Prisoners, Solitude, and Time

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Historical Perspectives

Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century prisons were crowded, communal, porous places characterized by people milling around the yards shouting, drinking, gambling, carousing, and fighting. Newgate was epitomized by 'noise, contention, licentiousness, and tumult' (Buxton 1818: 76) and Evans (2010: 2) lamented how the same institution was repeatedly used 'to illustrate evil in its natural habitat as a mixture of unbridled crude pleasure, bestiality and filth'. Playfair (1971: 257) observed that, 'Clerkenwell, prior to its being rebuilt in 1834 as a remand prison, was known as a "great brothel" '. Echoing this theme, the renowned prison chaplain, John Clay (1861: 12), painted a picture of drunken rambunctiousness:

> Beer clubs and spirit clubs were patronized lovingly; the losels and harlots of the neighbourhood were freely admitted to carouse with their incarcerated pals; all the usual enticements of the pothouse were sedulously offered: cards, dice, skittles, fives, Mississippi, Porto Bello and billiards flourished vigorously. For the due promotion of drunkenness the prisoners were allowed to levy a tax on every new comer.

These were squalid locations where extortion and exploitation flourished. Their occupants were dirty, disorderly, dissolute and, occasionally, dangerous. Nutritious food was in short supply, the ventilation was poor, and the conditions were ideal for disease to fester and spread; the stench threatened to overwhelm. Henriques (1972: 63) listed the defining characteristics of prisons of this era as, 'idleness, corruption, drunkenness and profane jollity'. Debtors and their families were present in large numbers, visitors mingled with prisoners, and there were few staff to enforce discipline. The jailer's major preoccupation was the maximization of profit (from fees charged to prisoners and entrepreneurial activities such as selling food, bedding, alcohol, and tobacco, or charging admission to the public) rather than the humane treatment of those in his charge.

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Sex, alcohol, and violence were not unique to the English prisons of the day. Smith (1833: 11) described the Pennsylvanian prison of the late 1700s as a place of 'perfect pandemonium . . . one revolting mass of festering corruption' and of Walnut Street jail in Philadelphia, Gray (1847: 15–16) observed that:

> It is represented as a scene of promiscuous and unrestricted intercourse, and universal riot and debauchery. There was no labor, no separation of those accused, but yet untried, nor even of those confined for debt only, from convicts sentenced for the foulest crimes; not separation of color, age or sex, by day or by night; the prisoners lying promiscuously on the floor, most of them without anything like bed or bedding. As soon as the sexes were placed in different wings, which was the first reform made in the prison, of thirty or forty women then confined there, all but four or five immediately left it; it having been a common practice, it is said, for women to cause themselves to be arrested for fictitious debts, that they might share in the orgies of the place. Intoxicating liquors abounded, and indeed were freely sold at a bar kept by one of the officers of the prison. . . . Such are the naked facts.

Growing qualms about the propriety of such confinement were reinforced by occasional outbreaks of lethal infection. The crowding and lack of proper hygiene meant that morbidity among prisoners was high and disease spread quickly. John Howard (1777: 16–17), the great calibrator and cataloguer of prisons, remarked in the first edition of *The State of The Prisons in England and Wales* that, based on his observations in 1773 and 1774, he was persuaded that 'the havock [*sic*] made by the gaol-fever' was responsible for more prisoner deaths than 'all the public executions in the kingdom'. Transmissible diseases destroyed the lives not only of prisoners but also of those who came into contact with them; the lice that carried epidemic typhus were indifferent to social status. Evans (2010: 95) gave the example of an incident at London's Old Bailey in 1750 when prisoners brought before the court passed a virulent fever to others in attendance, many of whom perished soon after: 'The death toll included the Lord Mayor of London, two judges, an alderman, a lawyer, an under-sheriff and several of the jury, not to mention 40 others'. Howard (1777: 17–18) wrote of an even more catastrophic 'Black Assize' at Oxford where the presence of infectious prisoners in court led to more than 300 deaths within two days.

The mortality rate on some of the hulks, prison ships which had been introduced as an expedient to accommodate prisoners who

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could no longer be transported to America, was as high as one in four in the late 1770s, a death toll which their operators described as 'inventory shrinkage' (Ignatieff 1989: 81). Premature death was a persistent problem whether prisoners were held on water or on land. The penitentiary at Millbank in London was temporarily closed in 1823 having been ravaged by typhus, dysentery, and scurvy, with 31 malnourished prisoners dying and another 400 becoming incapacitated (p. 176). In 1842, the satirical magazine, *Punch*, observed that the lethally unhealthy state of Millbank rendered it 'a capital substitute for capital punishments' (cited in Collins 1994: 151).

The need to stop the spread of moral, as well as physical, degeneration added impetus to the reform movement. Prisons were seen as incubators of a kind of disease that, unchecked, might act to deplete the community of God-fearing and law-abiding citizens who came into contact with prisoners, but also of a kind of vice that served to swell the ranks of the criminal classes. The response to this chaotic congregation emerged gradually, and stutteringly, on both sides of the Atlantic. At its heart was the design of a system that, at the same time as preventing contagion, would cultivate introspection. Grass (2003: 22) described how these twin objectives became unified in Howard's scheme of penal reform after his visit to Italy:

> Howard argued that moral reclamation should be the principle [*sic*] aim of imprisonment, a sentiment . . . cultivated during a tour of the prisons, *lazarettos* [places of quarantine], and monasteries of Italy. Howard learned that *lazarettos* employed solitude to arrest the spread of physical disease, and that monasteries used it to inspire introspection, spiritual cleansing and moral awakening. Physical and spiritual cleansing were aims that Howard could advocate in English prison discipline as well, and he argued consequently for a new prison system in which solitary confinement would produce guilty feelings as prisoners were forced to the lonely contemplation of their past wickedness.

Those subjected to solitary confinement would be exposed to the lacerating effects of unavoidable self-examination, into which would be rubbed the salt of remorse. For rough and arbitrary sociality would be substituted clinical aloneness, the latter intended to cause the greater pain. There was no doubting the terror of solitude at the time. In *Solitude in Imprisonment*, published the year before Howard's *State of the Prisons*, Hanway (1776: 42; emphasis

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in original) wrote of the 'balmy remedy of *solitude*—balmy in the effect; though, for a time, nauseous to the taste or terrible to the imagination'. Ignatieff (1989: 74) cited what he described as a 'chilling phrase' used by John Brewster, who remarked in 1792 that: 'There are cords of love as well as fetters of iron.' Ignatieff elaborated that 'Cords of love bound minds in guilty remorse; fetters of iron bound only the body, leaving the mind free to fester in anger' (p. 74). The prison chaplain played a key role in tying the cords of love by persuading prisoners of their guilt and the righteousness of their punishment.

Those who advocated solitary confinement knew how painful, and occasionally perilous, it would be and the debate was characterized by an emphasis on how much solitude could be borne before the costs would outweigh the benefits. The key questions were when, and how, to dilute it with company, activity, or a combination of both. The individuals who were broken by isolation were seen as the collateral damage of a system that, in overall terms, was considered superior to what it replaced as regards its potential to create a safer society.

Solitary confinement was a form of quarantine that operated on several levels. It kept prisoners apart so they could not communicate diseases or nefarious thoughts; it reduced opportunities for misconduct; and it created a setting where there could be no escape from the pangs of conscience or the ministrations of the chaplaincy. It would prevent criminal contagion as well as curing offenders of their anti-social impulses, effecting a transformation of the prison, which according to the *Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy* in 1856, would cease being 'a pest-house of incurables' and would instead become 'a moral infirmary' (cited in Anonymous 1987: 12). The public would be protected from prisoners, and prisoners would be protected from each other. Segregation by sex, which freed vulnerable women from the risk of exploitation, was a notable step forward and has been described as 'one of the major achievements of nineteenth-century penal reform' (Zedner 1995: 333). The chaplains were the surgeons in these moral hospitals, identifying when prisoners would be most amenable to the curative properties of the gospel message. This was a role they could not have played in the chaos of congregation where, recalling the Sermon on the Mount, the Reverend Clay (1861: 17) described how 'religious teaching in Gaols was mere casting of pearls before swine; the drunkenness and promiscuous

intercourse among the prisoners would have thwarted the most zealous chaplain'. In addition, and another welcome development from the perspective of prison administrators, the practice of separation caused the prisoner subculture to fragment and vested much more authority in the staff.

Chatter and its Discontents

Confidence in the rehabilitative potential of silence was rooted in Christian monastic practices. The time of quiet reflection was to be a prelude to prisoners making peace with their God and achieving a state of grace. Once cleansed of their wrongdoing they would emerge from the prison with inner light lit, faith fortified and hope restored, ready at last to engage with the world on mutually beneficial terms. Unlike the anchorite, who sought sanctification in hardship and whose bricked-in existence was indefinite, the prisoner was coercively confined, usually for a determinate period, and while spiritual regeneration was hoped for it could not be guaranteed. There was always a risk that the prisoner would reject the institution's aims or simply mimic the language of penitence while remaining unmoved by it.

The prison philosophy based on segregation, discipline, and solitude as the foundations of moral improvement draws most directly, perhaps, from the *Casa di Correzione* (house of correction) of San Michele, a juvenile prison built in Rome in 1703 by Pope Clement XI. This was not the first cellular prison but it was the most elaborate in scale and design, as well as the most thoroughgoing in its attempt to marry punishment to rehabilitation in its routine operations. Inmates were isolated during the night and worked together in silence during the day, chained to desks in the large rectangular hall that was the building's hub. The young offenders ate, worked, and worshipped at their desks. Their chains were removed if they earned a walk (which took place in the same hall) or if they were to be lashed (the 'place of chastisement' was located at one end of the hall, the altar at the other). The dietary and sanitary conditions were relatively good. The daily routine was organized around prayer, religious instruction, and examination of conscience. Like young monks, the prisoners prayed while dressing, offered the day's work to the Lord, attended Mass each morning (from their desks), sang psalms and recited the rosary together, listened to one of their

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number reading spiritual literature while they ate their midday meal, and learned their catechism. Also like young monks they experienced mortification of the flesh, but with the significant difference that the flagellation was not self-administered (and as a result was unlikely to be ecstatically received).

According to Cajani (1996: 318) the inspiration for the *Casa di Correzione* was the cloistered abnegation of Catholic monastic life. If men and women of the cloth sought out silent penitence to atone for their sins, why not impose a similar discipline on secular wrongdoers in an attempt to effect a similar transformation? Howard was so favourably impressed by what he observed when he visited Rome in 1775 that he reproduced on the title page of the second volume of his study of European prisons an epigraph that he had seen in the institution's main hall. This read, '*Parum est coercere improbos poena nisi probos efficias disciplina*' ('Repressing villains with punishment is worth little if we do not render them good with discipline'; Cajani 1996: 301).

Evans (2010: 57) suggests that another root of the modern prison is to be found in the writings of Jean Mabillon, a Benedictine monk, 'who announced the principles of redemptive imprisonment' in his *Reflexions sur les Prisons des Ordres Religieux* (published posthumously in 1724; see Sellin 1927). Mabillon's critique of the excessive harshness of ecclesiastical prisons contributed to the emergence of the notion that incarceration, properly tempered with compassion, could provide the basis of a system of rehabilitation for prisoners. Mabillon proposed the construction of monastic prisons modelled on the Carthusian charterhouse where wayward priests or brothers could be brought back within the fold through a combination of isolation, spiritual guidance, and participation in occasional communal rituals. The emphasis was to be on reclamation through reclusion rather than vengeance (see also Wines 1895: 143). In other words, monastic life influenced the architectural forms that prisons would later embrace as well as the underlying penal rationales. Another contributory factor was a cellular prison for minors that opened in Florence in 1677, which was based on perpetual isolation and where, anticipating developments in the nineteenth century, prisoners' heads were covered with tin helmets when they left their cells to attend religious services (Cajani 1996: 320).

The Architecture of Isolation

Much has been written about competing models of prison design and the penal philosophies that underpinned them (e.g. Brodie et al. 2002; Jewkes and Johnston 2007; Spens 1994). No attempt will be made here to review this literature in its entirety, but simply to draw on some of the key elements of the debates about separation and isolation, as they played out in the US and the UK, insofar as they impact on the themes addressed in this book. The aim is not to offer a comprehensive historical account but rather to achieve something akin to what Rhodes (2004: 15), in her ethnography of life in maximum security, described as 'a sense of echo', showing how the lessons (and mistakes) of the past continue to reverberate in terms of architecture, penological thinking, and human relations.

Walnut Street

The Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons was established in 1787 by some of the founders of the Philadelphia Society for Assisting Distressed Prisoners which had been set up in 1776 but dissolved the following year (Smith 1833: 7; it remains in existence as the Pennsylvania Prison Society). Its members were horrified by the sordid, crowded, and corrupting conditions at Walnut Street jail in Philadelphia. The Society's desire was for squalor, filth, and noise to be replaced by the terror of their opposite—a sterile, uncompanionable, and unyielding discipline. This development, which occurred in April 1790 at the instigation of the Pennsylvania legislature, was 'the real foundation of the separate system' (Wines 1895: 146). The county commissioners for Philadelphia were directed to build, in the grounds of the jail, 'a suitable number of cells six feet in width, eight feet in length, and nine feet in height' which would be designed 'to prevent all external communication, for the purpose of confining there the more hardened and atrocious offenders' (p. 146).

To this end 16 cells for male and 14 for female convicts were constructed in which it was hoped that the legislative intent to reform and to deter (two sides of the same providential coin) would be achieved by joining unmitigated solitude to steady labour. The new regime coincided with a drop in crime in Philadelphia and for a while the experiment was viewed as a success (Smith

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1833: 16–17). However, the crime rate soon began to rise again, the prison became overcrowded, and to cope with increasing numbers many of the serving prisoners were pardoned. William Crawford (1834: 8), an English visitor and future prison inspector in his own country, was sceptical about the extent to which Walnut Street ever delivered on its expressed purposes, noting that the new cells were small as well as being 'badly ventilated, and so defectively arranged that the convicts in the adjoining cells could communicate with ease'. He added that there was little in the way of labour carried out in the cells which, in any event, had been appropriated for the punishment of refractory prisoners as evidenced by 'there being in the floor of each cell an iron staple, to which are attached three short chains, for the secure confinement of as many convicts' (p. 8).

But the reformers did not lose confidence in their belief that solitude, and the inward redirection of the person's gaze that it forced, were vital ingredients of the reform process. The challenge lay in discovering the best mode of administration. If the dose could be got right, stimulating enough regretful insight to cause behavioural change post-release, then the hardship would be worth it. Personal transformation would be wrought, not primarily through surveillance, but through enforced aloneness. Quietude would allow the conscience to develop into an effective guide and the fear of it would keep potential malefactors within the law. The prison would act as a 'furnace of affliction' where suffering would allow for the entry of grace and the ensuing characterological reform (see Graber 2011). But when the discipline became too severe the furnace, which was supposed to heat the soul so that it could be remoulded, grew too hot and scorched. If madness and recidivism followed, then a different approach would be required.

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Auburn

There followed a more focused experiment when solitude without labour was introduced to a newly built cellblock at Auburn prison in New York in 1821. The chaos of congregation was superseded by cellular control but idle inmates could find little to do in their cramped quarters where the side walls were less than the span of a child's arms apart and some inmates could touch the ceiling with their hands (the cells measured 7½ feet long by 3 feet 8 inches wide and floor to ceiling was 7 feet; Johnston 2000: 75). During the day

they were not permitted to sit or lie down (Smith 1833: 36). Even allowing for the fact that people were smaller in the early nineteenth century, these were still tightly confining spaces or, as Evans (2010: 318) described them, 'claustrophobic cubicles' containing 'closeted convicts'. (It is difficult to imagine that more restrictive conditions might ever have been contemplated, but when Kingston Penitentiary in Canada opened in 1835—the design and construction having been overseen by Auburn's master builder—it contained sleeping rooms measuring only 6 feet 6 inches by 2 feet 6 inches (Johnston 2004: 30). The narrowness of the accommodation reflected the narrow view that was taken of the convict's capacity to change in a pro-social direction. These were not intended to be places in which the human spirit could flourish and expand. They were places of tight constraint and minimal ambition.)

The initiative at Auburn was a spectacular failure leading within a year to a litany of death, despair, and madness. There were problems with heat (too cold in winter), light (insufficient to read the Bible by), and ventilation (dampness and vermin infestation). Hopelessness soon set in. The consequences, even by the standards of the time, were severe: 'five inmates died, one "became an idiot," and another committed suicide' (Graber 2011: 80). The Governor of the State of New York pardoned 26 prisoners to compensate them for the suffering they had endured. Their subsequent behaviour showed that as well as being injurious to physical and mental health, the experience of unrelenting solitude had little reformative impact: 14 of the pardoned men reoffended and were reimprisoned within a short period of time. Smith (2009: 82) offers a graphic nine-word summary of this experiment: 'The trial of solitude had become a notorious massacre.' In Franke's (1995: 60) less pungent, but concurring, assessment: 'Completely solitary confinement had brought about death and insanity but not moral improvement.'

The harms of extreme isolation were undisputed. Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville, who had been commissioned by the French government to visit the United States and to examine its penitentiary system, observed that: 'absolute solitude, if nothing interrupt it, is beyond the strength of man; it destroys the criminal without intermission and without pity; it does not reform, it kills' (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1833: 5). Adopting a parallel line of argument, Crawford (1834: 15), who had undertaken a similar excursion on behalf of the British Home Secretary, rejected the view that the gravely damaging effects of this experiment could

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be attributed to solitude, holding that they were due rather to prisoners being confined in tiny cells which they never left even for exercise, with no work and nothing in the way of moral or religious instruction; it was the 'unmixed severity' of the regime which undid the prisoners. This was confinement at its most cramped and least consoling. Solitude leavened by meaningful work, regular exercise, spacious and comfortable accommodation, and directed thought—as recommended by Crawford—was unlikely to be as detrimental.

Crawford recognized that if solitary confinement was to be prolonged 'labour is absolutely indispensable' (p. 38). To be effective its burden needed to be bearable; if the convict was overwhelmed and unhinged by the experience there would be nowhere for the divine light to penetrate. The advocates of solitude and silence were driven by a desire to reclaim souls as well as to deter potential wrongdoers. A regime that drove people mad was inimical to the first of these objectives. The Keeper of Auburn Prison, Gershom Powers, commented on the introduction of absolute isolation—which he had overseen—in the following terms:

> There is no doubt that uninterrupted solitude tends to sour the feelings, destroy the affections, harden the heart, and induce men to cultivate a spirit of revenge, or drive them to despair; although such may not always be the effect upon martyrs and patriots, whose devotion to liberty, or religion, may sustain their bodies and minds in health and vigor while suffering in a righteous cause. (Cited in Gray 1847: 41)

This gobbet contains much of what has been found by many others since, namely that solitude makes those subjected to it angry and desperate but if they have a framework in which to make sense of their suffering it can more easily be borne. Given that the men subjected to the regime of unrelieved isolation at Auburn fared so badly at the time and after release, it was decided to abandon it in 1823 and to substitute hard labour in silent association during the day and cellular confinement at night.

Despite the vigilance of the guards, a regime based on silent association was difficult to enforce. Whenever prisoners at Auburn were marching in lockstep, eating together in the mess-room, or at labour in the workshops, there were opportunities to communicate, whether through whispers, notes, hand signals, or other ruses. Each time they succeeded in doing so, or were flogged for attempting to, the system was discredited. The regular use of

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corporal punishment indicated that this approach could not work and brutalized those subjected to it. The presence of the lash ensured the existence between the prisoners and guards of 'malignant and murderous relations' which changed them into 'fiends and blood hounds' (Prison Association of New York 1845: 48–9). When one man was introducing a whip to the back of another who had been stripped, bent, and tied in place, the finer points of prison discipline soon disappeared in yells, welts, and recrimination. Gruelling labour and cruel treatment, no matter how enthusiastically or half-heartedly they are combined, do not create reformed characters. A beating may result in obedience, but only temporarily; its lasting effects are resentment and anger. The fact that it relied so heavily upon the violence of flogging critically undermined the Auburn system. As Lieber (1838: 88) put it, 'the whip degrades, irritates, exasperates'. By contrast, the submission that follows solitary reflection can endure because it has its roots in a process of individual reorientation that comes from within.

Lane (1835) provided a useful account of life in Auburn. Describing himself on the title page of his pamphlet as 'a discharged and penitent convict', he studied his Bible closely, reading the good book seven times from cover to cover. He wrote of his regrets and the challenges of his spiritual journey. Nevertheless, soon after he was released he reoffended and was reimprisoned; clearly his knowledge of scripture and his desire for salvation failed to keep him sober and law abiding for long. This is an early example of the system succeeding on its own terms (a docile and remorseful prisoner is produced) but failing at the same time (the prisoner returns to serve another sentence). It illustrates many of the complexities associated with creating structures that will lead to change that is enduring and transferable as well as sincere and contrite.

The regime at Auburn was also compromised by overcrowding which frustrated the authorities' desire to eradicate conversation. When occupied by more than one body, as happened when the demand for prison places outstripped the supply of cells, the 'claustrophobic cubicles' became squalid and fetid meeting places. It did not take long for this to occur. Graber (2011: 160) reports that by 1850 New York had more inmates than single cells. The women in Auburn were cramped from the outset, being held in an attic room in very poor conditions. The prison chaplain was sympathetic to their plight, opining in 1833 that while the life for male prisoners at this institution

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was tolerable, 'to be a *female* convict, for any protracted period, would be worse than death' (cited in Zedner 1995: 338; emphasis in original).

Eastern State Penitentiary

Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia was a hybrid model. It upheld the principles of solitude and labour but the labour was to be carried out alone in cell and not in company with other prisoners as had become the norm at Auburn. The first inmates arrived in 1829 although construction was not completed until 1836. The penitentiary was influential for its design features and for the bold statement it made about human nature. It exemplified the brimming optimism of a generation of penal reformers whose intentions were clear, whose motivations were pure, whose dynamism was undisputed, and whose firmness of purpose was unshakeable. The prisoners whose lives were shaped by this confluence of forces were seen as salvageable and worth salvaging. They were fellow citizens who had strayed but whose life trajectories were amenable to change. The richness and roundness of this vision serve to highlight the pessimism and poverty of imagination that followed in its wake.

Popularly referred to as Cherry Hill after a cherry orchard that was once on the site, Eastern State Penitentiary was a triumph in terms of design, rectifying many of the flaws that had become apparent in the Western State Penitentiary at Pittsburgh where defective construction methods meant that prisoners could easily communicate with their neighbours. The cells were large, measuring 'eleven feet nine inches long, seven feet six inches wide, and sixteen feet high to the top of the arched ceiling' (Crawford 1834: 10). A number were even more generously proportioned, with dimensions of 20 feet in length, 8 in width and 12 in height (Anonymous 1987: 10–11; by volume these large cells could have incorporated ten of Auburn's 'claustrophobic cubicles'). Each was heated, ventilated and equipped with a privy 'constructed in such a manner as to preserve the purity of the atmosphere, and to prevent the possibility of communication from cell to cell' (Crawford 1834: 10). Ground-floor cells had a double door leading to an enclosed yard (8 feet wide by 18 feet long, surrounded by walls that were 12 feet high) where an hour's exercise was allowed each day, except Sunday. The new prisoner was conducted to his cell wearing a

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hood. When this was removed his eyes rested on the walls that would set the physical boundaries to his world for the years ahead.

Johnston (2004: 25) noted that the prisoners at Eastern State Penitentiary had access to a flushing lavatory before this innovation in plumbing was introduced to the White House. Their quarters were centrally heated and they could avail of showers, again years before such facilities were available to wealthy US citizens. These extras did not come cheap and the enormous construction costs deterred other states from following the Pennsylvania model although, as we will see, these reservations did not carry the same force in Europe and elsewhere, where the achievements of Eastern State Penitentiary in giving physical expression to a clear penal philosophy were acclaimed. Johnston described it as 'the U.S. building most widely imitated in Europe and Asia in the 19th century. No other U.S. building form, until the modern skyscraper, played such a seminal role' (p. 39).

According to Johnston (2000: 74) when the penitentiary opened it was 'an international sensation' attracting scrutiny from delegations sent by the governments of Britain, France, Russia, Belgium, and a variety of other countries. Most reported favourably on the architectural excellence of the buildings and the coherence of the underlying philosophy. They were persuaded by the argument that the rational organization of space could induce rationality in its occupants. The prison also became a major tourist attraction, becoming 'a rival to Niagara Falls and the US Capitol in popularity' with 4,000 visitors in 1839, including school children and groups of Native Americans (p. 74). Admission tickets could be purchased and opening hours were advertised. This popularity did not fade over time, with the prison receiving 114,440 visitors between 1862 and 1872, according to Vaux (1872: 94). The title page of the book about Cherry Hill written by Teeters and Shearer (1957) carries an observation from a Venezuelan lawyer which was recorded in the minutes of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons on 9 July 1832. It reads: 'The Pennsylvania System is a Divine System.' These seven words capture what inspired the system and how its effects were viewed by those who believed in it.

Crawford (1834) was aware of the view that long periods of solitary confinement were inherently dangerous and this was a matter to which he directed a great deal of attention. His considered opinion was that, properly administered and limited in duration to a maximum of 18 months, solitude had the power to cause a man to

change the direction of his life: ‘Day after day, with no companions but his thoughts, the convict is compelled to reflect and listen to the reproofs of conscience. He is led to dwell upon past errors, and to cherish whatever better feelings he may at any time have imbibed’ (p. 12). Essential to the proper administration of a regime of solitude was the provision of religious instruction. When a convict’s mind was clear, and the experience of silence was prolonged, the sound of a human voice was a source of major refreshment. If this voice was imparting a religious message it was to an especially attentive and receptive listener. Crawford felt that Eastern State Penitentiary had not done enough to add this vital ingredient to the mix. Whatever instruction was provided tended to be somewhat patchy and, as illiterate prisoners were not taught to read, there was little they could do to make good the deficit through personal study of the sacred texts.

It is important to note that while the prisoners in Eastern State Penitentiary were to be totally separated from each other they were not entirely deprived of human contact. If they were to recognize their wrongdoing and repent, it was essential that they had available to them role models such as the warden and his staff and appropriate visitors from outside, especially members of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons. Members of the Society visited regularly. The *Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy* (established in 1845 and continuing to appear as *The Prison Journal*, but no longer a proponent of the virtues of solitary confinement) reported in July 1861 that in a single month the Society’s visitors had been in Eastern State Penitentiary on 813 occasions. In 612 of these a prisoner was interviewed in his cell and in the remainder a conversation took place at the door. A later issue of the *Journal* reported that during 1912, the total number of interviews carried out by visitors was 8,400 (cited in Anonymous 1987: 19). Kahan (2008: 37) quoted a report from the September 1854 issue of the *Chambers Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts* to the effect that, ‘though styled the separate system, the discipline admits of the freest intercourse with respectable visitors. The best people in Philadelphia call upon, and hold converse with the convicts, who doubtless receive no small benefit through such agencies.’ These interactions were no doubt brief and somewhat lopsided given the gulf in social status between the two groups but, nevertheless, they broke the monotony and kept open a conduit to the outside world.

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In addition, prisoners would have occasional family visits to look forward to, letters to write, and books to read. All had a Bible and a prayer book and some were furnished, in addition, with an atlas and a dictionary. Musical instruments were allowed and, occasionally, pets, and prisoners were permitted to adorn their cells with frescoes, should they have the talent and temperament to do so. Some of the small yards that were available to prisoners were cultivated to grow fruit and flowers. The *Journal* reported in 1848 that one prisoner picked 150 bunches of grapes from the vine in his yard, where he also raised over 100 cucumbers, while others had peach trees, grown from seed, that yielded abundant crops (cited in Anonymous 1987: 10).

Thus, solitary confinement was something of a misnomer; the emphasis was on separation rather than unbroken aloneness and the burden was eased somewhat by the ability to personalise one's living space and to have access to the pleasures that come from reading, playing music, and engaging in a modest level of horticulture. What was at issue in the Pennsylvania system of prison discipline was not idle solitariness (except for the initial phase) but what one of the system's most ardent proponents described as 'uninterrupted confinement at labor', with equal importance attached to the elements of work and solitude (Lieber 1838: 68). As Beaumont and Tocqueville (1833: 23) put it, 'Labour gives to the solitary cell an interest; it fatigues the body and relieves the mind.' Engagement with those who could assist in the moral improvement of prisoners was permitted, and even encouraged. What was prohibited was association with fellow prisoners. Similarly, the silent system practised at Auburn aimed to prevent communication between inmates while keeping open the possibility that they would be receptive to the voices of instructors in trades, education, and religion. Communication between prisoners was seen as mutually contaminating; the possibility of benign exchanges was not contemplated by those pressing for penal reform, whether their preference was for individual separation or congregate silence.

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Debate and Dissent

Not every observer was convinced by the merits of the new arrangements. When the great novelist, Charles Dickens, visited Eastern State Penitentiary on 8 March 1842 he was horrified, seeing not an enlightened monument to reform and humanity, but a place of

dread. He was unequivocal in his scorn and condemnation: 'The system here, is rigid, strict, and hopeless solitary confinement. I believe it, in its effects, to be cruel and wrong . . . very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony which this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers' (Dickens 2000: 111). Dickens felt that isolation for any length of time caused unnecessary suffering and was at odds with the aims of the system that embraced it. When he met, during his visit to the prison, a sailor who had been in solitary confinement for upwards of 11 years, he was stunned and dismayed. The man was due for release but appeared not to care. He had lost interest in his life and what his future at liberty might hold and struck Dickens as 'helpless, crushed, and broken' (p. 116). Dickens must also have been staggered by the sheer length of the sailor's sentence, which was a multiple of the longest prison term available in England at the time (see Table 2.1). To Dickens' readers at home, who had been used to seeing transportation as the solution to the convict problem, incarcerating prisoners for terms measuring a decade and more—some even for life—would have seemed like a barbaric curiosity. Interestingly, Dickens felt that the prison's female inhabitants fared better, noting of the three young women whose cells he visited that, 'In the silence and solitude of their lives, they had grown to be quite beautiful' (p. 117).

Dickens' claims were robustly challenged and it was argued that he had exaggerated the psychological effects on the prisoners he encountered. We return in the following chapter to a reconsideration of Dickens' critique but for present purposes it is enough to note that if the solitary system he so deplored had really been in place, he would not have had an opportunity to tour the prison and talk freely with those it held, and that if his lamentation had been taken seriously, the system he so roundly condemned would hardly have been imitated with such enthusiasm in his native country and across Europe.

For all the vigorously expressed views of its advocates the system applied at Eastern State Penitentiary was not adopted by most other states which preferred congregate labour by day in workshops (i.e. the Auburn model). Some, like Maryland, Massachusetts, Maine, and New Jersey, tried separate confinement, but the limited income from prisoners working in their cells set against the high costs meant that they soon switched to the Auburn model and by 1858 the only prison still adhering to the separate system in

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the US was Eastern State Penitentiary (Johnston et al. 1994: 104). The Auburn system became dominant not least because it cost less (the separate system required cells large enough for the prisoner to work in and individual exercise yards) and was more suited to the kind of factory-like labour demanded by a growing industrial economy (the artisanal work carried out in Cherry Hill, such as shoemaking, was becoming outmoded and inefficient in the age of the machine). Whatever about the underlying penal philosophy the Auburn system won out in terms of the bottom line: it was cheaper to administer and resulted in a more generous profit margin. Johnston (2000: 71) estimated the cost per cell at Cherry Hill at $1,800 compared with $151 for a prison in Connecticut, constructed at around the same time (McElwee 1835: 102 gives different estimates). The strenuous promotional efforts of the Boston Prison Discipline Society also contributed in no small way to the popularity of the Auburn model in the US (Barnes and Teeters 1943: 533–43).

Notwithstanding reservations about its efficacy in the US, 'the Philadelphian system swept through Europe' (Franke 1995: 65). It has been estimated that 'About three hundred prisons worldwide can trace their paternity to Cherry Hill. Its influence was strongly manifest everywhere in the world, except in the United States' (Johnston et al. 1994: 79). At the first International Penitentiary Congress in Frankfurt-am-Main in 1846 it was resolved that separate confinement should be adopted as the norm (Evans 2010: 384). When introduced in the Netherlands in 1851, its proponents repudiated the link between solitary confinement and insanity, with one professor of psychiatry arguing that there would be no threat to mental health even after 20 years in a cell (Franke 1995: 142). By the end of the nineteenth century, there were ten cellular penitentiaries in the Netherlands with prisoners spending the first five years in solitude.

Denmark built prisons according to both the Auburn and Pennsylvania models and continued to operate the distinctive regimes associated with these competing philosophies until the early decades of the twentieth century, long after they had fallen into desuetude in their country of origin (Smith 2008: 1054; for a review of prison historiography outside Europe and the US see Gibson 2011). The Danes clung tenaciously to the principle of isolation and it was not until 1924 that wearing masks was made optional for inmates in Vridsløselille (Smith 2004: 24). The

Belgians were enthusiasts too. When the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment (1953: 485) visited Louvain Prison in October 1950, it found that relics of the system of solitary confinement still survived including the prison's motto, '*accipienti solitudo amica*'. This epigram might be translated as 'solitude is a friend to the one who accepts it' and it captures the optimism that animated penal reformers in the nineteenth century. It must be remembered, of course, that the benevolent intent had a hard edge in the recognition that for those who could not, or would not, befriend solitude, the alternative was bitter enmity.

Crawford (1834: 13) paid particular attention to the 'four insane persons and one idiot' who by his reckoning had been confined in Eastern State Penitentiary in the first four years after it opened. His inquiries left him in no doubt where the blame lay, namely that the prisoners 'had been subjected to mental disorders before they were admitted, and that the disease was in no respect attributable to any peculiarity in the discipline of the penitentiary' (p. 13). Furthermore, he observed that while the prison recorded a small number of deaths each year (one in 1833 and four in 1832, for example) its general effect on prisoners' health was beneficial as they were sheltered from the hazards that characterized their lives outside, such as poverty, bad weather, vagrancy, violence, and excessive alcohol consumption. This was a strong statement to make at the time and one that appears to have been largely forgotten in the intervening period, when the effects of separation have all too often been seen as unequivocally pathological. (Lieber (1838: 72–3) also challenged the assertion that the Pennsylvania system had adverse implications for the health of those subjected to it, noting that 'many who arrive diseased and broken down recover'.) Crawford went on to comment that there was nothing particularly original about the philosophy expressed in Eastern State Penitentiary, the main principles of which were to be found at the Gloucester Penitentiary 40 years earlier and, more recently, in the Glasgow Bridewell. In a sense it was not until the idea of separate confinement had been transplanted to the US (by English architect John Haviland who won the contract to design and build the penitentiary at Cherry Hill) that it was reintroduced to Britain and the rest of Europe for adoption on a much more ambitious scale. As Evans (2010: 318) put it, 'The English rediscovered the reforming power of solitude in America.'

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At Eastern State Penitentiary, while the whip was eschewed, devices such as the iron gag—a metal brace that was secured in the prisoner's mouth with a lock and chain—were used instead. Not intended to harm the body, this was seen as a mechanism for bending the inmate's will: 'Like the walls of the cell it restrained the recalcitrant will of the inmate. And, its defenders believed, once in place, the gag, like the cell, eliminated the physical violence and struggle that marked the whipping scene' (Meranze 2000: 318). The subtlety of this distinction was surely lost on the inmate who was forced to yield to its severe discomfort. That a metal clamp like a horse's bit could be resorted to within an institution supposedly guided by benevolence shows how brutality can break through the best of intentions.

Distinctions between the Auburn and Pennsylvania systems are sometimes too sharply drawn. Prisoners at Eastern State Penitentiary from time to time endured the iron gag and the (freezing) shower bath—it was not just at Auburn where the body was distressed. Those at Auburn were sometimes psychologically crippled by the whip—it was not just in Eastern State Penitentiary where the will to live could be broken. In both places opportunities for easy communication and meaningful relationships with other prisoners were non-existent. Both systems sought to subdue through silence, to instruct, to guide, and to reform. They also hoped that inmate labour might defray some or all of the running costs.

Johnston (2004: 27–30) described how the separate system as practised at Eastern State Penitentiary was imperfect from the outset. He gave as examples the deployment of prisoners as assistants to the carpenters and stonemasons who were involved in the institution's construction; the use of prisoners as waiters at staff parties; and the involvement of prisoners in maintenance tasks such as supplying cellblock stoves with fuel (if male) or working in the kitchen or laundry (if female). These violations of the principles underlying the separate system led to a legislative inquiry five years after the prison opened (see McElwee 1835). Prisoners were also adept at communicating with their neighbours by rapping on the walls, shouting into the sewer pipes when they were empty, or throwing notes into adjacent exercise yards. But there was 'a more blatant violation of the system's ideals' (Johnston 2004: 29). This was caused by the presence of prisoners who could not speak English who were sometimes

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accommodated with a bilingual inmate so that one could act as translator for the other. Similarly, there were reports of the single cell policy being breached if an inmate needed to be observed for medical reasons or if he required instruction in a trade from another prisoner.

But the most serious undermining of the official ethos of silence and separation, what Johnston termed the 'dirty secret' (p. 29) of the Pennsylvania system was that the prison soon became overcrowded, with some cells containing two convicts as early as 1841. According to Teeters (1937: 401): 'By 1860 the system had broken down to the point where a disinterested observer would have admitted that the concept championed by the Society [for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons] was no longer tenable. It broke down first for the very practical reason that it was not only expensive, but difficult of attainment from an administrative point of view.' As Johnston (2004: 29) reported, the heyday of separation did not last long:

> Prior to a major building program in 1876, 795 inmates occupied 585 cells. More than half of the prisoners in a penitentiary organized around the principle of separation were sharing cells. Before the turn of the century, the prison's population approached 1,400, with as many as four inmates occupying one cell. The Pennsylvania system, fiercely defended by its local partisans against the rival Auburn system, never maintained strict seclusion for all of its inmates.

Johnston's numbers differ from those reported elsewhere which suggest an even worse situation of 977 inmates in 580 cells in 1876 (Eastern State Penitentiary Task Force 1994: 178, Table 2a). Quibbles about the figures aside, the trend is clear, with more prisoners than cells by the 1860s and an entrenchment of this problem thereafter, despite the provision of additional accommodation. Kahan (2008: 48) cites an attack on the penitentiary's administration made by a local judge in 1881 that was reported by the *Philadelphia Inquirer.* The judge had bemoaned the fact that: 'the prisoners are not in solitary confinement, unless you can call two and three persons in one cell solitary'. However imperfect the Pennsylvania system may have been in terms of enforcing silence and separation, any pretence that the experiment could continue was ended by the doubling up of prisoners. The erosion of the concept of separate discipline to a point beyond which it could not be retained even as a convenient fiction was finally arrived at with its

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legislative repeal in 1913, bringing law and policy into alignment with what had long been the practice.

Developments on the other side of the Atlantic followed a similar trajectory. The integrity of separation, as exemplified in London by HMP Pentonville, was soon challenged, diluted, and abandoned.

The Model Prison

The Penitentiary Act 1779 formalized the idea that prisoners in England should be lodged in 'separate rooms or cells' at night. Maximum (12 feet long, 8 wide and 11 high) and minimum (10 by 7 by 9) dimensions were specified for these rooms. The Act envisaged the construction of two national penitentiaries—one for 600 men and the other for 300 women—that would involve 'solitary imprisonment, accompanied by well regulated labour, and religious instruction'. The rationale was that this combination of effects would allow the individual to acquire the requisite tools to construct a new life just as solitary confinement worked to obliterate their former self. The impact of this legislative initiative was largely felt at local level in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, where numerous prisons designed with a view to solitary confinement were constructed. The national penitentiaries did not emerge as planned and in the local jails where solitary confinement had been introduced it came under sustained critical attack on the grounds of (high) cost and (dubious) effectiveness and was used less regularly, 'ending up as a special form of discipline for refractory prisoners' (Evans 2010: 192). The enthusiasm for penal solitude waned significantly in the opening decades of the nineteenth century before being revived by Crawford's report of his American visit.

Evans (2010) showed that the reasons for abandoning solitude as a penological principle were practical as much as they were philosophical. As well as exacting a considerable toll on the individual it was difficult to impose successfully. One of the first English prisons to attempt blanket enforcement of silence was Coldbath Fields House of Correction in London. Attempts to communicate were ruthlessly suppressed in the early 1830s. In one year more than 11,600 punishments were awarded for talking or swearing (Playfair 1971: 78). But the governor and staff had to admit partial defeat as, even if they stamped out casual conversation, prisoners managed to convey information through a sign language of winks

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and hand movements, by tapping on pipes, and other ingenious measures. As expressed by Ignatieff (1989: 178), the prison authorities were limited to 'policing a silence that actually hummed with secret language'. This meant that when architectural solutions emerged to meet the challenges of separation, they found a receptive audience. The experiments in Auburn and Philadelphia gave hope to reformers in England that: 'Silence and separation would yet be the salvation of prisoners' (Evans 2010: 317).

The 1779 legislation allowed imprisonment in a penitentiary for up to seven years as an alternative to transportation, which had been abandoned due to the outbreak of the American War in 1776. But, as the national penitentiaries envisaged by the Act were not built, prison terms remained short. When transportation resumed after 1784, now to Australia, the plans for the penitentiaries were shelved. Work eventually began on a national penitentiary at Millbank in London in 1812. This huge institution, described by Teagarden (1969: 358) as 'a sprawling, shapeless labyrinth of cell blocks and ancillary buildings', was exorbitantly expensive to build and to run, and was plagued by difficulties from the outset. Built on marshy ground and inadequately ventilated, the poorly fed prisoners were vulnerable to disease; disgruntled by the regime, they became rebellious; structural flaws meant that parts of the building were unsafe; public sentiment was ambivalent at best; and the complexity of the layout compromised effective surveillance.

HMP Pentonville, the 'model prison', was intended to overcome these problems and to vindicate penitentiary discipline. It would demonstrate how severity and mercy could be combined in a building that was designed to eradicate communication (of disease as well as of criminal contacts). In this sterile and silent environment those who had done wrong would learn to do right in a way that was cost-effective and served to promote public safety. A flawless institution would eradicate the flaws in its occupants. It would be, in Evans' (2010: 354) words, 'a kind of chrysalis within which the transmutation of the criminal mind was to take place'. When Pentonville opened in 1842 the architectural and philosophical influences of Eastern State Penitentiary were readily apparent in its imposing facade, radial design, individual exercise yards, and relatively large cells. Like its American cousin, Pentonville excited great interest internationally and was used as the blueprint for prisons in many other countries.

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Pentonville was the apotheosis of a long process of deliberation, experimentation, failure, and revision. It was the culmination of the desire to connect individual reformation to institutional design, so that modifications to the latter would impact directly on the former. According to Evans it was 'more impressive for its complexity and perfection than for its originality' (p. 363). It was the epitome of the reformers' credo that a man who has fallen can, with assistance, learn to stand and to walk straight. It drew on a long, but inconsistent, commitment to solitary confinement as a penal objective in Britain and the scrutiny of developments—especially architectural, but also medical and moral—in the US. Inmates in the 'model prison' would spend 18 months in separate confinement, in what was described at the time with alliterative flourish, as, 'a silent solitary sepulchre of stone' (*The Times*, 29 November 1843, p. 4). They were entitled to a single visit of 15 minutes duration every six months and they could send and receive two letters each year. At the end of their term they were transported to Australia.

Care is required with the language used to characterize competing penal priorities. As noted already, neither Auburn nor Eastern State Penitentiary involved absolute solitude as in the former, after the brief failed experiment with total isolation, there was communal work and dining and in the latter, while denied intercourse with other prisoners, there were many visitors from outside as well as regular encounters with the chaplain and other prison staff. Also, there was a distinction in the British legislation between separate confinement and solitary confinement. The former was intended for the prisoner's benefit even if it was felt as punitive, and the latter was intended as punitive, and to be used sparingly, with little consideration as to its wider impact. Reviewing the situation in England, Field (1848: 146) drew a sharp distinction between 'solitary confinement' which was purely punitive and unambiguously harmful, and 'separate confinement' which was intended for 'the permanent moral benefit of the prisoner'. The former was spent in cramped conditions, with minimal human interaction and a reduced diet. It tended to 'harden, provoke, and brutalize' (p. 147). The latter was spent in a spacious and well-ventilated cell with decent food and opportunities for work, education, and religious instruction together with regular visits from those concerned with the improvement of morals. Its effect was 'to induce reflection, kindliness, gratitude, and amendment' (p. 147). As Henriques

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(1972: 77) put it: ‘Separation was from other criminals only, not from the superior moral company of prison governors, chaplains, schoolmasters etc.’

The subtleties of the situation were not always appreciated. A letter to *The Lancet*, penned while Pentonville was under construction, drew attention to some of the adverse consequences of prolonged solitary confinement that had been reported in America and Belgium. The correspondent cautioned that, if true, these reports ‘would make the refined cruelty of the silent system appear less humane and merciful than was the Spanish Inquisition’ (Simpson 1840). (As will be shown in Chapter 5, technological advances have allowed this ‘refined cruelty’ to be taken to another level in what have become known as supermax prisons.)

A ‘maniac-making system’?

There was adverse commentary in the press in the period after Pentonville opened. A short piece in *The Times* on 27 November 1843—no more than a column inch on page four—was entitled ‘Insanity in the Model Prison’. It drew attention to the fact that although the prison had not been open long, and held inmates who were in good health, nevertheless two among their number, John Reeve and John Hill Stone, had become insane during the year and been transferred to hospital. The comment was made that ‘It is remarkable that insanity only occurs in the Penitentiary and Model Prison, under Government inspectors, and not in magistrates’ prisons.’ Madness, it was suggested, seemed to be a problem peculiar to Pentonville. (For a highly partisan, and entertainingly barbed, account of the hostility of *The Times* towards the separate system, see Adshead 1845: 13–93.)

The Illustrated London News described how Pentonville had claimed ‘another victim’, a convict named Cowle, who was the third within the space of a year to have become insane and been transferred to Bethlehem hospital (13 January 1844, p. 22). Concerns about the model prison incubating madness were made all the more acute by the fact that the rigours of the regime had been anticipated and the prisoners who were sent there were carefully chosen from among those who had been sentenced to transportation. They were young, strong, generally first offenders, and believed to be capable of withstanding the rigours of separation. That a slide into solitary madness was found in an apparently

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healthy group exacerbated concern in some quarters. As the separate system became more widely established and the ability to preselect prisoners diminished, its adverse implications became more evident. The deleterious psychological consequences of solitude were no surprise. This hazard had always been recognized; indeed the process of reformation, if it was to begin in earnest, required the aversive stimulus of isolation. The question was simply whether the risk was disproportionately large. This was where discussants differed, and prisoners died. (The argument has changed little in the intervening period, namely, how is it possible to establish with any degree of precision the independent effect of isolation, especially among a group where there is known to be a high level of underlying distress and dysfunction?)

Within a year of its opening *The Times* was describing Pentonville as a 'maniac-making system' where the prisoner became a 'coffined living man' (29 November 1843, p. 4). Indeed, *The Times* had been pessimistic even before the model prison opened, believing that prolonged separation was 'unnecessarily cruel, impolitic, and injudicious' and that it would cause an unacceptable level of distress: 'Misery will follow the want of excitement, melancholy will give place to despair, and if not relieved by contact with living beings, madness or idiocy must follow' (20 May 1841, p. 8). In the same article, the newspaper warned that, 'if other prisons be built on the same principle, a madhouse will be a necessary adjunct to a county prison' (p. 8).

Table 1.1 summarizes what can be learned about the extent to which this dystopian claim can be empirically validated drawing upon the annual reports to parliament of the prison's commissioners. A complete understanding of medical care in Pentonville would require a detailed archival study but the official figures probably serve as reliable counts of mortality and are suggestive of institutional priorities more generally. The table is limited to the most serious cases—those that led to removal on the grounds of insanity, or where the prisoner took his own life. There were other cases each year—albeit few in number—where prisoners were removed to Millbank or the hulks because they were deemed unsuited to the discipline of the prison. Among this small group were some who showed signs of psychological distress. Other prisoners whose disturbance was insufficient to lead to their removal were treated within the confines of the penitentiary. Table 1.1 shows that, during its first seven years, just two suicides and thirteen cases of insanity

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Table 1.1 The 'maniac-making system' at Pentonville

	Admissions	Removed insane	Suicide	Other deaths	Mania/ delusions
1843	525	2	0	2	8
1844	240	1	0	3	0
1845	283	1	0	4	3
1846	243	1	0	2	6
1847	360	0	0	2	2
1848	519	4	1	6	7
1849	599	4	1	1	5
Total	2,769	13	2	20	31

Source: Commissioners for the Government of the Pentonville Prison, second to eighth reports. The figures for 1843 include the final ten days of the previous year; the prison received its first prisoners on 21 December 1842.

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were recorded in Pentonville. Ten times as many prisoners died from physical diseases as at their own hands. During the first full year of its operation there were no suicides and two prisoners were removed to Bethlehem hospital on the grounds of insanity. The following year there were no suicides and one insane prisoner was transferred to hospital. If Pentonville was a machine for making maniacs it was not a particularly effective one. Even in the earliest days most prisoners seemed to get by without drawing attention to themselves. Only a tiny minority became floridly unwell and in some of these cases there was a history of mental illness that came to light later. So it is difficult to sustain the argument that the prison *systematically* propelled people towards insanity. Nevertheless, these few cases generated significant interest and the regime was progressively softened, with the period of separate confinement truncated from 18 months to 12 months in 1848 and then to nine months in 1853 (Departmental Committee on Prisons [Gladstone Committee] 1895a: para 78).

The commissioners were at pains to point out in their second report that the first prisoner to be removed to Bethlehem hospital (John Reeve) had not been in custody long and had not been exposed to the rigours of separation. He was admitted on 8 February 1843 and six weeks later (22 March) showed symptoms of melancholy

which soon gave way to 'violent religious mania' (Commissioners for the Government of the Pentonville Prison 1844: 9). Discipline was relaxed and he seemed to improve but suffered a relapse and was transferred to hospital on 24 June. According to the commissioners: 'During the short time he was in the prison, and before he became insane, he was almost constantly employed out of his cell and in company' (p. 9). The second prisoner to be removed to Bethlehem that year (John Hill Stone) was reported to have had a history of insanity before his imprisonment and was principally occupied outside his cell (p. 9). There is a defensive tone to these reports; an unwillingness to contemplate that there could be a causal relationship between the regime and the prisoners' mental states. The physician's report to the commissioners for 1844 is emphatic: 'the system of Pentonville presents nothing in itself conducive to the development of insanity' (Commissioners for the Government of the Pentonville Prison 1845: 12). Like the chaplains, prison doctors played an important role in the debate about separation and its effects.

Teagarden (1969: 363–4) was not convinced by the proposition that the regime at Pentonville was 'maniac making', observing that the available records suggest it fared well vis-à-vis comparable institutions in England and the US in terms of rates of insanity and overall mortality. The available data show that the number of prisoners transferred out of Pentonville was very small but that this outward trickle caused a flood of controversy (especially in *The Times*). In addition, there was a less dramatic underlying level of dysfunction that probably resulted in the decision to abbreviate the period of separation. In short, there were few suicidal lunatics but there was much evident distress.

Whatever its effects the infatuation with redemptive separation did not last long. According to Grass (2003: 44), 'Through the rest of the decade [1850s] local officials continued to build separate prisons, and prison chaplains . . . continued to sing the separate system's praises. At Pentonville, however, the great national experiment in separate discipline was over.' As McConville (1981: 209) put it:

> Pentonville sank under the weight of public disapproval, its own unfulfilled promises, and the requirements of the new public works prisons. In 1849 the special selection for Pentonville of the most fit and promising convicts ceased and, with various other changes in the regime, the reformatory

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experiment was effectively abandoned. Henceforth Pentonville differed little in objectives, methods or population from Millbank convict depot; in both, convicts were disciplined before being sent, as a preliminary to transportation, to labour in association at the new public works prison at Portland, thus irrevocably wrecking the scheme of careful penitential preparation followed by ejection into completely new circumstances.

The abolition of transportation and the loss of faith in the reformative effects of separation meant that the period of isolation that characterized the first phase of the sentence became seen as an entirely aversive experience for a growing number of prisoners. The report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords (1863) chaired by the Earl of Carnarvon, and the Prisons Act that followed two years later, marked the shift towards a uniform system of discipline across local jails and greater emphasis on hard labour, hard fare, and a hard bed. Devices such as the crank and the tread wheel (or 'everlasting staircase' as it was sometimes known), and pointless exertions such as shot drill, became more popular. The food was precisely measured, minimal and monotonous. The hammock was replaced with a plank of wood. The prevailing wisdom according to Forsythe (2004: 759) was that imprisonment should involve 'rigid, measured severity' and 'carefully graded suffering'. In 1895 the Gladstone Committee ushered in a new era of reform and, once again, the prison system changed tack. The tread wheel and the crank were abolished and the relentless and withering punitiveness of the previous 30 years was jettisoned in favour of more reformative and hopeful measures. What had been accepted was once again discredited (see Harding (1988) for an account of the committee's antecedents and how its work was influenced by differing perceptions of crime and recidivism rates).

In the opening decades of the twentieth century the enforcement of the rule of silence and the rigours of the initial phase of separation were gradually relaxed; the former because it was routinely subverted and the latter because any residual belief in its reformative rationale had evaporated. This is not to say that prisoners were allowed to mingle and communicate freely, but rather that it was generally recognized that the pursuit of absolute silence was futile and had the undesirable side effect of bringing the framework of prison rules more generally into disrepute. Even when silence was a paramount value it was never complete. Prisoners rapped on walls, shouted out windows, banged their doors, or exchanged a few

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words with a sympathetic guard. When they came together in the chapels of England's separate prisons, they took the opportunity to roar out the responses and to sing the hymns at the tops of their voices (Priestley 1999: 94–5). This served a variety of purposes, none of which was intended. First of all it allowed those who were forced to live by a rule of silence to exercise vocal cords that had been forced to lie idle for too long. Secondly, it provided an opportunity for illicit conversation, camouflaged by loudly insincere singing. Thirdly, it offered opportunities for sacrilegious diversion as ribald lyrics were substituted for Christian verse. Fourthly, the excessive exuberance that characterized the congregation's performance caricatured the chaplains' efforts to bring their flock closer to God; this was divine service as defiance.

The gulf between policy and practice began to widen (see Hobhouse and Brockway 1922: 562–6) and the initial phase of separation was suspended in 1922 as the Home Secretary felt that 'a man brooding alone in his cell became morose and vindictive' (cited in Baxendale 2011: 171). When it was clear that this change did not lead to an increase in indiscipline the suspension was continued until the introduction of new prison rules in 1931 which brought the practice to a formal, and final, conclusion (p. 171). The last vestige of separate confinement had now been stripped out of the system.

When the optimism that surrounded the design and operation of the model prison evaporated, it was replaced by an emphasis on hopeless and pointless discipline. The failure to live up to expectations had profound effects. According to Priestley (1999: 119)

> the damage the penitentiary did went deeper than broken promises and hurt minds. The void left by its collapse was progressively filled by a disciplinary timetable from which all humanity and all hope were all but extinguished. The original vision foresaw a dark tunnel of suffering, at the end of which there shone—however distantly—the light of redemption and salvation. When the light went out, the darkness closed in around the Victorian prisoner. It was not to be lifted again for a generation.

The 'darkness closed in' again with the proliferation of supermax prisons in the closing decades of the twentieth century. In another turn of the penal screw, the void created by the disappearance of therapeutic optimism and the pessimism about improving prisoners' behaviour without recourse to the most repressive measures, was filled by harsh hopelessness. As regards prisoner treatment,

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the view taken was that if nothing worked, then nothing mattered. But, just as the infatuation with hard labour passed, so too the supermax obsession is likely to wane and if the historical precedent is any guide, a more beneficent cycle may lie ahead.

The Hard Cell of Solitude

The separate system was lauded initially and officials at Pentonville and other establishments where it was in place in the UK, such as Reading and Preston, held that prisoners benefited greatly from it. They claimed that former convicts corresponded after release to praise the disciplinary regime to which they had been subjected (Field (1848: 297–8) reproduced some 'specimens'). No doubt this did happen on occasion, but the inmates who had gone mad or returned to crime were unlikely to pen such missives. Also, many reports of the benefits of separation came from chaplains who played an important role in telling prisoners' stories. As Grass (2003: 33–4) argued, taking control of the discourse in this way allowed them to propagate a view of prison discipline in accordance with their own preferences or, at least, to shape the prison narrative so that it became a story of depravity, separation, and religious awakening. Or, as Graber (2011: 187) put it, the writings of reformers and ministers of religion, 'functioned as volleys in a rhetorical war'. This does not negate the value of such publications—the detailed accounts of prison life they yield are important—but their underlying purpose must be kept in sight as an aid to interpretation.

It may be that the more credulous among the chaplains were quicker to go to print with their experiences, so persuaded were they by the success of a system in which they played a central role. By drawing attention to reformed rogues they could bask in reflected glory; not every clergyman could take credit for the spiritual renewal of parishioners who had fallen so far and yet risen so high. Those who laboured among the criminal classes searched hard for virtue among villains and when they found it, it is understandable why some of them were quick to suspend doubt and keen to spread the word. An example of this literary genre is the book of letters and autobiographies compiled by the chaplain of Chester Castle Gaol (Joseph 1853).

Some of the accounts prisoners provided to chaplains of their internal transformations may have been written to curry favour

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with the authorities but there were others that appeared to be sincere. But why would this be surprising, argued Henriques (1972: 83), given the attention paid to these alienated and barely literate working class men and women who, when they arrived in prison, 'were suddenly overwhelmed by the full impact of self-confident middle class evangelical religious and moral propaganda . . . If the pliable merely bent before the wind, some may well have been, at least for the time, subjugated by the solitude and the torrent of exhortation. The techniques described as deterrence and reformation might nowadays be called brain-washing.' In other words, while some did respond to separation as its advocates hoped they would, the range of reactions was wide. In a review of more than two hundred prisoner autobiographies, Priestley (1999: 114) concluded that 'The weight of prisoner opinion is tilted firmly against the chaplains.' Despite the earnestness of their ministrations, and the claims of success made vociferously by a few among them, the chaplains' efforts were, by and large, rebuffed. In a long letter to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle* composed the year after his release from Reading Gaol, Oscar Wilde (1898) described the prison chaplains as, 'entirely useless. They are, as a class, well-meaning, but foolish, indeed silly, men.'

The prison reformers of the nineteenth century believed that enforced silence and solitude would cause prisoners to reflect on the error of their ways and that this reflection would become the springboard for a change of direction in their lives. The first element of this belief was certainly true, but sometimes the regret and remorse that attended hindsight, in conjunction with the limitations of the unbolstered self that solitude laid bare, were too much to bear. Writing of the 15 years penal servitude she served for poisoning her husband, Florence Maybrick (1905: 74–5) offered the following comment about her first nine months, which, in accordance with the practice of the time (Maybrick was convicted in August 1889), she spent alone: 'Solitary confinement is by far the most cruel feature of English penal servitude. It inflicts upon the prisoner at the commencement of her sentence, when most sensitive to the horrors which prison punishment entails, the voiceless solitude, the hopeless monotony, the long vista of to-morrow, to-morrow, to-morrow stretching before her, all filled with desolation and despair.' She saw it as 'inexpressible torture to both mind and body' (p. 81). Maybrick, who was born in Alabama, returned to the US after her release. She was unimpressed by Eastern State

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Penitentiary, describing it in 1906 as the worst prison in all of America (Kahan 2008: 71).

Jabez Balfour (1907: 46), a swindler and former Member of Parliament who was sentenced to 14 years penal servitude in November 1895, found the rule of silence to be rigorously enforced: 'The silent system was as strictly maintained as was possible under human organization. I was at Wormwood Scrubbs [*sic*] for close on seven months, and I hardly exchanged twelve words with a fellow-prisoner during the whole of that time. My conversations were limited entirely to very brief replies to the warder's questions, to an occasional chat with the chaplain, and a passing remark with the then Governor.' One of the problems experienced by the solitary prisoner is retaining a sense of self. This is exacerbated by a lack of company as we tend to make sense of ourselves by comparison with others. When the prisoner is denied access even to his reflection, the grip on identity becomes ever more tenuous. Balfour described how his appearance became foreign to him: 'Curiously enough, I never saw myself in a looking-glass from the moment I left my cell in Holloway, on December 14, 1895, until November 1, 1904—practically nine years. When I did see myself I started back, for I did not know my own face. It was one of the most amazing and terrifying experiences in my life. I had changed past recognition' (p. 37).

Michael Davitt (1882: 10), who began his first period of penal servitude in 1870, with the obligatory nine months of solitary confinement at Millbank, recalled how: 'During the whole of my stay in Millbank my conversation with prisoners—at the risk of being punished, of course—as also with warders and chaplains, would not occupy me twenty minutes to repeat, could I collect all of the scattered words spoken by me . . . I recollect many weeks going by without my exchanging a word with a single human being.' However, during this period and the years that followed (Davitt was sentenced to 15 years penal servitude in 1870 and released on a ticket-of-leave after seven years and seven months; he was jailed again in 1881 and elected to the House of Commons the following year, while still a prisoner) the Irish patriot was not damaged beyond repair. 'It is his glory' Moody (1941: 525) tells us, 'that, resisting the jail-machine to the end, he was never broken by it—never became insane, or neurotic or embittered or hopeless.'

An account of how the 'jail-machine' is resisted is one of the key aims of this book. It is hoped that a critical examination of

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the impact of long-term isolation will attest to the durability of the individual under even the most arduous of circumstances. This may act as a prompt to reconsider the rationality of such treatment (to say nothing of its necessity or desirability). Why punish longer and harder if the limits to human endurance are so elastic? Secondly, it is hoped that foregrounding the temporal aspect of imprisonment will stimulate interest in a somewhat neglected aspect of the prisoner's psychological world. Time feels different depending on the individual's age, expectations, and phase of sentence. For solitary prisoners, it has an almost palpable quality, bearing down on them and threatening to crush. For the lonely prisoner the days seem endless and coping with boredom becomes an existential trial. Despite the odds, many discover the wherewithal to cope and their styles of 'time work' deserve closer attention than they have hitherto attracted. Thirdly, by rekindling the debate about silence and separation and returning to the historical precedents, it is hoped that some of the mistakes of the past will not be repeated and once again forgotten. Fourthly, there are lessons for policy and practice. These include the potential for preparing prisoners to mitigate the harshness of solitary confinement and the expanse of time that yawns ahead of them.

The historical message is that unrelieved solitary confinement was a severe burden for prisoners and one that could not be borne for long without running the risk of psychological derailment. When congregate labour was added but the rule of silence remained in place, the enforcement of the rule through corporal punishment created different hardships. Both the Pennsylvania and Auburn systems, but especially the former, came to be seen as embracing approaches to discipline that had few beneficial correlates from the perspectives of those subjected to their demands. But the assumption that the damage caused by isolation was universal and irreversible cannot be supported and there are several aspects of the debate that repay closer scrutiny. These are considered in the following chapter.

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