

BOOK REVIEWS



E Block

By Mark Perrott

Pittsburgh: Woods Run Press LLC, 2012

101 pps., b&w photographs

\$35 paperback

Reviewed by Barbara Antel, Conservation Services Manager, Museum Conservation Center

Through the lens of his camera, Pittsburgh photographer Mark Perrott has painstakingly and sympathetically documented the abandoned 43-cell E Block unit of Western Penitentiary on Pittsburgh's North Side. Within *E Block*, he presents a record of Pennsylvania's oldest prison with deeply textured and masterfully composed black and white photographs. The title is spare; it suggests a paring down to the most basic element, like a cell is basic to the block.

Perrott has worked as a photographer and educator in Pittsburgh for 40 years. His work is represented in private and public collections and he was named Master Visual Artist by Pittsburgh Center for the Arts in 2013. Perrott said of his work of the 1980s—photographing the vanishing Mon Valley steel culture—that he “photographed the hell out of [it].” In *E Block*, Mark documents the living hell *in* it; every surface, each container of incarceration within the block, the drawings, writings and scratchings on the walls, the communal interior spaces, and the riverside setting of the old state correctional facility.

“Our place in this world is to witness without judgment,” was Mark Perrott’s informal remark prior to his public introduction of the Crime of Punishment forum in April

2014. Held at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, a panel of experts discussed the history, growth, and privatization of incarceration. This forum, joined with Perrott’s observations, were a means to contribute a small act, one that might join with others, to “help end the epidemic of imprisonment.” While photographing, Perrott also transcribed the writings that were left behind by prisoners from each wall in E Block, the place of “lock and clock.” A place once entered for sorting and classifying prisoners, it was sometimes exited via the sheet “you tie around your neck.”

Landesberg Design’s layout aids the reader’s act of witnessing by assigning these photographs a space within a book of spare design. The bold use of photos and text are juxtaposed, as in *Rope, E Block*, 2005. A horizontal bar, black against the diminishing perspective of the cellblocks, is wound with a thick knotted and opposes the text that follows. In prisoner-to-prisoner advice it reads, “Don’t go the 1/2 way house or a center its only paroles way of giving you a rope to hang yourself.” On another page, the grid of barred walls is one the left, and the prisoner’s hand-drawn calendar with an arrow leads to the date known as “Hopefully.”

The history section includes excerpts from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission’s *Two Centuries of Corrections in Pennsylvania*. Author Adam Gopnik’s article, “The Caging of America” (first appearing in the *New Yorker*), was used as the preface to *E Block*. It describes the staggering statistics of incarceration where imprisonment is for some “a destination that braids through an ordinary life.”

Seeking the Greatest Good: The Conservation Legacy of Gifford Pinchot

By Char Miller

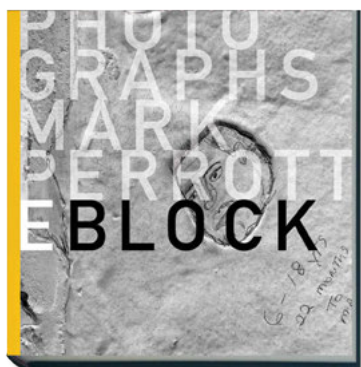
232 pps., b&w illustrations

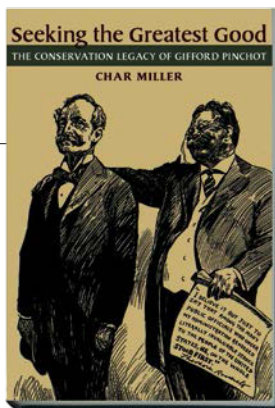
\$24.95 paperback

Reviewed by Vagel C. Keller, Jr., Ph.D.

This history by Pinchot biographer Char Miller of the National Forest Service’s Pinchot Institute for Conservation at Grey Towers National Historical Site in eastern Pennsylvania illustrates how the “wise use” philosophy of America’s first Chief Forester has evolved since its founding in 1963. Although Pinchot is commonly portrayed as having viewed forests as primarily an economic resource, this author argues that Pinchot also understood that the definition of what he famously termed “the greatest good of the greatest number” would change with time. That said, the Institute’s founding principle of “collaborative engagement” by public-private coalitions does reflect the Conservationism of early-20th Century Progressive Republicans more than the “confrontational” nature of modern Environmentalism. But, after numerous changes in strategy—and four name changes—the Institute has remained true to what Pinchot’s son, Gifford Bryce Pinchot, who conceived the idea for the Institute, saw as his father’s vision: current generations should leave their natural resources in better condition than they found them.

The narrative chronicles the restoration and re-purposing of Pinchot’s material legacy (Grey Towers) and describes efforts to preserve his ethical legacy (the vision) through programs developed there; its twelve chapters fall under two broad categories. “Living Memorial” places Grey Towers and the Institute in the context both of the social and political climate during its early years and of the evolution of the Forest Service’s organizational culture since its foundation under Pinchot. One chapter of particular interest in this section, “Greening the Presidency,” is an important exposition of the





President Kennedy's uniquely urban view of the environmental problems facing the United States. This is preceded by "Under Fire," in which the author shows how the Forest Service's original culture of "forest regeneration" shifted under the pressure of the post-World War II housing boom to "accelerated yield." By the 1960s many rank and file foresters were ill-equipped to grasp the need for change being urged by their leadership, who were more attuned to the nascent environmental movement and growing public concern for the esthetic and recreational value of forests.

The second half of the book, subtitled "Institutional Change," describes how the Forest Service and the Institute for Conservation emerged after three decades of frustrating false starts stemming from opposing viewpoints held by key personalities in the Forest Service and in its erstwhile partner, the Conservation Foundation. The Forest Service sought specific policy recommendations through "mutual engagement of scientists and conservationists," a narrower scope than the public "environmental education" agenda urged by the Foundation. Failure to reconcile the conflict led the Foundation to pull out after just four years. During the 1970s and '80s, Grey Towers and the Institute suffered from a lack of interest by the Forest Service, which led to the physical deterioration of Grey Towers and limits on the urban environmental forestry programs that became

the Institute's major focus. Finally, in 1991 the two organizations reached consensus on how exactly to express Gifford Pinchot's vision and on a strategy to implement it, expressed in the Grey Towers Protocols, which look beyond Conservation as "scientific management" to a "moral imperative" of improvement rather than mere sustainability.

This successful model follows a bottom-up approach, funding and coordinating collaborative efforts between community-based conservation groups, businesses, and local, state, and federal officials to formulate best-practice policies to solve local problems, while steering clear of contentious political debate. It contrasts to the centralized approach of using legislation and the courts to impose regulatory regimes, which Miller considers to be both a cause and a result of today's partisan landscape of environmental politics. It follows a two-pronged approach: educating the public and fostering interdisciplinary research by biologists, foresters, social scientists, and others.

The case studies presented in the closing chapters demonstrate how the Pinchot Institute for Conservation has lived up to its original "aspiration to help Americans comprehend their obligation to enhance the health of people and places, striving to make the planet more habitable and just—a new greatest good for the long run, a moral imperative worth pursuing." ☀

Vagel Keller is an independent scholar whose interests include the relationships between society, technology, and the environment. He lives in Pittsburgh, where he lectures on topics related to the material causes of natural disasters.

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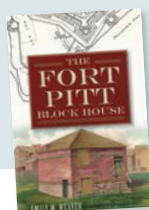
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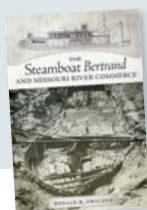
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