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Long Dark Road: Bill King and Murder in Jasper, Texas
(review)

David O'Donald Cullen

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demonstrates the serendipity of life as he recounts, "looking forward to getting his degree and getting a job" behind a desk in a career unrelated to corrections. But, after leaving his part-time job as a gas jockey, Willett found more lucrative employment with the prison system, a coveted job in the 1970s. This is a striking contrast to the present-day shortage of correctional officers that leaves security wanting in a number of the state's prison units.

The author describes a career behind bars as a kind of reverse Stockholm syndrome, explaining, "In an odd way, I felt at home. In some ways, I'd grown as institutionalized as an old convict" (p. 119). Willett describes the changing prison culture, where the young violent prisoners do not respect the older codes of conduct that were apparently followed by the convicts of yesteryear. It was here that the reviewer hoped that Willett might shed some light on the gang culture that pervades most prisons since the Ruiz decision did away with the building tender system in the 1980s.

Willett chronicles his rise through the ranks of TDC, from a lowly corrections officer (CO) handing out medications and chow, to sergeant, lieutenant, assistant warden, and finally senior warden at the Walls unit in Huntsville. During his career he saw the reintroduction of capital punishment in Texas in 1982, when he witnessed the first lethal injection in the United States (of Charles Brooks). Willett admits that he was unprepared for dealing with executions since there hadn't been an execution in Texas in twenty years. However, once it did return he found himself confronted with moral questions that he thought he would never have to face, admitting "it wasn't something that we did at the Walls" and "never counted on killing people" (p. 141). During his career he would accompany eighty-nine prisoners into the death chamber.

Warden recounts the story of a small-town boy who after decades in corrections finds himself in charge of one of the nation's most infamous prisons. Willett is adept at shifting gears between stories of brutality and malice and moments of surprising humanity. The book is interspersed with his journal jottings and thoughts about several specific executions, in particular the recent executions of Gary Graham and Kenneth McDuff. Willett is never judgmental and often tells his story through the words of the convicts.

This book is recommended to general readers, students of corrections, and those interested in Texas history, not just for its descriptions of the state's prisons and inmates, but most of all for Willett's descriptions of small-town life. His description of growing up in Texas and his affection for the state's culture is often touching. His eight years as warden between 1993 and 2002 happened to coincide with the ratcheting up of the Texas death row machinery, and while he is too loyal a public servant to admit it, this must have contributed to his retirement.

Sam Houston State University

MITCHEL P. ROTH

Long Dark Road: Bill King and Murder in Jasper, Texas. By Ricardo C. Ainslie. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. Pp. 254. Preface, acknowledgments, photographs. ISBN 0292705743. \$24.95, cloth.)

Psychological profiles of murderers tend to humanize the criminals, neglect the victims, and suggest that we are closer to the former than the latter. Ricardo Ainslie's *Long Dark Road* follows this formula. The murder of an unarmed black man by a group of white thugs, although tragic, is not surprising to historians of the American South or American race relations in general. But this murder captured the nation's attention not because of the crime itself, but because of the nature of the crime. After a chain was wrapped around his ankles and attached to the back of a pickup truck, James Byrd's body was dragged for over two miles. The man and boy who discovered Byrd near the front of an African American church at first thought the crumpled bundle along the road was the remains of a deer that had been hit by a driver the night before. Within twenty-four hours of the discovery of the body, local police, with the assistance of the FBI, had arrested three men and charged them with murder and committing a hate crime.

The *Long Dark Road* is not the story of these three men, nor is it a history of race relations in Jasper, or a case study of how the relationship between class, race, and poverty produce the societal ingredients that result in fear, racism, and violence. Rather, Ainslie, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, profiles the life and mind of only one of the three convicted killers, Bill King. Based upon twenty hours of interviews and three years of correspondence (the number and length of the letters is not revealed), Ainslie suggests a variety of reasons that might explain why King became a racist and murderer. For example, at the age of thirteen King discovered that he was adopted, and this news, according to Ainslie, dramatically altered King's perception of himself and resulted in a personality in need of much emotional support. Or, there is the issue that King was bipolar (although who diagnosed King and when this medical analysis was made is not clear), and he often did not take his medication. Then there is the fact that King spent only fourteen months out of prison between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three. And, while in jail, he joined the Confederate Knights of America, tattooed his body with various racist and satanic images, and became friends with one of the two other men who murdered Byrd. King also suggested that he had attempted suicide four times (although whether this pronouncement is true or not is difficult to determine). Thus, Ainslie's profile suggests that an alienated, insecure, medically unstable young man released his anger at himself and the world through the act of murder. Although Ainslie argues that King's life was a result more of nurture than nature ("our collective failure" he writes on p. xii), he does not provide a comprehensive study of the community that produced King, nor does he provide a comparative study of the three men to explain King's actions more successfully. Most importantly, Ainslie failed to travel the long dark road of American racism to comprehend better why James Byrd's walk home in 1998 was as dangerous as a walk home taken by a black man in 1898.