

BOOK REVIEWS

***Jailhouse Journalism:
The Fourth Estate Behind Bars***
by James McGrath Morris (1998)
Reviewed by Paul Wright

Little has been written about the prison press. *Jailhouse Journalism* is a first step in chronicling the history of prison publications. The book is organized largely in chronological order combined with biographical information about various prison editors. In the book's introduction Morris outlines the frequent hostility of prison officials to prison publications, the censorship that occurs when prisoncrats are the de facto censors of what news is "appropriate" and the trials and tribulations of prison editors.

In some respects *Jailhouse Journalism* is a history of the American prison system. The first prison paper was started in 1800 in a debtor's prison. *Forlorn Hope* was published by New York lawyer William Keteltas. Keteltas was in prison for being unable to pay his debts, which was common at the time. Abolishing debtor's prisons was the paper's main goal. Subscriptions cost \$3 a year, allowing its independent publication. At one point *Forlorn Hope* ran an ad for the sale of a slave which prompted outrage among some of its readers and later led to the paper supporting abolition. It appears to have published for less than a year.

The idea of prison papers did not gain widespread acceptance until the 1870s when prison reform became popular. Prison officials in that era considered the newspapers of the day to be corrupting and immoral. Their solution was to create prison newspapers that did not "offend or startle the inmate." The first of these prison newspapers was *The Summary*, published at the Elmira Reformatory in New York which appeared on November 29, 1883. Warden Zebulon Brockway ensured the paper was sanitized and devoid of anything he found objectionable, such as "sensational court or criminal news ... horse racing or prizefighting." Brockway saw the paper as a tool of prison reform and circulation grew outside the prison's walls as well as spawning imitators in prisons across the country. Between 1880 and 1890 prisons in more than a dozen states established newspapers. This included the *Prison Mirror*, started by the Younger Brothers (members of the Jesse James

gang) at Minnesota's Stillwater prison in 1887. The paper is still published.

Coming into the twentieth century prison papers complained of prison slave labour and work conditions for prisoners, issues which have hardly disappeared. Among the more famous prison editors chronicled in the book is Julian Hawthorne, a journalist and the son of famed author Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was imprisoned on federal mail fraud charges for a year. Hawthorne was assigned to edit *Good Words* at the federal penitentiary in Atlanta. Papers in other federal prison soon followed.

Morris chronicles the influence political prisoners from the Industrial Workers of the World and the Communist Party USA had on prison publications. This included fiction written by William "Big Bill" Haywood in *The Can Opener* at the Chicago jail in 1917, to a section on labour news in the federal McNeil Island penitentiary's *New Era* written by Communist prisoners.

One of the most fascinating parts of *Jailhouse Journalism* is its discussion of the newspapers published during World War II in the Internment camps where some 106,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated. The first of these papers was the *Manzanar Free Press*, started by former newspaper writers at the Japanese dailies and weeklies that were shut down when the U.S. government rounded up Japanese Americans. Unlike virtually all other prison papers, these were not propaganda sheets put out by the camp administrations. Financed by ads from Sears Roebuck and other companies as well as subscriptions and the War Relocation Administration, the papers were largely independent. Their coverage included reports on internees arrested by the FBI. However, censorship did occur. In December, 1942, the *Free Press* was censored and shut down for two weeks for attempting to report an incident where three internees were shot and killed and 10 wounded by U.S. army troops when they protested the arrest of the detainee accused of beating an informant.

Jailhouse Journalism also chronicles the little-known story of papers put out by the almost half million German, Italian and Japanese Prisoners of War (POW) held in American POW camps during World War II. While most of the papers were started as a means by which camp administrators could communicate with the POW's, one began as a secret project of the U.S. government's POW Special Projects

Division. Its purpose was to expose Nazism as vicious and impractical and inculcate “democratic” ideals in the POWs. When the project started in 1944, German and Italian POWs were publishing at least 80 camp newspapers. U.S. officials were dismayed to learn, after analysing the papers content, that at least 50 were openly pro-Nazi, three were ante-Nazi and the rest were in between.

The U.S. government then secretly funded *Der Ruf* (The Call), aided by POW Gustav Hocke, a former correspondent. Morris reports that most of the German POWs were unimpressed and denounced the paper as “a newspaper of traitors and deserters.” By its fifteenth issue, *Der Ruf* was printing 75,000 issues and selling 90 percent of the print run at 5 cents each. It was actually making a profit. By July, 1945 the government could report that only three of the camp newspapers were still pro Nazi. Of course, Germany’s defeat and surrender two months earlier might have influenced this more than *Der Ruf* did!

A common theme running through *Jailhouse Journalism* is the ongoing battle of censorship between prison officials and editors and writers. The book is replete with example after example of prison editors being fired if they did not toe the administration line of the day. By the 1970s prisoners were filing lawsuits over the censorship of prison newspapers. In many cases they won. Unable to win in court, prison officials responded by simply closing the papers down. The result, as Morris notes is that the prison newspaper is a dying institution despite the proliferation of prisons and prisoners in the last 20 years.

Anyone interested in the topic of prison journalism will find, *Jailhouse Journalism* worth reading simply because it is the only modern book on the topic. That said, the book does have its shortcomings. By focussing almost exclusively on the “official prison press,” namely those publications that have appeared with the blessing, censorship and financial support of prison officials, Morris misses the boat.

Morris devotes only two paragraphs in the book to what he calls the “underground” prison papers, despite observing these were “often the only ones with accurate information.” The only paper from the 1970s that is mentioned is *First Step* published by draft resistor Joel Meyers at the federal penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

It is a real shame that Morris did not see it to include the real prison press in his book: the publications prisoners have published, often in

considerable adversity, without the sanction of prison officials. A few that come to mind, and there are many others, include *The Marionette* (published by Bill Dunne at the federal pen in Marion); *The Red Dragon* and *The Abolitionist* (published by *Prison Legal News* (PLN) co-founder Ed Mead); *The Iced Pig* (published by Sam Melville at Attica before his murder by police during the 1971 uprising); *Jericho, Florida Prison Legal Perspectives*, *Voices Behind the Walls* and many others. Hopefully someone will take up where Morris left off and tell this still untold story about prison journalism. The Samizdat of the American gulag.

The impression I got from reading *Jailhouse Journalism* is that Morris actually researched and wrote the book during the late 1970's and early 1980's, could not find a publisher and let it sit. When he did find a publisher he hurriedly "updated" the manuscript to make it seem more current. The 1980's and '90's are largely missing from the book.

Morris mentions PLN on the last page of the book in a chapter titled "Prison Journalism Writes 30". It has some minor errors (PLN started publishing in 1990, not 1989. In the appendix on prison publications Morris states that PLN ceased publishing "at an unknown time.") The result is that while the book is extensively footnoted it makes me wonder if everything else, that I do not have firsthand knowledge about, is accurate.

At \$41.50 for a hardbound edition the book is pretty pricey. Contact: McFarland & Co. P.O. Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640. (336) 246-4460.

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