

BEHIND THE NORTH GATE: THE PRISON STORY OF DR. OSWALD WITHROW

By Frank B. Edwards

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An excerpt.

As an adult, I am still affected by the grim exterior of Kingston Penitentiary, even though its harsh lines are now broken up by the bobbing masts of Olympic Harbour. No chain gang (en route to the little quarry at the end of Church Street) has marched out of the North Gate for decades, but the looming walls still give a sense of harsh punishments and miserable conditions hidden from public view. The early wardens, keepers and guards were not hired to reform or rehabilitate; they were there to punish and control the miserable wretches who landed inside. Thousands have passed through its grim corridors since it opened in 1835, and dozens of prisoners have died of violence, disease and court-ordered executions.

Of all its inmates, perhaps the one who made his misery best known was Dr. Oswald C.J. Withrow. From the moment he arrived on May 21, 1927, the educated and erudite MD railed against both the judicial system that placed him there and the place in which he was jailed. He labeled most of the guards brutal or incompetent, the food bad, the accommodation uncomfortable, the library inadequate and the general conditions of the penitentiary unsanitary.

To Withrow, prison life seemed terribly unfair. It was not a surprising opinion for a man who considered himself innocent in spite of his seven-year sentence. The tone for his unhappy incarceration was set two days after his sentencing, when the guards transporting him by train from Toronto pocketed most of his meal allowance for themselves. His last brush with luxury was a ride in the “fine car” that carried him (and a scruffy shackled youth) from the station at Kingston Junction to the prison; his middle-class life ended when the heavy door in the prison’s North Gate closed behind him.

Inside, total silence was the rule, and tobacco rations were the prisoners’ underground currency. (Sadly for Withrow, he declined his tobacco allowance during his brief orientation meeting because he did not smoke and discovered only later that he needed it to barter with guards or cons). By the time he was eventually paroled, the prosperity of the twenties had been replaced by the despair of the Great Depression, and his medical career and social reputation were in ruins.

From the first week of his stay, the refined Withrow focused his quiet contempt for prison life on Portsmouth’s coarse warden, John C. Ponsford, a bulky political appointee with a military bearing and a love of the lash. Although he wisely never confronted the warden

with his views, Withrow made his feelings known on the front pages of newspapers several years after his release. The stories regaled readers with tales of Ponsford's daily warden's court sessions, during which he meted out punishments for a variety of minor offences: some inmates were sent for hellishly long stays in the dank solitary cells; others were manacled across "the strapping bench" and flogged with a heavy – and occasionally wet – leather strap that was perforated with holes to draw flesh up into the strap with each lash.

Up until a few months before his incarceration, Withrow had led a quiet and prosperous life as a medical doctor in Toronto's Annex neighbourhood. A Baptist whose wife was active in church affairs, he was a handsome man with elitist tendencies and was proud of his United Empire Loyalist ancestry. Withrow had lectured at the University of Toronto, served in the medical corps during the First World War and been a founder in 1914 (with Dr. C.K. Clarke, eventually of the Clarke Institute) of an innovative mental health clinic at Toronto General Hospital. His belief in eugenics and concern that too many babies were being born to unsuitable parents led to his establishment in 1925 of the Ontario Birth Control League and, it seems, a secret abortion practice. Today, he is regarded by some as a pioneer in the Pro Choice movement, but in 1927, when a 21-year-old pregnant patient died after an operation in Toronto's private Strathcona Hospital, he was charged with manslaughter and sent to trial. *[continued...]*