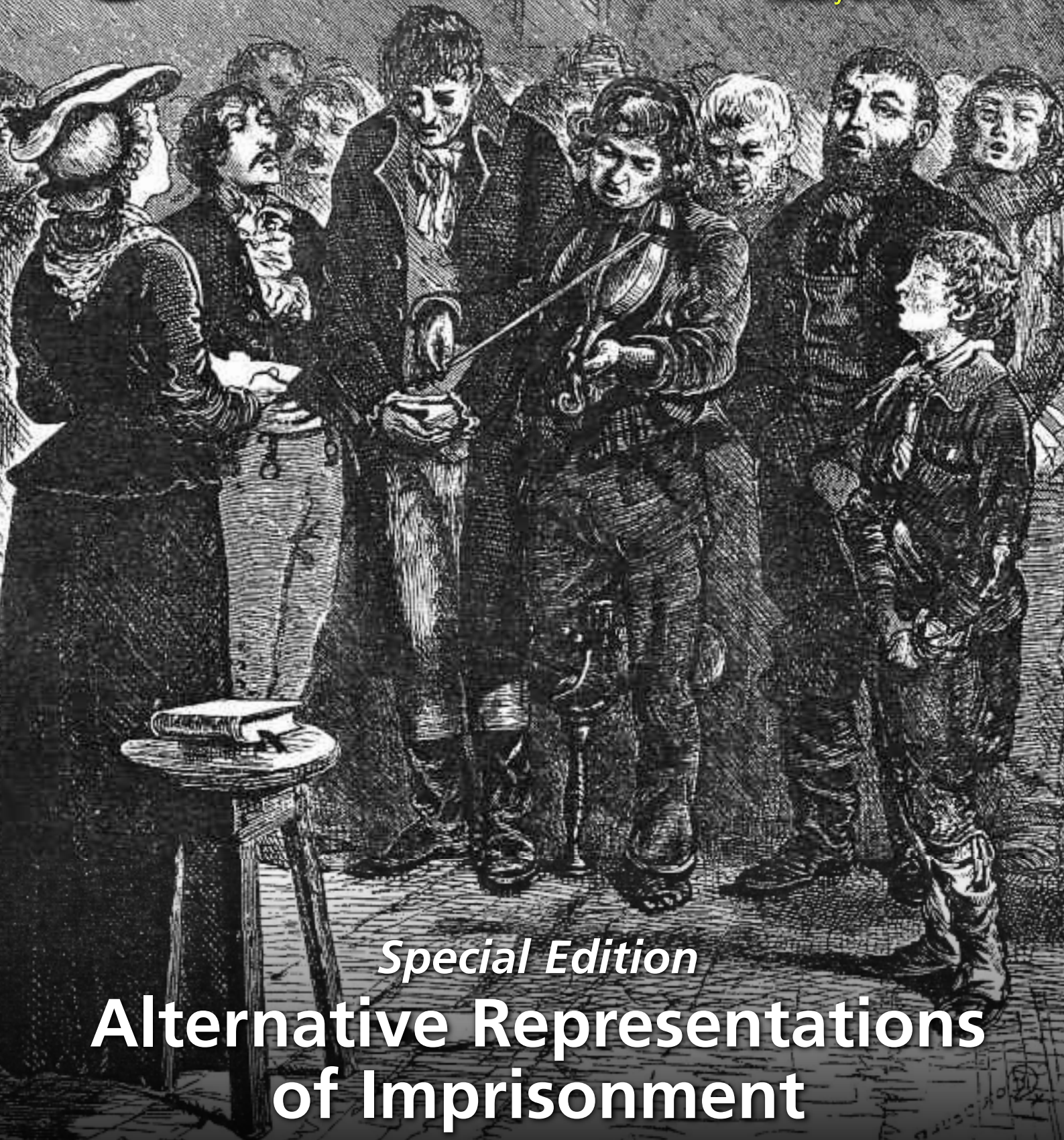


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**Alternative Representations
of Imprisonment**

Singing at Yarmouth Gaol:

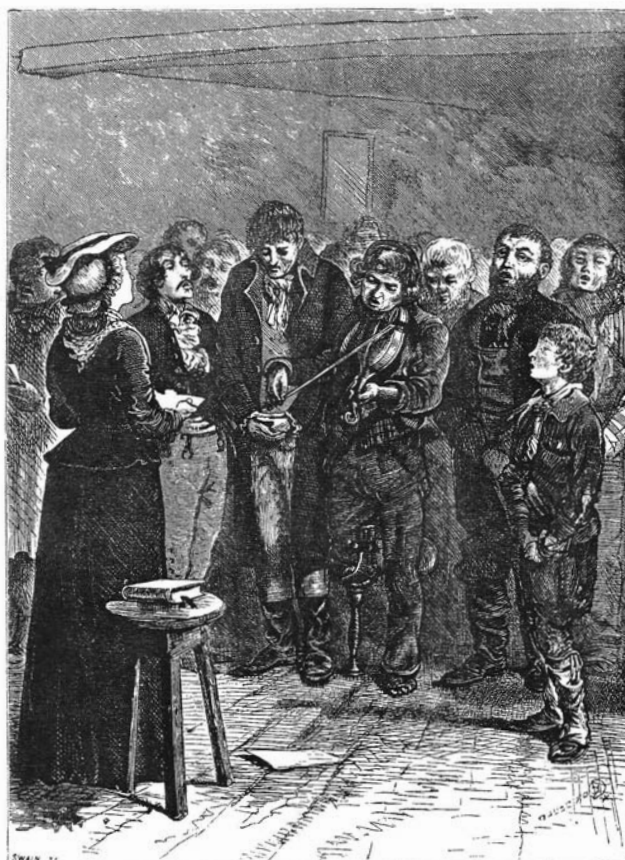
Christian Instruction and Inmate Culture in the Nineteenth Century

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Leafing through papers at the Great Yarmouth Museum Service relating to Sarah Martin, Christian visitor at Yarmouth Gaol between 1818 and 1843 and a pioneer in prisoner rehabilitation, I came across an extraordinary image of prison life. Taken from a popular history of the 1880s, the illustration depicts 'Sarah Martin Conducting Service in Yarmouth Gaol' (see figure 1).¹ The engraving is highly unusual not only because it shows a woman preaching to male inmates but because it conveys the liveliness and spirit of the prisoners when most contemporary representations portrayed them as silent and constrained. The humble dressmaker stands, hymn-book in hands, right before her gaol congregation to whom she preached each Sunday. In the front row of the informal assembly is a one-legged fiddler accompanying his fellow inmates, who sing heartily, their eyes fixed towards heaven, or bow their heads in silent, but earnest, contemplation. The prisoners are active participants in the service and in singing they find liberation as well as redemption. The fiddler — a traditional figure of organic community — lends the scene a homely, village air while the closeness of the preacher to her flock emphasizes intimacy and fellow-feeling. No bars or guards are shown. This is a community, not just a prison.

With its focus on the fiddler as well as the preacher, the illustration evokes the remedial power of music to humanize and bring about social harmony. However, at Yarmouth there was a far less harmonious and devotional tone to inmates' songs than suggested by the pious and optimistic illustration of Sarah Martin's congregation. Though I have found no evidence of violins or any other musical instrument at the gaol, 'tuning', 'whistling', 'hallooing' and 'singing, shouting and swearing' were among inmates' chief pastimes and the many ways they challenged prison regulations and order. Whatever benefits prisoners derived from communal hymnody, singing was a source of defiance and contest at Yarmouth Gaol.

Ideas about the recuperative effects of music are not new to the prison sector but they have rarely been



'Sarah Martin conducting service at Yarmouth Gaol' (with thanks to Yarmouth Museum Service and with permission of the British Library).

put systematically into practice and they have been studied even less. We know almost nothing of the history of music in British prisons.² In this article I seek to sketch out the nineteenth-century experience, first by outlining approaches to prisoner discipline and reformation. Then I explore inmates' responses to devotional singing and verse at Yarmouth gaol before investigating how they continued to participate vocally in their own song-culture. Finally, I examine another alternative representation of imprisonment — a song composed by a ballad singer about his punishment on the tread-wheel — before discussing how historical evidence of the use of sacred and vernacular song by Yarmouth prisoners might inform current approaches to music education and therapy in prison.

1. Illustration by Swain in Hodder, E. (nd) *Heroes of Britain in War and Peace* London: Cassell p. 186. The earliest dated version is 1878-80.
2. For US studies, see Lee, R. (2010) 'Music Education in Prisons: A Historical Overview' in *International Journal of Community Music* 3:1 p.7-18.

1. 'This ain't a music hall!'

The illustration of the Yarmouth congregation accompanied a chapter on the 'Prison Heroines' Elizabeth Fry and Sarah Martin who were frequently paired together in hagiographic studies of the early penal reformers.³ Famously, in her visits to Newgate Gaol in 1817, Fry had been appalled to find female inmates 'begging, swearing, gaming, fighting, dancing, dressing-up in men's clothes'.⁴ Following Fry's lead, the prosecution of singing became part of a sustained onslaught by penal reformers against inmate culture. Christian devotion and instruction moved to centre stage in the 1830s and 1840s as reformers championed the idea that prisons could be sites of moral correction and not just punishment. In order for religious teaching to take effect, however, inmates had to be isolated from the 'contaminating influences' they exerted over each other. By 1835, when the Prison Inspectorate took charge of overseeing local and county gaols and national penitentiaries, two rival systems of prisoner correction were taking hold. In both systems, inmates' only communication, except with their guards, was at the instigation of the schoolteacher, chaplain or religious visitor who solicited their confession and penitence. Under the silent system, prisoners were associated together for work and dining but watched continuously by guards so they could neither speak nor gesture. Under the separate or cellular system, inmates were kept in solitary cells and only came into contact with each other in the chapel and exercise yards where all communication was prohibited.⁵

Music in the Victorian prison, therefore, was confined almost exclusively to religious service in the prison chapel. Former prisoners recalled relief and pleasure in being able to raise their voices to sing during Sunday services and in a few institutions efforts were made to yoke such energies to rehabilitation.⁶ At Parkhurst, the juvenile reformatory formed on the separate principle, the chaplain ran a choir

Under the silent system, prisoners were associated together for work and dining but watched continuously by guards so they could neither speak nor gesture.

for boys and found hymn-singing to be 'a powerful auxiliary in softening and preparing the mind for instruction.' The 'first symptom' of a boy's readiness to improve, he claimed, 'was his beginning to join in the singing.'⁷ But penal institutions seldom seem to have recognized the reformatory potential of communal singing. As a former burglar recalled, when the revivalist songs of Sankey and Moodie found their way into his prison, 'We sang Sankey's hymns with such gusto as to attract the attention of the prison authorities' who '[c]onsidering such joyous song inconsistent with the sombreness of prison life, they forbade the hymns, and sent us back to the psalms and paraphrases with their plain puritanic tunes.'⁸

For the penal authorities, the prison congregation had to be carefully managed since it threatened the maintenance of both separation and silence. Communal singing presented opportunities for illicit communication. Prisoner memoirs report inmates whispering to each other, for instance, or singing their own ribald versions to the tune of devotional verses.⁹ The new-style penitentiaries and gaols were designed, therefore, to instil order and submission, the chaplain raised high above the ranks of prisoners watched closely by the guards, whose attendance, like that of inmates, was compulsory. The architecture of the chapel, as the rest of the penitentiary, was designed to turn prisoners into 'docile bodies', to use Foucault's suggestive term.¹⁰ Some chapels constructed on the separate principle, as at Pentonville, confined inmates in individual wooden compartments like upright coffins, and required them to wear masks on entry so they could not see each other.¹¹ Yet as Daniel Nihill, governor and chaplain at Millbank, astutely observed in 1839, such arrangements contradicted the very purpose of Christian congregation:

On the one hand, we bring Christians together for joint sympathetic worship; for the primary

3. Hodder, pp. 177-190.

4. Corder, S. (ed.) (1853) *Life of Elizabeth Fry* London: W. & F.G. Cash p.219.

5. For classic studies of prison discipline, see Henriques, U.R.Q. (1972) 'The Rise and Decline of the Separate System of Prison Discipline' *Past and Present* 54:1 p.61-93; Ignatieff, M. (1978) *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1950* London: Macmillan; Forsythe, W.J. (1987) *The Reform of Prisoners, 1830-1900* London: Croom Helm.

6. See Priestley, P. (1999) *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography 1830-1914* London: Pimlico pp. 94-5.

7. *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*, 5 September 1840, p. 258; Frederick Hill, *Crime: Its Amount, Causes and Remedies* London: John Murray, 1853.

8. Fannan, D. (1897) *A Burglar's Life Story in Glasgow, Edinburgh, London, Crimea etc.*, Glasgow: D. Bryce p. 129.

9. For examples, see Priestley, pp. 94-5.

10. Foucault, M. (1991) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan) Harmondsworth: Penguin.

11. For Pentonville see Mayhew H. And Binny J. (1862) *The Criminal Prisons of London* London: Griffin, Bohn p. 162-8. See the same for illustrations and discussion of various prison chapels in separate and silent regimes, and in the hulks.

*idea, the essential principle, which distinguishes public from private devotion, is sociality — the recognition of brethren — members of the same family — heirs of the same hope — aided by the sight and hearing of each other in a common assembly, where with one heart and one mouth they glorify God. Such is the principle on which the prisoners are brought together in chapel; but on the other hand, whilst so assembled, there is a studious effort to keep all in a state of separation, and to defeat the idea of their communion.*¹²

With its evocation of the restorative and civilizing influences of music, the illustration of ‘Sarah Martin Conducting Service at Yarmouth Gaol’ implies, therefore, a powerful critique of the penal regime that governed inmate life in the Victorian period. From the 1840s onwards, music was actively promoted by musical reformers through choral societies, brass bands and cheap concerts as a means of improving recreation and bringing together the classes.¹³ Some of their ideals began to filter into American correctional institutions: the hugely popular Hutchinson family delighted inmates and warders when they sang their four-part harmonies at Sing Sing prison in the 1840s, while a band was established at the Chicago Reform School in the 1860s.¹⁴ There are no reports of similar experiments in musical recreation or education in British gaols before the twentieth century. By the mid-nineteenth century the high-minded ideals that had motivated Christian reformers came under sustained attack.¹⁵ As attitudes towards the ‘undeserving’ hardened and policy swung towards deterrence, inmates’ experience was principally punitive rather than rehabilitative. When prisoners entered chapel at Coldbath Field in the late nineteenth century, their

When prisoners entered chapel at Coldbath Field in the late nineteenth century, their warders barked at them, ‘D’you know where you are?’ and ‘This ain’t a music hall!’

warders barked at them, ‘D’you know where you are?’ and ‘This ain’t a music hall!’¹⁶

2. ‘I will learn some out of a hymn book if you like’

Like other small to medium-size prisons, Yarmouth Gaol, usually holding around thirty inmates, was very different from the model penitentiaries that dominate our perception of the Victorian prison. On his first visit to the gaol in 1835 the Prison Inspector complained that no rules were displayed and no proper separation existed between the different classes of inmates — those awaiting trial, first-time and repeat offenders, male and female inmates, and debtors — while communication was carried on easily

between them. Any ‘degree of good order’ among the prisoners was due, he concluded, to the employment and instruction provided for them by Sarah Martin.¹⁷

Since 1818 the dressmaker had devoted her time to teaching inmates to read and write and, more unusually, to helping them to find work on discharge and assisting their families. Discovering there was no regular minister Martin began a bible reading class for inmates which soon turned into Sabbath worship.¹⁸ When the Prison Inspector attended her service in 1835 he described her voice as ‘melodious’ and reported that the prisoners ‘paid the profoundest attention and the most respect’ to the sermons she preached separately to the male and female inmates. The male prisoners sang two psalms ‘extremely well, much better than I have frequently heard in our best appointed churches’.¹⁹ Martin was a charismatic, forceful character — she had to be to gain the respect of gaolers and inmates. Her reports of ‘Liberated Prisoners’, whose good conduct following discharge proved their reclamation, indicate that some offenders were powerfully affected by Martin’s Christian teaching.²⁰

12. Nihill, D. (1830) *Prison Discipline in its Relation to Society and Individual* London: J. Hatchard p. 66.
 13. Russell, D. (1997) *Popular Music in England, 1840-1914* Manchester: Manchester University Press
 14. People’s Journal. 4 July 1846, p. 6. Hash, P.M. (2007) ‘The Chicago Reform School Band: 1862-1872’ in *Journal of Research in Music Education* 55: 3 p.252-67.
 15. For criticisms of the moral reformers, see Johnston, H. ‘“Buried alive”: Representations of the separate system in Victorian England’ in Mason, P. (2006) *Captured by the Media: Prison Discourse in Popular Culture* Cullompton: Willan p.103-21.
 16. D.S. [Shaw, D.] (1883) *Eighteen Months Imprisonment* London: George Routledge p. 300.
 17. 1836 [117-II] *Inspectors of Prisons of Great Britain II, Northern and Eastern District, First Report, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online* ProQuest Information and Learning Company (2005) p. 71. Hereafter, reports in this series shortened to *Inspectors of Prisons*.
 18. Anon. Sarah Martin, (c. 1844) *The Prison Visitor of Great Yarmouth, With Extracts from her Writings and Prison Journals* London: Religious Tract Society, n.d.. Available as a google book, it contains extracts from the Prison Inspector’s reports.
 19. Williams attended 29 November, 1835; see (1836) *Inspectors of Prisons* p. 69.
 20. 1840 [258] *Inspectors of Prisons, Fifth Report*, pp. 124-30.

Thomas Burgess, for instance, was sentenced in 1829 to seven years transportation for stealing over £100 from his master. His sentence was commuted to a year's penal servitude at Millbank, probably on account of his good conduct. On their departure, Martin frequently presented prisoners with a bible or hymnbook, as she did Burgess, giving him a copy of the *Cottager's Hymnbook* which he surely comforted himself with at the penitentiary. Immediately after his sentence, Burgess called on Martin and returned the money he had stolen. Hearing of the penitent's story, a tailor gave him an apprenticeship and subsequently Burgess set up his own 'respectable little shop as a tailor and salesman' and maintained his family 'by honourable and successful industry.' With the prospect of future assistance from Martin if they proved willing to reform, prisoners like Burgess had much to gain by complying with her Christian programme. No doubt Burgess kept his faith and love of hymn-singing, however, for his wife, who he met after his imprisonment, was one of Martin's former Sunday-school scholars.²¹

Nevertheless, the religious content of Martin's instruction was one of the main sources of dispute between teacher and scholars. Before they were allowed didactic stories or taught to write, inmates had to demonstrate commitment to reform by memorizing scriptural verses. It is telling, therefore, that some prisoners preferred to learn from hymnbooks than the Bible.

William Bachelor could read but was reluctant to memorize scripture though he helped two illiterate scholars learn their verses from Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs*. He rebuffed his teacher's insistence that his character needed improvement but hinted, perhaps, at the assistance she might give him on discharge: 'O I have other things to think about [...] when I am out I have to think about getting my living'. After a long exchange about his confinements in workhouses and prisons, Bachelor sought compromise — 'I will learn some out of a hymn book *if you like*' — but the teacher, who underlined his audacious words, stood her ground. He must first study the Bible for his own sake, not hers. By the following day Bachelor had helped his cellmates with their Bible verses and remembered two of his own, promising to learn the whole chapter before his departure. By way of reward, the teacher lent him the

hymnbook he had requested and promised a writing book 'and he seemed quite pleased'.²²

Devotional singing in the prison chapel will have helped many inmates develop their literacy skills which they often began to acquire for the first time under Martin's tutelage. Their education was as much aural as it was visual and the prison scholars learned by hearing their cellmates repeating their verses as well as by sounding aloud their own texts. No doubt, the verses they repeated to their teacher and each other often took on a sing-song quality; certainly the rhyme and rhythm of hymns sung in the prison chapel will have aided word recognition and memorization. Though this form of rote-learning came increasingly under attack by educationalists from the mid-century onwards, many prison scholars seem to have embraced its

challenges for repeating their verses helped to while away the tedium of incarceration. Some may even have competed in their learning while others, like Bachelor, took pleasure in helping less able cellmates. Over Easter week 1840, Martin took a short break from the prison. On her return she was delighted to find all the prisoners gave her 'perfect satisfaction' having learned far more than she had required. Two women had outdone each other by learning over thirty verses. The boy John Creach taught a new arrival — a boy who could not read — two scriptural verses and two of

Watts's songs, while memorizing six of his own. The bricklayer James Brown, sentenced to transportation for stealing bricks — his fourth conviction — repeated Luke chapter 23 and nine hymns by Watts.²³

Yet, just as many had been convicted of opportunistic offences — pilfering, vagrancy, disorderly behaviour, usually involving drunkenness — most inmates, including those just cited, seem to have been opportunistic in their use of the approved education provided by Martin. A few days after Easter James Brown gave his teacher a letter of 1,200 words addressed to 'the Young men he knew before coming to the Jail'. Warning of the evils of drink, swearing and neglecting scripture which had led to his imprisonment, Brown had adopted the confessional tone of the sermons and tracts he heard and read in prison. It is clear, however, that he enjoyed the lyricism and musicality of the hymns he sang in the gaol for the letter

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21. 1840 [258] *Inspectors of Prisons, Fifth Report*, pp. 130-1.

22. Everyday Book, 12-13 December 1839. Martin's surviving journals held by Great Yarmouth Museum include three Everyday Books from which all references to her journals are taken, hereafter EDB.

23. EDB, 31 March, 6 and 11 April 1840.

is littered with references to the psalms: 'if we look in the 51, psalm. . . we shall find it thus written, the sacrifices of god are a brooken spirt, if brooken and a contrite heart, God, will not despise, and so you see by looking in the bible, we find there, what the Lord, has promised he will do for us, if we will but go to him'. Almost certainly, the gaol congregation had recently sung Watts's version of Psalm 51, traditionally sung over Lent: 'O God of mercy! hear my call,/ My loads of guilt remove;/ Break down this separating wall,/ That bars me from my love.' Cries of lamentation and consolation that speak of confinement and the desire for liberation, psalms will have resonated with many prisoners' experience of separation from their friends and families. But Brown also found joy in their uplifting words: 'Give me the presence of thy grace,/ Then my rejoicing tongue,/ Shall speak aloud thy righteousness,/ And make thy praise my song.'²⁴ Yet James Brown seems to have been equally interested in profane as sacred verse. Soon he was discovered to have sent three pages of verse (perhaps song) to the female prisoners on paper supplied by Martin for copying biblical sentences. The content judged obscene, he was sent to solitary for a week.²⁵

In the period 1836 to 1845 only twelve punishments were meted out for misconduct in Martin's lessons and twenty-four for misbehaviour in divine service. In 1837, having 'behaved ill by laughing in the Chapel' James Brown and James Mudd were placed in their sleeping cell until after prayers 'when they promised to behave better in future'.²⁶ But when confined in the infirmary with illness, Brown begged Martin to be allowed to attend service: 'I observed a strong eagerness to go which told how he desired even the sight of the other prisoners.'²⁷ The scarcity of incidence in chapel and classes suggest that most inmates derived consolation, pleasure, or literacy skills from worship and religious education. Yet just as many were opportunistic in their use of their devotional instruction, they were opportunistic and strategic too in the ways they negotiated prison time and regulations to engage in their own culture of song and entertainment, as we can see from the Gaoler's disciplinary record.

No matter how rigorous their imposition of silence, prisons reverberated with noise made by the incarcerated.

3. 'Frequent ballad-singing and rude-noises'

No matter how rigorous their imposition of silence, prisons reverberated with noise made by the incarcerated. Muffled singing will have been part of the 'low-buzz' of furtive voices and taps by which, according to Michael Ignatieff, prisoners communicated 'sotto-voce from cell to cell', even in the strictest penitentiaries.²⁸ At local gaols like Yarmouth, where many prisoners had to share sleeping cells and most spent their waking hours together in dayrooms, inmate communication might be more tightly regulated than in the unreformed prison but it could not be eradicated. The Gaolkeeper's Journal listing prisoner infractions suggests that singing was a principle pastime in the cells.

When the Prison Inspector visited in 1835 he found that discipline was 'of a very lax order'. Prisoner wardens were paid four-pence a month to watch the dayrooms and inform the gaoler of any misconduct.

Instead, it seems that the current warden sought to defend inmate culture from intrusion and regulation. He could not say who had contraband tobacco, though the air was dense with smoke. The cells were decorated with 'low drawings, prints, and songs' which, no doubt, prisoners sang raucously for the woman in the adjoining dwelling house complained frequently of the noise.²⁹ The new keeper,

appointed in 1837, did his best to follow the Inspectorate's guidance to stamp out such debasing influences — including singing — and Sarah Martin approved the changes, finding her scholars more responsive to instruction: 'What a beautiful contrast the present change in our prison presents to its undisciplined state six weeks ago. No singing, laughing, bad language, or loud talking is allowed. No gaming, fighting or playing is permitted.'³⁰ Some prisoners must have taken the Gaoler at his word. The young mother Maria Bowler, sent for being a refractory pauper to the prison for a week, returned to the workhouse 'softened in temper and manner': 'What seems to have had the effect', noted Martin, was that 'She said she did not like being shut up alone and not allowed to speak — if she only sang to her baby', while in her isolation,

24. Watts, I. (1719) *The Psalms of David*. For a longer discussion of this prisoner's writing see, Rogers, H. (2009) 'The Way to Jerusalem: Reading, Writing and Reform in an Early Victorian Gaol' in *Past and Present* 205 p.71-104.

25. *Gaolkeeper's Journal*, 29 July 1840. These (and all subsequent records relating to the gaol) are held by the Norfolk Record Office (Y/L2, 47 [1836-40]; Y/L2 48 [1841-5]), referred to hereafter as GKJ.

26. GKJ, 23 April 1837.

27. EDB, 7 June 1840.

28. Ignatieff, p. 193. See also Mayhew, p. 163.

29. (1836) *Inspectors of Prisons*, p. 70.

30. EDB, 15 May 1837.

Martin 'could to better advantage adapt instruction to her case'.³¹

Songs that prisoners knew by heart, however, were among the few cultural resources that could not be taken from them when they surrendered their meagre property on entering the gaol. The deserter James Watts handed over a printed song along with his sealing wax, knife, and two pocket pieces.³² That newspapers and songs continued to be smuggled into the gaol along with tobacco and gaming implements demonstrates the prisoners' attachment to the popular culture of the streets and taverns. The newly-wed James and Elizabeth Patterson were committed for stealing a feather mattress. After she was acquitted, Elizabeth smuggled to her convicted husband four notes, a weekly newspaper and some songs, knowing from her confinement how they would be enjoyed by James and his cellmates.³³ The gaol records provide few clues to what inmates sang, though the Inspector's reference to 'low drawings, prints and songs' suggest that many will have been the racy tunes sung in taverns and fairs. But vernacular song, especially the ballads which women prisoners were discovered singing, could be sentimental as well as saucy. Laments about the abandoned lover or the sailor parted from his sweetheart expressed feelings of separation and loss that must have comforted the incarcerated.³⁴

Singing was also one of the ways that the small number of female prisoners attracted attention from the men. When Elizabeth Humphreys was confined to the sick room with a feigned pregnancy, Sarah Rands, employed to watch her, was 'heard throughout the prison imitating the mewling of a cat and other noises.' Notably, 'the men were silent' though doubtlessly straining their ears. The following week Sarah Martin reprimanded both women for the 'frequent ballad-singing and rude-noises' made in the men's hearing which showed 'your character is no better than when you entered.' Evidently their singing was sexually provocative. When the dressmaker deprived them of the privilege of sewing, submission was not achieved and the women graffitied insults to their gaolers on their cell walls.³⁵

Laments about the abandoned lover or the sailor parted from his sweetheart expressed feelings of separation and loss must have comforted the incarcerated.

It is significant, however, that neither of these women was punished by the Gaoler for their bawdy singing. At Coldbath Field, one of the first institutions to implement a widely-publicized silent regime, there was a dramatic increase in prison offences and punishments as inmates stubbornly resisted the new regulations. After all speech and gestures were prohibited in 1834, the number of disciplinary offences rose exponentially from one punishment for every 191 inmates in 1825 to one punishment for every 3.4 inmates in 1835.³⁶ Yarmouth also saw increases in punishments but nowhere near the rise at Coldbath Fields. Between 1836 and 1845 74 punishments were meted out for illicit communication, either between inmates or with the outside world. In the same period there were 303 punishments for disorderly behaviour involving any combination of singing, shouting and swearing, by far the largest group of disciplinary infractions. Around 50 prisoners were punished specifically for singing. But given that approximately 300 inmates were committed each year, these are small numbers indeed.

From the Gaoler's records, it appears that inmates were only disciplined for singing, laughing, and talking when these caused significant disturbance or were related to other forms of rule-breaking and defiance, as when Georgina Tunmore, was confined for ten hours 'for singing and insolent conduct to the matron'.³⁷ Rowdiness and insubordination, rather than singing *per se*, were disciplined. Many offenders were punished for singing late at night when they will have disrupted other inmates' sleep or early in the morning, interfering with the unlocking routine. Some may even have been disciplined on the complaint of other prisoners. Philip Grudgefield was sent to solitary for three days for 'singing and disturbing fellow prisoners' at 9.30 at night. A week earlier he was one of three boys locked up for 'noisy conduct in the airing room'.³⁸

What the gaolers and what inmates considered noise may have been quite different. One boy eagerly split on his mates — 'Them two boys,' he told Martin, 'have been shut up in the cell for behaving ill — for singing' — but according to the Gaoler, they were sent down for 'noisy

31. EDB, 30 March 1840.

32. Index and Receiving Book, 14 May 1839 (Y L2/7).

33. GJ 11 May 1842.

34. Gammon, V. (2008) *Desire, Drink, and Death in English Folk and Vernacular Song, 1600-1900* Aldershot: Ashgate.

35. EDB, 25 May and 2, 7, 12, 14 June 1837.

36. Ignatieff, p. 178.

37. GJ 19 August 1840.

38. GJ 14 and 22 June 1845.

conduct'. Punishment for singing, which many prisoners must have considered a minor infraction, could precipitate deterioration in their conduct. James Smith was sent with another prisoner to the cells for three days for 'singing and making a considerable noise, last midnight'. He refused to go and the Gaoler 'was obliged to take him by force' after which Smith continued behaving 'insolently' for which he lost a third of his bread allowance. A week later, Smith 'who is of a violent and refractory disposition' was confined again for three days for striking another inmate in the face.³⁹

Following punishment, singing could be a form of bravado as inmates cockily reasserted their place in the prisoner community and its pecking order. Robert Batley and John Creach (who taught his cellmate from *Divine Songs*) were sent down for three days for fighting each other. Two weeks later they had made up their differences and were confined for twelve hours for singing together after lock up.⁴⁰ But the Gaoler appears to have been prudent in policing inmate conduct. As historians of other small and often poorly-resourced gaols have discovered, discipline required a degree of cooperation and discretion between staff and inmates.⁴¹ In 1837 the Gaoler noted that William Sherwood had made a 'very great noise' after lock up and continued until morning, yet he was not punished. The following week Sherwood was confined for 'noisy, abusive and obscene language' and climbing the partition wall to send notes to the debtors. He was released after two-and-a-half hours having promised to be quiet, but confined soon after for throwing his toilet tub at the turnkey.

On his many returns to the gaol, Sherwood became one of its most unruly residents. In 1840 when he commenced singing at five in the morning, the Gaoler tried to make 'an impression in his mind by mild means of the folly of his conduct' only for the prisoner to adopt 'a fighting position' and bite the Keeper when put in handcuffs. 'I'll tell you the truth because I firmly believe and so do other Prisoners', Sherwood protested, 'that it was and is your doing and yours only that singing is prohibited and other restrictions enforced in this Prison and if it had not been for you it never would have been the case.' As he had on previous occasions, the Gaoler

informed Sherwood, 'such regulations were instituted by the laws of this Country and were enforced expressly for the welfare andc of himself and other prisoners.' Compromise appeared to be reached: 'The Prisoner expressed sorrow that he had conducted himself so, and promised if I would release him it should not occur again. I released him accordingly.'⁴²

Six months later Sherwood was again annoying guards and inmates, and was struck by another prisoner; 'I believe Barrett was urged to the attempt by Sherwood's language and conduct, which is generally reprehensible and exciting', concluded the Gaoler. Sherwood remained defiant: 'I request to know by what authority you lock me up in this Cell. I can tell you whether you know it or no that there ought to be Printed Rules hung up in the prison then I should know what I should do and what I should'nt do for that matter. I can produce the Act of Parliament and shew you, I have not lived in a wood all my life time, now take my life'. This explicit challenge to his authority mystified the Gaoler; 'Restriction fails in keeping the Prisoner quiet, his conduct is altogether very strange.' He must have been thankful to see the prisoner removed to Hoxton Lunatic Asylum in July 1844, and perhaps Sherwood's cellmates also breathed a sigh of relief.⁴³

Though the Gaoler was perplexed by Sherwood's complaint about the absence of clarity in the prison rules, the inmate's criticism highlights the anomalous status of prisoner communication in the age of silence and separation. Without the means to physically separate inmates, gaols like Yarmouth could not stifle their voices. When the Gaoler received the long list of 'Regulations for Prisons in England and Wales', these did not explicitly prohibit speaking or singing.⁴⁴ Silence was a principle rather than a statutory regulation, and one that inmates continually tested. Knowing that the maintenance of order depended on their compliance, the Gaoler chose only to act when they pushed his tolerance too far.

Silence was a principle rather than a statutory regulation, and one that inmates continually tested.

4. 'Sing my great Deliverer's Name'

Following Sarah Martin's death in 1843 a schoolmaster was employed at the gaol. He expanded the curriculum beyond devotional teaching to

39. GKJ 17 and 24 March 1840.

40. GKJ 8 and 23 February 1841.

41. Forsythe, W.J. (1983) *A System of Discipline: Exeter Borough Prison 1819-1863* Exeter: Exeter University Press; Ireland, R.W. (2007) *"A Want of Order and Good Discipline": Rules, Discretion and the Victorian Prison* Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

42. GKJ 7 March 1837, 24 June 1837, 20 and 22 Aug 1840, 6-7 September 1840.

43. GKJ 2 6 Feb 1841, 4-6 March 1841, 10-11 June 1841, 14-19 July 1841, 29 July 1841, 17 August 1841.

44. GKJ 20 March 1843; (1843) [457] Report relative to the system of prison discipline, &., by the Inspectors of Prisons, pp. 15-29.

incorporate arithmetic. Over the ensuing decade, however, discipline hardened at Yarmouth as at other gaols. Though many offenders were sentenced to hard labour in the 1830s and early 1840s, the gaol had no mechanism to carry out such punishment. In 1845 a tread-wheel was constructed for the purpose, built to work eight prisoners. Within a year, its stairs had worn out. In 1847 the chaplain and schoolmaster complained to the magistrates that the teacher was required to supervise prisoners at the wheel which 'places him in a relationship that involves physical restraint and implicit obedience and so injures his moral influence over the prisoners when called to win them by gentleness and kindness to receive instruction at his hands.' The teacher was relieved of the duty but, consequently, lost over a third of his salary.⁴⁵ We now turn to examine how one inmate, a ballad-singer, responded to the schoolteacher's 'moral influence' and how he brought together his own skills in song-making with his devotional instruction to express his experience on the tread-wheel.

In the 1850s another James Brown was committed to Yarmouth Gaol on six occasions for vagrancy, assaulting a policeman and threatening to assault a woman. He was in his late thirties and variously described as a labourer, vagrant, and ballad-singer in the streets and public houses. Following his discharge after serving three weeks for vagrancy in July 1855, the schoolmaster wrote that Brown was a drunkard who had entered the gaol 'in a quite disgusting state of dirt and filth'. Brown's reading and writing were good, however, and he had left behind 'several pages of poetry composed in his Cell about [paper torn] and the Prison'. It is telling that the schoolmaster read the verses as poetry for given Brown's occupation they were almost certainly composed as songs. The schoolmaster appears to have approved their sentiment. Most likely they were penitent lines on the need to mend his ways and abandon drink, for the teacher clearly believed that Brown hoped to reform, though doubting his commitment; 'he owns he is doing [paper torn] but has not the fortitude in withstanding against his propensity.'

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Brown's subsequent arrest highlights the incongruity between the world of popular song and the penitent literature promoted within prison. On 13 September 1855 he burst into the New Independent Chapel, his face blackened, and in a state of intoxication threw himself onto the steps leading up to the pulpit where the minister was preaching his sermon. Several women had to be 'removed in a fainting state'. Was his prostration a drunken gesture of remorse for his fall from grace, or protest against the prison piety from which he was now released? Hauled before the magistrates as a 'rogue and vagabond', the culprit said in his defence: 'I am in the habit of getting my living by singing songs, and yesterday I sung among the harvest people.' His blackened his face, which so appalled the religious ladies, will have been part of his entertainment of the harvest workers — a carnivalesque feature of popular festivities and revelries. 'I should be sorry to disturb any religious congregation', he continued; 'I did not know what I was doing.' Brown's plea was to no avail. He was sentenced to three months imprisonment, this time with hard labour.⁴⁶

Once again, Brown employed his time to compose penitent lines on the evils of drink for, on discharge, he printed a broadside verse entitled 'Yarmouth Gaol' on his 'thoughts on the Tread-wheel'. The lines promised abstinence and that Brown will use his freedom to sing of his redemption: 'And I a brand pluck'd from the flame,/ Will sing my great Deliverer's name,/ While sinners old in crime shall trace/ The wonders of Redeeming Grace.'⁴⁷ James Brown did not return to Yarmouth Gaol but it is doubtful that he remained reclaimed. More probably, his brief moment of notoriety — his conviction was one of the few Yarmouth cases to be noted in the press — provided the opportunity to make a little money from an alternative audience to the workers and tavern drinkers he usually entertained. However strong his repentance while treading the wheel, or how consoling the gospel message then appeared, it seems unlikely that he will have refrained from the alehouses and fairs where he made his living.

45. Gaol Committee 1836-50 [Y/TC 3/36], 6 May 1844; 4 February 1845; 20 October 1847; 5 February 1847; 17 February 1847.

46. Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette, 22 September 1855, p. 2; Norwich Mercury, 19 September 1855, p. 3.

47. 'Yarmouth Gaol', Norfolk Online Access to Heritage, BroadSides/30129037793537, <http://www.noah.norfolk.gov.uk/Summary.aspx?n=3&pos=0>.

What can we learn from the uses that prisoners like Brown made of approved, devotional verse and their own illicit song-making? Over the last decade the Good Vibrations project has led investigation into the therapeutic and rehabilitative potential of music in prisons by tracking the immediate and longer-term benefits of participation in gamelan music-making. As reported in this journal, the creative music programme in which participants collectively improvise with the Javanese percussive gamelan, has been shown to foster well-being, confidence and desire for personal transformation as well as improving inmates' relationships with each other and with staff. Importantly, given the low levels of literacy among prisoners and widespread antipathy to education, over half of participants have gone on to pursue further educational activities.⁴⁸ The Indonesian instrument has been selected for the programme partly because few participants — project leaders as well as prisoners — have prior experience of or expertise in this form of music. With no leader, the music is communal, inclusive and egalitarian. Its very 'exoticness' allows it to 'float above ethnic divisions' and to 'act as something of a leveller'.⁴⁹

Yet prisoners, like those at Yarmouth, possess between them a rich inheritance of song, music and performance, though now far more diverse than in the 1840s and 1850s. Many have considerable musical literacy and facility. If harnessed, this cultural knowledge and creativity might be empowering and transformative, especially for those lacking recognized skills and with poor educational experiences, allowing them to own for once a sense of expertise.⁵⁰ Of their own accord, prisoners at Yarmouth frequently strove to help each other learn their verses, a responsibility they enjoyed, while the sociability of their learning was an important factor in the dramatic progress many made in literacy. But they could only legitimately express their feelings and creativity through the approved language of Christian words and verse. Engaging with prisoners' own musical culture today may well enable them to experiment more confidently and open-mindedly with other modes of communication, feeling and expression — written, spoken and aesthetic.⁵¹



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51. I would like to thank Michael Allis for kindly advising me on the history of music and song.