

BOOK REVIEWS

Confessions of an Innocent Man: Torture and Survival in a Saudi Prison

by William Sampson

Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd. (2005), 432pp.

Reviewed by Pascal Dominique-Legault

Being much more than a mere description of the horrors William Sampson endured during his 963 days of imprisonment and solitary confinement in Saudi Arabia, *Confessions of an Innocent Man* is a complex firsthand account of the feelings, emotions and mental representations of an innocent man subjected to torture, and forced into writing and rewriting confessions that will be later used to incriminate him and his fellow friends. Left without adequate legal representation or diplomatic aid and deprived of a fair trial, Sampson is beaten into falsely confessing of being a British spy involved in two car bombings in Saudi Arabia. This book review focuses on the disorientation regime he was subjected to, the survival strategies he developed, his relations with the Canadian Embassy and the humanity he encountered despite the torture.

Early on, Sampson acquaints us with the sensory deprived environment that contained him and describes his processing into a cell. He notes that by assigning you a number and by effectively eradicating your name, it serves more than to put you off balance – it literally strips you of your assumed place in the world, of your sense of self, of your own identity and deprives you of everyday life cues. Once processed, he was confronted with a disorientation regime based on waiting games meant to produce anxiety, fear and loss of control. He experienced sleep deprivation induced by being handcuffed to a cell door which eventually led him to hallucinate. He was also subjected to physical and psychological abuse – all meant to destabilize him into confessing crimes he did not commit. We also learn that he rapidly became a victim of torture at the Al Ulaysha interrogation centre and the Al Ha'ir detention. The fanaticism of his captors seemed to be directed to the conquest of his very soul like the chilling pious trials by fire or water. Never did it appear to cross his captors' minds that Sampson might have been innocent. He was consequently subjected to beatings, to repeated sessions of falanga¹ while hanging upside down and to electric shocks. He was raped on two different occasions and was often left in stress positions or the "hog-tied position". He was physically, sexually, psychologically intimidated and humiliated to get his "mind right" or, as his captors used to say, to put him in the "right way". A cycle of lecturing,

beatings, relecturing, and beatings would go on *ad nauseam* to a point where he could not endure the pain any longer and would confess to whatever they wanted to hear to stop the torture. However, his captors' promises to relieve him from the pain, if he were to confess, were short lived for, once a confession was obtained. They then moved on to pin other false charges on him using torture to collect their "beaten in" evidence. In his account, Sampson uses a degree of humour and sarcasm to depict his captors, but also to show their ludicrous and sometimes contradictory attempts to pin fictitious crimes on him related to homosexuality, alcohol, drugs, murder and terrorism.

From the beginning, and despite Sampson's attempts to comply with the demands of his captors to prevent the use of violence against him, he engaged in resistance. This resistance, although not confrontational at the time, targeted the disorientation regime to which he was subjected. His story portrays a battle for psychological and emotional independence from his captors, a struggle between sanity and insanity, a fight to keep control, and to locate himself in time and space through the use of a series of survival strategies. He used the prayer calls, the natural lighting, and his "rice diary",² which eventually ingeniously became a "book diary",³ as a means to grasp control of the day and time.

One of the most important aspects of his resistance was either to clear his mind through meditation in order to sink less in the fear, anxiety and stress or, on the contrary, to keep his mind occupied within this stimuli lacking environment. He occupied his mind by reliving positive memories and experiences. Lost in his mind, bits of meaningful poetry would resurface and he would eventually come to recite a specific excerpt over and over as a powerful mantra to give himself courage and strength. Even if it did not drive the suffering away, it was sufficient to prevent a complete breakdown. As he says, he would leave his prison cell behind as he walked free in his mind. The more Sampson's mind was active and occupied, the more it helped to overcome the physical and psychological turmoil.

He also used his senses to record a great deal of information on his whereabouts and his captors, making a habit of memorizing every small detail in case it might be useful in the long run. The ritual cleansing and careful examination of his body after each torture episode occupied his time, like his "hidden treasures" made of small amounts of toilet paper which he fidgeted, rolled and unrolled into balls and chewed to help distract himself, as well as alleviate the intense stress that he is facing. The toilet paper also conveyed a sense of victory for he had to steal the strips and was often asked to empty his pockets when his scheme was uncovered. As small and as insignificant as these activities might seem, they purposively help him endure, give him a minor sense of control,

create a small area of privacy and basically help him anchor himself in time and place as well as preserve his sanity and sense of self.

Through his detention, his days became centred on seeking small victories, small advantages, to gain a small angle here and there. At one point in the book, Sampson refers to the politics of his incarceration and treatment as a complex chess game that he had been playing from day one. At first his struggles were mainly fought against the disorientation regime, but gradually he came to use whatever limited resources he had as means of resistance. For example, he carefully engaged in the writing and rewriting of confessions. Even if general and specific details were being beaten into the confessions, he managed to try to contradict, invalidate and show the absurdity of these confessions through his written words. William Sampson was beaten and tortured so intensely that he eventually suffered a heart attack. Paradoxically, this constituted a pivotal moment for him as his captors temporarily lost control over him. That is when he started to accept his fate, noticed the damaging effects of getting his hopes up and started to rely only on himself. He realized that death would be a small price to pay to stop the torture and would be in fact a form of freedom from the inhumanity, a conclusion that led him to refuse a much needed operation to remain in poor health to avoid more torture. An equally important realization was the problems his death would cause to everyone, from the embassy to his captors. He came to believe that his captors would be highly embarrassed if he were to die which turned out to be “strangely empowering” for him, made him feel “more alive” and made his sense of self return more strongly than ever. Therefore, Sampson used the fact that he would not be allowed to die as the result of torture to engage in more confrontational resistance and launched a cyclical campaign of action – reaction where interaction was part of the battle. Amongst other things, he used his nakedness and the Koran to insult his captors, he threw food, spit on his captors, stared fiercely at them, contradicted them, bit them, concealed a scorpion on his food tray, shred his clothes into pieces, mainly to resist the injustices he faced, to fight back, and provoke direct confrontations. Even though his “insolence” was punished and his privileges withdrawn, he engaged in a “dirty protest” using his urine and faeces to smear his cell. In response to religious propaganda and indoctrination, Sampson eventually went on a medical strike. As the events progressed and escalated, he decided to go on a hunger strike. Before the end of this potentially fatal strike, he was released after many visits by Canadian dignitaries from the Bloc Québécois and the Liberal Party, diplomatic officials, a lawyer and psychiatrists. His account stops in the early stages of his healing process and the reclamation of his identity.

During his gruesome experience, his only wishes were to have somebody look for him and to be granted visits from the embassy as he believed it would put an end to his torture. These hopes were dashed when the Canadian diplomats conducted their interviews in the presence of two of his brutal interrogators where he frequently saw them siding with his torturers. Beaten and instructed to say what needed to be said to these visitors or during his trial hearings, at first, Sampson was unable to directly tell the officials he was being tortured. Something he later regretted, because complying did not necessarily stop the torture. Later on, his attempts to send coded messages to the Canadian representatives seemed useless as the latter appeared to be involved in a culture of denial in order to protect Canada's relations with Saudi Arabia. Sampson perceived that the Canadian officials accepted without any critical assessment the confessions he and his friends were beaten into. Their role was limited to filling bureaucratic papers and showing the world they were doing what they could while Sampson and his friends continued to be tortured. He felt that the Canadian officials were more concerned with appeasing his captors than with helping him or his family. At a certain point, feeling that there was not much the embassy could do for him, he refused their visits and, in a moment of frustration, asked the embassy to revoke his Canadian citizenship, an all too meaningful gesture under the circumstances.

Sampson's account of these tragic events leaves the reader longing for more information on what has become of Canada's foreign and diplomatic policies. His case and subsequent book efficiently raises serious questions of the complicity of Canadian officials in torture abroad, the use of information derived from torture, and the overall impunity and responsibility of each actor in torture, from the prison doctors or psychiatrists, to the guards, the torturers, and, not the least, the government officials involved. With that said, I felt his story had been cut short. An account on the complexities of his healing process and another on the politics of claiming justice once physically freed would be an interesting follow-up to his already significant contribution. The arduous post-torture processes of healing and quests for justice shed further light on the enduring complexities associated with detention-based abuses.

As a final note, I strongly encourage readers to explore Sampson's analysis on the politics of incarceration, torture and resistance. His story is one of survival and resistance that transcends the sheer inhumanity under which his body and mind were subjugated. Paradoxically, his story of inhumanity is mainly one of humanity, beauty and freedom. Instead of sheering into a black and white analysis of domination, Sampson reveals gestures of humanity by some of his captors: a nurse who acknowledged

his experience, disapproving nods from the medical dispenser at the sight of his bruised body and guards who literally covered the door while Sampson was let free from stress positions imposed by his interrogators. The smallest kind gesture would make him feel less isolated in the sea of inhumanity that surrounded him and would help him cope. May it be known that Sampson acknowledges beautifully that through the lack of humanity of his captors, he was able to find his own humanity and become a better person – a positive outcome often difficult to recognize within the gruesome experience of torture.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Form of corporal punishment and torture in which the soles of the feet are beaten repetitively with an object. Although extremely painful, it is a method that leaves few physical marks. In Sampson's case, he was beaten with a rattan cane (that broke once) and an axe handle confiscated from his home. These beatings were also directed towards his buttocks and his testicles.
- ² His concealed rice diary consists of an accumulation of rice grains taken from his meals. One single unblemished grain marks the passing of a day, a bitten in half grain marks a day without sleep, and a grain stained in some manner (with faeces) would indicate each day of torture (p. 106).
- ³ While being deprived of writing materials, Sampson transforms a simple book into a diary by folding and tearing some pages. It becomes a more efficient, flexible and accurate method to record the events than cumulating rice.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Pascal D.-Legault was the “war on terror” coordinator for Amnesty International (Canada francophone) from January 2008 to December 2009, during which he worked to raise awareness on the many casualties of the on-going conflict. He completed his Master's in Criminology at the University of Ottawa. His thesis examined the political discourses regarding security and human rights during the passing of Canada's Anti-terrorism Act. He is also the co-founder of *Documentary Days: Inquiries on Social Conflicts* at the University of Ottawa where he is a lecturer for the Winter 2010 semester.