



Irish (Or Crofton) System

The Irish system of penal discipline, developed by **Sir Walter Crofton** in Ireland from 1854 to 1862, was viewed by late-19th-century prison reformers as a model for prison administration. In the 1870s, supporters of the Irish system played a major role in formulating correctional policies and shaping the reformatory movement in the United States. Vestiges of **Crofton's** Irish system can be found even today in the centralization of correctional administration, contemporary classification, education and behavior modification programs, community corrections, and parole.

BACKGROUND

When transportation of convicts to Australia finally ceased in 1868, prisons throughout Britain became increasingly overcrowded and troublesome. At the same time, concern grew over the number of convicts being released into the community, some through "tickets of leave" developed in Australia as a form of parole for good behavior.

In famine-struck Ireland in 1854, the British government responded to serious conditions in Irish prisons by appointing **Walter Crofton** (1815–1897) chairman of the Irish Board of Directors of Convict Prisons. With a centralized colonial Irish government, **Crofton** and his directors began to construct the Irish convict system. In their work, they were greatly influenced by the ideas of Alexander Maconochie, who had been placed in charge of the Australian penal colony on Norfolk Island in 1840. At the time, Norfolk Island housed convicts who had committed crimes subsequent to their transportation to Australia and consequently were viewed as requiring the most punitive of conditions. Maconochie, convinced of the value of positive incentives, developed a "mark system" rewarding work and good behavior with earned amenities and early release. Though Maconochie's experiment lasted only a matter of years, since he was removed from his post in 1844, his philosophy of convict discipline and prison management was widely disseminated and adapted by **Crofton**. With almost 4,000 convicts, **Crofton** and his associates faced overcrowded housing, limited resources, inadequate staff, and malnourished and resistant inmates. Out of these conditions, **Crofton** organized and skillfully publicized the "Irish system" of penal discipline.

THE IRISH SYSTEM

Crofton set out to develop a system that could integrate both punishment and reformation. In it, as in the mark system, prisoners were required to complete three stages to be eligible for a sentence reduction and/or supervised release. The Irish system, as it came to be called, was made up of an initial punishment stage and two stages of increasing reformatory incentives.

During the first or punishment stage, men were held in solitary confinement at Dublin's Mountjoy Prison, which had been built in 1850 and was thought to be a model cellular prison. Under **Crofton's** system, men were placed in separate cells, with a restricted diet. For eight or nine months they were held in spartan conditions and put to work at oakum picking. Women, viewed as more "sensitive," were held four months to the same regime. The goals of this part of the process were control and submission, a "deterrent" awareness of the consequences of crime, and after enforced idleness, desire for productive work.

During this period of punishment, **Crofton** asserted, the inevitable hostility that punitive and degrading practices

evoke could be averted through strategies that sustained hope for liberty. Consequently, each convict was instructed that the successful completion of the later stages depended on their self-control as "arbiters of their own fate" who needed an active cooperative relationship with "those placed over them." **Crofton** demanded that staff maintain positive, fair, and model relationships with prisoners to reinforce the legitimacy of their rule. Secular and religious education was critical for reformation. **Crofton** enlisted the aid of the National Board of Education to provide licensed teachers and arranged for both Catholic and Protestant chaplains. The observations and recommendations of the teachers and chaplains, although sometimes disputed and censored, were included in the yearly reports.

At the successful completion of their first stage, male convicts were transferred to public work prisons while the women remained at Mountjoy, working in a common sewing room. "Benevolent Catholic and Protestant ladies" regularly visited the women and there was nursery space for children. For both women and men entering the second stage, there was a four-level system of classification. Earning a designated number of "marks" at each level, based on the "will to achieve" in discipline, school, and industry, brought increasing gratuities and privileges and a distinctive badge. Misconduct could bring the loss of marks, restricted diet, and for men, return to Mountjoy. Monthly rosters, meticulously kept for each convict, can still be viewed in the Irish National Archives.

After achieving the advanced second-stage level, at the third stage convicts, with the exception of political prisoners, moved from the ordinary prisons to the highly publicized "intermediate prisons." There, in **Crofton's** words, "individualization" with small numbers took place in an open environment. Descriptions stressed that the purpose was not only to test the assumed self-control and good conduct of the convict but through lectures and job placement to increase their chances for employment after release and lessen public fears by their visible presence in the community. At their intermediate-prison stage, women convicts were placed in two "houses of refuge"; at Goldenbridge the Sisters of Mercy administered a refuge for Catholic women, while Protestant ladies provided a smaller refuge in Dublin.

In 1857, only after the integrated three stages of the Irish system were in place, were "tickets of leave" issued providing the final incentive of a reduction of sentence and supervised release. With a well-organized and centrally controlled constabulary developed for Ireland under British rule, each released convict registered immediately and reported monthly to the local constabulary. Any irregularity or a new crime brought the convict back to prison, protecting the Irish use of tickets of leave from the public outcry in England.

The development of the Irish system met resistance not only from inmates, who smashed Mountjoy's cell fixtures, but also from within **Crofton's** staff, some of whom resented the strict discipline, frequent inspections, and low wages, as well as from his English colleagues. Joshua Jebb, **Crofton's** counterpart in England, aided by a disgruntled Presbyterian chaplain at the Cork Prison, reacted to the Irish system's acclaim and the implied failure of his efforts in England by launching attacks on the validity of **Crofton's** widely circulated reports. Some noted that employment in a depopulated Ireland rather than a system of prison discipline aided the successful integration of convicts and others warned of dangers to liberty in police surveillance. Pamphlet wars were waged between proponents and opponents of the Irish system. In the eight years before **Crofton's** retirement in 1862, however, the Irish system became the working model of the prison reform movement.

NETWORKS OF REFORM

During this period, in what has been described as a form of "penitentiary tourism," persons interested in prison reform visited prisons and met regularly in national and international prison congresses. Their motivations varied, including a mixture of belief in the new social sciences, a commitment to evangelical Christianity or humanitarian benevolence, a middle-class fear of the "dangerous classes," and governmental concerns with social disorder. **Crofton** was a frequent speaker at the yearly meetings of the National Association for the Promoting of the Social Sciences, and the Dublin meeting in 1861 brought visitors to the intermediate-stage

prison at Lusk and the women's refuge at Goldenbridge, spreading the word of their successes internationally. Glowing descriptions of the total dedication of Lusk's James Organ to lecturing, finding employment, and constant supervision of male convicts modeled the role for future parole agents. Women reformers, including Rhoda Coffin, instrumental in 1873 in founding the first separate women's institution in the United States, visited and praised the Irish system's provision for women. With their Dublin contacts, members of the New York Prison Association began planning with Zebulon Brockway for the first reformatory based on the mark system, opening at Elmira in 1876. Contacts with **Crofton** and his writings by the organizers of the 1870 National Prison Association meeting, held during a period of economic and political unrest, led to the call in the famous Declaration of Principles for the implementation of the "Irish or **Crofton** prison system" in the United States.

CONCLUSION

In the context of contemporary penal theory, the goals of the Irish system, to produce through individualized surveillance "an altered and reformed being," could be considered as a model for Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power. Though **Crofton's** system was never developed in its entirety outside of Ireland, and even there existed only for a relatively short period, increasing centralization of correctional administration, the use of classification, forms of behavior modification, educational programs, community corrections, and parole have become integral components of correctional policy and practices.

—Esther Heffernan

Further Reading

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Entry Citation:

Heffernan, Esther. "Irish (Or Crofton) System." *Encyclopedia of Prisons & Correctional Facilities*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2004. 483-86. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.



