

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Life in jail was simple. The men took their fate calmly and philosophically. They read, exercised, and enjoyed discussions with one another. There was a lot of mail to answer. Visitors were permitted almost every day. The highlight of the week was their wives' Sunday visit.

In mid-April, a message was sent to the provincial jail informing Ivens that his small son was seriously ill with scarlet fever. A week later, on the approval of the Minister of Justice in Ottawa, Ivens was allowed to go home for two days. Two constables were assigned to guard him, one during the day and the other during the night. Ivens was at home barely an afternoon when his child died, leaving Mrs. Ivens "prostrate with grief." The *Western Labor News* reported on the funeral:

Thousands of union men and women – Internationals and members of OBU units – attended the funeral [...] The cortege – men and women walking four abreast – extended a distance of six blocks. A body of 150 returned soldiers headed it. About 100 automobiles were also in the line of procession [...] At the graveyard another large crowd had assembled, and were standing patiently, in spite of the cold weather, when the funeral party reached the grounds. It was estimated that nearly 8,000 surrounded the grave and watched and listened to the solemn rites as they were performed by Mrs. Woodsworth.

Fred and Winona Dixon received a similar blow later when their young son Jimmy died of scarlet fever on October 31, 1920.

Save a few exceptions, the men and their families were separated. Trade unions from across the country planned moral and financial support for the convicted men and protested against their imprisonment. The Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council appealed to the internationally affiliated labour organisations for contributions to a fund to support the imprisoned men's wives and children. The number of dependants totalled twenty-six: Ivens' wife and three children, Johns' wife and one child, Pritchard's wife and three children, Queen's wife and three children, Armstrong's wife and two of their children, and Bray's wife and eight children.

While in prison, Armstrong indulged in light-hearted pranks. The prison officials and prisoners all ate in the same large area. Armstrong sat down one day and calmly ate the warden's breakfast of bacon and eggs. When his "error" was pointed out, he gave a loud and animated apology, much to the delight of fellow prisoners. In addition, the prisoners entertained themselves with a raucous version of Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*. Pritchard boasted, "If you want to see Gilbert and Sullivan put up in a form you can enjoy, don't go to the opera house, go to the Winnipeg jail."

Because of their good behaviour, the men were sent to a minimum-security jail farm at Shoal Lake. There, Bray adopted a pet duck that followed him everywhere. Occasionally, their families would come down by excursion train for brief visits. At one point, Johns discovered that there was a protest strike against their imprisonment under way in Winnipeg. Upon hearing this, he asked, “Hey, what are we doing working, when there is a strike on?” In sympathy, the men joined the strike and stopped working. The men were later moved from the prison farm to the Vaughan Street Detention Centre where sympathetic guards would occasionally allow them out on the streets.

Queen, taking advantage of the return to Winnipeg, arranged to get some needed dental work done. His dentist lived on Bannerman Avenue in the North End of the city. Instead of going by streetcar, Queen went on foot, accompanied by a guard. Strolling along Main Street, he was approached by shopkeepers and friends. “John! John! When did they let you out?” they called. With mock dismay, Queen pointed out his “companion” several paces behind.

The 1920 provincial election campaign began while the men were still in jail. The strike had convinced Dixon and the labour party leaders that the workers needed a more unified organisation to express their aims. A joint committee consisting of members of three existing labour parties – the Dominion Labour Party, the Social Democrats, and the Socialist Party of Canada – was formed to field labour candidates under the single banner of the Independent Labour Party. Dixon actively promoted cooperation among the divergent groups and initiated the policy of limiting the number of candidates in order to avoid splitting the vote.

Dixon and Ivens were among those nominated by the Dominion Labour Party. The Socialist Party of Canada nominated Russell, Johns, Pritchard, and Armstrong. It was a strange and diverse group. Their slogan – Vote for the Men in Jail – was their common bond.

In the aftermath of the election, the publisher John W. Dafoe wrote to Sir Clifford Sifton, “You will have noticed the results of the Manitoba election. The outstanding feature, of course, was the strength displayed by labour. They will have nearly twenty-five percent of the membership of the next legislature and with perhaps one exception, all labour members are Reds.”

Altogether, the labour candidates had gained forty two percent of the vote. Armstrong, Ivens, and Queen had been elected. Dixon scored spectacularly, receiving eighty percent of the vote. Dixon commented on the election results:

I take the result as a sign that there are many not belonging to the working-class organisations who have seized this opportunity of protesting against the policy of

repression which has placed these men in jail [...] The British tradition of free speech dies hard and, I believe, will survive the Union government. It is to be hoped that the protest which the voters have made will not go unheeded. The election of these men is the very best form of a petition for their release.

While the men were in jail, Andrews was fighting for a larger fee. On May 21, he appealed to Arthur Meighen, with whom he had become friendly. Andrews, Coyne, and Pitblado had been retained at the rate of \$150 per day in court and Sweatman at \$100 per day. Andrews pointed out to Meighen that the prosecuting counsel had worked far beyond the normal court day, from early morning to midnight most days and often on Sundays. Andrews pointed out that if the court had gone into extended sessions, the trial might have lasted about twice as long and “the cost to the country would have been infinitely more, with the danger of something happening to some of the jurors or the judge, which might have necessitated new trials.” In addition, he wrote a letter to Justice Minister Meighen that stated:

I do not think the government would have been criticised if, in view of the arduous labour performed, the results achieved, and the importance of the cases, they had allowed me some special fee, in view of the fact that the burden of the responsibility fell largely upon myself. I am not, however, asking this, but I do think the bill should be paid as rendered. The result, I believe, of these trials has been to produce a much better feeling throughout the whole Dominion. The position here is exceptionally tranquil, and I think it will be many years before there will be trouble of this kind again in Winnipeg.

The bill was paid in 1920. Andrews received \$32,623; Pitblado, \$26,990; and Coyne, \$21,587.

Russell was released on parole on December 13, 1920. He had served 350 days of his two-year sentence. Mrs. Armstrong gave a reception at her home to celebrate Russell’s release. No formal announcement was made, but their house was filled with guests all evening as hundreds of labour men and sympathisers flocked to greet the released man. A Christmas cake, which had been prepared in anticipation of his acquittal a year before, was brought out, and Russell assisted in serving the dessert to his guests. Prison had not harmed him physically, and he looked well despite his prison haircut. “They just go over your head with a pair of clippers – two or three sweeps over the scalp once a month,” he said. Russell’s release marked the birth of a milder man. Although equally committed to his cause, he no longer made fiery speeches calling for a Soviet style of government.

Rumours began that Ivens, Pritchard, Armstrong, Queen, and Johns would also be released before Christmas. But on December 23, Sheriff Inkster announced that the men would all spend Christmas in jail.

When the Manitoba Legislature opened on February 10, 1921, one of the first orders of business was a motion by Fred Dixon asking the provincial government for the “immediate release from prison of George Armstrong, William Ivens, Richard Johns, William Pritchard, and John Queen. Or, failing that, make some arrangements by which George Armstrong, William Ivens, and John Queen may without further delay perform their functions as duly elected members of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.”

Dixon’s request launched a ferocious debate. Premier T.C. Norris stated: “When in Ottawa last December, I interviewed the Minister of Justice, I was informed that the imprisoned labour men could obtain parole by requesting it. Mr. Russell was not above asking for parole and is now enjoying freedom. What the other men want is the Department of Justice to release them unconditionally.” One conservative member declared, “It is Mr. Dixon’s duty to revise the wording of the motion so that it will be only a petition for mercy.” Similarly, Attorney-General Thomas H. Johnson expressed his opinion on the matter:

They were tried according to the impartial and well-safeguarded British procedure for the trial of criminal cases. The accused were given every opportunity to defend themselves. They were found guilty, not by the Crown authorities who submitted to the court the evidence against them, nor even by the judge who presided at the trial, but by a jury of twelve men selected in an impartial manner, which jury after mature consideration rendered an unanimous verdict [...] If it was so important that these men should be in the Legislature and they were anxious to take their places here, all they had to do was ask for parole and the Minister of Justice would have granted it.

The motion was amended to provide that if the men requested parole, it should be granted.

Dixon denounced the amendment and declared that by accepting it, the men would be admitting their guilt. He believed them to be innocent and would not insult them by supporting it. Premier T.C. Norris said that the amended motion met with his approval. The amendment was passed by 26 votes to 22. The men had only to ask for parole in order to be free. But to admit guilt was beyond contemplation for the imprisoned men, and they preferred to serve their full sentences than to bow their heads.

A few minutes after midnight on February 28, 1921, the five men were released from prison and walked into the darkness. Each had served his full sentence with five weeks remitted for good behaviour. None had admitted guilt in exchange for mercy.

History is full of examples of men who served in public office after serving their time in prison. But seldom, if ever, have men gone from prison to public office on the same day. That afternoon, the clerk swore in Armstrong, Ivens, and Queen. That evening, the three calmly took their seats

as members of the legislature. The galleries were filled with spectators who flocked to see the celebrities. The men made only brief appearances and then departed.

Later that evening, more than three thousand people packed the Board of Trade Building for a welcome home party. As the released men, accompanied by their wives and families, filed into the building, they were greeted by shouts and cheers. Someone began a chorus of "For They Are Jolly Good Fellows." As the men mounted the platform, the cheers intensified, and several minutes passed before silence was restored and the speeches could begin.

Dick Johns was the first man to speak:

There are people who do not understand why we were sent to jail, but when I hear of men who have betrayed the movement and condemned the principle of the strike of 1919, I say 'damn them.' They ignored the class struggle and forsook the workers. If you are here with the spirit of the labour movement at heart, I am pleased, but if you are here primarily to hero worship, I have cause for regret [...] In my opinion, the best way to avoid a repetition of the 1919 occurrence is for the forces of labour to organise solidly and prevent the master class from throwing men from our ranks into prison.

Furthermore, Johns praised the work of the Winnipeg Defence League for its efforts in caring for their dependants.

As Pritchard rose, the audience began singing "The Red Flag." When the song finished, Bill Pritchard told his audience, "I want to tell you that the real enemies of labour are the traitors within our ranks. Declare war upon these skunks and tell them that it is a war to the knife, and knife to the hilt. When we kill them we will dispose of the finest weapon that the master class has ever employed."

Armstrong gave an unexpected speech that day: "I want to impress upon you that we got justice pure and simple, although my fellow ex-convicts do not agree with me. It was merely an interpretation of the existing laws [...] Keep up the good work, and some day in the near future we will be in a position to interpret the laws."

Ivens, in his best evangelical form, asked for a show of hands from all those who had taken part in the strike or had been in sympathy. "I am going to ask you the same question that was put to our jury: Are we guilty or are we not?"

"No!"

"Say it once more."

"No!"

Then Ivens asked the audience to stand up as a tribute to the wives of the convicted men. "I believe no women in history have played a nobler part. A

prison term makes a considerable change in a man,” Ivens continued. “We are not the same men mentally or physically that went to jail.”

When Queen’s turn to speak came, he poked fun at the prison and government. Then becoming serious, he spoke of the principles of socialism: “The workers are haunted by the spectre of unemployment. It is time that we stopped to inquire into our conditions. While we produce the wealth of the world, the worker continues to live in poverty. It is power that we want, and I am glad to be out of jail and to know that I will be able to take my share of the work of the movement.”

When the speeches and celebration were over, the men, their families, and their supporters filed out into a changed city. The citizens of Winnipeg did their best to pick up the pieces after the strike and the trials, but there was much human wreckage. Wilfred Queen-Hughes, son-in-law of John Queen and an associate editor of the *Winnipeg Tribune*, provided a grave description of the wounds:

It did more damage, in my view, than any other happening since the time of the Red River settlement. It was very divisive and it lingered so long. It labelled people. Employers would look carefully at employees. Those who were prominent in the events almost walked about as if they had a brand — 1919 — on their forehead. There was a sense of outrage about the strike, how it was settled and on the way the trials prosecuted. There were guilty feelings on the part of the establishment.

The people had to learn to live with the ramifications of the Winnipeg General Strike, incorporating the damage done into the fabric that forms the city’s soul.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The name — The Great Canadian Seditious Trials — is appropriate because it carries with it the embellishment and aggrandisement of the events themselves. With all its distortion, exaggeration, and commotion, this story has the makings of a tragi-comedy. But many innocent people suffered, and some lost their lives in the hysteria surrounding the Winnipeg General Strike. The lasting impact precludes historians from casting anything but a sombre light on the summer of 1919 and the ensuing legal machinations.

To many individuals, these events were a nightmare. No wonder some did not want to talk about it. Should we let bygones be bygones as many of