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“...they didn't just do it because it was a job”: Representing wardens in Canadian penal history museums

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ABSTRACT

Wardens figure centrally as part of the plot in popular culture representations of prisons such as in films (e.g. *The Shawshank Redemption*) and television (e.g. *Wentworth*). Yet little is known about how wardens are depicted in another form of criminal justice popular culture: the penal history museum. This paper examines representations of wardens observed as part of a study of 45 punishment memorialization sites across Canada. We analyze the symbolism used in these penal history museums, as well as the framing used to curate warden-related objects. Our analysis reveals that positive representations of prison wardens depict them as family-oriented, benevolent men of a strong character, who embody and command respect for authority. We found fewer representations that were critical of warden's work. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings for literature on cultural depictions of penality and justice.

1. Introduction

Biographical accounts of wardens (Wiebe, 2000; Pitofsky, 2000; Meskell, 1999), as well as studies examining their attitudes toward and role in managing prisoners (Tewksbury and Mustaine, 2008; Hensley and Tewksbury, 2005) have been the primary focus of scholarly inquiry. Few researchers have assessed how wardens are represented in popular culture (e.g. Fiddler, 2007) or in museums. Analyzing the work and representations of wardens is important, as both convey the objectives and values underpinning punishment in any given national and economic context (Cullen et al., 1993).

Penal history museums exist in all parts of the world (Wilson et al., 2017) and engage in punishment memorialization practices that depict the past realities of incarceration. By performing “the carceral past in the present” (Turner and Peters, 2015: 75), penal heritage museums – whether operated by heritage groups, companies or state entities (Walby and Piché, 2015) – claim to provide visitors access to authentic spaces, relics and narratives associated with penality. These “dark tourism” destinations where death is depicted (Lennon and Foley, 2000; Dalton, 2015) tend to reify the necessity of incarceration by conveying the idea that prisoners are a different breed of human (Wilson, 2008). We analyze the displays created in Canadian penal heritage sites and the frames used to curate warden-related objects. By analyzing the framing of representations of wardens, their power and authority as depicted in Canadian confinement museums, we examine how museums tend to legitimate dominant social practices and present versions of history to museum-goers that are largely devoid of counter-narratives (Ott et al., 2011) that could foster the contemplation of alternatives to incarceration. This encouragement of social distance between museum visitors and the criminalized, which Brown (2009) refers to as a process of “penal spectatorship”, occurs in part through positive depictions of wardens that allow patrons to

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relate to their life and work while encountering dehumanizing portrayals of the incarcerated.

First, we explore relevant literature on representations of authority and state power, and how this work informs our research methods in the study of depictions of wardens in penitentiary, prison, jail and lock-up museums across Canada. Building on [Modlin's \(2008\)](#) finding that most plantation museums in the United States depict slave owners as altruistic, we then analyze the dominant frames used to curate the objects and symbolism in these heritage sites, with focus on the character of wardens, their status, and their work. We found that wardens tend to be portrayed in a positive light, fostering solidarity between these penal agents and penal spectators (i.e. the tourists) by suggesting wardens are family-oriented, benevolent men of a strong character, who embody and command respect for authority. Yet few museum representations of wardens were critical of their work. We also examine representations of wardens' wives and prisoners, comparing these to warden depictions. In the discussion and conclusion, we assess what these patterns mean for literature on representations of penality.

2. Studying representations in penal history museums

Framing is a key aspect of representation, which communicates specific images, characters and plots relating to criminal justice to an audience ([Robson, 2002](#); [Hall, 1997](#); [Greenfield and Osborn, 1995](#)). As [Kuypers and Cooper \(2005: 2\)](#) claim, framing "elevates the salience of some facts over others". Framing serves to "punctuate, elaborate" ([Creed et al., 2002: 37](#)) and define an issue. While meaning is produced in part through written language, images and sounds may be used to enhance intended meanings ([Hayward, 2010](#); [Mason, 2000](#)). Films or other symbolic productions use representation to project specific images, characters and plots of 'criminal justice'. In the museum context, the work of framing involves some people (e.g. curators) deciding what information to include (e.g. in a museum display) and what to exclude. Persons engaged in framing borrow from cultural stocks of knowledge ([Van Gorp, 2007](#)), which are readily apparent, intelligible ideas that users of the framed information can comprehend. These cultural stocks of knowledge contain statements and assumptions about what has happened or what should happen, in our case in relation to 'criminal justice'.

[Ashley \(2005\)](#) argues that knowledge communicated by museums is trusted. Museums operate as sites that authorize some forms of knowledge. Events and objects are given "mythic signification when... depicted in a museum" ([Ashley, 2005: 6](#)). Ashley explores how museums depict aspects of the Canadian state in ways that promote national myths of belonging and citizenship. Examining representations of wardens in penal history museums not only requires an understanding of museums as sites of authority, but requires an assessment of representations of the power of wardens. For instance, [Modlin \(2008\)](#) assesses the myths that plantation museums perpetuate about slavery, finding that these sites perpetuate the idea that slave owners were benevolent. [Kennedy \(2017\)](#) examines how forms of forgetting and selective remembering at prison and plantation museums eschew racialized state violence and normalize the brutality of prison staff. [Ott et al. \(2011\)](#) demonstrate how a firearms museum conveys information about guns without mentioning the ways firearms are implicated in state violence. [Immergut and Kosut \(2014\)](#) have also studied the semiotic dimensions of representations of authority. Related literature on memorialization ([Davidson, 2016](#)) shows how monuments can naturalize forms of state power. Contributing to literature on museums as authorities and the memorialization of state power, we explore the framing of representations of wardens in penal heritage museums and the implications for how imprisonment, punishment, and authority are depicted.

We have examined a total of 45 Canadian penal history museums located in defunct small county gaols and lock-ups, as well as decommissioned jails and prisons that are larger in size. Each locale in our sample was at one time part of an active carceral site. Field visits were conducted at all locations. The sites included in this analysis (n = 12) are the Kings County Museum in Kentville, Nova Scotia, the York County Jail/Science East in Fredericton, New Brunswick, the Prison des Patriotes in Montreal, the Old Prison in Trois Rivières, and the Morin Centre in Quebec City in Quebec, the Middlesex County Jail in London, the Oxford County Jail Museum in Woodstock, the Olde Gaol Museum in Lindsay, the Huron County Museums and Historic Gaol in Goderich, and the Federal Penitentiary Museum in Ontario, as well as the Rotary Museum of Police and Corrections in Prince Albert and the Duck Lake Museum in Duck Lake, Saskatchewan. These are the sites in our sample where we encountered the most diverse representations of wardens.

Data collection was team-based. In conjunction with interviews of curators and tour guides we explored the sites and participated in tours if they were offered. We focused on site architecture and spatial organization shaping visitor movement, the objects, displays and texts that patrons encounter, as well as the performances of tour guides, curators and other museum staff members. These observations were then entered into a mixed-coding grid where prominent museum themes were documented and an open-grid where other reflections (e.g. theoretical, methodological and substantive) were noted. Site histories, marketing practices, the visitor experience, and museum staff views of prisoners, prison staff, incarceration, punishment, and the role of museums were also addressed during interviews. We also made field notes concerning silences in penal heritage discourse, and took photographs, which we report on elsewhere ([Walby and Piché, 2015](#)).

Data analysis was a team-based process too, in a way modeled on constructionist approaches to grounded theory ([Apramian et al., 2017](#)). We engaged in an initial round of open-ended coding. Each researcher reviewed all 45 sets of data, making note of observations. We isolated warden-related data from the overall dataset. We use the term warden despite [Crawley's \(2004: 180\)](#) finding that prison and jail staff do not think fondly of this word. We do so because the term was used prominently in the museums we examined. Other terms such as jailer, gaoler and governor were used in the 19th century, but fell out of use early in the 20th century. Materials had to mention wardens to be included. We separated the data into 229 different vignettes. We formed classifications broad enough to represent a range of data, but narrow enough to be mutually exclusive. We then grouped data together under thematic descriptions of the core categories, including the character of wardens, their status, and the nature of their work. Finally, identified vignettes that were representative of each sub-category.

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