

Exploring the history of prisoner education

The causes and effects of change in penal policy - Change & continuity: The 1860s (6/7)

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In 1854, a prisoner who had been sentenced to transportation managed to escape twice from Lincoln Castle Gaol. The event provided an excuse for an inquiry, and for the dismissal of the Governor John Nicholson. He was replaced by James Foster, who had been the deputy governor at the Wandsworth House of Correction.

Foster made a much more concerted effort to enforce a separate system of prison discipline. However, his efforts coincided with the rise of disillusionment about the separate prisons in Britain. Some feared that sustained periods of seclusion could lead to insanity. Others believed the prisoners, with their warm, ventilated cells, running water, and toilet facilities, generous diet, long hours in bed, and light labour were being pampered.

As recorded crime continued to rise and the prison population grew, many questioned the ability of religious instruction to reform prisoners. At the same time, there was a much wider loss of confidence in the capacity of the churches to lead the fight against social problems.

Other changes were afoot. Between 1853 and 1857, sentences of transportation were replaced with sentences of penal servitude, being long term imprisonment for a minimum of three years or a maximum of life.

Penal servitude was served in three stages, a period of separate confinement, hard labour at public works, or an equivalent for women, and finally, if earned through good behaviour, release on licence, that is, parole, for the remainder of the sentence.

The idea that serious offenders were being released back into British society instead of being transported to Australia caused alarm among the middle and the upper classes. When, in July 1862, a member of parliament was garrotted meaning strangled and robbed, while walking to his club on Pall Mall, the press had a field day. By filling their newspapers with accounts of violent street crime, editors suggested, falsely, that a crime wave caused by men on parole had swept the country.

A major review of criminal justice policy followed. The 1864 Penal Servitude Act, and a raft of standing orders issued by the convict prison directors, increased the minimum sentence of penal servitude to five years, intensified the separation of convicts during their first stage,

reduced the diet, curtailed religious facilities, and introduced a system of surveillance of released prisoners.

The 1865 Prisons Act introduced new rules for local prisons, through separate confinement and the strict performance of truly hard and unproductive labour, such as a treadmill, a low diet, and the use of plank beds. Policy makers intended to deliver a sharp shock to short sentenced prisoners in order to dissuade them from returning.

What impact did this have on the experience of imprisonment at Lincoln Castle Gaol? Although it was a local prison, the Gaol continued to hold prisoners on remand, and those who had been convicted and were awaiting punishment, death, or transfer to a convict prison for penal servitude.

There were no instruments of hard labour in use here. The men pumped water for the prison, mowed the castle lawns, or were employed in mapmaking or oakum picking. The women were given sewing and washing.

Yet, a punishing experience in the convict prisons lay before them, as did the stigma of having done time. These prisoners became members of a criminal class, increasingly identifiable through new methods of record keeping, and increasingly, believed to be incapable of rehabilitation, even through education, either inside or outside the prison.