Chessman, Caryl (1921-1960) Encyclopedia Article

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In 1948, a career criminal named Caryl Chessman was charged with being a "red light bandit" who raped and robbed couples in lovers' lanes near Los Angeles. Chessman was sentenced to death for kidnapping two of the victims. His 12-year effort to save himself from California's gas chamber intensified the debate over capital punishment. Chessman was successful in persuading various judges to postpone his execution. This gave him time to make legal arguments against his conviction and death sentence and to write *Cell 2455 Death Row,* an eloquent, bestselling book which purportedly described the author's life and criminal career.

The courts ultimately ruled against Chessman's legal claims. Many celebrities opposed his execution, including the Pope and Eleanor Roosevelt. In February 1960, Chessman was granted a stay of execution while the state legislature considered California Governor Edmund Brown's plea to abolish the death penalty. The Governor's effort, however, failed and Chessman was executed on May 2, 1960.

Further Reading:

Brown, Edmund G., and Dick Adler. *Public Justice, Private Mercy: A Governor's Education on Death Row.* New York, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989.

Chessman, Caryl. *Cell 2455 Death Row.* New York, Prentice-Hall, 1954.

Kunstler, William M. *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt? The Original Trial of Caryl Chessman.* New York, William Morrow and Company, 1961.

Largo, Andrew O. *Caryl Whittier Chessman, 1921-1960: Essay and Critical Bibliography.* San Jose, California, Bibliographic Information Center for the Study of Political Science, 1971.