The Canadian Penal Press
A Documentation And Analysis

The penal press is a world-wide phenomenon which reached the height of its achievement in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in North America.

A survey taken in the United States in 1959 found that there were more than 250 penal press publications in Canada and the United States, reaching an estimated readership of two million (Collins Bay Diamond, January, 1959). Russell Baird (1967), in his study The Penal Press (which focuses exclusively on the United States), discovered that the penal press started in the late nineteenth century, with Summa-ry (1883) from Elmira Reformatory in New York State laying claim to being the first publication. It was followed by Our Paper (1885), Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Concord, and Prison Mirror (1887) of the Minnesota State Peniten-tiary at Stillwater (Baird, 1967). The Canadian penal press officially came into being on September 1, 1950 with the publication of Kingston Penitentiary’s Tele-scope. Since then there have been more than one hundred separate penal publications produced and published by prisoners in Canada's federal penitentiaries.

I have read and subscribed to numerous penal press publications since the early 1960s, but did not give them the serious consideration they are due until recently. My new interest was spurred by my doctoral research into the history of Canada's prison system, and the dearth of available documentation which provides an account of the experience of criminalization and incarceration from the perspective of those subjected to it. While working on my reconstruction of the history of the development of Canada’s prison system (See Gaucher, 1982; Gaucher, 1987), I came to readily accept the arguments of historians such as George Lefebvre (1989) and George Rude (1970) concerning the necessity of taking into account what they refer to as “history from below.” In my research I discovered neither organized sources nor analytic texts which addressed this aspect of Canadian criminal-justice in its forma-tive years, and I would argue that the same situation holds for the contemporary post World War II period. My interest has also been heightened by pedagogical concerns. Frustrated by having to rely on sensational commercial work by writers like Roger Caron (1978) and Steven Reid (1990), or scurrilous academic products whose editors force feed prison writers to reproduce the editors’ perspectives and prejudices (See Adelberg and Currie, 1987), I had almost given up assigning such ethnographic reading to criminology students. Upon re-examining some of the penal press publications I had accumulat-ed over the years or currently receive, it became clear that they constituted an exceedingly rich ethnographic source of prisoner experience and prison life in Canada during the post-war period of prison reform and change.

A distinction needs to be made between what I define as “outside directed magazines” and “inside directed or joint magazines.” Outside directed magazines are intended to serve as a means of communication with the Canadian public, and therefore feature an analysis of contempo-rary criminal-justice issues and serious prose on the experience of criminalization, incarceration and recidivism. Joint magazines are di-reced at the popula-tion of a particu-lar prison and focus on reporting institu-tional activities such as sports, so-cial events and club endeavours, and on providing information on new programs and legisla-tion, coming events and internal news. Both provide insight into the per-spectives and understanding of prisoners and the everyday experience of prison life in Canada.

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Native Brotherhood groups to be particularly interesting. As the people of Canada's First Nations' perception of their role and social situation changed in the containing society, these changes were refected in the move towards more traditional ways, and spiritual understanding amongst Canada's large incarcerated Native population. The history of the Native Brotherhoods and Sisterhoods in Canada's penitentiary system can be researched through the penal press, which is so in doing we encounter many outstanding Native leaders, such as Malcolm Norris (Débain, 1981) and Art Solomon who were instrumental in their development.

The problems of post-release, the stigmaization of a prison record and the need for post-release facilities and work opportunities for the released "exonerated convicts" were also addressed. More localized concerns were also thoroughly debated in these journals. For example, British Columbia Penitentiary's "Transition" (1951-1966) often focused on the area of drug addiction, drug legislation, the legalization of drug use (following the British model of that period), and the use of the Habitual Criminal Act to control drug users. Even the tiny "paper magazine" provides (in total) a fertile insight into the everyday activities of prison life and prisoners' concerns and problems. One also gets a sense of the "temper and feet" of a particular penal institution through its publications. For example, Warkworth Institution's "The Outlook" (1972-1989) presents an image of a tightly controlled institution in which the inmates are somewhat subservient and pliable to the authority of the staff and administration, while publications from Millhaven Penitentiary (e.g., "Osgo" 1978-1982) reflect the high level of tension, despair, and opposition which has characterized that institution's history.

Special publications produced by specific prisoner groups (and speaking only for those groups) such as Native Brotherhood groups, Life's groups, or Alcoholic Anonymous groups, provide a particular perspective on criminal justice and correctional issues. They also reflect the historical changes that characterize Canadian society in this period. In this regard, I have found the publications of Canadian membership in the International Penal Press

The penal press and its exchange network was a major international phenomenon in the 1950s and 1960s. The legacy of this phenomenon is apparent in the continuation of the penal press today. While the centre of interest was the United States and Canada, most European nations (including Soviet block countries), Australia, New Zealand, Latin America and Eastern Eastern Nations had well established penal press networks and many new magazines or new publications were started or appeared in the 1970s and 1980s. It is especially true for the penal press in Colombia. A notable example is "El Colono Bernardo" (1952-1962), the "penal press" of the national rehabilitation prison that established a penal press network in Colombia and in nearby countries. Each with their own individual historical and cultural characteristics, Canadian imprisonment was recognized within the press exchange columns of the network's publications, and many new magazines or new editorial staffs were started for this purpose. The publication of prison regimes and administrations which were "too supportive" of prison regimes and administrations which were more repressive were openly censored in the penal exchange columns. To receive wide-spread recognition was the ultimate sign of success, and which outstanding articles in fellow penal press publications. Canadian penal press publications were not exceptions to this trend, and until the demise in the late 1960s of the principal magazines from Canada's maximum security penitentiaries, Canadian publications were staunch members of this network.

The Canadian penal press peaked in the 1950s, with widespread outside distribution. Kingston Penitentiary's "L'Esquive" (1955-1968) was the forerunner of penal publications here, establishing the credibility needed to gain official support — and it was strongly supported by Penitentiary Commissioner R.B. Gibson and his office. After publishing for six months within the institution (September 1949 to February 1951), it was allowed to solicit outside subscribers. By June 1951 it had 653 outside subscribers, with which grew to 1,500 paid subscribers by June, 1958. The Kingston Penitentiary for Women provided a similar program, and poetry from January 1951 and editorial staff in May 1952 until the mid-1960s. The success of "L'Esquive" opened the door to publications like Gardener's Pen and the Penitentiary Times, Pen and the Penitentiary Times, G-Rama (Ramosa) and the Penitentiary Times, Pen and the Penitentiary Times. The 1950s were the most successful, but we have not forgotten their role in the development of penal press in Canada. The print shop opened in 1951 and was successful, but it is not the only way to produce papers. It is now possible to produce prison literature for other purposes, such as relief, education, or other purposes.

The print shop is an integral part of the prison system, and it is not only for producing prison literature. It is also for providing education and relief to inmates. The print shop is an important source of income for the institution. The print shop is also a place for inmates to learn new skills and to prepare for their release. The print shop is an important part of the rehabilitation process, and it is a way for inmates to gain self-esteem and to feel more control over their lives.
to publications from all the remaining penitentiaries, with the exception of The Kingston Prison for Women. Saskatchewan Penitentiary’s The Pathfinder (February 1951) was the second subscribed magazine, followed closely by British Columbia Penitentiary’s Transition (March 1931), St. Vincent de Paul’s Pen-O-Rama (1951), Dorchester’s The Beacon (July 1951) and Stoney Mountain Penitentiary’s Mountain Echo (September 1951) and the Collins Bay Diamond (January 1952). This is the story of publications that firmly established the penitentiary tradition in Canada. Each with its own individual style and focus, they independently attempted to bring something positive to the lives of the prisoners.

The Diamond (1951-1968) was the most successful, by 1958 having a paid subscribers list of 4,000 and numerous outside advertisers. A fully-illustrated magazine (all articles translated), it was noted for its outstanding prose on prison life and serious treatment of criminal justice and penology issues. Like many of the Canadian publications, it benefited from the stability and continuity of its editorial staff and their serious commitment to the standards of the International Press. Except for The Beacon (1951-1971), all mentioned in institutional print shops as adjuncts to vocational training programs, giving the high quality writing within their pages a high quality presentation.

The incommensurable of stable, continuous editorial groups needs to be stressed, for this stability enabled staff to learn their trade and maintain the quality that developed over a long period of time. These Canadian publications clearly reflect the high standards and abilities of their staffs. Mentioning only a few: Gord Matt, Cliff Bastine and Sam Carr of the first editorial group of Telescope, Vladimir Nekrosoff of Pen-O-Rama, George Constantine and Lyle Jennings of The Pathfinder, Blondy Martin and Gord Thompson of Transition, Tony Ricardo of The Beacon (whose eight plus consecutive years as editor, 1953-1960 is the record), W. Lake and Bud Winters of Mountain Echo, and Nancy Ward-Armour of Tightwire. Outstanding writers and poets such as Doug Bevans, Harvey Blackmore, Frank Guinery, G. Hjalmarson, Steve Wood and George Watson all appear in these pages, as do outside supporters of note such as Earle Stanley Gardner, whose eloquent support of the penal press in other publications was constantly reprinted in the International Penal Press. The widespread distribution of these publications and the support of public figures like Gardner heightened media attention and the Canadian penal press was acknowledged, refuted, and analyzed in the outside media throughout this period. Some of Canada’s major penal reformers were also enthusiastic supporters, and spokespersons such as Alex Edmison figure prominently in these publications.

The problems facing editorial staff were and are considerable. Confronted by the isolation of incarceration, faced with the prospect of pleasing both administration and fellow prisoners, constrained by often uninformative censorship demands, and in the first two decades, by the prospect of being punished throughout the penal press network, editors had to walk a tightrope of conflicting demands and expectations in a situation where failure could have serious personal and community consequences. As the right tone was attained, one which pleased the Commissioner’s office, prison administrators and prison population, the continuity of staff and publication required to maintain a quality product was forthcoming. This held throughout the 1950s, but changes in the mid-1960s spelled the end of this golden era of the penal press in Canada.

History And Development Of The Canadian Penal Press

The Canadian penal press got its tentative beginning with the publication of Facsimile (1949-1954), a correctional staff-produced publication involving prisoner writers at the Federal Training Centre at Laval, Quebec. It was an occasional publication which focused on and lobbied for the new vocational training program being put into place within the federal penitentiary system, and which was already established in this prison. With the permitting of Canadian publications (1949), largely prison-organized, there was a tentative encouragement of prison populations to get involved in their own reform and to take some small measure of self-determination in prison life. This led to the creation of a weekly, Sports Bulletin, at St. Vincent de Paul in May 1950, the Kingston Penitentiary’s Softball Review in the same year, and Sports Week in April 1951 in Dorchester Penitentiary. Similar “joint magazines” may have been published in other penitentiaries at the time, though I have found nothing to that effect. The Collins Bay Diamond (1951-1968) exemplifies the process of their early development. Continuing as an inside sports magazine in 1950, it became an outside directed penal publication in April 1951, and started taking paid subscriptions in January 1952. Telescope established the credibility of this endeavour and served as a notice to the penitentiary authorities that penal publications were a positive means of selling the new "humanized reform-oriented prison" they were in the process of trying to create under the leadership of Commissioner R.B. Gibson. Magazines were officially encouraged and financially supported by both the Commissioner’s office and senior management. The professional presentation of these publications, the product of vocational print shop programs, spoke highly of the scope and quality of the "new" vocational training component of the "new" penitentiary system. In short, these magazines were a valued means of publicity for the "new" penology, and their large paid subscription lists, advertisers, and country-wide distribution assured that the message got across to the public. News media and literary circles

Collins Bay Penitentiary

C.B. Diamond

Started as an inside sports magazine in 1950, then outside-directed magazine from April 1951. Monthly commenced publication April 1951 to April 1958.8.7.

C.ONT.A.C.T.


C.O.Nquest

An outside-directed magazine. Bi-monthly commenced publication October/November 1978 to 1981.7.

Ice Carrier

An inside magazine. Monthly commenced publication May 1986 to present. Flag of Life


Olympiad News

Newsletter of the "Exceptional People's Olympiad Committee." Quarterly commenced publication Spring 1978 to present.

Vacation


Tribalways


Spirital Newsletter

An outside-directed religious magazine. Bi-monthly commenced 1986.7 to present.
critical analysis of Canadian criminal-justice and penology. The articles from the penal press in the 1950s constituted an important critical mass of commentary and analysis on penal themes in the formative years of Canada's modern prison complex.

By the late 1950s, the effectiveness of the new reformative and increasingly rehabilitative (i.e., treatment oriented) penology was being questioned. For prisoners the promise of the continued development of vocational and educational opportunities was not being met. Nor was acceptance by the reintegration into civil society of "reformed convicts" forthcoming. By this time prisoners who had "benefited" from vocational training (etc.) were returning to penitentiaries with a different story. Discovering that their vocational and trade credentials were not accepted outside, that stigmatization was as problematic as ever, and that promised employment opportunities did not materialize, they added an important ingredient to the developing cynicism vis-a-vis the new "reformative" penology. And so, the temporal and internal social relations within our penitentiaries started to change for the worse. Increasingly, reform programs were used by prison staff and the new parole authorities as a "hoop" through which the convict had to jump to win release. As the rising refrain from front line custodial staff, "The costs are running the joint...," started to have an effect on official and public perceptions, as well as staff actions and, therefore, internal staff-prisoner relations, the penal press came under a new, critical scrutiny. The growing interest in the internal problems resulting from the "control versus reform" contradiction split over onto the pages of the Canadian penal press. The cheery, positive relationship of editorial staff to the Commissioner's office and prison administrators changed to one focusing on the issue of censorship, and the failure of reform programs (existing as policy) to be actually implemented in the spirit and material manifestation promised. The result was a constant turnover of editorial staff, irregular publications (affecting style, form and distribution) and a lack of consistency in style, form and content. The tone of the writing reflects the situation, and is more biting, openly critical and oppositional, or muted and silenced. The key to understanding this penal pressflotilla in the water was their membership in the International Penal Press, and the network's inter-subjectively shared conversation around the goals, focus and necessity of the penal press.

By openly discussing their problems, the International Penal Press provided support, answers and strategies for dealing with the changing circumstances of their publications. A fixation with the role of the penal press, and the role of function of the editor and editorial staff is highly characteristic of the Canadian penal press in the 1960s and indicates a number of important factors being addressed. First, as tenure rose within the prison, prisoners increasingly rejected the new penal programs as a fraud masking the traditional goals of domination of the prisoner by the prison complex, the format, style and substance of the government publications became an important point of contention within prison populations. The population's demand that their magazines moreover suddenly air prisoners' grievances was made in a period when censorship was heavy and administrative demands were largely in contradiction with those of the prisoners. This is played out in the pages of this press with the endless debates and editorial commentary on the question of tone and content—bitterness and "crying" charges being countered with exhortations to be positive or to write more substantial critical analysis. Second, the prison press itself slowed in the 1960s, the result of strong custodial staff opposition to a liberalized penal regime and the rehabilitative goal, and of a growing confusion and self-doubt amongst senior management staff of the penitentiary service, and their academic and professional advisors and supporters. In this atmosphere, the penal press was a liability whose previous officially endorsed lobbying activities were now defined as "insistent demands," particularly their lobbying "to continue to move forward" towards the original stated goals of prisoner reform through training and opportunity, an essentially critical task expressed as front line experience. By the mid-1960s, the majority of the original Canadian penal publications had ceased publication or were going through their death-throes. In the winter of 1968, The Beacon reported that it was the only penal press still publishing in a maximum security prison in Canada, and was the last of the original group of publications. It also ceased publication later in that year.
The Canadian penitentiary is transformed at this moment. Its focus on education and converting to the public, its strong identification with the International Penal Press, the regulatory continuity of its public, its widespread distribution and large readership, and prisoners' positive evaluation of their publication goals and achievements, disappeared. The lack of the Penitentiary Service's continued financial support and curtailment of outside subscriptions and distribution was justified administration of prison publications to the product of the irregularity of penitentiary publications. Tighter administration and new rules in the form of Commisioners' Directives are cutting prison publications to much more "joint-oriented," amounting to inside informational newsletters, containing far less substantive writing by prisoners, particularly on criminal-justice and correctional issues. The highly characteristic irregularity of publication (mid-1960s to present) and constant change in format, style, quality and even title, indicate the massive destabilization of prison populations and therefore prison publications. The absence of a compelling project was taking place at this time. The wholesale classification of prisoners and their redistribution into different types and classes of penitentiaries started seriously in the mid-1960s with the commencement of a major prison construction program. Later, "a rehabilitative system model" was put into place which encouraged, indeed demanded, that prisoners move to the system towards less secure institutions and gradual release through "community corrections": temporary absences, day parole, parole and mandatory supervision. This movement within the prison population was supplemented by the constant use of involuntary transfers. Though there were other important factors in the destabilization of the prisoner community (e.g., the new rehabilitation programs and new prison regimes) and its drift towards a state of social disorganization, it was the constant movement of prisoners which had the most debilitating effect on the editorial continuity and regularity of publication for the Canadian penal press. Add to this situation a constant turnover of editorial staff and the closing down of publications because of disputes over institutional censorship and the growing turmoil developing in the larger penitentiaries, and the demise of the Canadian penal press in this period is easily understood.

The exceptionality of Tighbairne (1973-1980), the penal press publication of the Kingston Prison for Women, confirms the importance of institutional and editorial stability on the continuity of the penal press. A bi-monthly that started publishing in 1973, it represents the penal press of the past in terms of its consistency of policy, format and quality. It is the only Canadian publication of note which maintained its ties to the International Penal Press network into the 1980s. It presents a consistently critical analysis of Canadian criminal-justice and corrections, and ably addresses the particular problems of women who are caught within the social control bureaucracy. I attribute the stability and consistency of Tighbairne to the lack of wholesale transfers and constant movement of this prison population (because no other federal facilities exist) and the minimal changes in the internal regime which have occurred. Constant changes in policy and program demands in federal (male) penitentiaries, under the guise of prison and prison reform, have contributed strongly to their social disorganization. This has not happened at the Kingston Penitentiary for Women, and is reflected in the regularity and quality of Tighbairne's 16 years of continuous publication.

There were a number of exceptional magazines in the 1970s. The Outlook (1972-1989) published from Warkworth Institution is the longest current, continuous publication. I especially enjoy Tarpaper (1971-1980) from Massui Institution, with its exceptional graphics and cartoons, and a strong commitment to publish substantive analytical essays on social control issues. Taken collectively, the post-1960s era of Canadian penal publications present a portrait of the changing composition of our federal institutional populations, their internal social relations and organization (increasingly disorganization) and the basis for current problems and debates.

The Canadian penal press has experienced something of a resurgence in the 1980s, and once again includes some high quality, outside-directed writing. A new understanding of the penal press has been developing, and its editors have provided it with a new format and style. Of particular note are special group publications, such as the Collins Bay John Howard Society Group's Tocin (1982-1989) or the "Innitty" Letter Group's newsletter, The Fallacy of Life (1986-1989). Special Group publications can be traced back to the 1960s. In 1965, the Jaycee Group at British Columbia Penitentiary commenced publishing Bridgewater (1965-1973), the first such publication which concentrated on its club activities and the Jaycee program. Many Native Brotherhood Groups had newsletters and magazines dating back to the 1960s. What is new is the specific and exclusive criminal-justice focus of some of these recent penal press publications. I have traced this strand back to its prototype, Quarter-Century News (1973), the penitentiary's annual for a criminal-justice study and self-help group at Millhaven Penitentiary. It was followed by Odyssey (1978-1982), the magazine of a similar type of group at Millhaven. The latter is a highly critical, analytical and combative publication. Today these special group publications, along with a few more traditional (male) publications like Tighbairne and The Outlook, constitute the core of prisoners' writing on criminal justice in the penal press.


NOTES
1. The latter is of particular note, having been started through the financial contribution and editorial support of a group of prisoners which included three of the infamous Younger Brothers, Cole Younger playing a major role in its production (See Baird, 1967).
2. To try and offer this problem we have recently started a new publication, the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons which presents the analysis of prisoners and former prisoners on various aspects of criminal justice and corrections.
3. Art Soloman, an Ojibwa spiritual leader and elder, has devoted the last two decades to
Phoenix Rising
Its Birth And Death

Phoenix Rising was a unique magazine, not simply because it was the only anti-psychiatry magazine in Canada, but also because it was published by former psychiatric inmates. Phoenix began publishing in March of 1980 only to die in July, 1990 due to lack of funding. During its decade of publishing, the magazine was a supporter of the international psychiatric inmates' liberation movement. Thirty-two issues were produced, including three double issues, exposing psychiatric abuses and challenging the tyranny of psychiatry over people’s lives. We focused on a wide variety of social, political and human rights issues faced by psychiatric inmates and survivors; homelessness, electroshock (ECT), forced drugging, and the abuses of the rights of women, children and elderly prisoners. We did our best to draw attention to the myth of “schizophrenia,” to the deaths caused by psychiatric treatment, and to the psychiatric victimization of gays and lesbians. It is doubtful that another magazine will replace Phoenix in its fearless exposure of psychiatric abuses.

I founded Phoenix Rising with Carla McRae in 1979. We were both psychiatric survivors. We had read and been inspired by Madness Network News, the first inmates’ liberation and anti-psychiatry magazine in the U.S., The Cause, and the newsletter of the New York State Association of Hospitalized Patients. The “New York State Psychiatric Patients League,” newsletter. We were also inspired by the work of the New York State Psychiatric Patients League, which has been influential in the development of the Phoenix Rising movement.

Our first issue came out in March 1980. The front cover featured an illustration of the mythical phoenix rising from its ashes, a symbol of the psychiatric survivor reborn after a kind of death by fire. In our first editorial we outlined our goals and philosophy and coined the term “psychiatric inmates” to replace “mental patients.” A few excerpts from this editorial are worth quoting:

"We'd like to see Phoenix Rising serve as a rallying point for inmates and ex-inmates to bring about changes in the psychiatric system in various ways."

-- DON WEITZ

WORKS CITED