

From the Literature . . .

by Michele Y. Deitch*

Prison Reform Then and Now

Miracle at Sing Sing: How One Man Transformed the Lives of America's Most Dangerous Prisoners

Ralph Blumenthal

St. Martin's Press (2004)

Fans of correctional history, advocates of penal reform, and foes of the death penalty will want to read this new biography of Warden Lewis Lawes, the legendary prison reformer who led New York's Sing Sing Prison from 1920 to 1941. Sing Sing was known as America's greatest prison, and its warden could rightly claim the title of the nation's "penologist in chief," according to author Ralph Blumenthal. Yet prior to Lawes's arrival, Sing Sing had the reputation of being ungovernable: there had been nine wardens in the previous eight years, with one lasting only 16 days. Physical conditions at the facility were unspeakably bad; political cronyism was rampant; questionable business practices had decimated the prison budget; vice was rife; and inmates appeared to run the institution. How Lawes transformed this prison—how he, in Blumenthal's words, "made Sing Sing sing"—is the focus of this fascinating book.

Author Ralph Blumenthal, a New York Times Bureau chief, brought a journalist's eye for detail to his extensive research. Drawing primarily on the voluminous archives of materials that Lawes left behind, as well as Lawes's own writings, which included six books, Blumenthal brings this extraordinarily complex character to life.

Lewis Lawes brought to Sing Sing a personal conviction that no human being was unredeemable. This belief shaped his daily dealings with the inmates, whom he treated with compassion and respect. He reached out to prisoners when they were in the depths of despair and recognized that even the most fallen of prisoners could be lifted up through demonstrated trust in their ability to handle responsibilities. For example, he allowed himself to be shaved every day by a prisoner who had once slit a man's throat, and he entrusted his infant daughter to the care of a man convicted of kidnapping. Lawes and his family lived within the walls of Sing Sing, and

his wife Katherine was beloved by "the boys," whom she treated as her own. Lawes promoted the notion that a prison was a community, and he sought to increase the morale of the prisoners at every turn.

If Lawes transformed the lives of the prisoners through his humane treatment of them, they also transformed him. When he arrived at Sing Sing, he did not question the use of the death penalty. But as he began to witness the death penalty process up close—more than 300 executions were conducted at Sing Sing during his time as warden—he came to be an outspoken critic of the death penalty, writing several books and numerous articles in opposition to execution. Lawes challenged anyone to provide evidence that the death penalty deterred crime, noting that one of the builders of the electric chair later committed a murder and was executed in the very chair he helped create. He also was disturbed by inequities in the sentencing process, pointing out that what constituted a capital crime differed greatly among jurisdictions. He found the electrocution method grisly and brutal, and was horrified by the autopsies that followed, complete with whirring saws cutting through skulls—sounds that could be heard by the inmates on death row. And most distressing to him was the public's insatiable need for vengeance above all; he found it inexplicable that inmates would be put on suicide watch so as not to deprive the state of the right to kill them. One of the book's interesting anecdotes involves the time a soon-to-be-executed inmate begged the warden for a sip of bourbon to steady his nerves (during Prohibition). The warden obliged, but when the prisoner saw how ghostly pale the warden looked, the inmate offered the drink to Lawes instead.

But Lawes did not achieve his fame from his humanitarian impulses alone. Lawes had a Forrest Gump-type ability to meet and socialize with all the larger-than-life figures of his

day. He achieved (and cultivated) a level of celebrity that is incongruous with our image of corrections professionals. Whether arranging for Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and the Yankees to play exhibition games with Sing Sing inmates, or hosting Charlie Chaplin, Harry Houdini, or journalist Nellie Bly, or arranging for the filming of a movie about the Alamo at Sing Sing and having prisoners act as soldiers (complete with weapons), Lawes was always seeking ways to make his facility transparent to the world and to provide once-in-a-lifetime experiences for his charges. These headline-making events also appealed to Lawes's vanity, as Lawes enjoyed the spotlights of Broadway and Hollywood even as he performed his warden duties.

The Sing Sing prisoners themselves also contributed to the public's fascination with Lawes and his views. It seems there were just as many celebrities among the inmate population as among the law-abiding visitors to the institution. Charles Chapin, a New York newspaper mogul convicted of murdering his wife, was a favored prisoner who figures prominently in the book. Lawes gave him free run of a prison newspaper (which was later abolished by opponents), helped him cultivate a long-distance romance, and allowed him to become the prison's resident horticulturalist. Willie "I rob banks because that's where the money is" Sutton was also one of Lawes's prisoners, and escapes while under his watch. (Amazingly, the book pays scant attention to this event.) Some of the death row prisoners were among the country's most notorious murderers—the Charles Mansons and Jeffery Dahmers of their day. Had Martha Stewart been a prisoner during Lawes's reign, no doubt she too would have managed to find herself in Sing Sing.

Throughout his lengthy career (in which he also served as President of the ACA's predecessor organization), Lawes took much criticism for his perceived "coddling" of prisoners, a charge he vehemently denied. While he was a forceful advocate for improved physical conditions at Sing Sing, believed strongly in the need for prisoners to have outlets such as sports, and took calculated risks on behalf of prisoners in whom he trusted (e.g., allowing the broken-hearted men to attend Lawes's wife's funeral), he was no pushover. Lawes was an early adherent to the view that "one is sent to prison as punishment, not for punishment," yet he believed firmly in indeterminate sentencing and the need to keep behind bars those who could not control their behavior while in prison. Many of Lawes's fiercest critics were actually members of the New York corrections establishment and government bureaucrats rather than members of the public. These ongoing battles foreshadowed the policy disputes of the modern era as well. Political rhetoric about the need to be tough on criminals is not as recent a development as one might have thought.

For all his obvious accomplishments at Sing Sing and his worldwide acclaim—including international lecture tours, movies made of his books, and headline stories about him in the newspapers—it is a bit sobering to discover that the reforms Lawes put in place were not long-lived and that his

legacy was so easily dismissed. Just a few years after Lawes's tenure as warden ended, the state Department of Corrections published a special issue of a magazine devoted to the history of Sing Sing that never mentioned this longtime, influential warden who was so beloved by the men whose lives he touched.

It is possible to read *Miracle at Sing Sing* just for the entertaining stories and the glimpses it provides into a bygone era, but readers today are apt to have some critical observations about the extent to which the notion of reform has itself been reformed over the years. For example, today's advocates of prison reform—while admiring Lawes's courageous stances on behalf of prisoners and his humanitarian instincts—might well question his practice of granting special privileges to favored inmates, as well as his frequent and long absences from the prison to promote his views. Also, while the book delves deeply into the experiences of some of the most-favored inmates (who are essentially trustees) and the lives of those awaiting execution, we get very little sense of the daily lives of the majority of Sing Sing prisoners. In particular, it would have been interesting to know how a reformer like Lawes handled those inmates with behavior problems. What was Sing Sing's historic equivalent of disciplinary segregation like? Were there ever incidents of brutality on the part of staff members? The true mark of a reformer is not how he or she handles the easy inmates, but how he or she acts when confronted with the trouble makers. We know Lawes felt devastated when certain inmates betrayed his trust, but we don't learn how these inmates were treated as a result of their misdeeds.

Correctional practitioners today may marvel at Lawes's ability to achieve celebrity status as a warden and for his willingness to buck the authority of the New York Corrections Commissioner (and survive in his job). Clearly, this was an era in which wardens had greater autonomy and the job seemed more glamorous than in today's penological world. But so too may they be forgiven for wondering whether Lawes's achievements stemmed as much from the cult of personality he engendered as from the legitimacy of his vision.

As thought-provoking as those questions can be, however, the most profound issue this book raises is a simple one. Do we share Warden Lewis Lawes's belief that the men and women who populate our nations' prisons are redeemable? And if so, how will we change or shape our correctional policies to accommodate that belief?

Copies: St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10010; ISBN 0-312-30891-4; Price: \$25.95 (320 pp.) ■

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