Penal servitude, a sentence of long-term imprisonment, was first established in the mid-nineteenth century. Helen Johnston, professor of criminology at the University of Hull; Barry Godfrey, professor of social justice at the University of Liverpool; and David J. Cox, reader in criminal justice history at the University of Wolverhampton, explore the rise of penal servitude and the evolution and administration of the convict prison system in Great Britain from the Penal Servitude Act of 1853 to the Criminal Justice Act of 1948. They examine changes in policy and administration and utilize materials compiled by parliamentary commissions, annual reports by the directors of convict prisons, official records, newspaper reports, and the writings and correspondence of elite actors. Furthermore, the authors have also delved deeply into the lives of the prisoners themselves. Through skillful use of long-overlooked sources in the National Archives of the UK, they have reconstructed the lives of 650 people, both men and women, who served at least one sentence of penal servitude. Thus, Penal Servitude examines convict prisons from the perspectives both of the elite and of prisoners and provides detailed and comprehensive analysis of these prisons and their occupants.

Johnston, Godfrey, and Cox begin by exploring “how the notion of a national government-run penitential system developed in the late eighteenth century” (p. 10). At the end of the eighteenth century, despite the efforts of prison reformers, prisons remained places of detention that did not charge or reform inmates. The role of the state was limited to transporting convicts overseas and arranging contracts for prison hulks (decommissioned warships). While transporting convicts to Australia, the government began to experiment with prisons, and the expansion of public works prisons occurred rapidly. Transportation to Australia declined precipitously due to an anti-transportation movement. In 1840, for example, the government began diverting transport ships from New South Wales to Van Diemen’s Land. New South Wales authorities were happy to be rid of convicts and employers embraced “a wave of new, free settlers whom they considered to be more re-
liable than convict labourers” (p. 21). Shortly thereafter, anti-transportation sentiment emerged in Van Diemen’s Land. In sum, Australia no longer needed convicts and Britons now began to think through how to create a home prison estate. Sir Joshua Jebb, “the towering figure behind the creation of the new penal servitude system ‘at home’” (p. 25) played an important role in the move from transportation to implementing long prison sentences within Great Britain, and his vision mixed reformation and punitiveness. Prisons had to be built in order to accommodate prisoners, of course, and from the late 1840s to 1878, ten establishments were built or adapted as public works prisons.

What was life like within the prisons? The authors spend multiple chapters answering this important question in many different ways. They examine the bureaucracy of prisons and the officials employed in this system. Prisoners accumulated marks and, when they had sufficient marks, were promoted to a different stage/class, which involved the granting of additional privileges. Marks and stages were particularly important because, among other things, they governed the prisoner’s frequency of communication with the outside world. Prison uniforms made the status of prisoners clear to authorities. Furthermore, they were stamped with a large, broad arrow to indicate that prisoners were the property of the government and to shame prisoners. The daily regime in the separate confinement prisons “consisted of labour and isolation in cells, punctuated by attendance at chapel or visits from the chaplain for religious and moral education, as well as by daily exercise” (p. 66). In the public works system, convicts generally worked from about 5:00 a.m. to about 6:15 p.m. Jebb hoped prisoners would learn or improve their skills in a useful trade. However, his vision was soon superseded by “more practical and monotonous work designed primarily to help finance the large cost of building and maintaining the prison estate” (p. 72). Authorities considered the attainment of education a very important part of a prisoner’s sentence. Indeed, “unless convicts had progressed in their secular instruction, they were not permitted to progress in their special class” (p. 80). Prisoners attended chapel services, and all prisons had a Church of England chaplain and a Roman Catholic priest. Nonconformists and Jews had to make do with irregular visits from their religious leaders. Henry Harcourt, a Muslim, faced conflict with prison authorities.

Prisons were both disciplinary institutions dedicated to keeping order as well as lively communities of men and women. Roughly half of the 650 prisoners in this study committed minor regulatory offenses (including speaking without permission, singing in quiet times, not walking quickly enough, and communicating with other prisoners during divine services). Large-scale riots and disturbances were rare and the authors note two major disturbances at Chatham (1861) and Dartmoor (1932). The political discourse of the “deserving poor” and the “undeserving poor” played an important role in shaping prisons. Authorities did not want people to go to prison to get better health care or a better diet. Consequently, convict prisons “engendered ill health in thousands of prisoners, and the treatment inmates received was basic at best” (pp. 106–107). The prison diet tended to be inadequate and monotonous and was one of the reasons for the 1932 Dartmoor riot.

The authors then move to a discussion of prison communities, with particular focus on gender, sexuality, and class. Women sent to convict prisons generally came from urban areas and had been convicted of stealing clothes, textiles, or household goods. A typical woman convict “would be single or married (as they made up similar proportions in our sample) and, after being convicted of larceny, would serve just one penal servitude sentence” (p. 120). Were male convict prisons violent places full of violent men? The authors take exception with theorists who have portrayed prisons as tightly controlled environments that produce docile bodies. As they noted previously, rule
breaking of various types occurred in prisons, everything from minor infractions to deadly violence. The relationship between warders and prisoners ranged from friendly to distant/neutral, but the possibility of violence between the two groups always existed and did occur. Nevertheless, the records suggest that much more violence occurred among prisoners than between prisoners and warders. Violence was often a test of masculinity. Victorian prison was in many senses a microcosm of life outside the walls, and “the most successful were those who could take control of their environment and circumstances, while those who were unwilling or unable to fight for what they needed were left bereft” (p. 132). Homosexuality appears infrequently in reports and people seemed to spend more time worrying about masturbation by prisoners. Unsurprisingly, class background mattered and could make a significant difference in a prisoner’s treatment and experience in a convict prison.

After a detailed and thorough discussion of prison life, the authors turn their attention to release and recidivism. Becoming free was a process, not a singular event. The licensing system, which entailed early release, offered many advantages, including reducing costs and making the system more affordable, helping to keep order in the prisons by holding out the promise of an early release, and allowing authorities to correct errors that threatened to undermine the legitimacy of the criminal justice system. Licensing reduced the length of sentences and Discharged Prisoners Aid Societies offered licensed convicts some support. However, a central and persistent problem remained, namely, the stigma of having been in prison. Furthermore, people fretted about recidivism among licensed convicts. Lurid newspaper accounts of crimes committed by released prisoners contributed to fears about recidivism. License-holders faced barriers to reform, including being targeted by the police. Consequently, as the authors note, many of the convicts in their sample were frequently reconvicted and imprisoned. The convict prison population eventually began to decline and the demise of penal servitude occurred with the Criminal Justice Act of 1948.

Johnston, Godfrey, and Cox, through deep analysis of an impressive array of sources, examine convict prisons from the inside out. In the records at the National Archives, they found “life, friendship, chatting, the occasional illicit love affair, and multiple episodes of fighting, violence, and disorder” (p. 198). Prisons, they conclude, were “contradictory places that defy coherent narratives” (p. 199). This well-researched and well-written book will appeal to anyone interested in prison history, criminology, criminal justice history, and British history.
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