

# Shawshank Redemption

Chris Cuneen

We all have an image of prison, some pictures of prisoners and imprisonment. My first experience of prison was as a teenager at my girlfriend's house opposite Long Bay goal. It must have been in the early 1970's, although I can't recall exactly when. It was Christmas time, possibly Christmas Day or Boxing Day. We were sitting on the front lawn drinking beer. I remember the burning and choking sensation of tear gas mixing with the hot summer air, and the family moving inside the house and closing the doors and windows. Her brother said there must be a riot at the goal. And he proceeded to tell stories about prisoners running down the street in front of the house, trying to take off their prison clothes as they ran.

I also remember the late 1980s with the prison regime under Michael Yabsley. At that time the tear gas was so bad they closed the local high school because the students were being gassed in their classrooms.

And I have images. Again from Long Bay. There is a segregated area *within* protection in the remand wing where those who need 'protection from protection' are locked in dark cells. There is no natural light except through the small flap in the iron door. As I walked past I heard a voice asking for a light. I saw a pair of eyes and the silhouette of a black face. Opposite the cells were the exercise areas for these prisoners – individual ages with exposed toilets and shit smeared on the rear wall. I still feel one of the greatest dangers of people who regularly experience prison either as academics, gaolers or gaolled is that the essentially abnormal being normalised.

On the level, the *Shawshank Redemption* is an interesting movie because of the performances by Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. It is a film which deals with many issues from a position sympathetic to prisoners. The notion of rehabilitation is shown to be a shallow measure of a person's worth and right to freedom. As the Morgan Freeman character Red Redding states, 'Rehabilitate is a political work'. The film is very much about survival strategies and about friendships in a controlled environment. It is an environment which creates 'institutional men' who indeed find it difficult, if not impossible to survive outside. When Brooks, the prison librarian, is released after decades of imprisonment he is unable to adjust and soon

---

commits suicide.

However, I did find the film too predictable and a little too 'clean'. It's not that the movie doesn't deal with violence, murder, sexual assault and corruption. Indeed, these are central themes. As Dufresne, the character portrayed by Tim Robbins states, 'On the outside I was an honest man, I had to come to prison to be a crook'. Yet there is something missing. Perhaps it is that these issues are so overstated. The viewer is presented with a morality tale, albeit one where prisoners are the good guys and the gaolers are the bad guys (and they are all 'guys'). The initial ambiguity as to whether Dufresne is innocent or guilty of the crime for which he is imprisoned is resolved in favour of his innocence. The film is a tale without moral ambiguity, and because of that, it loses some of the potential power inherent in the issue.