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Book Review: Mitchel P. Roth, *Fire in the Big House: America's Deadliest Prison Disaster*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press. 2019. ISBN: 978-082142383-7 (Hardcover). 278 Pages. $29.95.

Reviewed by Robert M. Worley[1] and Vidisha Barua Worley[2]

In his book, *Fire in the Big House*, criminal justice historian, Mitchel P. Roth provides readers with an in-depth analysis of America's deadliest penal disaster. The book specifically examines a horrific fire which occurred at the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus, Ohio on April 21, 1930—Easter Monday. Even though 320 prisoners perished in this devastating event (plus two more inmates who died later of gunshots

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indirectly related to the fire), the author notes that there has never been a scholarly book devoted to this topic. Although this event caused only $11,000 in damage to the Columbus institution, Roth contends that it still ranks as America's third-worst fire (excluding 9/11). The author points out, this prison fire has a much higher body count, than say, the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire (where 146 people perished); however, history has all but forgotten about this horrific tragedy. This is most likely due to the fact that the victims of the Ohio State Penitentiary Fire were convicted felons as opposed to innocent immigrant women working in a sweatshop with poor and illegal working conditions. Given the fact that the victims of the Ohio State Penitentiary Fire were killers, rapists, and generally "society's castoffs," it is understandable that history has largely forgotten these victims in spite of the fact that there was such as high body count (3). Interestingly, the fire occurred when there was a mass incarceration movement (much like there is today) which was marked by long prison sentences, the elimination of good-conduct time, and the granting of fewer paroles.

In the opening pages of the book, the author describes the very initial stages of the fire giving the reader a feeling of actually being at this horrific event. A convict prankster was one of the first people to let guards know that there was a fire; however, since he was known to play jokes, his comments were disregarded by correctional officers. Later when smoke was detected by prison staff, this was mistakenly attributed to the belief that convicts were burning their mattresses to smoke out bedbugs, which was a fairly common practice. The fire also occurred between shifts, which more than likely contributed to the chaos and resulted in a delayed response. On top of this, the warden consistently refused to institute safety drills and focused instead on preventing escapes. He believed in keeping inmates in their cells, rather than preparing for emergencies, such as, large fires. On top of this, the outdated Ohio State Penitentiary, which had a wooden roof that had not been replaced in fifty years, was also regarded as a "firetrap." The warden also refused to use modern locking mechanisms (referred to as the *snap lock*) which would have undoubtedly saved lives. After this devastating event, an official inquiry would reveal that there was no apparatus for firefighting in the cell buildings. Sadly, as a result of bad timing and poor prison management, several inmates slit their own throats rather than being burned alive, and prisoners begged their captors to shoot them (even though guards were not permitted to carry firearms within the facility).

When guards began responding to the fire, the author writes that some convicts were given ropes, axes, hammers, as well as other equipment, to assist in the rescue efforts. The divide between inmates and guards temporarily subsided. In an effort to help their fellow prisoners, some inmates even grabbed hoses away from some of the city firefighters they thought were not responding quickly enough—though they were eventually persuaded to let the firemen do their work. Still, as the author illustrates, the firefighters were disorganized. For example, it took fifteen minutes after their arrival for the fire officials to ascend to the top range of cells where most of the inmates would die from smoke inhalation. Roth writes that there were up to 140 firemen on the scene at the height of the fire with twenty-three different streams of water being pumped into the burning penitentiary. Each pumper had about a one-thousand gallon capacity, according to Roth.

Even though the warden had not taken adequate steps to prepare for the fire, Roth still points to some examples where prison officials helped to lessen the impact of this devastating event. For instance, the warden's daughter took charge and was on the phone to make sure that every available doctor and nurse, as well as National Guard members and at least 600 soldiers from miles away came to the scene of the fire in Columbus, Ohio. She incidentally carried a six-shooter pistol on her person while working in her father's office. Besides manning the phones, she assisted her father in placing guards and medical staff in key areas throughout the prison. The prison chaplain, a priest, was also a pivotal figure in this event. He noted that eighty-five inmates who were Catholic would all receive Communion on Easter—the day before the fire. The day of the fire, he prayed with some of the critically injured inmates who he said "reached up their hands, and died as [he] imparted absolution" (28).

One interesting aspect of the Ohio Penitentiary fire is that it was perhaps the first major American disaster to be covered "instantaneously by sound motion picture crews, radio stations, and newspaper reporters, the three major arms of the mainstream media" (35). For this reason, Roth's book contributes not only to the penological literature but also to film and media studies. As he notes, airplanes rushed photographs and new articles to their home office within the first few hours of this disaster as it unfolded. Only twenty-one hours after the fire began, movie goers in New York City saw news reels of this event at theatres approximately 600 miles away. The year of the fire, 1930, is also when the *sound newsreel* "had come into its own...as a *talking newspaper*" (35, italics added). On the night of the fire, an inmate also chronicled the events on

WAIU, the prison radio station. This was later viewed by industry officials as "one of the epoch events in radio broadcasting," and the CBS president gave this prisoner $500 (roughly $7,000 in today's dollars) as a reward for his efforts. At times, the inmate broadcaster was only 30 feet from the blaze and could literally feel the flames as he told his listeners about the harrowing damage.

Prior to World War II, very little was known about treating burn victims, and as the author contends, opiates were the go-to-drugs of choice. Most of the victims died from carbon monoxide poisoning. Enormous collaborative efforts were taken to dispose of more than 300 dead inmate bodies. Family members of inmate victims gathered around the prison gates to claim their loved ones' bodies. One hundred embalmers and assistants, including an All-American Notre Dame football player, volunteered to help dispose of the inmates' bodies in a humane manner. Some of the bodies were so badly burnt that no forensic tools could be used to identify their corpses, and a process of elimination had to be used. Roth notes that the prison's horticulture building was turned into a makeshift mortuary. Students of the Pi Kappa Alpha Fraternity at Ohio State University helped provide makeshift security for this building.

While criminologists and legal scholars, such as Michelle Alexander (2012) and Todd Clear (2009) have written extensively about the current mass incarceration movement, *Fire in the Big House* points out that a similar anti-inmate sentiment permeated throughout the U.S. during the 1920s and 1930s. As the author contends, "The country's prison population more than doubled, before quadrupling to 120,000 by 1930 (the year of the fire), when according to one noted penologist, there were as many Americans behind bars as in the military" (87). Roth correctly attributes this high incarceration rate to the Great Depression, and more importantly to Prohibition—which undoubtedly resulted in a higher crime rate, and thus, a higher incarceration rate. Throughout this book, Roth examines issues, which are pertinent not only to prisons and public policy but also to media and culture studies. He suggests, for example, that lurid crime reporting may have led the public to demand punitive action toward criminal defendants and inmates. Ohio's Norwood Act (which was passed in 1921) gave judges the leeway to set the minimum sentence only one day less than the maximum sentence. At the same time, pardons and paroles were drastically reduced which contributed to overcrowded prisons. One year after the Ohio prison fire, the Norwood Act was repealed.

It is noteworthy that between the early 1920s and 1930, Ohio's prison population increased 120% from 3,837 to 8,613 inmates. The Ohio Penitentiary in Columbus (where the fire occurred) was among the largest penal facilities in the U.S. housing more than 4,300 prisoners. One of the joys of reading this book is that the author always provides facts and figures that satisfy the reader's curiosity—especially with regard to money (and he always adjusts for inflation). For example, Roth writes that the unit warden of the Ohio Penitentiary earned approximately $4,700 a year, which he notes is about $63,000 in today's dollars. He also writes that the warden had free housing as well as an almost "unlimited opportunity to use inmate labor for personal assignments" (100). The author observes that during the time of the Ohio Prison Fire, the average income of the American family was around $2,335 (which is roughly $35,109 today). A brand new Pontiac Big Six Car could also be purchased for $745 (around $11,202). At the time of the fire, the average prison guard in Ohio only earned between $535 and $1,000 per year. This comes as no great surprise given that correctional officers continue to receive paltry wages (Worley and Worley, 2016). Much like today, there was a high attrition rate among correctional staff members with almost one-third of the guard workforce resigning after a year or two.

Throughout this book, the author delves into certain aspects of the prison culture that contributed to the fire. When the fire occurred, one officer's blind adherence to bureaucratic rituals caused him to refuse to turn over the keys to his fellow officers for more than five minutes—until he was literally wrestled to the ground. One week after this devastating event, there was pure pandemonium with thousands of prisoners running loose throughout the yards. Perhaps not surprisingly, newspaper reporters embellished the confrontation between guards and inmates; and this, understandably caused anxiety among those who lived in close proximity to the prison. As Roth observes, local residents were fearful that desperate prisoners with nothing to lose would scale the walls and break into their homes. Nearly 150 city policemen, as well as National Guardsmen, helped to quell the inmates from revolting. Machine guns were mounted on the walls of the prison and inmate agitators were identified and placed in solitary confinement. This aspect of the book reminded us a bit of the response to the Attica prison uprising that occurred in New York more than forty years later (though it fortunately had a much happier ending than Attica).

While the inmates who revolted in Columbus, Ohio were eventually subdued by prison administrators with a "combination of coaxing and

quantities of coffee," two inmates were killed and another was seriously wounded when a guardsman accidentally fired his machinegun while working on it (165). This, again, speaks volumes about the level of disorganization and chaos surrounding the management of this event. Amazingly, only one inmate escaped in the tumultuous aftermath of the fire. The inmate disguised himself as a doctor and walked out of the prison in plain sight. After the inmate was apprehended two weeks later, the warden "laughed it off" saying that the inmate escapee was a *good convict*. While the prison administration tried to restrict the flow of information to inmates (for example, by refusing to allow convicts to have newspapers), it is most interesting that they continued to allow WAIU, the inmate radio station, to broadcast behind the prison walls. This, again, is one of the many ways in which this book examines issues related to media studies. Even though Roth is a historical criminologist, we think he could easily publish an academic paper that would be of interest to scholars in the fine arts.

Toward the end of the book, Roth discusses the inquiry after the fire where city officials testified that all of the prisoners who lost their lives in this event could have been spared had it not been for a lax and negligent prison administration. The author also examines the causes of the fire and discusses how there were strong indications early on that it was caused deliberately by an incendiary device. He notes that even though arson investigation was still in its early stages of development in the 1930s, and it was therefore, difficult to determine definitively whether this tragedy could be traced to the actions of a pyromaniac, officials nevertheless caught a break during the investigation. The true cause of the fire came to light on August 19, 1930, when an inmate, James Raymond, revealed to Warden Thomas and Deputy Fire Marshal Clear that he and his fellow conspirators, Hugh Gibbons and Clinton Grate, started the fire using candles to escape from prison. Although he requested protective confinement during the investigation, Raymond killed himself in the hole on August 21, 1930.

In order to get confessions from the remaining two conspirators, the warden and the fire marshal came up with a brilliant plan, which demonstrates the psychology of the inmates and the effect the prison environment had on them. They put Gibbons and Grate in solitary confinement. Gibbons, known to have a weaker mind than Grate was placed in the same cell where Raymond took his life, with everything in the room left the way Raymond had improvised to commit suicide. Grate was placed in the cell directly above Gibbons. It was hoped that Grate would coax Gibbons to commit suicide. That way, with Gibbons gone,

Grate would have nobody to identify him as a conspirator. A guard was placed right next to Grate's cell to abort any kind of suicide attempt. The plan worked like a miracle. Grate did persuade Gibbons to commit suicide. He would have succeeded on his third attempt if the guard had not intervened.

In March 1931, another inmate, Jimmy Maloney, came forward and confessed to prison officials that he had given two of the candles stolen from the Catholic chapel and used in the fire to Grate and Gibbons for a soldering project. Maloney was now afraid because Grate had made several attempts to kill him. While Grate and Gibbons admitted to setting the fire to cover up an escape, they added that they objected to the mass incarceration movement, revealed by the building of new cells. As it states in the book, "All they wanted to do…was prevent the construction of L block and the addition of forty-eight new solitary confinement cells" (187). Finally, on April 1, 1931, after the grand jury concluded its investigation, Grate and Gibbons were charged with first degree murder and if convicted would be given the death penalty. Even though the inmates said they preferred death to serving a life sentence, both inmates were sentences to life in prison. Grate would later hang in his cell and Gibbon died decades later in 1973 as a "broken and haunted old man" (187).

Even though the Ohio prison fire meant death for 322 inmates, Roth insinuates that it may have indirectly resulted in positive criminal justice reforms (though some historians may argue that these may have happened anyway). Nevertheless, within a year after the fire, the Ohio state legislature passed a series of laws that attempted to alleviate rampant overcrowding and lengthy prison sentences. One piece of legislation in particular doubled the state parole board from two to four members and gave the board authority to increase the number of inmates released from correctional facilities. Additionally, indeterminate sentencing was reinstituted which effectively prevented judges from fixing minimum sentences. As a result of new legislation (which, again, was passed almost immediately after the fire), inmates were awarded *good time*, and many would be eligible to finish their sentence in a year or less. Interestingly, legislators who supported these laws stated that these were passed due to the "alarming increase in the number of inmates and consequent unrest in practically every penal institution in the state" (194).

It is evident from reading this book that during the late 1920s and well into the 1930s, there was a mass incarceration movement much like there is today (Alexander, 2012; Clear, 2009; Worley and Worley, 2016). Roth

notes, however, that by 1940, conditions at the Ohio Penitentiary began to dramatically improve. For example, the facility hired three-full time physicians, as well as a psychiatrist, and had six *dental chairs*—used by both civilian and inmate dentists and technicians. An inmate classification board was also assembled in order to provide inmates with tools, such as job training, in their quest toward rehabilitation. A new prison school system with a curriculum approved by the State Department of Education also allowed inmates to reduce their sentences by getting their GEDs. These significant advances marked the beginning of new movement in penology—which is often referred to as the *treatment era* in the history of U.S. prisons.

According to Roth, in 1972, the Ohio Penitentiary ceased to function as a maximum security prison and for the next twelve years was primarily used as prisoner hospital and reception center. The facility would officially close its doors in 1984, and fourteen years later, all of the penitentiary buildings were demolished and removed. As the author notes, some of the local residents were able to bring home enough bricks from the fallen institution to build fireplaces and patios. Today, the site of the prison is a stadium parking lot for the National Arena, home of the Columbus Blue Jackets hockey team. Roth notes that there are no memorials or plaques to remind visitors about what happened on Easter Monday in 1930.

Fire in the Big House is worth reading for many reasons. First, we believe it provides invaluable insights into the inner workings of prison facilities which, therefore, makes our essay germane to this special issue related to institutional climate and correctional culture. Throughout the pages of this book, the reader gets a sense of the inmate-guard divide which has been written about extensively by many—including us (see Worley, Worley, and Lambert). At, the same time, however, we seem that there is, at times (and perhaps especially so during large scale emergencies), an uneasy and unspoken alliance between prisoners and their captors. For this reason, we strongly encourage scholars who are interested in correctional culture, as well as the history of incarceration, to buy a copy of *Fire in the Big House*. It is a pleasure to read, and there are plenty of interesting twists and surprises along the way. We highly recommend this book, and given that the setting take place in Columbus, Ohio, it is likely to be of particular interest to members of the Midwestern Criminal Justice Association.

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