

Former con wins U of S medal

By Jenni Mortin
of the Star-Phoenix

Brian MacLean, top graduate at the University of Saskatchewan's fall convocation, came to this province five years ago in handcuffs and leg irons, en route to Prince Albert penitentiary.

Today, he receives the president's medal for the most distinguished graduate receiving a first degree and another prize as the most distinguished graduate of the college of arts.

He refuses to be described as a prison success story, though.

That label would merely reinforce a penal system of which he is very critical after spending half his adult life within it, says MacLean, 31, already studying for a master's degree in sociology, while working as a teaching assistant and a part-time social worker.

He hopes to promote change in the penal system, by writing books — he has already contributed to one book — and pushing for more community involvement in and public education about that system.

Canadians have the prison system they deserve, he says, insisting that inmates must be treated more humanely. "They have the authority to lock people up like animals, but not to poke them with a stick."

MacLean began studying for the arts degree he receives today, with high honors in sociology, in an anthropology class offered by the U of S at the pen in 1977. He was serving 5½ years for armed robbery.

Paroled last December, he began studying full-time in January and has completed the four-year honors program in 4½ years, achieving his goal of getting a degree before his release from prison. His sentence expires, and his parole will be up, in March.

He didn't know when he started studying that sociology would grab his attention and commitment.

He did know that he didn't want to continue in the life that had given him a lengthy criminal record and, at one time, a serious involvement in drugs. He didn't see many alternatives to that life: university offered a way out.

"I did it because of the educational aspect and the intrinsic rewards — a certain amount of personal growth, a certain amount of self-discovery that otherwise wouldn't have happened, a certain amount of reassurance that I could overcome the difficulties."

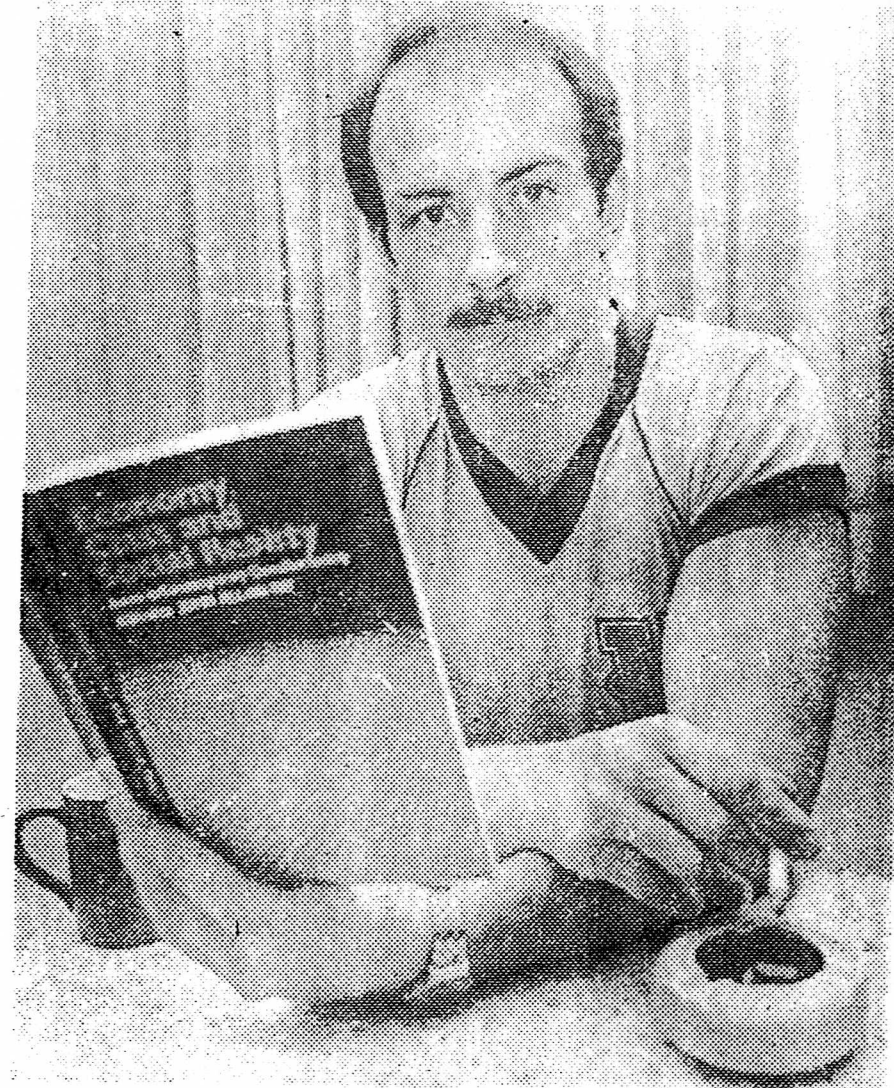
Many of those difficulties were put in his path by the prison administration, MacLean says, including six months in solitary confinement never satisfactorily explained to him. Students were always being screened for other motives for studying, and were considered an expense, because they weren't working.

There was also vital help. Prof. John Fry, who taught a sociology class in the pen, helped him get into U of S and get the classes he needed. He provided a kind of role model, and encouragement.

Paroled and penniless, MacLean found lodgings at St. Andrew's College with the help of dean of residence Dr. Charles Johnston, and, despite his criminal record, a job as bouncer at the A Four night club.

Fry, Johnson and the owners of the A Four shared in his rescue operation, he says. He hopes to pass that help on. He's working part-time at Kilburn Hall, a home for delinquents and young people who have no place to go.

MacLean started his own slide into crime as a teenager, and he's



—S-P Photo by Linda Holoboff

Brian MacLean with book containing chapter on Canadian prisons

analyzed that complex situation: a restrictive home environment, an energetic kid who was always youngest and smallest in class, who did well in school but was labelled "unusual," with negative connotations.

"I was always seeking a bit of excitement," he remembers. "I was

immature too. Once you are set aside, labelled, pointed out as different from the rest, it's hard to break away from that process."

Trouble at school was followed by trouble with what he calls "the agents of formal social control", and at 16, he was sent to the Guelph Reformatory for theft.