



The History and Romance of Crime: Prisons Over Seas

Arthur Griffiths

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It will hardly be denied after an impartial consideration of all the facts I shall herein set forth, that the British prison system can challenge comparison with any in the world. It may be no more perfect than other human institutions, but its administrators have laboured long and steadfastly to approximate perfection. Many countries have already paid it the compliment of imitation. In most of the British colonies, the prison system so nearly resembles the system of the mother country, that I have not given their institutions any separate and distinct description. No doubt different methods are employed in the great Empire of India; but they also are the outcome of experience, and follow lines most suited to the climate and character of the people for whom they are intended. Cellular imprisonment would be impossible in India. Association is inevitable in the Indian prison system. Again, it is the failure to find suitable European subordinate officers that has brought about the employment of the best-behaved prisoners in the discipline of their comrades: a system, as I have been at some pains to point out, quite abhorrent to modern ideas of prison management. As for the retention of transportation by the Indian government, when so clearly condemned at home, it is defensible on the grounds that the penalty of crossing the sea, the "Black Water," possesses peculiar terrors to the Oriental mind; and the Andaman Islands are, moreover, within such easy distance as to ensure their effective supervision and control. Nearer home, we may see Austria adopting an English method,—the "movable" or temporary prison, by the use of which such works as changing the courses of rivers have been rendered possible and the prison edifices of Lepoglava, Aszod and Kolosvar erected, in imitation of Chatham, Borstal and Wormwood Scrubs. France has also constructed in the outskirts of Paris a new prison for the department of the Seine, and she may yet find that the British progressive system is more effective for controlling habitual crime than transportation to New Caledonia. In a country where every individual is ticketed and labelled from birth, where police methods are quite despotic, and the law claims the right, in the interests of the larger number, to override the liberty of the subject, the professional criminal might be held at a tremendous disadvantage. It is true that the same result might be expected from the Belgian plan of prolonged cellular confinement; but, as I shall point out, this system is more costly, and can only be enforced with greater or less, but always possible, risks to health and reason.

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