

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Jonathan Aitken's two-volume autobiography**  
***Pride and Perjury* (2000) and *Porridge and Passion* (July 2005)**  
**Published by Continuum.**

Reviewed by Lesley Hicks



Jonathan Aitken's story is no doubt well known in Britain, far less so here in Australia. Originally a respected British MP of impeccable Eton and Oxford background, a cabinet minister in the Tory government that preceded Tony Blair's Labour ascendancy, Aitken fell from grace to become a notorious, vilified figure. His total and humiliating fall, orchestrated by *The Guardian* and the tabloid papers, and Granada TV, culminated in a failed libel case which led to his prosecution for perjury. In June 1999 he received an 18-month prison sentence, and was released on licence in January 2000. He then served a curfew period with an electronic tag.

The period leading up to Aitken's disgrace was compounded by various personal dramas including bankruptcy and divorce. He had been an Anglican churchgoer, but at this time he embarked on a spiritual quest through which he came to know and follow Jesus Christ deeply and personally. The Alpha Course which originated at the Anglican Church of Holy Trinity, Brompton, Kent and is now a worldwide ministry, played a part in this.

Out of Aitken's roller coaster ride of sin and sadness, forgiveness and joy, these two autobiographical books have emerged; together they make a great read, inspiring, full of surprising plot twists, very moving and often quite hilarious. He is a fine writer – and now also an evangelist. Many non-believers would find these books no less gripping to read than Christian readers would.

His story has remarkable parallels with that of Charles Colson, thirty years earlier in America. Colson was one of President Nixon's top aides, a 'dirty tricks artist' who, in the backwash of the Watergate scandal, served a seven month jail sentence in 1974 for obstruction of justice. Before prison Colson too had become a Christian – was born again, which is the title of the first of his many books – and went on to devote his life to Prison Fellowship, the organisation he then founded. It too is now an international ministry, active in approximately 140 countries. Colson has become a friend and mentor to Aitken, standing strongly by him in his ordeals. Aitken is now a director of Prison Fellowship International, and his Colson biography – *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed* – is to be published September 2005. His current visit to Australia is on behalf of Prison Fellowship and Alpha and he is speaking at several functions for each.

Aitken's first career pre-politics was as a foreign correspondent. In surprising ways he had become friends with some prominent oil-rich Arabs, including members of the Saudi royal family such as Prince Mohammed bin Fahd, son of the king who has just died (August 2005). He even became the guardian of two small boys from the Gulf state of Abu Dhabi who were at school in England when their father was assassinated. These friendships aroused deep suspicions and hostility on the part of the left wing press. *The Guardian* alleged that he had amassed a fortune by corrupt arms dealing, that he had acted as a pimp procuring girls for Arab visitors and much else. There was not a skerrick of truth in these allegations but the mud stuck clammily. Aitken sued the paper for libel. And one by one the various allegations were shown to be totally false and accepted as such in court. But one story was that in 1992 he had spent a weekend at the Ritz Hotel in Paris at the expense of one of his Arab friends – that as a cabinet minister he had improperly accepted hospitality. He denied the allegation on oath, saying that his wife had paid the £900 bill. This was not so. In that one instance he lied and was duly caught out; many therefore believed that all the rest was true of him too. In his later trial for that perjury he pleaded guilty.

His wife left him, but his then teenage children were deeply and touchingly loyal, as were friends and supporters by the thousand, especially those who knew of his conversion to Christ. In prison

he received an embarrassing volume of letters, and endeavoured to answer them all – at least by postcard.

In the seventies when Chuck Colson's book *Born Again* was first published I read and appreciated it, and wrote a review. I remember reading it in the train and discussing it with a Christian man I knew. He scorned the validity of Colson's conversion. "Once a con, always a con", was his verdict; "he's just trying to win sympathy for his own ends." Saul of Tarsus wouldn't have had much chance with him, I argued. We agreed to disagree. I can understand unbelievers as a matter of principle discounting the reality of any and every Christian conversion – one *Guardian* enemy wrote under the headline "**Now the liar is trying to prove he's holier than thou**" – but not those who themselves know God's grace and forgiveness.

Jonathan Aitken had to contend with incredible malice from some journalists, and as a high profile celebrity in disgrace, with an unrelenting, unethical pursuit of him and his family by the paparazzi. Some of the funniest stories in both books, especially the second, deal with his efforts and those of family and friends, and even the prison authorities, to foil and avoid them. And he struggled to forgive and not to hate in return those whose hatred and vilification caused him endless problems.

*Pride and Perjury* (a best-seller) ends with his spiritual rebirth and prison looming before him. More than half of *Porridge and Passion* deals with his six months in jail. Petty prison bureaucracy provided both frustration and humour. For instance, old Lord Frank Longford was determined to visit him. He walked with the aid of two sticks, but regulations required that they be confiscated lest they become weapons. "So Frank had to wobble his stickless way towards me, teetering and tottering in unsupported lurches ... Halfway across the hall, his 94-year-old legs gave way. As he crashed to the ground, four or five prison officers rushed to his aid. ... But I realized he was unharmed when I heard that piercing voice telling the officers, 'I warned you I'd be more trouble without my sticks!' " (P. 70) Longford told Aitken that God often works through humiliation. "He breaks us down, remoulds us and builds us up again so we can go out and serve him in different ways than we had ever imagined."

A high proportion of prisoners are illiterate. Like Colson before him, Aitken found himself filling a valued role of reading and writing letters for prisoners. In gratitude, a young Irish burglar called Paddy provided one of the turning points of his prison journey. At first he offered Jonathan anything he liked, hetero- or homosexual, from his cell porn "library". Declining politely, he explained, "These days I'm trying a different path in life. "So what kind of path would that be?" asked Paddy. "Well, if you really want to know, it's the path of praying to Jesus and obeying his teachings. It's the path that has changed my life." And to his astonishment Paddy said he'd really like to try that path himself. So began a "cell group", for prayer and fellowship, PFG, to which Paddy enthusiastically invited dozens of other young prisoners.

One of Aitken's disciplines in prison was to begin his study of New Testament Greek. On his release, as planned, he entered Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, to study for a B.Th under Alister McGrath, graduating in 2002. While there, under the leadership of Michael Green he was involved in evangelistic missions and has since found a considerable vocation as an evangelistic speaker, in church outreach events generally and through Alpha and, most satisfyingly of all to him, in prisons through the Prison Fellowship ministry.

**Newly published in July 2005, *Porridge and Passion* is available from Allen & Unwin, 255 pages hardcover, retailing for \$49.95.**

My review copy of *Pride and Perjury* is in soft cover, 392 pages, RRP. .... Aitken is also the author of *Nixon – a Life* (1993); *Psalms for People under Pressure* (Continuum 2004), and *Prayers for People under Pressure* (Continuum 2005) and the coming Colson biography.

*Lesley Hicks, August 2005*

