Coxsackie
Spillane, Joseph F.

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Coxsackie: The Life and Death of Prison Reform.

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In February 2011, with the research for this book complete and well into its writing, I was surprised to find the reformatory at the heart of this book (the New York State Vocational Institution, more commonly known as Coxsackie) thrust unexpectedly into the news. Mike Stobbe, medical writer for the Associated Press, published a lengthy story reviewing the history of medical experimentation on prisoners in the United States. Stobbe uncovered some shocking examples for his article, including an experiment at Coxsackie in which researchers made young male prisoners swallow unfiltered stool suspension as a means of studying the transmission of a stomach illness. To employ something like the prisoners’ own vernacular, they had been made to “eat shit” by institutional authorities. Of the many failings of Coxsackie and the reformatory system, it was one I hadn’t come across before, but Stobbe had his facts right. In 1947, the results of the experimentation, conducted by doctors from the New York State Department of Health studying the transmission of epidemic gastroenteritis, were published in the *Journal of Experimental Medicine*. The fecal matter came from ill patients at Marcy State Hospital—one of New York’s massive state mental hospitals—and was swallowed by young volunteers with no knowledge of what was being done to them. It made most of the young men ill, producing nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, and it sickened readers all over again in 2011.1

Medical experimentation at Coxsackie, as elsewhere, is a troubling and significant aspect of the twentieth-century prison’s history. But it is just one small part in a larger history of wrongs done, in the name of the state, at reformatories like Coxsackie. Fewer than a dozen prisoner-volunteers were made to swallow the fecal filtrates—but in the first two decades after Coxsackie opened in 1935, it was home to more than ten thousand young men, with several times that number being confined in New York’s other reformatories for young male felony...
offenders. Although their stories have never been the stuff of national media attention, they deserve to be told and, in the end, are no less shocking.

This writing of this book began more than a decade ago, with my first review of Coxsackie prisoner case files held at the New York State Archives. Other projects undertaken during the intervening years delayed the completion of this study, but time has not diminished my recollection of the intense human drama revealed in every one of those files. Week after week, the inmate photographs that began every file (always attached to the inside cover) reminded me that the case records captured some small part of real lives, as full of youthful promise as they were riddled with deep and abiding conflict. Every case file offered unexpected connections to the past. When a discipline report cited an inmate for using a pack of cigarettes to prevent a cell from locking, I turned the page and found a neatly folded Camel cigarette pack—untouched since it had been placed there decades earlier. My time with the case files remains the most personally challenging research I have undertaken, and I made a commitment to document the experience of the reformatory prisoners as completely as I could. If they are still living, the oldest of the prisoners covered by my case file sample would now be over 90 years of age, while the youngest would be just past 70. Very few graduates of Coxsackie ever told their stories in a public way. Those who remained entangled in the criminal justice system moved onward and upward into the massive prisons for adult offenders, while those who avoided going back into the system undoubtedly wished to put that chapter of their lives well behind them. Should any of them read this account, I hope that they will recognize what it portrays, even as it inevitably falls short of the richness of their own personal experiences.

The completion of this work owes a great deal to inspiration and encouragement from a wonderful network of colleagues. I first encountered Coxsackie twenty years ago, while exploring the history of vocational education in American corrections with Steven Schlossman, then my doctoral adviser, now friend and valued colleague. My collaborators on other projects have, each in their own way, helped me refine my thinking about aspects of this book: John Burnham, Nancy Campbell, Trysh Travis, and David Wolcott are all innovative historians whose work has encouraged me to keep this project evolving. My “drug history” network, especially Caroline Acker, David Courtwright, and Eric Schneider, helped me shape my thinking about Coxsackie’s engagement with heroin-using young men. I have also been fortunate to discuss aspects of this project in a variety of settings, including the Incarceration Nation conference held at the University of Florida in 2010; the Social Science History Association annual meet-
ing in 2011; the 2012 LSE IDEAS Conference on Governing the Global Drug Wars; as well as the biennial conferences of the Alcohol and Drugs History Society in 2011 and 2013. Over the course of the final years of this project, I have been energized by my engagement with many outstanding entrants into the field of prisons, punishment, and social policy, including Marsha E. Barrett, Michael J. Durfee, Michael Fortner, Marie Gottschalk, Volker Janssen, Jessica Neptune, Sam Roberts, and Heather Ann Thompson.

The staff of numerous archives and libraries helped facilitate the research for this project; without their professionalism and energy, I could not have made the progress I did. Working at the New York State Library and Archives was a pleasure, and I am particularly grateful to Jim Folts for his assistance at every stage of my research there. The M. E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, University at Albany, was a wonderfully congenial setting for research, and I am particularly indebted to Supervisory Archivist Jodi Boyle, whose willingness to dig through files in storage helped me uncover some critical sources. The outstanding special collections staffers at the Newton Gresham Library at Sam Houston State University are the proud keepers of some remarkable manuscript collections, and I hope that these will continue to attract scholarly attention. Thanks as well to the staff of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library as well as to David Connelly for sharing some of the Osborne-MacCormick correspondence from the Osborne Family Papers at Syracuse University.

Critical financial support for this research came from the Larry J. Hackman Research Residency Program of the New York State Archives; the small grants program of the Spencer Foundation; and the Humanities Scholarship Enhancement Fund of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Florida. I am also deeply appreciative of the support I have received from Johns Hopkins University Press, and particularly the ever-patient Bob Brugger. I am glad to have finally had the chance to show him what this prison project was all about.

My academic home for nearly twenty years has been the University of Florida’s Department of History. Among many wonderful colleagues, I am fortunate to work with two of the finest historians of crime, law, and justice, Jeff Adler and Elizabeth Dale. Among others, Sean Adams, Jessica Harland-Jacobs, Matt Gallman, Howard Louthan, and Jeff Needell helped make my time as department chair just easy enough for me to keep moving forward with this book; my successor, Ida Altman, has been an encouraging and supportive chair. The late Robert Zieger encouraged my progress, and his untimely passing before this book’s publication is a source of great sadness for me. Prisons and imprisonment
have recently become a topic of much interest for historians, but Bob was among the few I knew a decade ago who found the subject compelling. Just as this book was completed, another valued University of Florida colleague, Alan Petigny, passed away suddenly. I am grateful for our many productive conversations about modern American politics and punishment. The Center for Studies in Criminology and Law was also an academic home for me for many years at the University of Florida, and I am thankful for the wonderfully supportive colleagues from that program, especially Jodi Lane, Lonn Lanza-Kaduce, Chuck Frazier, and Ron Akers (who was the first to push me toward pursuing this as a book project). Criminology and history graduate students have given me many insights over the years, in and out of the seminar setting. Among my graduate research assistants, the first and most important was Julian Chambliss, who shared with me the experience of working through the case files in Albany. My doctoral students, including Julie Baldwin, Erin Conlin, Hayden Griffin, and Bryan Miller, have done a magnificent job of charting their own scholarly paths and, in so doing, reminded me to keep following my own.

Above all, my family has provided the support necessary to sustain this project through to completion. Barbara and George Stackleth remain outstanding consumers of history and always help me imagine my reading audience. Tara, Emma, and Howard Chilton were patient and kind hosts in New York. My parents, Joseph and Judy Spillane, were the first people to teach me how to value the past and appreciate it in the present—they both continue to be historians of the first order. My daughters, Maggie and Lily, have grown up around this project. They have shared time with my research trips and with my writing and have grown into thoughtful and remarkable young women despite my scholarly distractions. Finally, my wife, Jennifer, remains the most important influence on my work. I know of no one more committed to speaking truth and to hearing the voices of the unheard; this work tries to live up to that standard and, even where it falls short, is much the better for it.
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