

2007

## Paved with Good Intentions...Sometimes

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### Recommended Citation

Woodley, Randy, "Paved with Good Intentions...Sometimes" (2007). *Faculty Publications - Portland Seminary*. 78.  
<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes/78>

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*The Colony: The Harrowing True Story of the Exiles of Molokai*

It takes an incredible amount of research and a great editing process to make a non-fiction book like this one, read like a novel. In this feat, John Tayman has surpassed any expectations. His research concerning the “longest and deadliest instance of medical segregation in American history” is admirable.

In hindsight, there is much more known about leprosy (Hanson’s disease) now than what was known during most of the 106 active years of the Molokai Leper Colony. For example, most forms of leprosy are not usually as contagious as people once thought and in order to contract it, most often people must contain a genetic disposition towards the disease. Many of those banished never actually even had leprosy but the level of concern was high enough to cause undue diagnosis to occur often. It was however, a plan that was executed according to the best medical opinion of the day.

What many of us did not know was that the disease was declared illegal in Hawaii and diseased people were actually hunted down as criminals and forced into a life sentence in exile on a long, and nearly uninhabitable peninsula on the island of Molokai. This patient/prison camp became what visiting authors, such as Robert Louis Stevenson called “a prison fortified by nature” with the highest sea cliffs in the world, and Jack London referred to as “the pit of Hell” and “the most cursed place on earth.” Indeed, during the first five years the Molokai Leper Colony had a mortality rate of almost 50 percent. Rumors about the Colony that spread throughout the Islands were so egregious that sometimes potential prisoners would fight to the death to stay an exile. Such was the case of Koolau and his wife and child as told in the first chapter of the book.

Tayman creates for us a reasonable understanding of all parties concerned without placing undue blame. Where there was negligence—he points it out with documentation. He does not fall prey to making two dimensional heroes and heroines. This is not to say that heroic people do not exist in the story, not the least of whom is a young Belgian priest who volunteered in his sick brother’s stead to serve as a missionary to Hawaii. Enter Father Damien, the Catholic priest who works selflessly to allow Molokai residents once again to feel the sense of dignity afforded most human beings in the

midst of what often amounted to lawless anarchy. Father Damien observed the distance created via the precautionary measures, by staff and other workers to avoid contracting the disease. Within just a few days of his arrival Father Damien throws off his mask and gloves in order to relate to the people as one of them. He eventually contracted the disease and died—with no regrets. His own words tell his story, “I am a leper...blessed be the Good God!”

Perhaps the greatest gift in *The Colony* is the stories (untold before now) of the everyday lives of the over 8,000 victims in this cruel confinement. The residents of Molokai who were able to survive often ghastly and inhumane conditions, deserve admiration and recognition due to Tayman’s uncovering another ugly chapter in American history. In later years, the conditions at the Colony ultimately improved. The constant bad publicity eventually had a negative effect on tourism and, medical conditions continually improved in the advancement of treatments for the disease.

Today, there are still a number of residents at the Molokai Colony who are the survivors of what is now considered a very flawed experiment. In 2004 the average age of the residents was 76, with many of them having spent over forty years in exile. Their options are few. Their memories are obviously painful but one can only hope that some new expectation has emerged in them, knowing that their story is now being brought to light.

*By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans*

Executive Order 9066 (signed February 19, 1942) was formally revoked in 1976 by President Gerald Ford. That order, given by President Franklin Roosevelt, under pressure from a group of U.S. Army officers who feared espionage and imminent attack from the Japanese on the West coast, allowed the Army to create a series of prison camps that would forcibly incarcerate thousands of Japanese Americans, and remove over 110,000 from their homes for over three years — especially those in the Western states.

Roosevelt died in 1945 and by December of that year, all the “internment camps” were closed. In 1980 Congress authorized the *Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* (CWRIC) to recommend an action, due to pressure from Japanese Americans. Among the eventual results would be monetary reparations and an immediate strong statement that read as follows:

Executive order 9066 was not justified by military necessity, and the decisions that followed from it—exclusion, detention, the ending of detention and the ending of exclusion were not founded upon military considerations. The broad historical causes that shaped these decisions were race prejudice, war hysteria, and a

failure of political leadership (251).

What Greg Robinson does for us in this book is to help us understand the complexities of such a defective move. This is not so much a book about the conditions of prisoners during confinement but rather it is about the circumstances in our democracy that can lead to such a breach in the democratic idea. Robinson especially focuses on FDR's role in the process. Roosevelt's tag as a humanitarian is subtly stripped from him as the weaker, more pressured President emerges under Robinson's investigations. Robinson's findings eventually lead the reader to concur with the CWRIC report that there was "a failure of political leadership."

The author gives us a good view of the historic events surrounding the internment and a great analysis of how such a travesty could occur. For example, while Roosevelt deplored open prejudice, he favored immigration for "the right kind of European blood." He was opposed to mixed-marriages and against promotion of Japanese land rights because he felt this would make the conditions for intermarriage between Japanese and Whites more favorable. Roosevelt believed in disbursement of immigrants and assimilation into the dominant (read White) American society. All this is documented through Robinson's historic investigation. Additionally, he shows that other viable options to internment were presented to the President but were given little consideration. Favoring "mass evacuation" as a solution, Roosevelt's position flew contrary to the views of the Attorney General and even FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who "contended that mass evacuation was unnecessary."

Anti-Japanese sentiment, especially on the West coast, was replete after Pearl Harbor. This was the reality of the political climate in which FDR had to work and to which he would eventually succumb. The climate of open, and at the same time ubiquitous prejudice, also produced opportunities for greed that were waiting to seize the Japanese market share in agriculture, land holdings and other areas of the West. Western White farmers organized groups such as the White American Nurserymen of Los Angeles, the Grower Shipper Vegetable Association and Western Growers Protective Association which sought to force the Japanese out of the market and obtain their lands. Roosevelt did little to reverse such systemic racism.

Robinson's book is a challenge for us today as we seek a just and democratic society. It is also a reminder that tyranny can come swiftly with just the stroke of a pen, and from leaders and governments whom one would not immediately dismiss as tyrannical. In the case of Robinson's telling of the Japanese internment, all the right players are present to make a classic Shakespearian play; the king, the generals, the angry citizens and

the victims, unfortunately made a real story of another American tragedy.

*A View*

The unfortunate truth is that these two stories are all too familiar to us as Americans and to us as human beings. As a Cherokee Indian, I know well the story of the “Trail of Tears.” What most Americans don’t realize is that there were hundreds of “trail of tears” stories among our Indian people. Let us not forget that the Indian reservation system, which continues to keep Native Americans marginalized, was innovated upon by a Jeffersonian idea and then advanced by Christian missionaries.

Another example of unnecessary racial segregation was the forced abduction and systematic cultural destruction of Native Americans into Government-sponsored and church-endorsed residential schools for almost a century. This is the dysfunctional “elephant in the living room” for Native Americans today. In 1877, the first site of what would become over a hundred of these Indian boarding schools throughout the U.S. and Canada was located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Their mantra became the call of missions, “kill the Indian, save the man.” The conditions were much the same regardless of location or country: strict and swift punishment for speaking or acting Indian; a rigorous military lifestyle, malnourishment, isolation from family, long and difficult work hours and short school hours for industrial school. Common jobs for the students after graduation were domestic servants for women and the military, mostly as “cannon fodder,” for men. Severe humiliation was a common punishment. Also beatings, rape, sodomy, and torture happened much more frequently than most admit.

Add to these tragedies, the cruelties of slavery and then Jim Crow laws, Irish Immigrants as Civil War cannon fodder, the forced sterilization of Black males and Native women, the detainment of suspected Middle Eastern terrorist, the Patriot Act and the list could go on. What these all have in common is the fact that we as human beings tend to allow ourselves to be grouped into “us and them” scenarios. What is also shown is that we constantly breach our own sense of justice in order to deny justice to “them” (whoever they may be).

Why do we do it? Fear? Expediency? A false sense of entitlement? Fear is one great factor. Expediency is perhaps too great an American value. A sense of entitlement that we may feel guarantees our freedom over some other person or group’s freedom. We allow “fear mongers” to peddle their wares without much questioning. Perhaps because we are conditioned to it, we accept too easily the lines that are drawn between “us” and “them.” Fear comes in many varieties. Fear from without—protection; Fear from within—betrayal. Fear that is based on flawed logic, poor facts and public

sway are too easily cast and draw our allegiance.

As Americans we love efficiency and expediency. It allows us to move quickly from attempting to solve one problem to solving the “next” problem. In our systematic, modern quest for efficiency, we have often forgotten that human beings require and deserve more thought and deliberation than what we are usually willing to give. In fact, humans sometimes require extraordinary time-tables in order to solve human problems.

Democracy is just that. It takes many voices to not only solve perceived problems, but even just to understand the problems. If a problem involves human beings—it is guaranteed to be complex and not easily solved without much deliberation and debate—especially including those who will be most effected by the outcome. We must begin to question sooner what the loudest voices who would cause us to bend and break our own democratic principles (in order to gain “freedom” or “security”) have to gain. Greed? Power? History shows that they are almost always figured in the equation somewhere.

This leads to the question of accountability. Even under the best social theory, without a strict accountability during the *whole process*—something will usually go wrong. Often, as in the case of the lepers of Molokai, or in the case of the students of Indian boarding schools, the ones whom we are trying to “help” become the victims. This often is the result of short-sighted thinking. When the whole of the process is considered and not just the outcome, better results are sure to follow.

I am thankful for brave authors who will not allow travesties such as have been mentioned, to pass undetected through American history without a critical evaluation. As mission-minded folk, we should be the first to implement these principles of accountability and critique and the last to acquiesce to the mistakes of the past. Honest “truth-seeking missiles” such as these, create the opportunity for these types of unfortunate historic events to not be repeated. It is obvious that the voices of such critique must be made louder and more widespread in order for us as Americans and as humans to call upon our “better angels” more consistently.