Reading to Educate and Reform: The Books and the Libraries of the Port Arthur Penal Establishment

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Abstract: In the nineteenth century, the British penal establishment of Port Arthur sat incongruously amongst the bleak and remote landscape of the Tasman peninsula in the Australian colony of Van Diemen’s Land. This place, known infamously for its harsh regime of solitude, corporal punishment and unremitting labour, seems an unlikely place for books to find a home. Yet, as will be discussed, books and reading had an important role to play in the life of the settlement and of the convicts sent there. This paper will discuss preliminary work into the collections of these prison libraries and their collections, and establish the context for their development as a case study on the use of books and libraries in the reformation of character in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Library History, Education History, Books and Reading, Prison Libraries

In the nineteenth century the British penal establishment of Port Arthur sat incongruously amongst the bleak and remote landscape of the Tasman peninsula in the Australian colony of Van Diemen’s Land. This settlement became known infamously for its harsh regime of solitude, corporal punishment and unremitting labour and seems an unlikely place for books to find a home. Yet, as will be discussed, books and reading had a role to play in the life of the settlement and of the convicts sent there. A library at Port Arthur, it has been claimed, held over 13,000 volumes at its peak1 and there is evidence to suggest donations of up to 4000 items were made to the neighbouring Point Puer Boys’ settlement for the establishment of a circulating library for the boys housed there2. It often elicits some surprise that libraries such as these existed in what have commonly been viewed as brutal and isolated places of punishment. Books, reading and libraries were however seen by many involved in early nineteenth reforms to the prison system as key to the reformation of character and preparation for life outside the prison. Such libraries therefore existed not only in the penal settlements but also on the prison hulks in the United Kingdom and elsewhere and the prison ships sent to the new colonies. The link made between education, reading, books and libraries underpinned much reformist thinking and drove the establishment and support of these libraries. This paper will discuss some preliminary work into the collections of the prison libraries at the Port Arthur Penal Establishment and discuss the context for their development as a case study into the use of books and libraries in the reformation of character in the nineteenth century.

The establishment of the Port Arthur penal settlement in 1833 is set against a backdrop of an increasingly industrialised society, an expanding middle class and a period of library development and penal reform which mirror the changing social conditions of the first half of the nineteenth century. Prison library commentator Larry Sullivan characterises the period in which Port Arthur was established and the decades following as

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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.

In this environment stern punishment, routine and order were viewed as essential to the prison system and reading linked closely to reform objectives within prisons and generally as a means of constructing the expanding industrial worker in the image of an increasingly fearful middle class. Rarely examined is how libraries were seen to have an active role in this. This may be because later commentators have anachronistically viewed libraries as passive agencies through which other forces acted. This is at odds with the contemporary view of them being an active agency in the process of reform. The establishment of libraries of various types can be seen not only to reflect moral and religious agendas but attitudes to education and to trade and labour. In this libraries are seen to have an active and at times central role to play.

In Scotland, England and the United States (US), in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the changes in industry and production contributed to the rise of subscription libraries. These aimed no longer just to entertain as their pre-cursor commercial circulating libraries had, but were established to contain and direct the population through useful and rational recreation, to provide guidance and act as exemplars of desirable social values. Some, such as the apprentice libraries in the US, were established at the instigation of the trade associations as they negotiated the shift away from the traditional trade model to emerging large scale production and attempted to remain relevant. The apprentice libraries aimed to provide access to “the broad expanse of knowledge which had hitherto been the property of the privileged few” and act as a means of self-improvement. Other libraries such as mercantile libraries and mechanics’ institutes were established at this time by industrialist, philanthropist and other wealthy groups to serve a largely utilitarian function related to educating the new industrial worker, to direct his leisure time and provide productive and appropriate entertainment. According to library historian Sydney Ditzion these 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.

Ultimately, in the latter parts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these subscription libraries were to be usurped by the emerging free and public library movements which reflected a number of new elements in the agenda for libraries, including the promotion of democracy and mass education. The question to be explored is if the imperatives driving library development generally can be seen reflected in the collections of the penal establishments of nineteenth-century Australia.

Port Arthur

The probation system to which Port Arthur belonged aimed to both punish and reform. The first aim was to be achieved through “coercive labour” the latter through “religious and moral influences and the inculcation of industry and regularity”. Literacy instruction and the

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6 British Parliamentary Papers, 'Regulations for the Religious and Moral Instruction of Convicts in Van Diemen's Land', Convict Department, December 1,1843, Correspondence Between the Secretary of State and the Governor of Van Diemen's Land on the Subject of Convict Discipline, 78 no. XXXV (1845): 21-22.
promotion of reading were championed by many in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as part of the reform process and aligned to moral and humanitarian objectives. It was not just the mastery of reading alone which was the objective as reading the wrong things was viewed as dangerous. Rather the ability to read was seen as a means to an end – the transformation of character – and fuelled by a belief that reading was a weapon which could be used to battle the deviant thinker, reform the sinner and help combat crime and vice. According to Sullivan, “reading materials [it was believed] would induce an ethical and moral change in the convicts” and in this a library of good and useful books, carefully chosen, was essential to both the moral life of the prisoner and in the prevention of crime. In the penal settlements the link between reading and reform was first established through the appointment of the settlement minister to the role of librarian whose task it was to keep a record of the library books and to distribute them to the convicts. On board the convict ship this role often fell to the person responsible for the overall well-being of those onboard – the ship’s surgeon. Colin Arrott Browning, one such ship’s surgeon, writing of his work on the convict ships between 1831-1847, highlights the link between evangelical Christianity, discipline, 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.

Browning also writes of the appointment of a ‘librarian’ aboard his ship who

> 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.

In such a colony the fears of the middle classes were manifested in the presence of large and visible numbers of those elsewhere it was hoped would be subdued and reformed. It is perhaps not be surprising in this environment to find close attention being paid to the development of libraries and other cultural institutions as part of the overall development of the community. In the colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land of the 1820s and 30s we find present the replication of many of the same institutions as in other parts of the world. In 1823 in Sydney we see the establishment of the Australian Religious Tract Society; in 1827 the establishment of the first mechanics’ institute in the Australian colonies, the Hobart Athenaeum; and in 1831 the Tasmanian Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was established. According to Tasmanian library historian John Levett, by 1850 almost “every significant Tasmanian village had its parish library”; in “Hobart most churches had a library attached” and even the Mercantile Assistants’ Association had a library for “the mutual improvement of members’ intellectual ability and social standing”.

### The Prison Libraries

In the last decades of the century and in the final days of the settlement the Colonial Secretaries’ Office of Van Diemen’s Land called for an inventory to be made of all the remaining items belonging to the colonial government at the settlement. Amongst other duties the settlement’s Civil Commandant, James Boyd, was asked in January of 1871 to furnish the Office “with a

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7 Sullivan, "Between Empty Covers" : 26-29.
catalogue of all reading Books belonging to the government in the establishment under your control, both of a religious and Secular character. This request, and the resulting list, provides us with a window into the contents of the libraries established for the use of the prisoners at these penal settlements. What is further evidenced from this list, and from the donation records of organisations such as the various religious tract societies, is that rather than the Port Arthur penal settlement having only one library it in fact had a network of libraries for the use of prisoners and officers: in the main settlement, the settlement outstations, the colony’s female factories, and the other penal settlements of the colony during this period.

How large these other libraries were and what their total collections consisted of remains contentious although something is known about the library and books at the Point Peur Boys’ establishment on Norfolk Island, another of the settlements of this time. What also begins to emerge from the primary sources is the importance placed by government, religious and civil administrators on reading, access to books (of the ‘right’ sort) and, by extension, libraries in the reformation of character. Next to the utility of labour reading was viewed by many at this time as the most valuable and extensive means for improving the moral character of the depraved. In the words of a US prison matron of the period, Elisa Fanham “The utility of the well-adapted books to ignorant and immoral persons is beyond dispute. If there is any way to turn man from evil deeds, it is to give him new thoughts.”

According to historian and bibliographer Keith Adkins it was, from the beginning, customary to provide books for the prisoners at Port Arthur. Evidence for this can be found in the requests being made by ministers of religion and others to societies such as the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and the various Religious Tract Societies for books for the convicts. It can also be found in pleas for money to purchase books by those such as Norfolk Island’s Captain Alexander Maconochie. Various reports, letters and newspaper articles of the period also describe a library at the main penitentiary building at Port Arthur to the reader, usually in glowing terms, and make reference to collections at Point Peur, the separate model prison, convict infirmary and asylum of Port Arthur, and other settlements such as the Cascades and Norfolk Island. In addition, a subscription library existed in the Port Arthur township, alongside the prison libraries for those not associated directly with the penal establishment, and an officers’ library seemed to play an important place in the social life of the prison administration for a period.

Descriptions of the library at Port Arthur are usually of the library post-1857 after the conversion of the settlement granary into a penitentiary along the lines of those emerging elsewhere in the UK and US. Contemporary plans of the penitentiary show the library on the second floor near the mess hall, with one newspaper correspondent describing its location this way:

Proceeding by a double staircase we arrive at a landing partitioned off with green drapery; on the right, our attention is directed to the word “Pantry” over a door which, the attendant politely opens, and displays rows of bright tin plates, and piles of pannikins of the same material. He tells us that the inmates eat all up at each meal, so that although the room is named the pantry,” we are not to expect to find cold meat or anything else eatable there. On the other side of the landing is the library for the use of the prisoners, and containing about 2,000 useful and entertaining books, Passing through the green drapery, we enter à noble dining hall, 140 feet long, 32 foot wide, and of proportionate height, supported by slender pillars.

10 Colonial Secretary’s Office, Memo 1874.
13 Fyfe, Books Behind Bars:132
14 Fyfe, Books Behind Bars
From sources such as the government commissariat’s call for tenders for books for the settlements we also can start to build up an idea of some part of the collections held in the penal settlements. The books were on the whole of a religious or moral nature or were considered practical and useful. There was little time for fiction though it was not dismissed completely. Keith Adkins in his research has uncovered a few extant volumes once belonging to the library and other hints of the collection can be found in government calls for tenders which include the provision of school books and occasionally other items such as magazines.

It is difficult to know with certainty how these libraries functioned but there are a number of standard practices which seem to have been applied across various penal establishments which provide some clues. For example the Standing Orders for the Regulation of the Probation System of Convict Labour in Van Diemen’s Land states ; “The superintendent will issue the Books in his charge, at discretion, to the best-conducted Convicts of each class, on Saturday and Sunday afternoon.” A letter to the editor of The Mercury, in response to a previous correspondent’s comment on the ill treatment of the convicts, further illustrates the use of the library:

>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 which wet weather and other causes may occasionally furnish.

Further illustrating procedures is a discussion of the convict system where we find this description of education and the use of the library:

I have a return of the periods of instruction given for a whole week, partly in class, partly in the cell. I find that the lowest sub-section receives during the week nine hours’ instruction; the two next above it, seven hours; the next, six; and the second, or highest class taught, four hours; the first and smallest class too much educated to need schooling, but the master’s assistance is given to any of the men if they require it. The prisoners are allowed various books to retain in their cells, besides materials for reading and writing. They are also allowed to borrow books from an excellent library in the prison—the first class, two secular and one religious book, exchanged fortnightly; and the other classes in proportion to their reading faculties. There is a good library for the subordinate officers of the prison, retained for their use during one year, and then merged in the general prison library. It includes many standard works, historical, scientific, philosophical, meditative, and miscellaneous.

Finally, in the Queensland State library, there are the fragile remains of a set of rules for the library of the Penal Establishment at St Helena in Queensland in 1887. While separated in time from the Port Arthur Settlement these rules seem to reflect what is known of the earlier libraries. These rules show that the library was open every Saturday. Books were collected by the librarian in the morning and then in the afternoon new books were issued. 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 a list for future borrowings. All of these activities tie in closely with what is known of prison practice elsewhere.

Port Arthur and the regime under which it operated in many ways serve as an archetype of the conditions, concerns, conflicts and agendas of the era in which it was established. It was an experiment in penal discipline unique to Van Diemen’s Land and shared a theoretical base with emerging systems being employed elsewhere. In this environment the provision of books and

16 Adkins, “Convict Probation Station Libraries in Colonial Tasmania.”
18 qQuoted in Adkins “Convict Probation Station Libraries in Colonial Tasmania”.
20 Sydney Morning Herald, August 29, 1861, 3.
21 St. Helena Penal Establishment. Rules for Prison Library, [Qld], 1887.
access to a library were a critical element in the reform process and their management and organisation essential to the system. The provision of ‘good’ books to occupy the idle reflected many of the wider motivations underpinning the mercantile and mechanics’ libraries elsewhere and in promoting libraries such as these we can see the early manifestation of those objectives which were to drive the free and public library movements later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
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