

Farewell to A Friend

Liz Elliott

It is no longer possible - as if it ever were - to remain indifferent to the sight of another human being encaged. One must either share the degradation or be responsible for it. In one way or another one has to be accountable, whether to conscience or to peers who do care.

Claire Culhane from
No Longer Barred From Prison

Claire Culhane died on April 25, 1996 in Vancouver, B.C. On that day, as on any other, 1 in 5 children in Canada lived in poverty, the unemployment rate was over 10%, and about 32,800 adults were imprisoned in one of the 216 federal and provincial institutions across the country. This, of course, would not have been news to Claire. But it is news she would have wanted to privilege over the news of her own death of natural causes. She likely knew that she would not be forgotten, having touched so many people in the course of her remarkable life. It was more like her to be concerned about the state of the world she left behind.

This was a world in which Claire had lived her politics. She abhorred waste and took personal measures against it, from the conscientious recycling of used envelopes and paper in her correspondence to donating her body to a medical school. She had a modest lifestyle and few material possessions - excluding, of course, the voluminous paperwork she accumulated over two decades of prison activism. She felt as accountable to humanity as she expected state authorities to be. Few could meet her standards.

Claire was once described by a prisoner as a one woman army, a characterization which became the title of her biography, *One Woman Army* by Mick Lowe (Lowe, 1992). Claire Culhane was reputed as a woman of action, and her powers of endurance were well known. She was a person of enormous strength and energy who, in the end, could only be stopped by death. It was inevitable that some of us would at some time clash with this dynamic woman, whose stubborn determination seemed to invite conflict. But most of us respected the motives which drove her soul to action, as well as her infinite capacity to act on virtually any injustice presented to her.

In the introduction to her first book, *Why is Canada in Vietnam? The Truth about our Foreign Aid*, Claire is described by Wilfred Burchett as, "one of those all too rare spirits who believes her duties to humanity as a whole outweigh contractual obligations to organizations or governments." Her experiences in Vietnam during the war and the sense of moral obligation to the people she left behind there motivated a series of actions on her return to Canada. On one occasion when Parliament was in session, she chained herself to a gallery chair in the House of Commons and scattered her pamphlets denouncing Canada's involvement in the war over the heads of the sitting M.P.s. Claire's duties to humanity came from a sense of connectedness to others and were complemented by her strong sense of duty to act. Her strategy was direct confrontation, her creed, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Vancouver Sun columnist Douglas Todd once wrote that rebels were found among people whose ethics motivated them to adopt unpopular causes, such as prisoners' rights. Claire was one such rebel, beginning her career at the moment of her breech birth: "I put my foot in it right from the start," she would say. Her involvement with prisoners began 21 years ago, as a women's studies instructor in the B.C. provincial Lakeside prison for women. This began her legacy as a prisoners' rights advocate and she spent the rest of her life working 20 hour days without pay at work from which, she would enjoy mentioning, she could not be fired. Claire was a watchdog for the human and legal rights of prisoners, who reminded government authorities and agents that they were accountable for their policies and practices. Government departments with security mandates such as those of corrections and the military, are notoriously resistant to public accountability. Undaunted, Claire called prisoners' rights, "the best fight in town." Her capacity for battle seemed inborn: "'Nineteen eighteen,' (her father) would tell his grandchildren ... 'The year they ended one war in Europe, and another started in my house'" (Lowe, 1992: 5).

After her death Stephen Hume, also of the Sun, wrote: "This indefatigable Montreal-born daughter of Russian immigrants made it her task in life to become the voice of the voiceless, the voice of society's cast-offs, the voice of the hated and the vilified, the voice of those buried in the labyrinths of the free world's second biggest prison state." Claire wasted no opportunities to make the connections between the politics of

imprisonment and the socio-economic practices of the state. The heavy reliance on imprisonment in addressing social problems speaks more to our failure as a society to provide for all of its members, than our illusory success in maintaining law and order. She denounced the individualist philosophies of capitalism and denied that the “problem of crime” was a legal problem of individual “criminals.” Prisoners were, rather, like canaries in a social coal mine and we ignored them at our peril.

Claire espoused the abolition of the carceral network, not its reform. Prison abolition, as we know all too well, is an enormous social challenge. As our prisoners’ rights colleague Ruth Morris and others have noted, abolition may only be realized when we challenge the notions of revenge and punishment in our socio-political responses to harmful acts. A system of “justice” which pits offenders versus victims - as if these categories were absolute and distinct truisms - legitimates revenge by laundering it through the machinery of law. Revenge is cleansed and resignified as “retribution”; harmful social conflicts and tragedies are reduced to cases, and the authors of crimes are transformed into punishable individuals. Claire recognized how categorizing people as “other” made it easier to abuse power over them, and how systems of punishment were conducive to this abuse.

In the meantime, our inner cities are in decay and the numbers of the homeless and unemployed escalate; education and health services continue to be eroded. There is apparently no shortage of money, however, to lock people up - in sum violating, as Claire would argue, any claim we might have to civilized status. She spent her life trying to change this, accumulating a number of critics along the way. At her Vancouver memorial celebration¹, however, it was over 300 family and friends who gathered together and sang Claire’s favourite song, “Joe Hill,” about the union activist whose advice, “Don’t mourn: organize” was one of her familiar quotes. As if responding to the critics, one speaker later said that if Claire had been destined for hell, she would have it well organized by the time the rest of us got there. She would have liked that.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Memorial celebrations were also held in Ottawa, Montreal and various prisons in Canada.

REFERENCES

- Culhane, C. (1991). *No Longer Barred From Prison*. Montreal: Black Rose Books.
- Culhane, C. (1972). *Why is Canada in Vietnam? The Truth about our Foreign Aid*. Introduction by Wilfred Burchett. Toronto: NC Press.
- Lowe, M. (1992). *One Woman Army*. Toronto: Macmillan Canada.

Intimidation and Resistance

Bob Gaucher

On June 7th, 1997, the University of Ottawa recognized the lifelong contribution to the cause of social justice of Claire Culhane by posthumously awarding her an honorary doctorate. Claire's life represents the triumph of commitment to social justice and resistance to state oppression. From Claire's struggles for women's and workers' rights as a teenager in the 1930s, through her involvement in the 1950s peace movement and anti-Vietnam War activities of the 1960s and 1970s, Claire was steadfast and active in her opposition to state oppression. For the next twenty years Claire devoted her efforts to the struggle for prisoners' rights in Canada.

During the same week, Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt was released on bail after serving 25 years for a COINTELPRO set-up on a homicide charge. His words, "I am contributing to the power of the people. The struggle continues" (Ottawa Citizen, June 11, 1997: A13), attest to his sense of commitment and resistance in face of extreme state repression. He neither could nor would be intimidated by the state's social control institutions.

How is such commitment to be explained or understood? My answer would focus on their social values and their relationships to their comrades, which sustained their struggles and themselves. Such values have been seriously challenged by the pronounced shift to the right and corporatism of the past two decades. This shift is represented by the increased use of penal justice as a means of intimidating communities and repressing dissent. The USA has been a global leader in this regard, targeting its disenfranchised minority communities, via mandatory penalties and extreme sentences. A key to this trajectory has been the divisive scapegoating of selected groups, which embodies state and social reaction to the increasing problems of social life in post-industrial societies.

The marginalization and disenfranchisement of increasingly large segments of western societies has been ideologically denied and reformulated as a problem of individual deviation and a lack of social discipline. Rather than declaring war on poverty, social inequality, discrimination and lack of opportunity, these post-modern societies have chosen to declare war on the most disadvantaged of their societies. In essence, the affluent have declared war on the poor. For some, this has been an economic boom, providing profit from rapidly expanding privatized correctionalist and security corporations, and employment for the

minions of the right (see Morse, 1995). The politically induced hysteria over drug use and crime has served to justify and encourage penal repression as a response to problems of social structure and social inequality. While this intimidation is a physical presence in the communities of the disenfranchised, the spectre of marginalization serves to discipline the middle class to the neo-fascist social relations of western post-modern society.

Crime and deviance are created by the same historical forces and social structural features that produce social discipline and conformity. The current denial in criminological discourse of the underlying historical forces and social structural features indicates an etiological crisis in criminology. The discourse of the crime control industry is based upon problematic assumptions about human nature, social relations and society, and the resultant false analytical distinctions of its problematics. What is clear is that poverty, unemployment and joblessness, gender relations and discrimination are massively determined by the social structures and social organization of the society in question. Social conflict, whether it is criminalized or defined as a problem of social organization and social life (i.e., social trouble) is rooted in the social structural features and consequent social relations of society.

The current etiological crisis in criminology reflects the necessity of grounding social conflict in the containing social structural features of society. Much contemporary criminological discourse displaces the causes of crime/social trouble via individualizing or openly discriminatory analysis. The appropriation and consequent criminalization of social conflict and social division has been forwarded by academic and administrative criminology's refusal to seriously address sociological factors. The result is stereotypical scapegoating of marginalized groups on the basis of class, race and gender. One lesson we learn from Claire Culhane and Geronimo Pratt is that their refusal to be intimidated and their life long resistance to oppression is based upon their understanding of the centrality of these social structural features. They exemplify that active resistance to state repression is linked to resistance to the ideological appropriation of social conflict by the crime control industry. Claire Culhane's life long struggle for social justice for women was grounded in her understanding that gender is a social construction. That understanding informed her twenty year fight for the rights of male prisoners in Canada. Geronimo Pratt's resistance to the USA's denigrating

definition of the criminalized, in light of twenty-five years of continuous and arduous incarceration, is grounded in his understanding of the social construction of the minority prisoner.

What Claire clearly espoused and exemplified was that we can resist the ideological manipulation of our society. The means of achieving this is by exposing the operations of the system and through community activism. The *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* serves as a vehicle for exposing the contradictions and inequities of current penal justice practices. It aims to provide an alternative discourse which addresses the causes of social conflict and interpersonal aggression. Not as a means of explaining away the problem of crime and social disorder, but as a means of focusing on its root causes.

Accompanying the shift to a larger and more repressive penal justice system has been the attempt to silence the voices of the criminalized. While legislation aimed at preventing prisoners from voicing their opinions and discussing their cases has been standard in numerous states in the USA since the time of Carl Chessman, such legislation has only recently been introduced into Canada (i.e., Ontario). Following the lead of the USA, it has been the monsters that society produces who have been used to justify such legislation. In this issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, Stephen Reid discusses the ramifications of legislation recently passed in Ontario and proposed federally. Rather than demanding that publishers act responsibly, this legislation attempts to control the writing of all the criminalized via copyright ownership. In response, our editorial group has decided to directly challenge the Ontario legislation, in part, by paying prisoners a nominal \$50.00 for articles we publish in the future.

I would like to introduce three recent additions to our editorial group. Melissa Stewart, founder and co-ordinator of *Project Another Chance*, in Kingston, Ontario, is a former editor of *Tightwire*. Recently paroled, Melissa's work is in support of federally incarcerated women. Stephen Reid, a noted prison writer will be working closely with our group in Vancouver, B.C. Stephen currently teaches creative writing in Canadian penitentiaries and brings considerable publishing expertise to our board. Peter Murphy, is a former editor of *The Prison Journal* and for many years taught literature and creative writing courses in Canadian penitentiaries.

We have also made changes in our duty roster. Liz Elliott has taken on the role of manuscript editor and Curtis Taylor has established and will edit our website: <http://www.synapse.net/~arrakis/jpp/jpp.html>. Please note that previous issues of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* are available via our website.

REFERENCES

- Morse, J. (1995). "In The Shadow of the Thirteenth Amendment," *The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, Volume 6:1.