

BOOK REVIEWS

Wasted Time by Edward Hertrich

Toronto: Dundurn Press (2019), 288pp.

Reviewed by Melissa Munn

Edward Hertrich is neither a poet nor an academic. Instead, his book, *Wasted Time*, is a straightforward account of his time in various prisons. Reflecting back on his 40-year involvement with the correctional system in Canada, Hertrich offers the reader an unapologetic memoir which focuses on his many years incarcerated or on parole.

The author grew up in Toronto's Regent Park area – a high crime, low-income area. This geographic neighbourhood becomes the foundation underlying the working-class voice through which he tells his story. Because of this, Hertrich offers a counter-narrative to social disorganization theorists who contend that these types of neighbourhoods are dysfunctional, lacking cohesion, norms and organization. In this memoir, we come to understand Regent Park as its own highly structured area where people rely on each other and support each other – at times to their own detriment. In some ways, Regent Park prepares its residents for time in prison where the “code had few rules, but they were firm (because) they had little else” (p. 92).¹ This community, which gets pegged as a ‘high-risk environment’ by parole boards, provides individuals a place to return to where the stigma of being an ex-con is, for the most part, non-existent.

Perhaps Hertrich's strongest contribution to criminology is the sense of solidarity that he captures in his descriptions of prison relationships. While much literature postulates that friendships among prisoners are both finite and utilitarian, this author devotes most of this book to the meaningfulness and endurance of these relationships. Hertrich manages to clarify the difference between general associations with other prisoners and the deeper bonds with select others: “Allegiances would alter from time to time, but many, whatever the situation, would not abandon friends and allies” (p. 85). Later he speaks to the depth of the connection when he states: “We each knew anyone could be killed in this place (Millhaven penitentiary). That realization settled in with experience. Our advantage was we could have cared less about dying. We just cared about each other” (p. 130). In these words we see how the total institutions (Goffman, 1961) – or what Hertrich refers to as “the abyss that would serve as your new world” (p. 86) – unites

prisoners who endured traumas and atrocities that authorities in the penal system ignored (p. 87).

Throughout the text, it is clear that Hertrich wants to expose the reader to the deeply troubling nature of imprisonment as physical and “mental torture” (p. 276), but this results in perpetuation of long-held beliefs about both prisons and those it (ware)houses. Yet, his story is told by jumping from one moment of violence and crime to another, and this occludes important parts of the experience from view. The tedium and boredom of prison, so often recalled by prisoners, is absent from this account leaving the reader with a sense of prisoners as primarily volatile. As a result, even the comrades with whom he served time become flat, unidimensional beings in his consecutive tales of violence, homophobia and racism. He alone stands out as the one who triumphs against adversity through his grit, toughness, sexual allure, wisdom, and the respect he commands by action and reputation. Other than his difficulties with employment and finance, the psychological and emotional post-carceral struggles he may have faced as a result of his lengthy incarceration are rarely acknowledged except to say that he felt he was “a total failure as ‘normal citizen’ working a straight life” (p. 233). Ultimately, he sets himself up as “the cool criminal” (p. 281) that he cautions have the potential to “impress upon and infect the single individual with a negative influence stronger than that of other, more positive influences” (p. 281).

With rare exceptions (like the change in drug testing policy and in the standardization of double-bunking), the author offers very little in the way of social or political context, and at times, this leaves the reader with an un-nuanced account. For example, Hertrich speaks of being placed in the newly decommissioned death row cells at the Don Jail, but misses the opportunity to explain how the abolition of capital punishment in 1976 (and the replacement with a Life Sentence) conditioned the experience of doing potentially endless time. Men receiving the new sentences had no similarly sentenced role models to guide their time² or to give them hope of release and this clearly influences how the author, sentenced to life in 1978, does the early years of his sentence.

Despite these problems, *Wasted Time* serves as an important first-person perspective on prisonization. We see the impact of life in a hyper-masculinized environment on a man barely out of his teens when he received

a sentence that expires when he does. Hertrich's accounts of the brutality of guards, including what is known as the "Millhaven Mafia" (p. 87), the extensive use of solitary confinement, the impact of involuntary transfers, and the impact of poverty on the ability to access justice provide a needed critical ethnographic account into life behind bars in Canada.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For more on this topic, see Crichlow's (2014) work on Black youth in Toronto, Ontario.
- ² For more on the impact of having no role models, see Munn and Bruckert's (2013) work on the successful reintegration and resettlement of former long-term prisoners.

REFERENCES

- Crichlow, Wesley (2014) "Weaponization and Prisonization of Toronto's Black Male Youth", *International Journal for Crime, Justice & Social Democracy*, 3(3): 113-131.
- Goffman, Erving (1961) *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Prisoners*, New York: Anchor Books.
- Hertrich, Edward (2019) *Wasted Time*, Toronto: Dundurn Press.
- Munn, Melissa and Chris Bruckert (2013) *On the Outside: From Lengthy Incarceration to Lasting Freedom*, Vancouver: UBC Press.