



Maconochie, Alexander (1787–1860)

Alexander **Maconochie** is an important figure in penal history, known as the originator of the “marks” system. **Maconochie** developed this strategy of incentives and privileges at the Norfolk Island penal colony in the mid-1800s as a means of managing men who had been deemed uncontrollable. In the United States, a version of the marks system was most famously applied at Elmira Reformatory by Zebulon Brockway. Although **Maconochie** was ultimately forced to leave his position as warden of the Norfolk Island prison, echoes of his highly structured system of prison management can be found in prisons throughout the world today.

HISTORY

In 1840, the notorious prison on Norfolk Island (a penal colony in the Pacific Ocean hundreds of miles northeast of Sydney) was sent a new governor, Captain Alexander **Maconochie**. He had requested this post. Norfolk Island was a place of secondary punishment for convicts who reoffended in the British colony of New South Wales. It was distinguished by a regime of brutality designed to strike terror in the hearts and minds of all transported felons. Here, men were starved at the slightest infringement of rules and were confined in small fetid cells. Here, too, they could be flogged until their bones were revealed. Norfolk Island was a place where hope was removed from prisoners' lives, and where death was eagerly awaited.

Maconochie, a former soldier, had been employed in Van Diemen's Land as a private secretary to Governor Sir John Franklin before he sought this new employment. He was a prison reformer, concerned to establish a process of improvement even in the most brutal prison of the antipodes. Inspired, in part, by his Christian beliefs, **Maconochie** thought it necessary to build new, healthier prisons with strict, regulated regimes that would persuade inmates not to reoffend. These institutions would also equip prisoners with skills to support themselves with honest labor once back in the world.

THE MARKS SYSTEM

Maconochie's contribution to prison reform lay in his introduction of a scale of “marks” that prisoners could earn for good behavior. Once an individual achieved a certain number of marks, his living conditions would improve. An accumulation of marks would also result in an early form of parole known as a “ticket of leave” that allowed a person to be released from prison under license.

Maconochie experimented on Norfolk Island with these ideas and, to his mind at least, achieved some notable results. He altered inmates' lives by allowing them to hope. Unfortunately for the Norfolk Island convicts, the ticket of leave could only be permitted on the island itself. They had little chance of returning to the mainland and even less of returning to England. **Maconochie** could not achieve miracles, but he could and did permit a level of humanity to return to the men's lives.

Convicts in this system had been brutalized. One man's treatment had included a period of time chained to a rock in Sydney Harbor, where he became an object of mockery for those who could reach him and throw bread or less savory items at him. His life sentence was to be served out on the island, and by the time **Maconochie** reached it the convict could barely make himself understood. He was removed from the prison and sent to live by himself in a small hut where he was permitted to cultivate a garden and was supplied by convict stores. In this way, **Maconochie** believed he had retrieved an individual who was thought to be beyond help of any kind

but God's.

MACONOCHIE CHALLENGED

Not everyone wished to see convicts reform themselves. Many proponents of the penal system firmly believed that a place of secondary punishment had to strike terror rather than hope in the malefactor's heart. They did not necessarily share a belief in the inherent goodness of man as a being created in God's image, which was the foundation of much reformist thought.

The first assessments of the marks system to reach London were negative, and in 1844 the colonial secretary ordered Sir George Grey to remove **Maconochie** from his post. A few weeks after this order had been received in Sydney, the home office received reports of a very different kind about **Maconochie's** successes. It was too late. **Maconochie** was recalled to live his life out in unrewarding positions in which he was briefly permitted to introduce his system of marks and then dismissed as too radical. Norfolk Island reverted to its former brutal regime. Yet **Maconochie's** ideas remained influential within the British convict system, and were imported to the Irish system and ultimately to the United States in the 1870s. In Australia, marks were instituted in Fremantle Convict Establishment, a large prison built for 1,000 inmates, in the 1850s. They remained in the system until the 20th century, although their implementation became more and more debased and further and further from the Christian ideals of their founder.

CONCLUSION

Marks gave convicted criminals the opportunity to alter some part of their sentence by behaving well within the prison structure of rules and regulations. They worked in Fremantle while men labored outside the walls, where their activities could be noted and recorded by an interested public. Behind prison walls, however, marks easily became dependent upon the goodwill of the recording officer, with increased chances of corruption or poor assessment. Despite such problems, a structured system of incentives and privileges was introduced to the English prison system in the 1990s that in many respects is a modern application of Alexander **Maconochie's** 19th-century ideas.

—Michal Bosworth

Further Reading

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