

'Star Men' in English Convict Prisons, 1879-1948

By Ben Bethell

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Ben Bethell's 'Star Men in English Convict Prisons, 1879-1948' is a well-researched and thought-provoking examination of a unique class of prisoners during a period of significant penal change. The end of transportation to Australia in 1868 (and to America before that, ending in 1775) raised new concerns about managing England's growing prison population. The prison-building drive between 1842 and 1877 led to the erection of numerous new local and convict prisons. However, concerns about the 'contamination' or criminogenic effect of incarceration emerged as the recidivist population began to outgrow first-time offenders. Convicts were perceived as inflicting wisdom, advice, or 'evil thoughts' on one another during their associations; Hulks and transportation vessels, and later convict and local prisons, were recognised as 'schools (or, perhaps, ships?) of crime'. Despite the introduction of separate and silent systems alongside the sentence of Penal Servitude, significant concern and confusion persisted regarding the impact of these systems and the effect of 'contamination'.

The introduction of the Star Class in 1879, made up of 'gentlemen convicts' with no prior convictions, aimed to separate first-time offenders, who were perceived as being at most risk from contamination by habitual or recidivist offenders and the 'residue'

and 'filth' (p.31) they 'would have been best for them all to forget' (p.149). Criminals within this unique class were perceived as either 'deliberate and in cold blood or led astray by others' (p.36). This dichotomy reflects a broader societal debate on the nature of criminality and the appropriate response to it during the late 19th century, with views suggesting certain criminals should be pitied rather than despised. Many convicts were driven to crime by desperation rather than inherent depravity; they were victims of circumstance. These individuals had often led otherwise normal lives, and their criminal acts were seen as moments of weakness rather than manifestations of depravity. Prison commissioners therefore viewed the protection of this class as essential to prevent the spread of 'contamination', though as Bethell articulates, this term became conflated with both the spread of criminal thought and disease or mental health (invalid convicts) within a custodial setting.

The 'gentlemen convict' was perceived as belonging to a more 'respectable class of convict' (p.39). While this group of first-time offenders maintained a higher status within their prison compared to the 'normal' convict, those convicted of unnatural offences sodomy, indecency, or homicide could also find their way into the Star Class ranks for their protection. While policy at the time stated that Star Men would receive no preferential treatment compared to their 'normal' peers, Bethell explains that, over time, the opportunities afforded to them often stemmed from their inability to complete the gruelling work of penal labour due to their often educated backgrounds and careers prior to imprisonment rendering them 'incapable' of such harsh labours. The Kimberley Commission in 1895 perceived it as pointless to send such men to conduct penal labour that would likely be

detrimental upon their release. The print shop, therefore, became a highly sought-after position for men within this class—but were Star Men afforded other benefits?

Parkhurst, Portland, Dover, and Chatham (among others) were all recipients of the Star Class. Despite the uniformity reinforced by successive Prison Commissioners, the regimes and opportunities available to those within their detention varied. Chapters 4 and 5 cover the experiences of Star Men across the convict prison estate, with a particular emphasis on Chatham, Maidstone, and later Dover (which became a Star Class-only prison—to the 'delight' of tabloid newspapers, where Dover became known as the 'prison hotel' (p.180)). Convicts here could expect to engage with tasks considered more suitable and less physically demanding for individuals of a Star Man status. Clerical work, printing, educational roles, gardening and horticulture or library work all formulated part of their daily routine. While in other prisons, officers were perceived as becoming 'corrupt' by bringing in newspapers or other 'luxuries' for the Star Class working groups. They were seen as undermining the legitimacy of the convict system, creating significant discrepancies in the treatment and experiences of Star Men and the normal convict. It is unsurprising that Star Men received preferential treatment at times for certain works over the 'ordinary convict', despite the latter bearing a different skill set. After all, 'discipline depended upon affording occupation' (p.112).

The use of the Star Class was perceived by Paterson as the 'prison administrator's overriding moral duty' (p.176), enabling more tailored approaches to the rehabilitation and training of different types of prisoners. With daily regimes accounting for 15 hours of the day out of cell, one might be forgiven for thinking

prisons were 'better' some 100 years ago. It is interesting to see the use of Camp Hill on the Isle of Wight transition between types of prison before becoming a Star Class prison from 1946. This prison represented something like today's Open Category D prisons, with limited fences, open space, and, comparatively, an abundance of opportunities, as it was reported, 'listless, hopeless men had grown alert and cheerful... within a few weeks of their arrival' (p.183).

Bethell concludes the book by referencing the unanticipated creation of both a class and, in the case of Maidstone prison opening in 1909, an establishment for a particular type of 'gentleman' convict. These men were often (though not exclusively) not low-level offenders but rather comprised of white-collar criminals, those who had committed uxoricide (the killing of one's wife) and violent and sexual offenders bound together by their first-time offending status and previously 'good character' references. They benefited from improved prison labour opportunities, diet, open spaces, and what might otherwise

be perceived as 'rehabilitative' opportunities; Star Men were perceived as being 'capable of reform, or not criminal in the first place' (p.201). While concerns around 'contamination' are pertinent throughout the book, there is limited consideration given to whether such respectable 'gentlemen' had a similar effect upon one another. The assumption that punishing recidivists in increasingly punitive ways would coerce their 'rehabilitation' stands in stark contrast with the tailored 'experience' provided to Star Men, who were presumed unlikely to reoffend due to their status. Rather, it was suggested that the exposure of the Star Class in certain convict prisons to their 'normal criminal counterparts' suggested that exposure to their 'normal criminal' counterparts was punishment enough.

'Star Men in English Convict Prisons' provides a glimpse into the development of a separate class of prisoners through changing times, the abolition of transportation, the rise of local and convict prisons, changing philosophies around punishment and reformation, and

the impact of two World Wars, culminating in the Mountbatten report in 1967 and the classification system operational in the English and Welsh system today. Bethell's ability to weave historical context with detailed case studies and broader societal debates makes this book an essential read for anyone interested in the history of penal policy and the treatment of prisoners in England and Wales. While Bethell acknowledges it would be incorrect to draw direct correlations between his work and the state of prisons in England and Wales today, it is almost impossible not to recognise similar regimes involving separation, confinement, and classification of prisoners alongside the often-deplorable environments in which they reside. There likely remains further research to be done on the lives of those involved within the Star Class, their experiences as Star Men, and their life trajectories post-release—whether being a Star Man had the desired outcome and 'reformed' the 'gentleman' would make for a fascinating research project and one this reviewer would most wholly welcome.