

REVIEW OF**AMY BELL, *LIFE SENTENCE: HOW MY FATHER DEFENDED TWO MURDERERS AND LOST HIMSELF.*****HALIFAX: NIMBUS PUBLISHING, 2023.****Philip Girard**

Amy Bell grew up in poverty in New Brunswick after her parents separated. Her mother, Ann, was a capable social worker and her father, Ed, a promising young lawyer. But Ann died when Amy was seven, and when she and her brother moved in with Ed, his life had already gone off the rails. He was no longer practising law and was “living in a run-down trailer in the woods in Lepreau, NB, unemployed, depressed, and poor” (4). They eked out an existence mostly on welfare, and her father seldom spoke. Amy left home at sixteen and made a better life for herself, eventually becoming a full professor at Huron University College in London, Ontario. Soon after her departure, in a plot twist worthy of a David Adams Richards novel, Ed inherited a burnt-out house in Moncton from a former client and moved there. He rebuilt the exterior, but the interior remained largely unfinished. And there he remained for the next two decades in increasingly squalid conditions, harbouring a pain and bitterness whose origins Amy could not fathom. Just before Ed’s death, she found some photos while helping him organize his things. These helped unpack the mystery of his shattered life, leading her on the journey of discovery that resulted in this book.

The photos were of two men, Richard Ambrose and James Hutchison, accused of murdering two police officers in Moncton in 1974. Although capital punishment had been suspended since 1967, this was not the case for those convicted of murdering police officers or corrections officers. Thus, if found guilty, Ambrose and Hutchison were still subject to the death penalty. Ed Bell, then a thirty-three-year-old lawyer with a mainly civil practice in St Andrews, NB, stepped forward to defend them. Leaving his young family in St Andrews, Bell spent the next four months in a hotel in Saint John, preparing for and participating in the trial. This quixotic act, as telegraphed in the title of the book, broke him. The bulk of the book is devoted to a detailed account of the trial that resulted in the conviction of the two men, reconstructed via newspapers and court records. But never far from the author’s mind is the toll that this experience took on her father, and by extension, her and her brother.

We have few books that reveal in such visceral detail the impact on defence lawyers of representing clients accused of horrific crimes. (And to be clear, this is not a tale of wrongful conviction. There is virtually no doubt of the guilt of the accused). As the author notes in her final chapter, “Defence Lawyers and Capital Punishment in Canada,” “defence lawyers also often bear the brunt of public outrage at their [clients’] crimes” (166). She considers the fates of several such lawyers, including Kenneth Murray, counsel for Paul Bernardo, and Ross Mackay, who in 1962 defended the last two persons hanged in Canada, Ronald Turpin and Arthur Lucas. Murray’s career was destroyed after he was charged criminally for withholding the tapes recording the sexual assaults of the murder victims, even though he was eventually acquitted, while Mackay encountered many difficulties both personal and professional after his defence of the two murderers. With the rise of social media, one can only imagine the kind of abuse that such defence lawyers may now encounter.

Eleven prisoners, including Ambrose and Hutchison, were on death row when Parliament abolished capital punishment in 1976, resulting in commutation of their sentences to life imprisonment.

But the damage was already done to Ed Bell even if his clients did not hang. The criminal justice system relies heavily on the presence of defence lawyers to preserve its legitimacy and appearance of fairness, but it does not take note of the personal costs inherent in this role when defending those accused of heinous crimes. This account reveals those costs in agonizing detail, including those paid by family members of the lawyers in question.

While superficially belonging to the “true crime” genre, *Life Sentence* is really a work of socio-legal history woven into a memoir. Bell is even able to use some of her research on the history of forensics in 20th century England to good effect. This book should appeal to many audiences, both academic and popular: lawyers and legal academics, historians, criminologists, and anyone interested in the Maritimes. The author draws parallels between the murders in this case and the chillingly similar slaying of three RCMP officers in Moncton by Justin Bourque in 2014 that will be of particular interest to scholars of policing.

The final chapter should be required reading for law students considering careers in criminal defence work. Defence lawyers have a semi-heroic status in the eyes of many young law students, especially those with a more libertarian or counter-cultural bent. In a sense Ed Bell is both the hero and the anti-hero of this story, but few lawyers would want to pay the price that he paid for his principled act of generosity.

Scholars of capital punishment should also take note of this work. In that literature, the emphasis is mostly on the perpetrators and victims, but seldom is the role of defence counsel considered in any detail. The crushing personal burden on defence counsel in such cases is yet another argument in favour of maintaining the current ban on capital punishment in the face of periodic calls for its termination. Amy Bell is to be congratulated for having turned a painful family history into a significant work of scholarship with broad appeal.

To comment on this review, please write to editorjnbs@stu.ca. Si vous souhaitez réagir à cet compte rendu, veuillez soit nous écrire à editorjnbs@stu.ca.

Philip Girard was a member of the Faculty of Law, Dalhousie University (now the Schulich School of Law) from 1984 to 2013 and is now professor emeritus at Osgoode Hall Law School, York University. With Jim Phillips and Blake Brown, he is co-author of *A History of Law in Canada*, volumes I (beginnings to 1866) and II (1867–1914). Volume III (1914–2000) is expected in 2025.