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Independent Study: Australian History; Dr. Orosz
October 17, 2005

Depths of Despair: Prisoners' Coping Actions on Norfolk Island

Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* is a work of fiction, but he fills the story with many precise details of convict life. In Book Four the setting shifts to Norfolk Island, the place of last resort in the British penal system. Here Clarke illustrates how the convicts coped with the harsh and terrifying reality that they faced daily. In his details of the inmates' defiance, apathy, and the scheme of murder by lots, Clarke weaves historical accuracy into a compelling story.

Clarke shows that some prisoners, including Rufus Dawes, find courage and meaning in defiance, which earns them ever more punishment. On two occasions Dawes knocks wardens to the floor, furthering his image as an untamable and wild man. The second assault was committed because Dawes had been tricked into incriminating himself, and in his anger at the injustice Dawes lashes out.¹ This makes his situation worse, but he is unable to suffer silently without defiance. When punished for this, he refuses to work and, when tied to another working inmate in an attempt to force him to work, he instead stops the work of the other inmate. He does this in response to being taunted. By asserting his selfhood, Dawes is able to find a bit of self-respect.² A popular means of defiance on Norfolk Island is tobacco. Inmates relish smuggled tobacco in any form, and it is quite the commodity in the prison. Possessing the substance is cause for

¹ Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (Sydney: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), 445, 468.

² *Ibid.*, 469.

punishment, inflicted on Dawes twice in the course of Clarke's novel.³ In one report two convicts are cited for having a pipe.⁴ Tobacco was a desirable enough luxury that the prisoners commonly risked punishment to have it. Tobacco was also widely enjoyed by free men, so it is possible that smoking or chewing tobacco enabled imprisoned men to feel more human. Clarke makes it obvious that tobacco was a hot item on Norfolk Island, one that was used in defiance of the authorities. Historical records show that one William Riley received fifty lashes for the infraction of "getting a light to smoke."⁵ This evidence indicates that Clarke knows what prisoners did in small acts of rebellion.

Norfolk Island was a place where terrors were limited only by the imagination of authorities, and the horrors of the prison island could produce a deep apathy that Clarke brings to life with vivid truth. Apathy in the prison population was thought of as good by authorities because it meant that they had broken the prisoners. The prisoners were broken by Norfolk Island indeed, both in body and spirit. Clarke shows them as mere shells of men, shadows who have suffered so greatly that they have lost even the ability to care. Losing the ability to care about their own suffering, humiliation, and debasement enables Clarke's inmates to survive. Caring would cost the men in energy, in the pain of anguish, and in the great number of things that, if a prisoner cared, would cause him to lament his situation and those of his fellow prisoners. Reverend North observes that Rufus Dawes "has sunk to a depth of self-debasement in which he takes a delight in his degradation," a condition that was not observed in the resilient Dawes until Norfolk Island.⁶ His lack of self-concern makes it easier to survive the harsh treatment of the

³ Ibid., 445, 486.

⁴ Ibid., 460.

⁵ Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 480.

⁶ Clarke, 451.

island prison, and the apathy that Clarke shows so well is a window into the abject hopelessness characteristic of Norfolk Island. This apathy extends from not caring about what happened in life to not caring if life continues at all. Dawes and Eastwood, the other leader of the Ring, declared themselves “weary of life” publicly.⁷ Because the life led by prisoners on Norfolk Island is numbingly cruel to all inmates, he includes others in this weariness as well. When the convict sub-overseer Hankey is murdered, Dawes points out that he tried to save the man, but comments, “What’s a life more or less here,” showing that he considers not merely his own, but all convict lives on Norfolk Island so miserable that they are not really worth living.⁸ His misery is all-encompassing, but he does not deem the lives of any fellow inmate to have hope either. This apathy about the death of a fellow inmate, even one who had been kind to Dawes, enables him to deal with his fate more easily. It is common for prisoners to die, and to mourn the death of every one would be emotionally draining in an environment that had already drained the prisoners of everything. Even more than personal apathy, Clarke demonstrates with this that Norfolk Island is a place of no hope. It is a place where the only things a prisoner can expect are beatings and new innovative forms of torture, and the only thing they can look forward to is the relief that death will bring.

A stirring indicator of the despair, terror, and resignation of Norfolk Island inmates is their willingness to draw straws in an orchestrated murder that is a mutually beneficial mercy killing. Clarke’s portrayal of a murder by lots is very accurate, although there is no way to know how many, if any, of the selected killers had such moral qualms

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 452.

as demonstrated by Bland.⁹ If possible, more than one witness would be ideal, because then multiple witnesses could benefit from the respite. In Clarke's scene there are only three men, so less prisoners benefit from the killing, but three men are enough. When the plan was originally conceived, the witnesses to murder would, along with the killer, be brought to Sydney for trial. By the time Clarke's story moves to Norfolk Island, transportation to Sydney was no longer an option, as authorities brought judges to Norfolk Island beginning in 1833.¹⁰ In the beginning, a time away from Norfolk awaiting trial in Sydney, with the remote chance of escape, was also goal of the killer and witnesses. After 1833, they simply anticipated hanging. Authorities knew of the not uncommon murder scheme. It was no secret.¹¹ Thus hanging the witness, as was fated for Rufus Dawes, was not uncommon, since the witness knew of and watched the killing. However, the witnesses were considered least fortunate, as the victim was dead and the killer sure to hang.¹² When told that he would be hanged, Dawes replies, "I hope so."¹³ He would consider it a good thing to be hanged, and that would bring benefit from the scheme to all involved. As prisoners are desperate to escape the terrors of Norfolk Island, hanging for murdering or witnessing a murder would appeal to many as better than remaining in the wretched place. Mooney, as the victim in the scheme, is the fortunate one.¹⁴ He is immediately released from bondage, suffering no more and not needing to wait in order to hang. Most prisoners saw this as a better moral position as well, for they committed neither the sin of suicide nor the sin of murder. Bland, who by the time he

⁹ Ibid., 480.

¹⁰ Hughes, 469-470.

¹¹ Clarke, 481.

¹² Ibid., 482.

¹³ Ibid., 482.

¹⁴ Ibid., 479.

kills Mooney has failed his attempts at suicide twice, will in due time have the noose commit the deed for him.¹⁵ This murder by lots was a last resort, but Norfolk Island offers little else to its prisoners. These men are already serving long sentences, most for life. Death is the only certain escape, and it appeals to prisoners because life offered them nothing. Robert Hughes relates a quote from a convict who was on trial in 1834: "It was no mercy to send us to [Norfolk Island]... life is not worth living on these terms."¹⁶ Murder by lots allows multiple inmates to reap the benefits of death and cease to suffer life on such terrible terms. Clarke shows the gruesome, desperate act well.

In *For the Term of His Natural Life* Marcus Clarke depicts with accurate specifics how convicts tried to cope with the agony of their lives on Norfolk Island. His characters demonstrate small acts of open defiance, apathy about the events that take place in their lives as well as the continuation of their lives, and the final resort to the murder by lots scheme. All of these were methods by which inmates attempted to deal with the bleak and dreadful place where they were incarcerated. Rufus Dawes, Clarke's protagonist, utilizes all three, presenting the reader with a layered view of how men endeavored to withstand their suffering.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Hughes, 477.