

A Review of *The Rise and Falls of Newgate Prison: A Story of Crime and Punishment in Connecticut*, Karyl Evans Productions, (Connecticut Public Television, 2007)

Karyl Evan's *The Rise and Falls of Newgate Prison: A Story of Crime and Punishment in Connecticut* is a fifty-four minute documentary that provides a fascinating account of Connecticut's three hundred year struggle over how to deal with criminal behavior. What, for example, are the most important crimes to address, and what is the most effective, efficient, and humane way to deal with individuals who commit crime? Evans' documentary is not simply a story about an historic prison that was closed in 1827. Rather, it is a look at how the same questions and problems surrounding crime and punishment that plagued Colonial Connecticut continue to be debated in our own time.

*The Rise and Falls of Newgate Prison* is a remarkable blend of history, public administration, and criminal justice theory and policy. There are four specific elements that make it appealing to a variety of audiences. First, it discusses the transgression of crime and society from Puritan law to Yankee law to American law. Second, it spends a significant amount of time presenting the rationale and purpose behind Newgate's creation. Third, it accurately displays how Connecticut's view of punishment has continuously vacillated between punitive and rehabilitative. And fourth, it reveals that the problems which Newgate faced are virtually the same that contemporary state departments of corrections are forced to address.

The questions of why people commit crime and how to best deal with offenders have been debated for centuries. St. Thomas Aquinas was one of the first writers to offer a rationale for why people committed criminal acts, insisting that human souls were the source of reasoning and that reasoning consisted of appetites and conscience. He theorized that the Devil tempted one's appetites to the point that the conscience was ignored. Breaking the law was considered sinning because the offender listened to the Devil in breaking God's law. Thus offenders had to be punished severely (primarily through torture) so they would make the choice of not listening to the Devil. Penalties associated with this belief were physical mutilations (commonly the removal of ears), whipping, and death. Branding was also a common punishment used to publicly shame the offender as well as deter other people from committing similar offenses.

When establishing the early Connecticut Colony, the Puritans embraced these beliefs about punishment, and crime was therefore dealt with in a swift and harsh manner. Prisons were not needed and jails were used only to house offenders until trial. *The Rise and Falls of Newgate Prison* dedicates considerable time to this topic, which is particularly important in understanding not only why the need for Newgate arose, but also why Americans today accept harsh punishment as a viable way to deal with criminals. Today's rationale for using harsh punishment is not, of course, related to breaking God's law. Rather, it is based on punishing offenders for committing crimes against society and the laws that have been enacted to keep that society safe.

Evans goes on to explain why Newgate Prison was opened in 1773 and how it was the first institution in the colonies dedicated to the long-term incarceration of convicted criminals. It accurately points out that Newgate was an experiment in dealing with criminals, one that was designed to be more humane than torture and branding. The Newgate rationale was to utilize an old copper mine, turned prison, so that inmates would both work the mine and be socially isolated. The philosophy was that long term isolation would cause offenders to reflect upon their criminal ways, and work would instill discipline. The belief was that those departing Newgate would be rehabilitated and thus not return to a life of crime. Early inmates at Newgate were property offenders and political prisoners (Tories during the American Revolution).

Almost immediately, however, Newgate was plagued with problems of overcrowding, cost, and accusations that the prison served as school for crime (that is, offenders came out better criminals than when they went in). These three problems, and Evans' consistent return to them, are what connects the historical aspects of Newgate to the still looming difficulties facing modern Connecticut prisons. Other connections between the past and present dealt with the community's need for retribution, as well as problems of race and class when it came to who was incarcerated. Evans notes, for example, that though Newgate was designed to do away with physical punishment, it was unable to do so completely because Yankee society, which strived to be more humane, nevertheless still demanded retribution. In terms of Newgate's prison population, inmates, much like today, were from the lower classes (i.e., poor) and close to one-third were considered minorities (African-American, mulatto, and Native American).

Newgate closed in 1827 due to concerns that it was overcrowded, too costly, and encouraged crime. Reformers also argued that it was inhumane and incapable of properly reforming inmates. A new state penitentiary in Wethersfield took its place and was based upon a new philosophy, that offenders could be reformed through long-term incarceration. One major difference between Newgate and Wethersfield was that the old copper mines had no cells and therefore inmates were left to congregate and socialize. In Wethersfield, inmates were incarcerated in individual cells, ensuring isolation, which in turn forced social reflection. Reform in this setting was achieved by having inmates sit alone to consider their lives and how they could be positively changed. Unfortunately, this was not to be. As *The Rise and Falls of Newgate Prison* accurately explains, the new state-of-the-art Wethersfield prison was quickly overwhelmed by the influx of inmates, and thus the same problems – overcrowding, cost, and a breeding ground for criminal instruction – that had plagued Newgate continued, even into our own day. Wethersfield prison was ultimately closed in 1963 due, in part, to arguments that it was inhumane.

The final part of *The Rise and Falls of Newgate Prison* includes interviews with prominent Connecticut criminal justice officials (primarily the Commissioner of the Department of Correction, a Prison Warden, and the State Representative who is the

Chair of the Connecticut General Assembly's Judiciary Committee) to discuss current issues of crime and punishment.

In concluding the film with a specific focus on contemporary issues facing the Connecticut prison system, Evans does an excellent job of tying the historical problems faced by our Puritan forbears and the founders of Newgate Prison to the very tangible dilemma within our more modern society and its rapidly growing prison establishment. Quite simply, the difficulties have not changed in some two hundred years: prison overcrowding, high costs, concerns that prisons train inmates to be better criminals, as well as racial and social class disparities related to the prison population.

At first glance, one might look at the title of this documentary, *The Rise and Falls of Newgate Prison*, and conclude that it is simply an historical documentary about a long closed colonial prison. Yet it is anything but simple, or purely historical. It is a telling tale of why Connecticut's correctional system has been in a perpetual state of crisis since the 1770s, due in large part to society's constantly changing ideas about the role and purpose of prisons in America. This is a story that needed to be told, and Karyl Evans has produced an outstanding piece of work. What is particularly evident is the significant amount of time spent researching, combined with the excellent visuals of the prison, both old and new, as well as intriguing interviews with historians and criminal justice experts that help to create an interesting and factual documentary that portrays an accurate, yet non-politically charged, social commentary on crime and punishment in Connecticut.

Finally, this is a documentary that political leaders, criminal justice officials, students of criminal justice and public policy, as well as Connecticut citizens in general, should see so that they can all gain a better understanding of why more of their tax dollars go to supporting prisons than all of the state universities and community colleges combined. Evans' documentary left me questioning my own personal beliefs about the role of prisons and whether they should focus more on punishment or reform. It's a conversation worth having.

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