance. The encounter was typical of most prison–public front-region interactions, with a small number of outsiders permitted inside for a relatively brief, tightly structured sporting event.

Of course, not all prisoners are inclined toward removal activities of such broad physicality; intrinsically presentable goods such as art and craftwork can lend themselves equally well to the prison’s front region. A Pentridge prisoner with a propensity for, say, woodcraft or textiles might have found himself encouraged to join the ‘Pentridge Toy Makers’, a group founded in 1961 to produce toys for ‘needy’ and ‘destitute’ children. Products of the Toy Makers’ labours (upwards of 6,000 toys and hobbies annually, at their peak) were ceremonially displayed and distributed at lavish Christmas events held in the jail, to which groups of children from refugee communities, orphanages, and so on, were invited. There they were treated to pantomimes and various other

entertainments, including meetings with a ‘Santa Claus’ long resident in E Division. (Whether the children noticed the word ‘death’ tattooed across Santa’s knuckles is not known.)⁴⁸

The contention that inmates were ‘exploited’ through the Toy Makers for the sake of the institution’s image may appear harsh. In their charitable purport, the Pentridge Toy Makers’ endeavours were undeniably worthy, and no doubt engendered much genuine satisfaction — perhaps even a degree of personal redemption — for at least some of the inmates involved in the intrinsic good of making children happy. On this basis it can be argued that in this particular front-region project the institutional authorities’ intent — to foreground the redemptive prison — aligned to a significant extent with the inmates’ motivation. But such endeavours are rare; the vast majority of removal activities are ‘privileges’ granted on the pragmatic basis that the inmate is, while so occupied, orderly. If the activity lends itself to front-region presentation, so much the better.

There is one further form of public access to the operational prison: personal visits to prisoners. These constitute by far the most common form of such access. Pentridge, for example, admitted in the order of 60,000 ‘non-professional’ civilians (those other than lawyers, and so on) per year on this basis.⁴⁹ This figure seems at first to contradict the notion of minimisation referred to above, but it is here that we actually encounter that minimisation in its most extreme form — so extreme that such visits have a markedly ambiguous standing *vis-à-vis* the front region/back region dichotomy. That ambiguity and its causes provide a glimpse, and hence a conceptual point of entry, into the institution’s back regions.

The non-professional visit tends to occur under austere utilitarian and security-impelled regulation. Such conditions exclude ‘general’ public access and are conducted with an apparent disregard for visitors’ emotional comfort or welfare. Apart from the obvious security factors influencing visitor conditions, another key aspect of the personal prisoner visit is the prison staff’s moral perception of, and attitude toward, the visitor. In conventional front-region performances in the outside world, a central, defining characteristic — in effect, the *raison d’être* of such performances — is that a tacit authority inheres in the audience/clientele. This authority is almost entirely missing in the case of prisoner visits. The run-of-the-mill visitor, insofar as he/she constitutes any form of audience or client, is completely lacking in authority. Indeed, the visitor may be argued to have taken on, by association, some of the prisoner’s fundamentally negative moral status in the institution.⁵⁰ Aside from the emotions that attend the strictly limited period of communication with the incarcerated friend or loved one, the visitor’s experience of the visit tends to be characterised by subtle manifestations of the prison’s back regions. These may be experienced as a sensation of arid confinement, official disapproval and a devaluation of the visitor’s comfort and wellbeing — sensations to some degree shared with the inmates, for whom these features of institutional life, *ad extremus*, constitute the matrix of daily existence.⁵¹

Attitudes are significant in a closed environment. In the systemic relegation of inmates’ welfare, Goffman identifies an ethos of the total institution whose prime imperative, always, is confinement.⁵² This ethos manifests, at base, as radical indifference on the part of the institution toward the individual inmate, and in practice almost always overrides whatever compassion may be extended by

individual staff members.⁵³ In many ways it frames and defines the inmate's general experience of life 'inside' from his or her first moments of imprisonment.⁵⁴ Further, it may be discerned as a principal contributory factor in the coercive dominance that characterises the experience of incarceration.⁵⁵

In its relationship to harm, institutional indifference *per se* does not equate with agency; it does, however, foster a tendency to do harm, in the form of wilful neglect and even direct assault.⁵⁶ But to establish a causal link between indifference and violent mishap does not require instances of deliberate staff brutality toward inmates — although history has recorded an infinitude of such instances, not least at Pentridge (where it was known among staff as administering 'therapy').⁵⁷ In any high-security prison it is inevitable that a significant percentage of inmates (whether convicted of violent crimes or not) will incline toward using violence as a ready, and often primary, mode of self-expression and/or social problem-solving. All that is needed, in a maximum-security prison, is for custodial staff to leave inmates relatively unimpeded to get on with the natural business of establishing and maintaining their 'pecking order'. In some prisons this approach, taken to its logical conclusion, leads to the inmate-management strategy of allowing and even actively encouraging the development of a radically divided, 'all-against-all' social regime among the incarcerated population.⁵⁸

Everywhere, every minute — like the air that you breathe — there is a threat of violence lurking beneath the surface ... it permeates every second of everyone's existence [and] there is no let up from it — ever.⁵⁹

A 'jungle-like' atmosphere facilitates the control of the prison population, both on a straightforward 'divide and conquer' basis and also via unofficial strategic alliances between staff and favoured 'warlord' prisoners.⁶⁰ It was in just such an environment, by his own account, that Chopper Read thrived; he states that on numerous occasions while in Pentridge he was permitted by prison officers to go about the prison armed, on the premise that the encouragement of his dominion helped to maintain order.⁶¹

A further ramification of the *laissez-faire* approach to prisoner administration, arguably the most egregious, is the proliferation of sexual violence — that is, rape. This phenomenon is extremely widespread (in some prisons affecting approximately one in four young male prisoners)⁶² and has a history perhaps as long as imprisonment itself. Of all prison experiences, it is among the most damaging, physically and psychically.⁶³ Despite its notoriety, it is also the problem whose severity or even existence is most consistently denied by officials at all levels, including the judiciary,⁶⁴ and only in recent years has it begun to receive a degree of acknowledgement and serious study.⁶⁵

Such studies notwithstanding, mass media reports or commentary on prison sexual violence are virtually nonexistent; hence, despite being 'common knowledge', public awareness of the realities of the problem remains very low.⁶⁶ This is the preferred state of affairs as far as prison officials are concerned. It is apparent that any discussion of the phenomenon deals, by definition, with the most remote and secret backstage areas of any prison — indeed, of the prison system.

Chopper and Pentridge: front and back regions

The aspects of the prison system outlined above, as back regions, are of course kept hidden from public perception as far as possible. These realities are far removed from the prison's 'public face' as evinced by the occasional football match or children's Christmas party. Much changes when the prison is decommissioned. Once it becomes an historical entity, and especially when that history is to be exploited by opening the site to the public on a profit-making basis, the relevance of the established front regions diminishes, and their moral resonance as signifiers of the redeemed inmate comes to have little more than anecdotal status. A transformation of purport is now underway, for the public face of the historical prison is vastly different from that of an operational prison. A new front region must be invented, and as the historical prison's appeal rests almost entirely on an expectation of back regions revealed — 'What's it like to be in jail?' — the re-invented front region must cater to that expectation.⁶⁷

For those with a stake in the invention of a public face for an historical prison, two issues immediately arise. Firstly, the secret nature of the functional prison leaves the public expectant, but with little clear idea of precisely what to expect. Secondly, and a corollary to the first point, there is much in those back regions — the many dreadful realities of maximum-security incarceration — with the potential to be sufficiently disturbing to the ordinary person's sensibility to cause entrepreneurs, site managers and tour operators to fear that visitors will find the tour experience too negative to be entertaining, or too morally ambiguous to be readily assimilated. The task of tour operators and their like, then, is to 'euphemise' the back regions, while somehow convincing the punters that they are receiving an authentic account of those regions.⁶⁸

In the case of Pentridge, the proprietors have adopted a solution common to many historical prisons around the world. The presentation will be informed, controlled and conducted by a group with existing links to the prison, extensive inside knowledge, and a strong motivation to propagate a palatable, entertaining and uncontroversial rendition of the back regions: former prison officers.

The announcement in July 2002 that retired Pentridge officers were to have a key role in forthcoming tours provoked a minor flurry of press coverage. Central to each report was the officers' proficiency as raconteurs, especially with regard to humorous anecdotes.⁶⁹ Whether in the sense of selecting the funny stories among the many that could be told, or throwing a jocular light upon serious, even harrowing, subject-matter, humour is a staple mode of presentation in historical prisons.⁷⁰ It is at this point that Chopper Read, in his post-prison incarnation, is in his element, and he becomes a significant asset to those with a stake in the made-over institution. A natural wit, with a vast fund of highly believable tales drawn from personal experience, he is one of the few ex-prisoners deemed suitable for a place in the 'official' history of Pentridge that is developing. (He was one of only two ex-prisoners interviewed for a documentary on the jail commissioned by the developers shortly after they acquired the site.)⁷¹ Although not directly involved in the projected tours, his 'larrikin' persona and status are integral and perfectly fitted to the invented Pentridge front region, and it is significant that many former prison officers express respect and some fondness for him. (As mentioned earlier, a number of them were included among his wedding guests.)

Read's role as a celebrity prisoner is consistent with a staple device of historical prison presentations, which is to make prominent mention of any particularly well-known inmates the prison may have ever contained.⁷² Thus, at various former prisons, tour presentations almost invariably feature anecdotes, artefacts and other 'relics' of notorious characters such as Ned Kelly (and his mother Ellen), Ronald Ryan, Garry David and, needless to say, Chopper himself.⁷³ (If such elements are not present, visitors can be relied upon to ask about them: while Pentridge was briefly open for tours immediately following its decommissioning, one of the questions most commonly asked of tour guides was, 'Which cell was Chopper's?')⁷⁴ Of no small significance is the fact that the prison interiors depicted in the film *Chopper* were shot in the authentic locations within Pentridge. But although Read's example is to some degree true to type, it also has certain unusual aspects of particular significance with regard to the historical representation of Pentridge.

Front-region manifestations are not necessarily confined to conventional on-site presentations; they can take diverse forms, and so too the involvement of what I term the 'celebrity prisoner'. In 2001 Melbourne radio station Triple M ran a 'reality' competition, 'Escape from Pentridge', in which contestants spent nineteen days and nights 'imprisoned' in the cells, undergoing a series of 'challenges' and 'punishments'; among the latter was spending 'a night in a cell with Chopper'.⁷⁵

The typical inmate's primary experience of the total institution tends to signify 'a loss of self-determination',⁷⁶ a loss that a great deal of inmate activity is designed to overcome. However, for the vast majority of prisoners, who for various reasons can attain only tenuous or no control over their circumstances (in many cases a continuance of their experience of life before prison),⁷⁷ such activity is largely ineffectual. For most inmates, self-determination remains essentially unattainable. The reason for this is simple: within the 'jungle' of the total institution, individual autonomy is almost exclusively a consequence of personal (physical) power, and this is, perforce, the province of a small number of inmates peculiarly fitted for such status — the prison's 'elite'. By all accounts (not least his own), Chopper Read was precisely such an inmate.

The elite prisoner sets the bar at an impossible height for the run-of-the-mill prison population, both during the period of imprisonment and after release. During imprisonment, the stakes concern coercive dominance of the closed social environment; afterward, more subtly (and of course far less urgently), the central issues become historical ones of remembrance and representation. Put simply, the celebrity prisoner's prominence *vis-à-vis* the remembered prison effectively overwhelms the voices of the vast majority of the institution's former population, helping to radically skew the overall interpretation of the site as an entity of public history in the process. In Chopper's case, a key aspect of this skewing is to reinforce the notion in the public mind that the experience of prison was at base funny — or at least sufficiently innocuous that humour constituted an effective removal activity.

Although the historical front region is premised on the imperative to entertain, there are limits to what may be presented with humour and retain any semblance of authenticity. Displays of confiscated weapons and judiciously selected

anecdotes of violent episodes are used to imply the wickedness of the inmates (precisely opposite to the 'redeemed inmate' discussed earlier). Such narratives invoke the prisoners' 'otherness'; this in turn legitimates and redeems the prison. Chopper is not without a role here, too. As noted above, he has come to display many attributes of the 'professional ex-', including the paradoxical 'self-othering' that lends credence to that role; in the process of repudiating his former self, by implication he fosters the othering of the general prison population. Also, prisons at which executions were conducted often display the gallows; in such cases, terrible crimes of the executed inmates tend to be emphasised in tour guides' accounts. The note of apparent authenticity struck in stories and images of institutional cruelty or unjust treatment of inmates obscures the fact that they are almost invariably derived from the distant past — often the nineteenth century — thus distancing the modern institution from such events in more recent times.

Some topics remain firmly taboo. As noted above, prison sexuality is relegated to the cognitive back regions more thoroughly than perhaps any other aspect of life 'inside'. But if it is hardly ever publicly referred to during the operational career of any prison, it is *never* spontaneously mentioned by tour guides during tours of prisons once they have closed down. Violent rape and serial sexual assault are unlikely to get too many laughs, however engaging the storyteller (even Chopper Read avoids the subject). I have heard tour guides flatly deny that 'it' went on in response to visitors' direct questions; the same guides privately admitted to me later that it did.⁷⁸

There is one more back-region aspect that I have not previously touched upon — one that, although not avoided outright in tour narratives, tends to be only sparingly acknowledged: the very high incidence of deliberate inmate self-harm. Tour guides will sometimes mention individual suicides, presenting them as unavoidable and, by implication, relatively rare tragedies.⁷⁹ In fact, people harm themselves far more frequently in prison than outside it.⁸⁰ In a study of the phenomenon, criminologist Alison Leibling found that 'the causes expressed by prisoners describing their activities as suicidal are the same as those causes relating to less lethal types of self-harm'. She concludes that such apparently disparate behaviours stand on 'a continuum of self-destructive behaviour'.⁸¹ It becomes meaningful, therefore, to refer to those 'less lethal' acts as 'para-suicides'.⁸² Apart from deliberate drug overdoses, the most common form of inmate para-suicide is self-mutilation, usually with edged weapons — what prison parlance terms 'slashing up'. The slash-up may be viewed as an inarticulate and desperate attempt by the inmate to compel the institution to attend to his/her welfare, a reaction to the institutional indifference noted above. It is a testament to the harshness of the environment within Pentridge that there were far more suicides and para-suicides there, especially in the last two decades of its operation, than in any other Australian prison.⁸³ Yet it is in this regard, I suggest, that perhaps the most effective euphemisation of all has occurred, in the process of re-inventing Pentridge's front region — and once again with the help of the celebrity prisoner.

Chopper Read carries a permanent, highly visible legacy of his years in Pentridge, in the form of his self-amputated ears — evidence that he, too, became caught up in what has been described as an 'epidemic' of slash-ups. It says much about the environment within Pentridge that the self-styled 'king' of H Division,

one of the most feared criminals in Victoria, could be driven to such an act. But in the course of remaking himself, Read has turned his own para-suicide event into an integral part of his image, a paradoxical symbol of empowerment, and a direct source of humour through both his anecdotes and a self-penned song he has recorded, which sports the rousing refrain ‘C’mon, c’mon, get yer bloody ears off’.⁸⁴ In such ways, Read has converted a physical legacy of the former back-regions of his life into a personal and professional front-region asset, which, by association, feeds into the reconstructed front region of the historical Pentridge. In the process, the corporeal significance of the para-suicide syndrome is, like so much else in the human history of the jail, diminished and effectively trivialised.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of dark tourism rests on disparate motives, and visitors to historic sites of death and suffering arrive with a range of expectations. Some visit to pay homage, some hope for edification; for others, the attraction is little more than ghoulish titillation, and many simply want to be entertained.⁸⁵ The dominant affect associated with a site may be sombre reverence, shock or amusement, depending on the site’s historical nature, on public perceptions of that history, and on the manner and style of its presentation.

In smuggling his story out of his cell in the early 1990s, Mark Brandon Read was responding to a self-expressive impulse that would set him on the path to celebrity status, open up for him a career as a ‘professional ex-’ (albeit one showing few signs of the typical professional ex-’s earnest sobriety), and render vivid and accessible the world within Pentridge Prison. Read’s account of his time behind bars represents another avenue through which visitors may ‘tour’ the jail. The world of Pentridge Prison, despite its manifold awfulness, became legitimised as an entertainment setting by virtue of its depiction, under Chopper’s pen, as the domain of the larrikin. Of course, *Chopper: From the Inside* was not intended as an advertisement for Pentridge as a public historical entity; but witting or not, it has substantially contributed to the front-region euphemisation of the prison, and led directly to the question apparently uppermost in the minds of tour visitors, ‘Which cell was Chopper’s?’

Dark Tourism and the Celebrity Prisoner: Front and Back Regions in Representations of an Australian Historical Prison
Jacqueline Zara Wilson

- 1 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Anchor, New York, 1959, pp 106–13.
- 2 *ibid.*, pp 17–20.
- 3 Eliot Freidson, ‘Celebrating Erving Goffman’, *Contemporary Sociology*, vol 12, no 4, July 1983, p 359.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Mark Brandon Read, *Chopper: From the Inside: The Confessions of Mark Brandon Read*, Floradale Productions, Kilmore, Vic., 1991, p 54; Mark Read interview, *Andrew Denton: Enough Rope*, ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] Television, broadcast 4 August 2003 (hereafter ‘Denton interview’). Read does not identify the character, but it was almost certainly Chopper the bulldog, friend to ‘Yakky Doodle’, a feature character in the early 1960s *Yogi Bear* series. (But cf. Read’s personal website, where he rather implausibly contradicts himself, dismissing his own account as ‘various theories’, and attributing the nickname to his notorious lack of ears. <<http://www.chopperread.com>> [hereafter ‘Read website’])
- 6 Read, *From the Inside*, *op. cit.*, pp 77–8.
- 7 *ibid.*, pp 74–5.
- 8 *ibid.*, pp 54–5.
- 9 *ibid.*, Editors’ note, p iv.
- 10 Simon Catterson, ‘Chopping into literature: the writings of Mark Brandon Read’, *Australian Book Review*, no 236, November 2001, p 19.
- 11 George Orwell, ‘Good Bad Books’ [1945] in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell*, Penguin, London, 1984.
- 12 Catterson, *op. cit.*, p 20.
- 13 Read, *From the Inside*, *op. cit.*, pp 6–7, 52–3, 77–86; Read website, *op. cit.*
- 14 Catterson, *op. cit.*, p 20.
- 15 Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly: A Short Life*, Lothian, Port Melbourne, 1995.
- 16 Catterson, *op. cit.*, pp 19–20.
- 17 Jeremy Kelly, ‘State Library buys Chopper art’, *Herald Sun*, 26 August 2003; see also Heather Gallagher, ‘“Chopper” exhibition almost sold out after two days’, *Age*, 1 August 2003.
- 18 Read, *From the Inside*, *op. cit.*, pp 71–5.
- 19 *ibid.*, p 75.
- 20 Mark Read, interview appended in Andrew Dominik (director), *Chopper*, motion picture, video recording, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001; see also Read in *Australian Story: Inside Out*, ABC Television, 3 May 2001.
- 21 Denton interview, *op. cit.*
- 22 See Read interview in Dominik, *op. cit.*; *Australian Story*, *op. cit.*
- 23 Read website, *op. cit.*; Denton interview, *op. cit.*; *Australian Story*, *op. cit.*
- 24 Dominik, *op. cit.*
- 25 See MRQE [Movie Review Query Engine] ‘Chopper’ [links]: <[http://www.mrqe.com/lookup?^Chopper+\(2000\)](http://www.mrqe.com/lookup?^Chopper+(2000))>; Stacey Bonanno, ‘Chopper: Critical Review and Bibliography’, 2001. Accessed 3 August 2003. <<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/film/dbase/2001/chopper.html>>
- 26 Read, *From the Inside*, *op. cit.*, p 100.
- 27 C James, ‘Chopper weds his first sweetheart’, *Woman’s Day*, 17 February 2003: pp 14–15.
- 28 See unofficial ‘Chopper’ website, 2002: <http://members.tripod.com/~Chopper_Read/> (hereafter ‘“Chopper” website’).
- 29 See Read website, *op. cit.*
- 30 See *ibid.*, link to: <<http://www.chopperread.com/Memorabilia%20pages/Hab007.htm>>
- 31 Read website, *op. cit.*
- 32 Read, *From the Inside*, *op. cit.*, for example p 75; also Denton interview, *op. cit.*
- 33 Read website, *op. cit.*
- 34 J David Brown, ‘The professional ex-: an alternative for exiting the deviant career’, *Sociological Quarterly*, vol 32, no 2, 1991, pp 219–30; *idem*, ‘Preprofessional socialization and identity transformation: the case of the professional ex-’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol 20,

- no 2, July 1991, pp 157–78.
- 35 Brown, ‘Professional ex-’, op. cit.
- 36 See, for example, Padraic Murphy, ‘Bulgarian Nick dies in a flurry of shots, victim of suspected underworld hit’, *Age*, 17 April 2003; John Silvester, ‘Why Gangland’s bloody code is hard to crack’, *Sunday Age*, 20 April 2003.
- 37 Read website, op. cit.
- 38 James, op. cit.
- 39 *ibid.*
- 40 John Rickard, ‘Lovable larrikins and awful ockers’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, no 56, March 1998.
- 41 Goya Bennett, ‘Prison yields its terrible past’, *Moreland Community News*, 2 July 2002; Farrah Tomazin, ‘From Prison to Piazza, Pentridge gets a Makeover’, *Age*, 1 August 2002.
- 42 Tomazin, op. cit.
- 43 *ibid.*; Bennett, op. cit.
- 44 This term refers to the phenomenon of tourists visiting sites notorious as former venues of great suffering or bloodshed. See John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism*, Continuum, London, 2000.
- 45 Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, Anchor Books, Garden City NY, 1961, p 69.
- 46 Daniel Bergner, *God of the Rodeo: The Quest for Redemption in Louisiana’s Angola Prison*, Ballantine, New York, 1998, pp 1–4 and *passim*.
- 47 Interview, George Thompson (former Coburg resident), 15 April 2001.
- 48 The tattoo is visible in a photo of ‘Santa’ with a young child in Bert Buckley, *H M Central Sub Prison Pentridge: Life Behind the Bluestone Walls from 1800s–1900s*, Pentridge Prison, Coburg, 1981, p 18. This magazine-format publication is itself a front-region adjunct, compiled by staff to present prison life in precisely the redemptive terms outlined above. The Toy Makers’ annual display received consistent press coverage. See: *Melbourne Sun*, 28 November 1970, 24 November 1972, 23 Nov 1973; *Melbourne Herald*, 30 Nov 1973. The Toy Makers’ activities were ended in 1976 by a major fire in their storage shed. *Sun*, 29 January 1976. On the Pentridge ‘panto’, see *Age*, 29 November 1974.
- 49 Peter Lynn, *Inquiry into the Victorian Prison System: Instituted to Inquire into a Report on Allegations of Maladministration, Corruption and Drug Trafficking Within the Victorian Prison System*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 1993, p 113.
- 50 For a personal account of a ‘generic’ prisoner visit consistent with this argument, see Jacqueline Wilson, ‘Representing Pentridge: the loss of narrative diversity in the populist interpretation of a former total institution’, *Australian Historical Studies*, forthcoming.
- 51 *ibid.*
- 52 Goffman, *Asylums*, op. cit., p 5.
- 53 See Pat Merlo, *Screw: Observations and Revelations of a Prison Officer*, Hudson, Hawthorn, Vic, 1996, pp 43–4; Interview, Jason Smith (former Pentridge welfare officer), 30 April 2001; also Ted Conover, *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*, Random House, New York, 2000.
- 54 Ray Mooney, ‘Bluestone shadows’, *Sunday Age (Agenda)*, 14 September 1997.
- 55 I O’Donnell and K Edgar, ‘Fear in prison’, *The Prison Journal*, vol 79, no 1, March 1999, pp 90–9.
- 56 Jason Smith, op. cit.; Wilson, ‘Representing Pentridge’, op. cit.; Jacqueline Wilson, ‘Relics of a desperate act: escape and containment in J Ward’ [hereafter ‘Relics’], *History Australia*, vol 1, no 1, December 2003; on the ‘capture’ process of corruption that induces responsible personnel to conform to institutional, rather than ethical, imperatives, see Richard Harding, *Private Prisons and Public Accountability*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 1997, p 33.
- 57 The literature on this issue is extensive; revelations of a culture of inmate abuse in Pentridge from the early 1970s provoked flurries of press coverage and official inquiries, which in turn led to a number of relatively ineffectual reforms. See, for example, Jason Smith, op. cit.; Wilson, ‘Representing Pentridge’, op. cit.; *idem*, ‘Relics’, op. cit; also more generally, Peter Grabowsky, *Wayward Governance: Illegality and its Control in the Public Sector*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 1989.
- 58 Anthony Scacco cited in David M Heilpern, *Fear or Favour: Sexual assault of Young Prisoners*, Southern Cross University Press, Lismore, NSW, 1998, p 86.

- 59 Inmate Rothenburg cited in *ibid.*, p 100.
- 60 Greg Bearup, ‘On the inside no-one can hear you scream’, *Good Weekend*, 19 October 2002; Read interview in Dominik, *op. cit.*
- 61 Read, *From the Inside*, *op. cit.*, pp 65–7; also Read in Dominik, *op. cit.* Former Pentridge prison officer Vaughn Ruddick confirms Read’s value as an inmate-management asset, although he does not explicitly corroborate Read’s account regarding weapons. Interview 7 March 2001.
- 62 Heilpern, *op. cit.* p 68; Frank Dunbaugh, brief to US Supreme Court in *Farmer v Brennan (1993)*, at ‘SPR — Stop Prisoner Rape’ website. <http://www.spr.org/en/farmer_argument.html>; Katy Richmond, ‘Fear of homosexuality and modes of rationalisation in male prisons’, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology: Symposium on Deviance, Crime and Legal Process*, vol 14, no 1, February 1978, pp 51–7.
- 63 Dunbaugh, *op. cit.*
- 64 Heilpern, *op. cit.*, pp 5–6, 44.
- 65 Richmond’s 1978 study was the first of its kind in Australia; virtually nothing substantive was then undertaken until Heilpern’s investigation in the 1990s. Richmond, *op. cit.*
- 66 Public awareness of prison sexuality, where it does exist, is in fact skewed toward a tacit acceptance that rape is an ‘appropriate’ part of the punishment of jail. Heilpern, *op. cit.*, p 86.
- 67 I make no claim that the (re-)invention is consciously conspiratorial but is more a concordance of individuals’ and stakeholder groups’ motivations.
- 68 Wilson, ‘Representing Pentridge’, *op. cit.*; *idem*, ‘Relics’, *op. cit.*
- 69 Andrew Rule, ‘The inside stories from a man who should know’, *Age*, 1 August 2002; Goya Bennett, ‘Prison Yields its Terrible Past’, *Moreland Community News*, 2 July 2002.
- 70 Wilson, ‘Relics’, *op. cit.*; also, for example, ‘Minardi boss in clink in a blink’, *Hume Leader (Moreland edn)*, 9 March 2004.
- 71 Catherine Birmingham [dir.], *Pentridge: Some Ghosts and Memories from the Big House*, videorecording, Pentridge Village Pty Ltd, 2000.
- 72 *ibid.*
- 73 Author’s personal observation; also Wilson, ‘Relics’, *op. cit.*
- 74 Ruddick, *op. cit.*; interview, Pat Burchell (former tour guide, Pentridge), 24 January 2001.
- 75 See Triple M website.
<http://www.mmm.com.au/promotions/2001/escape_pentridge/diaries/index.php>
- 76 Goffman, *Asylums*, *op. cit.*, p 44.
- 77 J Smith, *op. cit.*; interview, Maureen Hoffman (former Pentridge educator), 27 February 2001.
- 78 For example, Boggo Road (Brisbane), Pentridge, and Fremantle Gaol (former guards at the latter stated categorically that ‘it never went on here’, even when I pointed out instances of explicit and violent homosexual cell graffiti).
- 79 For example, Rule, *op. cit.*
- 80 Alison Leibling, *Suicides in Prison*, Routledge, London, 1992, p 84.
- 81 *ibid.*, p 63.
- 82 Richard Harding cited in Leonie Lamont and Bruce Tobin, ‘Prison suicides in Victoria top other states’, *Age*, 22 September 1990.
- 83 Richard Harding, *Review of Suicide and Suicide Attempts in the Custody of the Office of Corrections, Victoria: Report*, 1990; also Lamont and Tobin, *op. cit.*
- 84 ‘Chopper’ Read, *Get Your Ears Off*, Import Generic, 1998.
- 85 Lennon and Foley, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

The Tempest
Angela Campbell

This article is based on the production of *The Tempest* directed by Simon Phillips and produced by the Queensland Theatre Company performed in Brisbane on 23 September 1999.

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- 2 Rene de Obaldia, *Exobiographie: Memoires* [Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1993] cited in John Ralston Saul, *On Equilibrium*, Penguin Books, Canada, 2001, p 244.
- 3 Simon Phillips, personal interview, 16 November 2000.
- 4 Heiner Muller, ‘Fatzner +- Keuner’, in Margaret Herzfel-Sander (ed.), *Continuum*, New York,