

# The manhunt for Richard Matt and David Sweat: *High Sierra* in upstate New York

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In the 1941 film *High Sierra*, directed by Raoul Walsh, Humphrey Bogart plays Roy Earle, a career criminal who has just been pardoned and released from prison after eight years. The crime boss who helped free him expects Earle to participate in the robbery of a hotel in an exclusive resort town in California.

The heist, of course, goes wrong. Along with a woman he's met and fallen in with, Marie (Ida Lupino), Earle hides out. But then his only surviving confederate informs on him. The newspapers now call him "Mad Dog Earle."

In the final scene, Earle holds off a small army of police from a location on a steep, rocky mountain side. Shot from behind, Earle dies calling out Marie's name.

Bending over his corpse, she asks a reporter, "Mister, what does it mean... when a man... crashes out [escapes from prison]?" "Crashes out? That's a funny question for you to ask now, sister. It means he's free." "Free?", she asks him. Then, as she passes closer to the camera, she repeats, "Free."

Walsh's *High Sierra* came to mind in the wake of the sad, predictable end on June 28 to the three week-long manhunt in upstate New York for escaped convicts Richard Matt and David Sweat, with Matt dead and Sweat, wounded, in custody once again.

The pair, incredibly, had managed to escape from the maximum security Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, New York, twenty-five miles west of Plattsburgh and about the same distance from the Canadian border. It was the first ever escape from the prison in Dannemora, built in 1865.

Matt and Sweat were convicted murderers. Each committed terrible crimes. But are there not always stories behind such crimes? Do they come out of the blue?

Nothing is so simple and crude as the American media presents it. Criminals are criminals, according to them, and that's the end of the story. On the other hand, bankers who steal billions and US presidents who preside over illegal wars and drone strikes always receive the benefit of the doubt. In those cases, a more nuanced view is indispensable.

Matt, apparently a very bright and charismatic individual, who liked to paint, was especially violent, seriously damaged. One of the only figures in the whole case to exhibit any decency or rationality has been Matt's son, 23-year-old Nick Harris. Harris has no illusions about Matt, who beat his mother, but he explained that his father, according to a news report, was "subject to early trauma at the hands of a deadbeat father and ultimately ended up a

ward of the state."

Harris told the media, "He was left as an infant in a car. Everybody is born innocent, but he was raised around crime. Then he went into foster care."

Harris denounced the manner of his father's death, which may well have been cold-blooded murder.

Sweat's story is not so different: a broken home, in foster care, in and out of prison. According to the *Times*, "Since he entered prison at age 19, Mr. Matt has known freedom only a total of about four-and-a-half years. Since he was first locked up at 17, Mr. Sweat has been out just three years."

Nothing can twist and ultimately destroy the human soul as effectively as the penal system.

Matt and Sweat were products of American society—in other words, of its profound economic and moral dysfunction.

Even if someone has committed a serious crime, there is no reason sympathy and an effort to understand the source of the tragedy should be excluded. There is no reason to turn a human being into a monster, or obliterate him.

The absence of sympathy, of compassion, is appalling. Although rehabilitation was never genuinely pursued in the prison system, except in rare cases, for many years it remained the official goal. No longer. Politicians, editorialists, pundits now look at social life through the eyes of prison guards.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, currently under investigation for corruption, told reporters on June 28, "The nightmare is finally over."

Cuomo commented, "If you were writing a movie plot, they would say that this was overdone. You had hacksaws delivered by a facilitator in ground-up meat. You had two prisoners who were on the honor block. They hack-sawed through the back of their cell. They got into the catwalks. The catwalks brought them into a labyrinth of tunnels where they came across a contractor's job box, large tool box. One of the prisoners was a burglar, knew how to pick the lock, picked the lock repeatedly. They used those tools then to do the work of breaking the wall, cutting the pipe, cutting the chains and making [their] way to the sewer pipe."

Yes, but if a movie were made of the recent manhunt, and one might very well be made, what would it say? From whose vantage point would it be told? With whom would it sympathize?

In *High Sierra*, although Earle is portrayed as a hardened and sometimes ruthless criminal, he remains a complex human being. He befriends and helps an older couple from Ohio who lost their

farm in the Depression. He raises the money so that a young girl can have her clubfoot repaired.

Earle comes from a poor farming background himself. He is instinctively hostile to the crowds in the rich resort town where the robbery is to take place. The movie-going audience is expected to root for Earle, not the cops tracking him.

The film's script was written by John Huston, the future director, a left-wing figure, based on the novel by W. R. Burnett, the famed novelist and screenwriter. Burnett was responsible for, or had a hand in, dozens of films, including *Little Caesar*, *Scarface*, *Dark Hazard*, *The Dark Command*, *This Gun for Hire*, *Background to Danger*, *Yellow Sky*, *The Asphalt Jungle* and *The Great Escape*.

The original novel was even more explicit in its Depression-era populism than the film could be, in the face of censorship.

At one point Earle has this exchange with Marie:

"Look. A few guys have got all the dough in this country. Millions of people ain't got enough to eat. Not because there ain't no food, but because they got no money. Somebody else has got it all. OK. Why don't all them people who haven't got any dough get together and take the dough? It's a cinch. A bank looks pretty tough, don't it? OK. Give me a chopper and a couple of guys and I'll loot the biggest bank in the USA. I'm just one guy. What could ten million do?"

"They're all scared," said Marie, beginning to yawn. "Anyway, that's communism or something."

"OK. So what? Like in prison. A guy would get to talking like I am and some guy would yell: 'Communist!' and it would shut him up. But that don't scare me. Call it what you like. It's still good sense."

A film made (or novel written) today about the New York state manhunt would likely adopt the point of view of the "heroes" who shot Matt three times in the head or the "courageous" state trooper who fired twice at an unarmed, fleeing Sweat and struck him in the back.

"The nightmare is finally over."

The daring, complicated escape by Matt and Sweat generated a massive manhunt by 1,300 officers from a dozen police agencies. A \$75,000 bounty was put on each man's head by the government.

The escape also set off a media frenzy, hysterical, bloodthirsty and vindictive. To read the newspapers, including the "liberal" *New York Times* and the gutter right-wing *New York Post*, or listen to the television news, one would have thought that Matt and Sweat were master criminals.

In our estimation, the media in their coverage of the manhunt, egging on the dogs, helicopters and heavily armed officers, exhibited far more brutality than the poor wretches on the run. There was no need to kill Matt or Sweat, except to make an example of them, and to satisfy the sadism and ruthlessness of the authorities.

Dannemora (as the institution is known) is a brutal prison, referred to as Little Siberia because of the climate and the severity of the conditions. In a 2014 report, the Correctional Association, an independent non-profit, noted that the "Clinton Correctional Facility has an infamous history of staff violence, brutality, dehumanization and racist attitudes that are an affront to any sense

of humanity...

"Our investigation revealed that these longstanding abuses at Clinton remain pervasive. The CA's review of conditions at the prison found frequent infliction of solitary confinement for months and years, inadequate medical care, a high incidence of suicides and self-harm, and a dearth of meaningful programs." The conditions at the prison, the organization said, "epitomize the worst aspects of mass incarceration in New York State."

The authorities, for their part, expressed outrage that anyone would dare to try and escape their clutches. That merely shows their own obtuseness and savagery.

Matt and Sweat had spent years in the prison and faced being incarcerated for the rest of their lives. How can one not feel a certain respect for their remarkable escape, which expressed the striving of all human beings—including criminals—for freedom?

The prison or prison camp movies that one remembers concern the time-consuming, sometimes years-long, often heart-breaking efforts to break out of confinement: *A Man Escaped*, *Papillon*, *Escape from Alcatraz*, *The Great Escape*, *Stalag 17*, *The Hole*, *La Grande Illusion*, *The Shawshank Redemption* ... According to Governor Cuomo, a shill for real estate developers and Wall Street speculators, "One escape is one escape too many."

And how could one not feel some sympathy for the escapees' desperate situation, as they—more or less hopelessly—tried to evade the dragnet closing in on them. How many people in their heart of hearts hoped that the pair would disappear and never be found?

In *High Sierra*, Marie says to Roy, "How was it? I mean, knowing you're in for life. I should think you'd go crazy."

He replies, "Yeah, lots of them do. I was always thinking about a crash-out... We were just getting ready for another crash-out when my pardon came... You always hope you can get out. That sort of keeps you going."

There is no humanity to be found in the American political and media establishment. None. Every instance of opposition, even individual resistance, is to be met by overwhelming and deadly force.



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