

BOOK REVIEWS

**Down Inside:
Thirty Years in Canada's Prison Service
by Robert Clark
Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions (2017) 277 pp.
*Reviewed by Lucas Ridgeway***

Robert Clark is known among the prisoner sub-class as a cultural whisperer who denounces the toxicity manifested by the government body charged with our custody and care while incarcerated. His compelling personal memoir is a scathing indictment of bureaucratic indifference and agenda-driven administrative policy in relation to federally incarcerated Canadian citizens. During his 30-year career, Robert Clark rose through the ranks of the Canadian federal penitentiary system from student volunteer to deputy warden as he dealt with escapes, lockdowns, murders, deaths by suicide, and a riot. Inside this indexed account he challenges the belief that a “tough-on-crime” approach makes prisons and communities safer, arguing instead for humane treatment and rehabilitation.

Down Inside diagnoses many of the symptoms of inertia found in the penitentiary system that often defy logical arguments predicated on an understanding of both the Commissioner's Directives and *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. According to Mr. Clark, not only did these basic explanations fail to suffice many of his fellow employees, but he also observed that many people at the top would not risk poor relations with their staff or unions to ensure that every prisoner's rights were respected. In his opinion, the corporate culture is largely responsible for most of the problems that occur within our prisons. From his firsthand experience, he believes that the organization itself almost unofficially sanctioned the mistreatment of captives. In addition, Clark helps to frame his rationale objectively by stating in the introduction that the correctional system does employ many fine people who do deserve great credit for doing their best everyday under often impossible circumstances.

The Conservative government's “tough-on-crime” agenda prompted his retirement in 2009 after he saw several unconscionable changes impacted our prison environment that made it more closely resemble the US model. Apparently aghast at how readily the leadership embraced these draconian measures, seemingly without any hint of moral conflict, he decided that he had a duty to alert the world to what was going on inside the federal

penitentiary system. He did so even though he assumed that most Canadians would never believe or want to believe that a system like this could exist in Canada. At this point, he once again reinforces his great respect for those gifted staff members, uniformed guards, shop instructors, chaplains, parole officers, nurses, rehabilitation program staff, managers, and schoolteachers working within the system. He confirms that these unsung heroes of Canada's prison industrial complex do render our institutions safer and more humane. Regrettably, however, they often only make up a small percentage of a prison's total workforce.

Clark's principal assertion is that humane treatment is the most effective way of managing a prison safely by creating civilized conditions that rehabilitate prisoners to become productive members of society. Three decades of experience, which has included having a prisoner grab his throat, his life threatened more times than he can remember, urine thrown at him, innumerable sleepless nights leading to stress leave, alcohol abuse, and divorce, have driven this hypothesis. He asserts that warehousing people is what prisons are all about, because when we lock doors, we generally feel safer. Clark's insight is that this can actually make things worse as locks can also cause people to succumb to resignation over dreams, to rage over co-operation, to death over life. Locked doors can likewise prevent us from seeing what is on the other side. How do we know if it is dangerous? What if we are mistaken? Clark postulates that we must begin by unlocking doors and discovering who and what we are really dealing with *Down Inside*.

The reader will not find many graphic depictions of violence and death, yet the vignettes he does choose to elaborate on will still chill the reader to the core. Throughout his career, Clark explored discipline and punishment in depth, especially during his stint as a Performance Assurance Officer. His memoir demonstrates how he has often found himself on both sides of the self-described "blue wall" where the officers' motto is, "You never rat on a fellow officer, no matter what". He is equally conscious of his own hypocrisy and lack of concrete action during his tenure to which he likens to being "trapped between two opposing armies, a soldier of neither". As one can imagine, writing this book has clearly positioned him as an outsider within his home community of Kingston, Ontario – a city with multiple federal penitentiaries. Moreover, even though he wrote this memoir to bring public attention to the many shortcomings of the Correctional Service of Canada, the author rightly acknowledges all the victims of crime who

shared with him the social dilemmas of crime and punishment in all of its complexities over the years.

Unavoidable ethical quandaries centred on security with care bookend the stories he chooses to share with us. These accounts are written quite matter-of-factly and without regard to many traditional literary conventions found in academic texts. He attempts to take his audience on an honest and compassionate journey towards the obviousness of the truth in relation to our own pretences. He expounds on how drug dealing, money laundering, extortion, assaults, and the sale of confidential information to prisoners were all carried out by staff members inside our institutions. This leads to accounts of arrests and suicides on both sides of the “blue wall”. Finally, he laments on the use of solitary confinement, also known as administrative segregation, wherein he cites such sources as the United National, annual reports from the Office of the Correctional Investigator, and the 1996 Arbour Commission of Inquiry to bolster his message.

Clark ultimately highlights how the work involved in helping prisoners successfully reintegrate is crucial and how governments can even mistake their basic human rights for privileges. As an example, he references the 2007 *Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety* report commissioned by Stephen Harper’s government. In this review of the federal penitentiary system and its operations, it was argued that the system was too accommodating in its efforts to rehabilitate convicts despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. As a result of the legislative and administrative changes made by the Harper government, the system continues to feed itself new clients now that the chances of recidivism are much greater. Accordingly, when then Correctional Investigator, Howard Sapers, pushed back against these changes in 2014, he was effectively fired.¹ This compounded the authors own thoughts and feelings of disillusionment. How could such a practice make Canadians safer?

I found that the most refreshing part of this treatise is that it explores one man’s journey of hard-fought personal experience in a broad variety of roles. Therefore, we can glean from an insider perspective how a balance must always be struck between crime and punishment, as well as discipline and respect because a myriad of democratic demands must be met. Perhaps reading this book would be beneficial to all citizens concerned as it so clearly demonstrates a need for a paradigm shift derived from the author’s direct experience and longstanding involvement in the federal penitentiary

system. Many readers may find it difficult to remain unconvinced as to the veracity of the arguments presented in *Down Inside*. Robert Clark has humbly recognized his own naïveté and maybe for our part, we will choose to join him on this side of the “blue wall?” As the author profoundly insists, “No human being is defined by a single act, no matter how extreme. Under our current system of justice, most prisoners will eventually be released back into society. If rehabilitation is our primary objective, we must set aside our personal outrage at the nature of the crime and look at every prisoner as a unique human being needing assistance to get their life back on track”.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ling, Justin (2021) “Ending solitary confinement in Canada’s prisons, take 2”, *Macleans* – July 23. Retrieved from <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/ending-solitary-confinement-in-canadas-prisons-take-2/>

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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