

GREEN + WHITE WINTER 1981-1982

# Exchanging Shackles For Scholastics

by Brian MacLean

The 1981 President's Medal winner, on parole from the Prince Albert penitentiary after spending half of his adult life in prison, tells his story.

At the age of 17, I was sentenced to a reformatory for a term of 15 months for theft. This was not the first time I had been in trouble, but it was my first major altercation with the law.

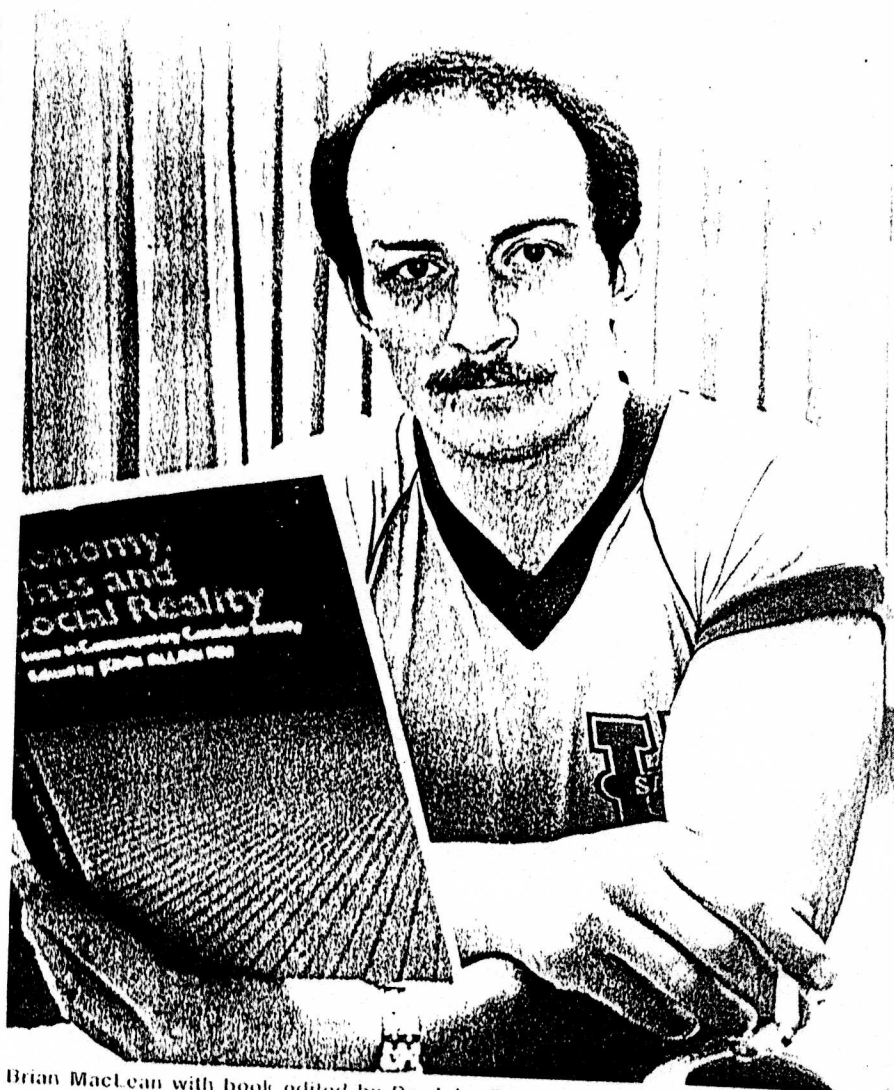
At school I had always been somewhat of a discipline problem. This was attributable to two things — first, I was highly energetic; second, my home environment was very restrictive.

For example, on the day following my fourth birthday, I was playing outside with a tiny plastic boat which was a gift from one of my friends. I was attempting to sail it in a mudpuddle in our driveway. Because the puddle was shallow, the boat became stuck in the middle, requiring me to walk into the puddle to rescue it.

My father, who had been watching from the door, called me inside in a rage. He was angry because I had soiled my somewhat new shoes. After taking me inside the house, he led me to the basement where he removed my clothing, tied me to a support beam, and proceeded to whip me with my sister's skipping rope.

Whenever I left home, I felt as if I had been freed from prison, and since I was allowed to leave only to attend school, and was required to return home directly after classes, school became for me a place where I could dissipate my energies. This situation led to my continual discipline problems at school, although academically I always did well.

In high school I was something of the class clown who nevertheless got high marks. This combination exasperated the school officials who expelled me three months before my grade 12 final exams. The problems created at home as a result of the expulsion were so unbearable I left home. I was allowed to write my final



Brian MacLean with book edited by Dr. John Fry, Department of Sociology

exams and so passed grade 12, although at the graduation ceremony my mother, whom I had not seen for some months, disowned me publicly.

In Ontario one is required to complete grade 13 to be accepted into university. Because I had always wanted to go to university, I found a job working the

Photo: Sasatoon Star-Phoenix

overnight shift at a filling station and managed to talk my way into another high school.

Living on my own, working from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m., and attending school full time proved to be too much of a burden, so after two months I began to explore other ways of supporting myself. The result was an ill-planned theft of a couple of hundred dollars from the gas station with a friend.

Because my school discipline record was poor, and because I was a young teenager no longer under the control of any adult, I was sent to Guelph Reformatory for 15 months. I can clearly recall thinking the day I was sentenced that I would never get into trouble again. The dread I felt approaching the reformatory for the first time in the prison bus strengthened this resolve.

#### Naively unaware

At that time, however, I was naively unaware of the effects prison life has on self-image and perception of society, or of the stigma that tends to go with a prison record.

After my release, I adjusted for awhile but before long became embittered that my prison record was preventing me from

pursuing a career for which I was suited. This bitterness, the loneliness of being isolated from my family, police harassment, and the stigma of being an ex-con combined to lead me into a life of further crime which — after many shorter prison terms — resulted in a five-and-a-half-year sentence for armed robbery received in Edmonton in 1976, to be served at the maximum security penitentiary in Prince Albert.

I was transported to Saskatchewan in handcuffs and shackles. Nearing the penitentiary, with its gun towers looming in the distance, I wondered *What will I do for the next five and a half years?* I had heard that some university classes were offered there, so I decided I would pursue the university education I had always wanted.

The brutal and inhumane conditions of the prison environment appalled me. I became an active spokesman against the degrading, dehumanizing system that psychologically tortured my fellow human beings. In a totalitarian environment, however, individuality is regarded as a threat, and I paid the price for mine.

Many barriers were placed in my way to impede my progress toward my

educational objectives, including a six-month stint in solitary confinement, never satisfactorily explained to me. Administrative segregation, as the prison authorities call it, is not conducive to study. Deprived of outside contact, one slides into a kind of waking dream state which is difficult to realize is occurring. However, disciplining myself to read my social sciences coursework not only gave me an awareness of the phenomenon, but also a method of dealing with it.

The educational progress I made was despite the prison system, not because of it. The main factor that allowed me to persevere and maintain the motivation to succeed was contact with a number of concerned individuals, primarily in the academic community, as well as with my young sister, the only member of my family to keep in touch with me regularly over the years.

#### The response of loyalty

Dr. John Fry of the Sociology Department, the Extension Division, and administrative assistants in the College of Arts and Science were among the individuals who not only assisted me in obtaining classes, but also showed a constant interest in my academic pursuits.



In solitary confinement, Saskatchewan Penitentiary, May, 1979.

Photo Regina Leader-Post



Gibson Photo

Congratulations from Chancellor E. M. Hall at the 1981 Fall Convocation, at which Mr. MacLean received both the President's Medal and a University prize as the most distinguished arts graduate in the College of Arts and Science.

Because these people made the effort to assist me, I felt toward them an obligation to succeed — not out of a sense of reciprocity, but rather from one of loyalty. The response of loyalty is a quality I have learned from the inmate culture, and one I continue to take seriously.

Prison is a consciousness-raising experience. It allows one the opportunity to learn the subtleties of being oppressed. My work in the social sciences together with my repressed existence provided me with an understanding of the experiences which women and minority groups must face daily. This knowledge precipitated an anger in me which took the form of hostility toward my keepers.

Despite the hostility, I was granted, in September of 1978, a day parole at a half-way house in Saskatoon in order to attend classes. Academically, I had done well at the penitentiary, and had taken all the classes that were offered.

My freedom was short-lived. After 46 days, following a conviction for an alleged attempted fraud in the sum of \$4.95, I was returned to the penitentiary to complete the remaining 27 months of

my sentence. I was found guilty on the basis of my record not the evidence of the case. The parole board refused to give me the benefit of the doubt and my parole was revoked.

As I saw the gun towers in the distance for the second time, I knew that any external support I had had was gone. How wrong I was. Soon after my return, Dr. Fry and his family came to visit and encouraged me to keep up my studies and my spirit. Other university personnel assisted me in maintaining my classes.

This sustained encouragement was an effective antidote to my bitterness, and it helped me to realize that a much more complete understanding of my situation could be facilitated by my studies in sociology.

Some 26 months later — December 19, 1980 — I was finally released and again faced the problem of re-integration. Once more the academic community assisted me. Dr. Charles Johnston, residence dean at St. Andrew's College, arranged for lodging at the College; Dr. Fry continued his support and encouragement; and the awards and scholarship committee presented me with

an honours scholarship. A few very special students provided me with much needed moral support and friendship, and I got a job as a bouncer at a local night club to earn the money I needed to live and to complete my degree.

In August, upon completing the last final exam required for my degree, I felt a deep sense of accomplishment. It did not occur to me at the time, however, that I would be considered as a candidate for the President's Medal.

At Convocation, when I was presented with the medal, there seemed to be a wave of emotion throughout the auditorium as President Kristjanson recited my biography. It was a very special moment for me which I shall never forget.

The importance is not so much in my academic achievements as in the fact that those who stood by me through all my difficulties were indirectly rewarded for their actions. While I am sure they feel that they played a minor role, only I am aware of the significance of their efforts. I am sincerely happy that I was able to live up to the faith they had put in me over the years.

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