

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Wilson, Jacqueline Z, Sarah Hodgkinson, Justin Piché, and Kevin Walby, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017, pp. 1045, \$352.29 cloth, (9781137561343).-

As Foucault so famously began to document, one aspect of the construction of the carceral system was the transformation of punishment as public spectacle into a hidden process witnessed only by those inflicting and receiving punishment. Despite the location of punishment being moved behind closed and locked doors, people left outside still desire to view what transpires on the inside. This demand for voyeuristic participation in the punishment process has resulted in the prison experience being portrayed in each emerging mass medium, beginning with the novel and moving on to recorded music, movies and television. These manufactured glimpses of the punitive process leave the viewer at some distance—for many, instilling a desire to visit a physical site of punishment. Thus arises the somewhat odd and growing industry of prison tourism, in which decommissioned jails, prisons, concentration camps, torture chambers, and scaffolds are converted into some combination of tourist attraction and commemorative museum.

The study of prison tourism has also been a field of growth. It is generally situated within the broader study of “dark tourism” that makes sites of human misery into objects of scrutiny by visitors. The editors of *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism* have pulled together a wide-ranging overview of current research. It consists of forty-eight chapters dealing with issues ranging from ghosts in small historic Canadian jails to the commemoration of the Holocaust and the Soviet Gulags. The chapters range from fairly abstract contributions to theoretical debates to detailed descriptions of what is viewed by visitors in a particular site. This diversity in approaches helps to create a unified project as the more theoretical chapters are supported by rich and detailed empirical observation. The editors deserve acknowledgement for ensuring a generally high quality of chapters, despite the large number of contributions.

Because of the number and diversity of chapters deserving acknowledgement, this review will not focus on any single contribution. It will instead focus on four issues that emerge from the work as a whole.

The first issue raised is a perceived contradiction between entertainment and education. The contributors generally share a moral premise that it is inappropriate to turn human suffering into entertainment and pleasure. The descriptions of the sites usually contain an assessment as to the balance between education and entertainment or titillation presented to visitors. The educative function of prison museums is undermined by the economic imperative of attracting large numbers of visitors and, in some cases, even by the physical beauty of the prison's location. The implicit theme is that entertainment is more successful at attracting tourists than education, thereby leaving ethical operators with a difficult balance to maintain.

If education is deemed to be the appropriate purpose for prison museums, the question of the content and goals of the education immediately becomes problematic. Two main themes on educative content emerge.

The first is the question of who the visitor is encouraged to identify with – the jailed or the jailor. Some sites seek to evoke empathy for the plight of those confined while others seek to define them as dangerous others deserving their plight. Sites such as Holocaust and Cambodian “killing field” memorials where many were killed for the crime of existence, clearly, unequivocally, and justly seek to create empathy for the plight of the victims. At the other end, museums attached to operating penal institutions in Texas unequivocally define the inmates as dangerous others confined for the protection of society. At most sites, the question of empathetic identification is contested. The question is determined by curatorial decisions such as whether to emphasize the acts that resulted in the inmate being incarcerated or the harsh treatment they were subjected to.

The second major issue highlighted by the educative function of prison museums is that of state power in determining what to commemorate. In countries such as Canada, Australia, United States and Britain, the museums generally emerge as economically motivated tourism industry initiatives repurposing decommissioned facilities. In other countries, the projects are often much more explicitly political and reliant on direct state support. As a general rule, it seems, prison museums arise following a regime change, as the new seeks to highlight the horrors of the old. The table of contents of the book provides an interesting snapshot of past and present power relationships. There is a discussion of the museums exposing the political prisons operated from 1949 to 1990 by the rabidly anti-communist regime in Taiwan, but no mention of prison museums in China. The museums in Africa commemorate only the misdeeds of colonial and apartheid regimes. In the former Soviet Union, the extent and nature of museums commemorated the Stalinist Gulags vary directly

with the nature of post-Soviet national regimes. Although the issue is not directly addressed in the book, the absence of prison tourism sites appears to be as politically sensitive as their existence.

The final major theme emerging from the book is the durability of the concept of progress. Imposing punitive sanction on people can be arguably necessary, but it is always intrinsically nasty. The purpose of punishment is to punish. Human pain and suffering is an integral to incarceration. Despite this reality, a key narrative of most prison museums is that of progress from the “bad old days” by showcasing physical punishments that have been eliminated, contrasting “humane” and “inhumane” methods of execution, and retroactively exposing atrocious physical conditions. In the end, a jail is a jail. The contributors to the book collectively do a good job of showing how a focus on the past can obscure the evils of the present.

The scope and comprehensiveness of *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism* make it essential reading for anyone engaged in a serious study of the nature of incarceration. These same features can make it a little intimidating for the non-specialist reader, but a periodic sampling of chapters will result in insights into the large questions of the nature of the state, power, social control, and how people can treat other people.

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