

## STILL BARRED FROM PRISON: Social Injustice in Canada

by Claire Culhane

(Montréal, Black Rose Books, 1985)

**Claire** Culhane is a social activist, a foe of social injustice who, since the mid-1970s, has focused her attention and tenacious energies on our penitentiary system. This book is a broad extension of her first work, *Barred From Prison: A Personal Account* (1979), which described the situation that led to a series of riots and hostage-takings at British Columbia Penitentiary in the late 1970s. Her new book, *Still Barred From Prison* should be required reading for every Canadian who demands longer prison sentences and a harsher penitentiary regime. It is a litany of the lawlessness of our prisons, of the constant brutalization of prisoners and their physical and psychological destruction. It is a record of prisoners' desperate pleas for our intervention, communicated in the only ways possible, through suicide, hostage-takings and riots. It is also a testament to public misconception, indifference and refusal to intercede. Culhane states her position clearly.

It therefore becomes all the more incumbent upon those of us in the outside world to insure that the rule of law is respected *inside* prisons...since the polemics of this book invite bias in favour of those who fight against the glaring injustices of the Canadian prison system, and by extension, against injustice the world over.

Our first penitentiary, opened in Kingston in 1835 (and still in use), was modelled after the American Auburn system which had been created in New York State in the 1820s. The architect of that system was Gresham Powers who noted that if reformation of prisoners was a consideration, then 'Reformation by horror, constant hard labour, and by the breaking of the spirit was the Auburn method'. It is clear from Culhane's work that little has changed in 150 years.

The text may be divided into two main sections. The first examines the pattern of prison violence, the second presents a more general discussion of prisons and prison reform and abolitionist arguments. More than half the book (Chapter 2) focuses on the violence, brutality and bad faith which characterizes our penitentiary system. Culhane takes us from penitentiary to penitentiary, mapping the main events which illustrate the nature of this culture of violence. This is a first rate exposé of the fraudulent state ideology of rehabilitation and reform which masks the day-to-day repression and out-right torture of prisoners. It is witness to the degree of pathology of these institutions. If the Canadian public is to realize the horror of these archaic failures, then a necessary first step is to provide them with an insight into what actually transpires. We need to see beyond the distortions and smokescreens of the Solicitor General's publicists, as in the recent Carson Committee Report (1984). Culhane examines the central issues. The overbearing and disruptive control of the prisons by the guards' union, evident in the torture of prisoners and the guards' refusal to allow constructive prison reform programs, is clearly described. She relates how Kent Maximum Security was opened in British Columbia in 1979,



and was hailed as '...an exemplary model in providing progressive programs for offenders in a humane and secure environment...', in a modern 'university campus' setting. And how the guards *indefinitely* postponed the 'rehabilitation part' on the grounds it was too dangerous to allow prisoners to mingle. Overcrowding and double-bunking; the manipulative use of involuntary transfers; the unjustified expansion of Special Handling Units; the constant torture of prisoners through beatings and gassings during longterm isolation in solitary confinement; are all addressed. Culhane indicates how control of prisons by the guards' culture of violence produces rising rates of prisoner suicide and violence, often translated into hostage-takings and riots. She discusses the contained construction of large, geographically isolated, maximum-security prisons, which is inexplicable in terms of the accumulated wisdom of the developments in penology of the past 30 years.

In the last section of the book, Culhane suggests links to the social context (Chapter 3) and attempts to expand on this connection through arguments for the abolition of prisons (Chapter 4). This last chapter provides a succinct argument for greater public access and community control of the institutions. 'The first essential remains to create a prison system scrupulously accountable to the community.' The demand is for Community Prison Boards which are representative of the society, particularly of the minority groups (e.g., natives) which are overrepresented in the prisoner population. These boards are to have ready access to the penitentiaries and prisoners, and are to be allowed *real* input into the day-to-day operations, as well as in areas such as parole and post-release. The author concludes with this statement:

**The intent of this book is clear—to link the prison abolition movement with other political struggles for fundamental change. A formidable task, but one which must be tackled—with creativity, with enthusiasm, and with a passion.**

Enthusiasm and passion characterize *Still Barred From Prison*. The author is known as Saint Claire among federal prisoners.

*The first essential remains to create a prison system scrupulously accountable to the community*

The strength of the book lies in the author's tenacious grip on the reality of prison life, the product of her constant contact with prisoners and their struggles. But the larger purpose—to locate prison struggles within the context of the containing society is not achieved, and that's the weakness of this book.

Claire Culhane is a prisoner, a defier of the faith, not a theoretician analyzing the larger questions which surround the issue. Why have the guards and their union achieved such power, and how have they gained control of our penitentiaries? What is the current state ideology which justifies the curtailment of the few resocialization and reformative programs that exist in favour of a purely punitive regime? This level of analysis is absent. Though there are indications of important connections to the political economic context in which prisons are embedded, these are never analyzed. No, this is not a theoretically informed analysis which *specifies* the role of the penitentiary within the Canadian state and Canadian society. Instead, the author opts for broad, unsatisfactory generalizations, arguing that the prison is a microcosm of our culture, the ultimate repression in an oppressive capitalist society. This tells us little. Culhane argues:

**Usually, exposés of the 'shocking reality of life behind bars' manage only to astound, agitate and infuriate. They appeal mainly to the emotions. Seldom do they draw political conclusions as by examining the prison system as a function of the state—an instrument for class, racial and national oppression. Publications of prisoners' autobiographies and other harrowing descriptions of prison life by reformists are not a threat to the establishment insofar as they merely describe what exists;...what is a threat is any truly political analysis which proves that prison conditions are not unique, positioned as they are in the increasingly controlled society in which we live.**

Unfortunately, *Still Barred From Prison* does not provide the kind of political analysis that the author herself requires in a book about prison.

The problem is located in the absence of a theoretical framework to organize the overall argument. For example, psychological positivism—biochemical therapy for prisoners—is applauded—and critical political analysis are connected by no ascertainable logic. This confusion is compounded by reliance on polemic instead of analysis. The division of the main chapter into sections on different penitentiaries is useful, but the constant digressions to major issues results in a sense of disorganization which at times made me uneasy. What is this *all about*? What's being argued? Unfortunately, I sometimes came away without answering that question.

But this is an important book, one which opens eyes and turns heads. Its principal strength comes from the author's rapport with the penitentiary population. The hard, clear view of reality expressed in the many excerpts from prisoners' letters gives the book a veracity not common to criminological writing. Claire Culhane is a medium for the protest of Canadian prisoners. This book is a vehicle for the articulation of their plight.

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