

Veteran photojournalist Geoffrey James captures the final days of Kingston Penitentiary

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From *Inside Kingston Penitentiary* by Geoffrey James. Courtesy, Glenbow Museum.
Change of seasons ceremony, 2013, archival ink jet print

With the exception of the paparazzi, it's rare that a photographer faces outright hostility while on the job.

But part way through Geoffrey James' 2013 photographic study of the notorious Kingston Penitentiary, he had a decidedly bad day.

The veteran photographer was intent on capturing images from the infamous facility's final days, a six-month journey that he was forced to divide into three-day stints because he found the experience "so intense."

But the worst may have been when inmates from one of the toughest prison ranges in one of Canada's toughest prisons turned on him.

"I happened to be in a control post when the senior officer came around swearing at the whole range and gave them a collective punishment," says James, whose exhibit *Inside Kingston Penitentiary* will be shown at both the Glenbow Museum and TrépanierBaer Gallery as part of the Exposure Photography Festival. "So they turned on me. 'What's he doing here?' They started putting sheets over the windows and I just got out of there. They hated me after that. They would put T-shirts over their heads when I came by. That was the real tough (convicts). They are sorted into degrees of violence and that was the guys who were chewing on the walls, the young guys before they had been worn down."

James stresses that this was only one range of the prison, and by far the most extreme reaction he had when inside. Other times the exchanges were pleasant if often a little surreal.



The Dome From Above, the Kingston Penitentiary Series, 2013 by Geoffrey James from the Exposure Photography Festival. James exhibit runs at the TrépanierBaer Gallery in Calgary from Saturday until Feb. 28.

“You meet all kinds of people,” he says. “You go in there and one guy wants to talk about Lebanon and Syria, because he is from there. Someone wants to talk about taquerias in Toronto and how to make a tartar sauce with pickles and mayonnaise.

Born in Wales and now based in Toronto, James is a former journalist for *Time* magazine who has carved out an impressive career for the past 30 years, offering photographic studies of everything from 18th century gardens in Europe to the tense strip of borderland between San Diego and Tijuana. *Inside Kingston Penitentiary*, which was also released as a book, features more than 100 photographs taken in the six months before the prison’s Sept. 30, 2013 closure. They chronicle the everyday life and sights of the facility, from the inmate-painted murals, to visiting rooms, to imaginatively decorated cells and even Native ceremonies held within prison walls.

Built in 1835, Kingston Penitentiary was the oldest prison in Canada at the time of its closure. It has housed some of country’s most nefarious criminals, including serial killers Clifford Olson, Paul Bernardo and Wayne Boden.

“Its age and essential mysteriousness,” says James, when asked what attracted him to the subject. “The prison system is not that transparent. They don’t let people in. People have no idea what they are actually like. I’ve always been a bit curious. We’ve all seen the prison movies and there are novels about prison.”



From *Inside Kingston Penitentiary*, by Geoffrey James. Courtesy, Glenbow Museum

While it's easy to dismiss this sort of curiosity as morbid, James is certainly not alone in his fascination with this facility. After it closed, tours that were offered to raise money for the United Way quickly sold out and there were reports of scalpers asking \$125 a ticket. But James wasn't interested in photographing it after it closed. He was surprised that he didn't have to jump through too many bureaucratic hoops to get permission. There were meetings with the warden and other corrections officials and his request eventually went before the Privy Council. But approval came fairly quickly and it allowed James to capture the facility in transition. On days inmates were transferred, he would take photos of abandoned cells.

"They were full of books and clothes and all the stuff on the walls without any invasion of privacy," James said. "So it was an incredible opportunity and it changed the whole project in a way. It gave them a voice. The stuff they write was just unbelievable. The art stuff is amazing."



Looking over Lake Ontario from the top of the Dome, the Kingston Penitentiary Series, 2013 by Geoffrey James

James doesn't romanticize the inmates, but he was keen on giving them a human face. Canada, particularly under the Stephen Harper regime, is moving backwards when it comes to prisons and rehabilitation and becoming more like our neighbours to the south, he says.

“I didn’t have any kind of political position going in,” James says. “But they are very hard places. There’s a lot of public debate about how we run prisons and the current government seems to want to get away from any notion of rehabilitation. It’s more about punishment. It’s about the desire to punish. But being locked up for 25 years is punishment.”

Geoffrey James: Inside Kingston Penitentiary will run until Feb. 28 at the TrépanierBaer Gallery. It will open Saturday February 14 and run until May 17 at the Glenbow Museum. Both exhibits are part of the Exposure Photography Festival. Visit exposurephotographyfestival.com

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