

Reading in Australian prisons: a history of good intentions and unfulfilled potential.

Dr Mary Carroll, Charles Sturt University, New South Wales, Australia

Jane Garner, RMIT University, Victoria, Australia

In a recent report on Vocational Education Francesca Beddie suggested that 'we can use history as a policy tool for uncovering trends, explaining institutional cultures and preventing the re-application of ideas already tested' (2014, p.4). With this in mind this paper will explore the history of reading and the provision of libraries and education to prisoners historically in Australia and reflect on what this can tell us about the provision of such services in the contemporary context. In doing so there is an assumption that libraries have are integral to the provision of education and training and one pillar in the services underpinning such provision. A serendipitous alignment in the location of this conference contributes to this discussion where the Alexander Maconichie correctional centre, a new model prison is located in the ACT. Its naming is no coincidence and is an important name in the historical narrative of Australian prison libraries. Using ongoing research into the motivation behind the establishment of early Australian penal libraries and the motivation for the use of the prison library in contemporary Australia this presentation will reflect on the place of books in the life of the prisoner and community attitudes towards education, crime and punishment.

Libraries for the convicts in Australia were established in the period post 1830 as part of an agenda to both educate and reform. The period in which these convict libraries were established was one of great social and political change in Britain reflected in changing attitudes towards the treatment of the convicts and amongst a general unease and discontent with the success of the original

system of assignment in the Australian colonies. Increasingly there were calls for penal reform and a perception of the failure of the Assignment system to contain, reform or deter the criminal classes. This led to a move away from the Assignment system and saw the development of a new probation system, the establishment of penitentiaries, the use of hard labour and harsh punishment alongside reformist calls for education, literacy and skills development. In this context reading, the provision of books and exposure to culture were regarded by some as part of the reform process. This led to the establishment of substantial libraries in penal settlements such as Port Arthur and Norfolk Island. As 'places of secondary punishment' for those who re-offended while under original sentence they were considered to hold the most depraved and intractable amongst the convict populations. Port Arthur, a place described by one commentator as having 'furnished a thousand texts for a thousand fallacious, if not perverted, commentaries'(Burn 1972 p.3)and Norfolk Island have reputations as places of harsh and brutal punishment however Norfolk Island for a brief time under the reformist administrator Captain Alexander Maconochie played a key role in the promotion of reading and the concurrent development of prison libraries in the Australian colonies and in influencing contemporary practice. An in each of these settlements systems of education, training and book provision were provided. Today's Alexander Maconochie Centre was built and managed along the lines of Maconochie's beliefs that prison should be a place of opportunity and reform.

These two settlements were to some extent experimental and reflected changing attitudes during the period towards crime and punishment. Port Arthur in particular was established at a tipping point in social attitudes towards the purpose of transportation bridging the earlier 18th century concepts of reform and economic and social utility and the later focus

emphasising deterrence. Prison library commentator Larry Sullivan characterises the period in which Port Arthur was established and the decades following as

an era of moral terrorism, with the middle class philanthropists responding with forceful measures to advancing urbanization and a burgeoning population of what were considered the vice-ridden poor.(p.26)

In this environment stern punishment, routine and order were viewed as essential to the prison system and reading linked closely to reform objectives within the convict system and generally as a means of constructing the expanding industrial worker in the image of ‘increasingly fearful middle class’ (Sullivan). In the penal colonies of Australia in this period convicts constituted at least 50% of the population and education and reform were of immediate and practical concern linked as they were very pragmatically to the colonies’ and colonists everyday survival. For example between 1842 and 1845 12,762 British convicts of all ages and of both genders were transported to Van Diemen’s land under the new Probation ‘system’¹ swelling the convict population to around 30,000 souls with an average increase of around three and a half thousand men and 700 women transported annually to Norfolk island and Van Diemen’s land. According to historian and bibliographer Keith Adkins (2010) it was from the beginning of transportation customary to provide books for the convicts and there is evidence of this practice occurring also on the prison Hulks in Britain and on the ships transporting the convicts to Australia with a librarian being appointed to care for the books on board ship. Early book provision largely focused on exposing the convict to ‘God’s word’ as a path to reformation with organisations such as the Society for the

¹ United Kingdom. Commonwealth and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices *Confidential Memorandum on Transportation*,1

Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) and the Quakers responsible for the provision of reading material. This was to change over time with with support for the provision of literature and technical books being included in book collections.

Colin Arrott Browning, a ships surgeon writing of his work upon the convict ships between 1831-1847 in *The Convict Ships and England's Exiles* (1847) is an example of the link drawn between, evangelical Christianity, reading and moral reform. On board ship he enthusiastically established 'schools' which were governed by a routine in which

Our first aim and grand object is to set before these men the Scripture of inspiration. The voice which they require to hear is the voice of God the Spirit speaking to their consciences and their hearts from his inspired word, convincing them of sin, of righteousness, and of judgement to come

On the appointment of a 'librarian' Browning writes that their role

Is to have charge of the books, and perform the duty of servant to the surgeon-superintendent. He will supply the inspector of schools with such books as shall, from time to time be required, and receive from him such as he may wish to return. (p.308)

The link between penal reform, literacy and the provision of books motivated by evangelical Christianity is often discussed as part of a general understanding of the reformist social and philosophical landscape of the first half of the nineteenth century. Reading, books and libraries were seen to have an explicit role in the penal settlements however their role was not confined just to the spiritual. Many saw literacy and access to good books as crucial in the construction of a new, 'better' society through their use in civilising the uncivilised and morally corrupt through the provision of uplifting reading.

Benjamin Horne (1843)² in a report to the British Governor on the Point Puer Boys' Prison illustrates these contemporary concerns when he recommends to the Governor the employment of a schoolmaster at the Boys' Prison.

The juvenile prisoner however is in general deplorably ignorant of religious and moral duties, incapable of comprehending the public addresses of the Chaplain, or of reading and understanding good books which may be lent him to peruse. In this case, besides the labors of the Chaplain, it is obvious that those of the Schoolmaster are required.³ Education and the ability to read 'good books' were therefore seen as critical to the reform process and to 'spiritual and moral uplift' which contributed to the wellbeing of the colonies. Others saw the provision of education and books as providing economic stimulus by educating all to participate and contribute to a new and egalitarian society and in the transportation and transmission of the culture of the old world to a remote and hostile context. Others viewed the provision of useful recreation as essential in constraining and redirecting the convicts (and others) away from idleness and temptations. According to library historian Sydney Ditzion 'Middle class virtues are seen to be inherent in the library thinking of the period' (1830s) libraries played four main functions.

1. The library would keep people away from cheap and harmful entertainment eg. drinking
2. It would prevent crime and delinquency, even rehabilitate the delinquent
3. It would provide relaxation for the tired workingman
4. And it would provide reading for the poor and their children

This emphasis on keeping the workingman and the poor occupied was linked closely to increasing urbanisation and industrialisation in the UK and United States with the shift from craftsman and small unit production to large scale

² 'Benjamin Horne's report on Point Puer Boys' Prison, to His Excellency Sir John Franklin K.C.H. and K.R. Lieut. Governor of Van Diemen's Land, Point Puer, March 7 1843'. Edited extracts from Archives Office of Tasmania document C0280/157/520, accessed November 13, 2011
<http://keyportarthur.org.au/extras/1040/Benjamin%20Hornes%20report%20on%20Point%20Puer.pdf>

³ "Benjamin Horne's report on Point Puer Boys Prison",

industry meaning that traditional tradesman/apprentice practices began to break down and in this changing industrial context access to books was seen not only as a necessity for spiritual and cultural enlightenment but to guide the emerging industrial classes and began to frame the publically accessible library as a vehicle for popular education. Ditzon state

Books assisted not only in the mastery of the processes of production but also in the revelation of vast power in the broad expanse of knowledge which had hitherto been the property of the privileged few (Ditzon) p. 205

This has relevance to our understanding of the provision of books and reading in the penal settlements of Australia as survival was very much reliant on the production of goods of benefit to the colonies and the survival of the colonists in the harsh new environment. To survive the colonist needed a workforce who were familiar with the agricultural practices and new means of production and skilled in the trades. Guiding the convicts from idleness and temptation and supporting the economic survival of the colonies and its future success were therefore seen to be linked to the provision of reading materials and to education. Lacking the traditional means of skills and knowledge transfer reading was seen to provide access to the necessary knowledge to build the remote Australian settlements. Within this broader context the provision of literacy instruction, books and libraries for convicts became an integral element in the convict system most notably at Port Arthur established in 1833 and in Norfolk Island while administered by Captain McConachie who governed from 1840-1844. In a confidential report to the British government on Transportation to Australia it was claimed that by 1845 'there is not now a gang without its library and its religious instructor or free schoolmaster'⁴. With this

⁴ Op. cit p. 3c

in mind it is worth reviewing Jane’s findings of the current state of the provision of library services in Australia which are in sharp contrast to the 1845 claim and to reflect on what this may tell us about changing attitudes to the place of books, libraries and reading in Australia’s contemporary prison system.

State/Territory	No. of prisons	Administrative responsibility	Staffing within the libraries
Australian Capital Territory	1	Education	One qualified librarian plus inmate staff
New South Wales	37	Education	One qualified librarian responsible for oversight of all NSW prison libraries. One library technician at one prison plus inmate staff. All other sites have inmate staff only
Northern Territory	4	Education	No qualified librarian Inmate staff only
Queensland	13	Offender Programs (incorporating both education & recreation programs)	No qualified librarian Inmate staff only
South Australia	9	Education/Volunteers	No qualified librarian Inmate staff only
Tasmania	5	Education/State Library of Tasmania	No qualified librarian Inmate staff only
Victoria	14	No consistent arrangement – some Education, some Recreation	One qualified librarian in one library in addition to

			inmate staff. All other sites, inmate staff only
Western Australia	17	Education	One qualified librarian in each of two prisons, with inmate staff. All other sites, inmate staff only

These findings contrast starkly to countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom where all contemporary prisons support a library and maintain a qualified librarian. With an articulated emphasis on employability and vocational training within Australian prison education these statistics also requires us also to reflect on what they tell us about current attitudes towards vocational or technical education and how it is conducted. What is the commitment of government to prison education and to a reform agenda. Such provision and staffing is far removed for example from the vision of The Kangan Report which described Library Resource Centres as central to the delivery of vocational training stating that

“college libraries constitute a natural core for their activities; second, that the quality of the learning process is strongly influenced by the range and quality of services available in or from resource centres; third, that to the extent that colleges are prepared to accept a substitute for the traditional formal teaching environment the central resource centres will grow in importance for self directed learning.”

In the 1995 *Focus on Learning, A framework for the provision of learning resources, library and information services in vocational education and training* stated that ‘independent learning is promoted and encouraged only if students are supported by well managed and appropriate learning resources and the deliberate development of the skills to utilise them.’ While this discussion cannot be expanded here these are aspects of contemporary education provision upon which historic conditions can provide perspective. It should be remembered also that those incarcerated in contemporary Australian Prisons

have little or no access to electronic information and communication and that distance education; once available has increasingly moved online curtailing or eliminating opportunities for this form of education.

Like 21st century Australian prisons the early convict settlements also emphasised the vocational training of the convicts. The Port Arthur penal establishment was made up of a main settlement with a number of outlying 'stations' focussed on mining , agriculture and other industries and a boys reformatory established at Point Puer to separate the boys from the adult male convicts. Those at Port Arthur were to be employed in 'gangs' working on government projects such as road building, land clearing, food production and quarrying.⁵ At the Port Arthur establishment nearly 2000 men, women and boy convicts were involved in industries such as logging, shipbuilding, tanning, brick making, and blacksmithing and in the manufacture of items such as shoes, barrels, spokes and shingles⁶ . Training and work in these industries was seen as essential to the rehabilitation process as the colony would benefit from the convict's hard labour, acquisition of skills and the acquisition of positive work habits. The aim was to inculcate *'habits of industry and self-control as will qualify him [the convict] to enter upon his new career when the period of his confinement is expired'* ⁷ .

We have some insight into the context in which reading occurred within the penitential from descriptions of the cells inhabited by the convicts. Once contemporary account provides a description of a visit to the prison cell of a convict housed at the experimental separate prison at Port Arthur and states that 'on a shelf was a variety of books, the Bible, an arithmetic and three or

⁵ *ibid*: 3. 20 such gangs were said to be in place at the time of this memorandum with 8000 convicts employed in this way.

⁶ Terry Newman *Becoming Tasmania :Companion Website*. Parliament of Tasmania, (2008). accessed 20/03/12 <http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/php/BecomingTasmania/BTMainPage.htm> .

⁷ United Kingdom *ibid* p. 3

four others on different subjects, these are changed once a week'. This brief description corresponds with what is known elsewhere for example the Standing orders for the regulation of the probation system of convict labour in Van Diemen's land (1841) in which

The superintendent will issue the Books in his charge, at discretion, to the best-conducted Convicts of each class, on Saturday and Sunday afternoon (as cited in Adkins p. 89)

While a later description of the cells in the Pentridge 'Stockade' in 1863, a Jeremy Bentham inspired prison in the colony of Victoria shaped around the panopticon, provides a further insight into the reading context, at this time. In it states:

The cells are light, roomy, and well ventilated. Each contains a folding wooden bedstead, abundant bedding (no mattress), washing apparatus, patent water-closet, a little table and stool, a pair of slippers, a slate, and a pile of books, selected by the prisoner from a sufficient prison library, and frequently exchanged. A Bible and Prayer book are permanently in each cell, and other theological books are accessible; and in addition to these, and at the same time, the prisoners have school books and also "light literature," including novels, magazines, and the like. Perhaps it did not occur to Dickens, when he was writing the account of Uriah Heep in the Model Prison that it would be frequently read in the solitary cells of a gaol at the antipodes. There were books in most of the cells I went into-in some, a pile as big as if the occupant had just returned from Mudie's library. "The clergyman issues them, although they are very interesting," my guide said, with a delightful unconsciousness of being sarcastic.⁸

While a still later examples describe the reading practices of the convicts. In a letter to the editor of the Hobart Mercury in 1873 the correspondent writes

a very large and most useful library is provided and is freely used by the prisoners both for their Sunday reading and for those leisure intervals

⁸ "Impressions of Victoria", *The Argus*, October 18, 1865, 5. Accessed June 9, 2014. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article5768963>.

which wet weather and other causes may occasionally furnish (29th March 1873)

and in the Queensland State library a fragile set of rules for the library of the Prison establishment at St Helena describes the operation of the library there . The library was opened every Saturday where the librarian would firstly collect the previous week's books before issuing of new books in the afternoon. Prisoners were given one week to read the books and only one book could be borrowed at a time. Each yard was also assigned a catalogue from which prisoners could write list for future borrowings. Reading aloud to the convict population was also a common part of prison routine with regular readings of sacred texts and of worthy books at mealtimes, in the evenings and during the winter months. (46 p. 4).

These remnants of evidence come together to help us not only understand how books were provided and accessed in the convict settlements. However we know very little as yet of the reading habits of individual convicts though there is evidence of what was available and some almost indecipherable loans registers which remain to inform us a little of what books were read. What emerges from the evidence thus far is a system of libraries and book provision in which those with authority and power were central to the establishment, content of collections and the use of the libraries. Jane's findings indicate that with little consideration given to libraries and their collections in contemporary libraries motivation to read does not come from authority but involves a complex set of motivations including;

- To fill in time
- To escape into another world
- To maintain a connection with the world they have left behind through reading newspapers and magazines
- To connect with others around them by talking about books and reading
- To learn about things of interest to them

- To educate themselves, in recognition that they have often missed out on a lot of schooling and have great gaps in their knowledge that they now want to fill
- To better themselves – based on the belief that reading can improve their lives and futures
- To learn about themselves and to help them envisage possible alternative futures for themselves, by reading autobiographies and biographies about people who have triumphed over adversity
- To answer immediate information needs, such as details on health or legal issues

In her research Jane found that inmates were very cognisant of the current limitations of their libraries viewing the libraries as an inadequate support to their educations while recognising the potential for the libraries to help them with their formal and informal educations, and articulating frustration at the libraries inability to fulfil this role. They want to be able to read about all the things they should have learned in school, but missed out on. They want to be able to read about their own legal cases and to work on their ongoing legal matters. They want to be able to read about things that they receive training in, when they want to learn more, for example anger management, or drug and alcohol awareness. They want to learn what to do about their own health conditions, or health problems that family members are experiencing. They want to learn about how to get their kids back when they leave prison. None of these things can be facilitated by the library, and they have no other options, so they remain a mystery to them.

What has become evident is that the direction of the motivation for library provision has shifted away from the historic top down to recognition of the value of such service by the inmates themselves

The collections

What then do we know about what was available to the convicts other than school books and bibles? From the two surviving registers and from the other sources, we can start to recreate at least some small part of these library collection and reflect upon what they tell us about their purpose. As we have seen it seems likely that large multiple collection of single titles such as the

bible and prayer books existed and from the records unsurprisingly the collections were made up of religious texts and tracts, useful books such as those associated with the trades and agriculture and books intended for reading instruction and schooling (Adkins, 2010, Fyfe, 1992). Captain Maconochie's hand appears frequently in the titles in the collection with his preference for works of practical utility and 'useful recreation' as well as moral inspiration. As well as works of a religious nature works of fiction as was requested by Maconochie including *Robinson Crusoe* and the works of Sir Walter Scott. Maconochie also requested travel books and evidence of all of these can be found in the registers including *Cook's voyages* which Maconochie had requested as he felt the convicts and soldiers would benefit as 'the whole white race in this hemisphere wants softening towards its Aboriginal brethren (cited in Fyfe 1992) and the right books could achieve this. In the registers there is also large selection of poetry many copies of Chambers Miscellany, copies of the Scott's Waverley novels, a number of biographies and a selection of historical works. Evidence of practical books are few in the remnants of the collections but include titles such as *The Mechanic's* magazine (another suggestion found in Maconochie's requests), *Domestic economy vol. II* and *Lessons in Mechanics*. It is worth reflecting on the privilege provided by access to these books as for many the subscription cost and the cost of books would have previously been outside the resources of many of the convicts. This meant that access to the library and its collection would have been a carefully controlled and constructed privilege.