



Kingston Penitentiary Museum. Correctional Service of Canada,

Reviewed by Roger Neufeld

Published on H-Canada (June, 1996)

For students of Canadian history who have been captivated by the development of prisons and asylums in Canada, then perhaps a visit to Kingston is in order. Kingston has the most federal penitentiaries of any city--eight by my count, nine by others--but it also has the Kingston Penitentiary Museum, a small institutional tribute to Canada's original penitentiary. <p> The Museum began as a centennial project in 1967, and in 1986 moved into the once-elegant warden's residence, a convict-built limestone house located just across the street from the penitentiary's main gate. Now funded directly by Correctional Service of Canada, which in recent federal budgets was one of the very few departments to actually receive substantial funding increases, the museum exists on a very small financial allocation. <p> Still, the museum offers a sharp look at the world of penitentiary discipline, thanks in great part to the labour of its curator, David St. Onge. On the first floor, which constitutes the bulk of the museum, the visitor will find four exhibit rooms. One holds a collection of uniforms, a camera used for mug shots (a practice begun in the 1880s), and the "count board" which was to show the location of each convict, where he/she worked, was being punished, hospitalized, and so on. The next room displays a flogging triangle and a strapping table, both used to hold prisoners as they were lashed with a cat-o-nine-tails, also exhibited in the room. The visitor can also see a range of shackles, handcuffs, body chains, restraint belts, leg irons, and

replicas of several innovative forms of punishment used in the mid-nineteenth century: water bath punishment and the "box," where the prisoner was locked in an upright coffin. In a third room, one might view old drawings of the penitentiary and its properties and examples of convict ingenuity in building hollow books and shoe heels, useful for hiding guns, drugs, or other handy items of penitentiary economy. In the final room on the first floor, there are displays of sanctioned convict labours, such as elaborately carved furniture, as well as a heavy wooden table like that used by generations of stone-cutting convicts. It might be remembered that the bulk of Kingston Penitentiary, including the stone walls, buildings, and even cell doors, were produced by convict labour. <p> This is the whole of the museum's exhibition space. On the second floor, more space is intended for displays, but lack of funding has left this development still in the planning stage. To be sure, this museum is meant as a public relations token by Corrections Canada, surprisingly underutilized in this capacity, given the recent controversies not only over the Prison for Women, but also the tuberculosis epidemic as well as the standard assortment of suicides, murders, and lockdowns. The curator, Mr. St. Onge, is himself an avid collector of artifacts like homemade spears, but mainly wants to get more money from Corrections Canada by finding friendly bureaucrats who might warm to the emphasis on Kingston Penitentiary as a good place. <p> But if the visitor studies

the collection of material here, one gets a clear sense of the breadth and physical force of penitentiary discipline. Yet a short look at the c. 1850 punishment book also suggests the complementary range of convict unrest and resistance, be it persistent and directed flatulence or a homemade gun. Together, these themes indicate a nasty world for the penitentiary population, both guards and convicts. None of this fits well with the general idea of the museum, which in some odd way hopes to promote the penitentiary. But it is an unavoidable, if not faintly ironic and amusing, foil to the more obvious intents of the museum. <p> Nevertheless, the curator has been most receptive of students wanting to look at his collection. Better still, if you get in good with David, he might show you some of the boxes of mug shots he has upstairs, dating from the 1930s. He also has an attic full of an unlikely assortment of penitentiary record books, not only from Kingston, but from as far away as Dorchester. These were all left behind by National Archives of Canada staff, who in 1986-87 took away a truckload of valuable material. I was browsing through these remainders when working on my MA when I discovered two volumes of minutes, taken during a 1913- 14 Royal Commission, and detailing a wealth of complaints and issues that were never published with the formal report. A writer subsequently came by, and after looking at these volumes, included some of the material in her book, "Convict Lover." <p> This is not a large museum, and its facility is more impressive on the outside than on the inside. But it is one of the rare public spaces now available where visitors can sample the material reality of penitentiary life. The museum is open between Victoria Day and Labour Day, and you can reach David St. Onge at (613) 530 3122. He'll be thrilled to hear from you. <p>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

Citation: Roger Neufeld. Review of *Kingston Penitentiary Museum*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. June, 1996.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14861>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.