

The Secret Barrister is not a book that could be recommended for light relief. The author – A Barrister – is anonymous probably for a good reason, perhaps because it is a scathing description of the criminal justice system in England. It starts with what may be described as a ‘typical’ Crown Court case, based on his own experience. The author follows with a brief chronology of the development of criminal justice in England, starting when law was determined by the monarch, going through the increasing involvement of landowners in criminal cases. The practice of the accused being afforded representation only really became established in the 19th century, along with the assumption of innocence until proven guilty beyond reasonable doubt.

Cases normally commence in a magistrates’ court, who then decide whether it should proceed to the Crown Court in front of a judge and jury. Magistrates also have the power to remand the accused or to release them on bail. There was severe criticism of the fact that magistrates are not trained in law and are predominantly made up of middle or upper-middle class people with little understanding of the backgrounds of many accused. This is also a hangover from the days when justice was meted out by landowners. The author was particularly fearful of moves to increase the power of magistrates to impose longer sentences, brought about by pressure from magistrates themselves and a desire on the part of politicians to save money by reducing access to a Crown Court.

It appears that nearly all government legislation concerning the Criminal Justice System in recent years has been aimed solely at reducing expenditure; the closure of Crown Courts, reducing access to legal aid and non-payment of expenses to witnesses or those found innocent. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) had been set up in response to devious behaviour by the police but is being increasingly starved of funds. The result has been a situation approaching chaos. The police sometimes lose or misplace evidence. The same applies with the CPS. This causes trials to be often delayed or moved to another court elsewhere. Privatisation of the language service led to translators who were less than fluent and other privatisations have had a largely negative effect.

The author is particularly harsh about the attitude of politicians and the press who aim to con the public that criminal law is too expensive and can be practiced on the cheap. The point is made that people would be happy to accept a lower standard of justice in exchange for a penny off a pint. That may be true until the individual suddenly finds themselves being accused and held on remand in one of His Majesty’s less than salubrious prisons because the magistrates don’t like the cut of his jib.

Two of the group had sat on a jury, one of whom felt that the verdict had been too influenced by a particularly pushy juror. One had been a magistrate and disagreed with some of the comments but accepted the fact that training was inadequate for the task in hand. We all agreed to try and keep out of trouble, though accepted that even being a witness, could make life difficult.

April – *Milkman* by Anna Burns

May – *Act of Oblivion* by Robert Harris

June – *The Perfect Golden Circle* by Benjamin Myers

July – *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink

August – *I’m not scared* by Niccolò Ammaniti