Port Arthur: The Beginning of Education and Training in Modern Australian Correctional Systems

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Abstract

Port Arthur was established in 1830 as a secondary prison for punishing male convicts who had been transported to Australia but had re-offended since their arrival. It was located in a remote part of south-eastern Tasmania and virtually escape proof. It was notorious for the brutal treatment of convicts and was commonly referred to as “hell on Earth”. Convicts were employed in harvesting timber, shipbuilding, agriculture, construction and supplying the colony with various commodities. Port Arthur was founded on Governor George Arthur’s belief that convicts could be reformed while being punished. He implemented a system of separation and classification, strict punishment and discipline, hard work, rewards for good behaviour, religious instruction, education and trade training. This was intended to provide convicts with the opportunity to become useful law-abiding citizens once their sentences were complete through the skills they gained in prison. However, convicts who refused to reform had a very difficult life indeed. Port Arthur also had the first juvenile prison established in the British Empire, an innovation subsequently adopted throughout the Empire. Port Arthur was also the beginning of a modern welfare system and pioneered scientific and compassionate treatment of mental illness. We have come a long way in the humane treatment of inmates since Governor Arthur’s experiments in the early 1800’s, yet many of his principles can be traced though to today’s correctional practices. It is particularly significant that education and training were seen by Arthur as having a critical role in preparing convicts for life after prison and to reduce the likelihood of re-offending, a philosophy that is still valid today.

The Early Days

In the early 1800’s living conditions in industrialised Britain were atrocious. Commonly men, women and children were forced to live on the streets and resort to crime to survive. These crimes were petty by today’s standards, but punishment was severe. British prisons were overcrowded and disease ridden. They were places of punishment, brutality, de-humanisation and deprivation – punishment not rehabilitation. In response to overcrowding in the prisons and the need to provide cheap labour in the colonies, the British authorities used transportation as a punishment. Viewed by convicts as ‘a fate worse than death’, it meant a 5 month journey by sea under difficult conditions to a strange land (Australia), and for most, no opportunity to ever return home and to their families. Approximately 162,000 male and female convicts were transported to Australia until transportation ceased in 1853, almost half to Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania).

The Establishment of Port Arthur

Port Arthur, named after George Arthur, Governor of Van Diemen’s Land 1824 – 1836, was established on Tasman Peninsular approximately 50 kilometres south east of Hobart in 1830 as a replacement for the unsuccessful and remote prisons at Maria Island and Macquarie Harbour. The site was chosen because of it remoteness and natural resources. It was almost impossible to escape.
In 1833 Port Arthur became a facility for repeat offenders and grew steadily. By 1840 there were over 2000 convicts at Port Arthur and surrounding outstations engaged in shipbuilding, shoe making, clothing, brooms, foundry, timber harvesting, furniture making, brick making, stone masonry, and growing food for the colony.

Convicts were mostly lower class with no education and little likelihood of improving their lot. There was a minority of convicts with trades or professions whose skills were much in demand.

**Governor Arthur’s Vision**

Port Arthur was a secondary prison. Convicts sent there were second offenders, that is, they had re-offended since their transportation and arrival in the colony. Arthur believed that these ‘incorrigibles’ could be reformed while being punished. He established a system of separation and classification of convicts, strict discipline and punishment, hard work but rewards for good behaviour, religious instruction, education and training in a variety of trades. His objective was to provide convicts with the skills to help integrate them back into society once they completed their sentences hence reduce the likelihood of them re-offending.

Arthur established the first juvenile prison in the British Empire. Boy convicts, 12 to 17 years of age, had their own prison at Point Puer across the bay from Port Arthur. They were segregated from hardened adult convicts, subject to strict discipline, received religious instruction, basic schooling and training in a selection of trades. The boys were expected to work in a variety of activities including much of the construction work around the prison. As adults, many became valued artisans in the colonies because of the skills gained at Point Puer.

**The Separate Prison**

By the late 1840’s a new philosophy in prison reform was being implemented throughout the British Empire. It was different from Governor Arthur’s in that it was based on the belief that physical punishment only hardens a criminal and does not reform them. Reform requires quiet and solitary reflection of their sins. The Separate Prison at Port Arthur was completed in 1849. New arrivals spent the first 4 to 12 months there before being assigned to other work around Port Arthur.

Upon arrival convicts were allocated a number by which they were identified, their name was no longer used. They were only allowed to communicate with staff, not other convicts. They spent 23 hours per day in their cell alone and in silence (noise was not tolerated). They even worked in their cells shoemaking, broom making or tailoring. When moving outside their cells to attend chapel or exercise yards they were required to maintain silence and wear hoods to prevent contact with other convicts. Punishment involved being locked in pitch black cell in total silence for up to 3 weeks.

Did this treatment reform convicts? Probably not! It certainly sent some of them insane but it is unknown how many because records were not kept. The Separate Prison was a flawed experiment and we will never know how many lives it ruined. This practice was still being followed into the 1860’s.

**Training and Education**

For the boys at Point Puer, at 6.15pm every evening their barracks were turned into a school room for one hour. Twice every day they received religious instruction and were required to attend church twice on Sundays. The Bible was used as a reader. The boys could also learn a variety of trades; carpentry, shoe making, tailoring, baking, gardening, bookbinding, wood turning, stone masonry, brick making, boat building, blacksmithing and coopering.

Adult convicts worked six days per week from dawn to dusk engaged in hard physical labour. After supper they were given the opportunity to engage in education. The Penitentiary 3rd floor mess hall was used as a school room and had a library. One can only speculate on how effective the convicts would be as students after spending the day cutting stone, working up to their armpits in freezing
water in the shipyard or cutting huge logs and carrying them out of the bush? Convicts received religious instruction as compulsory attendance at church on Sundays. Many convicts learn trades such as carpentry, shoe making, tailoring, baking, gardening, bookbinding, wood turning, stone masonry, brick making, brick laying, ship building, blacksmithing and coopering.

The Present

Today we recognise the importance of education and training in order to reduce recidivism just as Governor Arthur did. Inmates have access to a wide range of nationally certified educational programs to suit their level of education and need. Programs range from basic numeracy and literacy through Certificate I, Certificate II and Certificate III general and vocational courses. Some inmates study for university degrees whilst in prison. Training and traineeships are available in a variety of vocations.

Today training is also recognised as being important for correctional officers; they are required to be more professional. In Arthur’s day they were initially soldiers. Once the soldiers left the colony to fight in the New Zealand war then civilian prison guards were used and they were often ex convicts – largely untrained and of dubious character. Today’s correctional officers receive a high level of training to reflect the complex nature of the job and the emphasis on inmate welfare – a much higher level of skills are required.

Conclusion

Governor George Arthur was a visionary. His belief in providing convicts with education and training to prepare them for a useful life outside prison and reduce the likelihood of re-offending is still reflected in current practice. Other practices that can be traced back to Port Arthur include segregation and classification of inmates, juvenile prison (separation from hardened adult prisoners), and a welfare system looking after the disadvantaged and scientific and compassionate treatment of mental illness.

Although Port Arthur had a reputation for brutal treatment of convicts and failures such as the Separate Prison, there are many positive lessons to be learnt by studying Governor Arthur’s bold experiment. It changed the nature of prisons throughout the British Empire and that impact is still felt today, 132 years after Port Arthur closed.

References


Biography

Michael Cuthbertson is employed at Brush Farm Corrective Services Academy (BFCSA), NSW Department of Corrective Services as the Program Development and Support Consultant, Curriculum and Systems Advice Unit. This is an internal consultancy unit advising training units on standards, compliance, curriculum development, continuous improvement and other related areas.

Prior to working at Brush Farm Academy Michael was employed as a teacher by the NSW Department of Education and Training, and before that by TAFE NSW. He has also worked in Information Technology, health and mapping.

He holds qualifications in Education, Information Technology, Mathematics and Training and Assessment.