

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

George H. Gregory. *Alcatraz Screw: My Years as a Guard in America's Most Notorious Prison*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. ix + 252 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8262-1396-9.

Reviewed by David Noon (Department of Social Sciences, University of Alaska Southeast)  
Published on H-Amstyd (December, 2002)



Alcatraz, like Elvis, is the carcass that keeps on giving. No prison in U.S. history has so successfully outlived itself, and none has been so lucratively propped in so many overlapping economies, from tourism (up to a million visitors per year) to Hollywood (*Murder in the First* put the prison within six degrees of Kevin Bacon in 1994) to the less visible archive of firsthand accounts issued over the years by presses large and small. Indeed, memory is industry at Alcatraz. In the four decades since the federal penitentiary was scuttled, memoirs have been cobbled by former wardens, inmates, and even staff members' children who grew up on The Rock. Prior to this year, however, no correctional officer had ever published an account of the ordinary work that took place in this most extraordinary facility. The late George H. Gregory's *Alcatraz Screw* is a noteworthy text to the extent that it contributes this one belated perspective to an archive of already-existing memory. Gregory patrolled Alcatraz for the last fifteen years of its existence; a back injury ended his career the same year that Alcatraz itself closed shop. Yet Gregory's narrative is less a story about Alcatraz itself than it is a thick description of custodial labor; that is, *Alcatraz Screw* is perhaps best approached as a book about work. Between contraband searches, rec yard scuffles, movie screenings, and stints overseeing the kitchen, Gregory and his colleagues listened to the radio, forged friendships and petty rivalries with one another, studied for correspondence courses, and trolled the island for coffee and sweet rolls. If the tower at the center of Bentham's panopticon was conceivably empty, Gregory shows that it was instead staffed by men who measured their lives out in 12-hour teaspoons.

Gregory, a World War II veteran raised in the upper Midwest, worked for the United States Bureau of Prisons

(BOP) for nearly twenty years, beginning his career in federal penitentiaries at Leavenworth (Kansas) and Sandstone (Minnesota) before being transferred to Alcatraz in 1947. At the time, the island had been in use as a federal prison for little more than a decade, having been converted in 1934 from a military prison into the first "supermax" facility designed to house the most violent and incorrigible felons. Tethered to a broad movement within American corrections that began in earnest after World War I, Alcatraz was one link in a system that classified and partitioned inmates according to the severity of their crimes and the security risks they were thought to pose. As John Roberts, archivist for the BOP, explains in his introduction to *Alcatraz Screw*, this stark island facility was "the apex of a graduated system of classification and diversified housing. It was the ultimate sanction that helped make the rest of the system work" (p. 4). As such, Alcatraz was disciplinary in several ways; it worked, as all prisons do, on those confined (and those who labored) there, but it also proved useful as leverage against inmates at other institutions who wished not to be transferred to what was then the most notorious facility in American corrections.

For Gregory, however, none of this seems to have been especially relevant to the routines of the correctional staff. While his tenure with the BOP overlapped with a number of sea changes in the practice and social context of American prisons, *Alcatraz Screw* does not meditate on the broader meaning of incarceration, nor does its author seem interested in adding to the sensational lore that has always accumulated around the island. Instead, the book surveys the landscape of the prison from the perspective of a worker who oscillates between boredom, irritation, and obligation. As a result

the book feels patiently (though erratically) catalogued, with prose straightforward and unremarkable—all appropriate qualities given the languid pace of Gregory’s work from one day to the next. In one passage, for instance, he describes his least favorite post on the island: “What do you do in the Road Tower at night? Nothing but sit and watch, walk around your limited space and watch, contact the Control Center every half hour, and push the road-gate button twice a night. Sometimes the morning lieutenant came to visit. It was a dull, monotonous, but peaceful post” (p. 61).

If Gregory is not the most dynamic narrator, he is not necessarily an unlikable one. There is something oddly charming about the way he indexes the quality of food at Alcatraz (the cake is generally good, the fried egg sandwiches are not) while cycling through the usual anecdotal genres of the prison memoir (the sex, the forced-feedings, the grudge killings, the riot, and so forth.) As we might also expect from a prison memoir, *Alcatraz Screw* is well-stocked with eccentric inmates, including the infamous Robert “Birdman” Stroud and George “Machine Gun” Kelley as well as the obligatory musicians, lunatics, autodidacts, and escape artists who make everyone’s job more interesting if not always more bearable. And because it is a book about work, *Alcatraz Screw* also documents the petty animosities that build up in institutions. Here, Gregory spends some time settling old scores, skewering policies and practices that he found burdensome or dangerous (such as the relatively uncontrolled distribution of prescription drugs within the prison) and lampooning outside “experts” who refused to defer to the local wisdom of the officers when considering new rules for the facility. Indeed, Gregory is highly conscious of the dividing line between administrative and practical knowledge, and his allegiance to the latter made it difficult for him to observe what he describes as “Mickey Mouse rules that had nothing to do with safety, custody, or security.” When officers violated these rules and earned formal sanctions, Gregory explains, they thumbed their noses at their supervisors by hanging copies of the complaints in their own lockers as petulant badges of honor. “By the end of my career,”

he continues, “the hook in my locker couldn’t take any more complaints. It was overflowing. The pages of criticism impaled on that hook became one of the standing jokes on the island” (pp. 191-2).

We might add another page (or paragraph) of criticism to Gregory’s hook. While *Alcatraz Screw* makes for an interesting and sometimes compelling read, it is also frustrating to the extent that it tells us almost nothing about the lives of the author or his colleagues outside the confines and routines of the prison itself. For example, Gregory himself earned a degree from the San Francisco College of Chiropractic and evidently maintained a practice in the city for a number of years, yet he only mentions this in passing. And as for the excruciating back injury that ended his career? We learn of this on the next-to-last page of the book, and again without any of the detail that characterizes the book at its best. These omissions are best chalked up to the timing of Gregory’s death, which took place before the manuscript ever reached an editor’s hands. For that reason, *Alcatraz Screw* often feels choppy, unfocused, and maddeningly reticent about events and issues that might otherwise have been more completely fleshed out. Although he contends that “social changes in the country during the 1950s and early 1960s” permanently affected prison culture, he does not elaborate on this except to note that the mingling of white and black inmates on the same cell-block heightened tensions in the prison toward the end of his career. And while Gregory clearly believes that officers and staff eventually lost the struggle for power at Alcatraz (and elsewhere), the anecdotal quality of the text makes it difficult for the reader to see precisely *how* this struggle was lost.

Set in the right context, however, *Alcatraz Screw* is a potentially useful text for opening up conversations about the intertwined worlds of labor, authority (in every sense of the term), even 1950s masculinity, as well as more focused considerations of prisons in U.S. culture. Gregory has surely not given us the final word on Alcatraz, but his final act of labor—the completion of this memoir—might allow us, oddly enough, to forget the island in a way that Gregory himself clearly could not.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amstdy>

**Citation:** David Noon. Review of Gregory, George H., *Alcatraz Screw: My Years as a Guard in America’s Most Notorious Prison*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. December, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7027>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).