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The rebellion of the 'basement lecturers':

The Wandsworth Prison Disturbances of 1918-19

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Introduction

From 1916 to 1919, nearly a thousand people were admitted to British prisons for being guilty of a new crime, that of being absolutist conscientious objectors.[1] From the start of World War One in August 1914 through to January 1916, the British Army consisted of professional soldiers and well over a million volunteers. By the end of 1915, the large number of casualties and the realisation that the war was going to endure for much longer than originally expected, led to plans for conscription, where all fit men would be expected to perform military service. The Conscription Act was passed by Parliament in January 1916, coming into effect the next month.[2] The act allowed for people unwilling to take up arms to either join the Non-Combatant Corps or to stay as a civilian and undertake work of national importance. Some conscientious objectors, known as absolutists, refused to accept any of these compromises, in the belief that the war was morally wrong and they did not want to contribute in any way, however indirectly, with its prosecution. Typically, the absolutist would be called up to the armed forces, would refuse to accept any orders and would then be court-martialled and sentenced to hard labour in prison. When they completed their sentence, they would be forced to re-join their military unit and the whole cycle would start all over again. Even when the war ended in November 1918 the absolutist conscientious objectors remained in prison, with the government being reluctant to release them while thousands of combatants in the armed forces were still required to serve.[3] By early 1919, many conscientious objectors had been in prison for nearly three years.

A large number of conscientious objectors were held at Wandsworth Prison in London. From September 1918 to April 1919, Wandsworth witnessed ongoing disturbances, mainly involving the large number of conscientious objectors who were kept there. This article will explore the peculiar characteristics of the Wandsworth disturbances, as well as examining their principal causes and probable consequences. It will be based primarily on contemporary sources such as newspaper articles, letters to newspapers and the documents kept by the prisoners. Many of these sources can be found in the scrapbook kept by Thomas Ellison, a conscientious objector prisoner in Wandsworth at this time, with the book now being housed in the Working-Class Movement Library in Salford.[4] Other sources include prison log books, minutes of prison committee meetings and the autobiographies and biographies of both prisoners and prison officials from the period.

The nature of the Wandsworth Disturbances

Several Wandsworth Prison conscientious objectors refused to undertake the hard labour that was part of their sentence and were then punished with isolation in their cells.[5]

It was the next stage of protest that made the Wandsworth disturbances particularly unusual. As a way of defying the authorities who had imposed silent isolation on them, many protestors made every effort to make as much noise as possible. Sometimes this involved traditional forms of prison protest such as banging crockery on cell doors or breaking windows and gas fittings.[6] More unusually, the Wandsworth protest concentrated on producing more intelligent noise, involving songs and lectures, often delivered through broken spy-holes in the cell door and through ventilation grids. One of the most popular 'lecturers' was Guy Aldred, a Glasgow anarchist, whose chosen topics for these 'basement lectures' included Karl Marx, Jesus, Women's Freedom and the Revolutionary Tradition in English Literature. Aldred often had to deliver these lectures with his chin perched on the gas

1. Rae, J. (1970) *Conscience and Politics: The British Government and the Conscientious Objector to Military Service 1916-1919,* London, 201
2. ibid
3. *Daily News* 20/2/1919
4. T. Ellison, *Scrapbook* (compiled between 1916 and 1920), Working Class Movement Library, 51 Crescent, Salford, M5 4WX
5. Caldwell, J.T. (1988) *Come Dungeons Dark: The Life and Times of Guy Aldred, Glasgow Anarchist,* Glasgow, p.165
6. *Visiting Committee minutes for Wandsworth Prison* from 23/12/18, from London Metropolitan Archives ACC/3444/AD/02/002

vent, so that his voice would carry to the other cells. To give him a break from this uncomfortable position, the other prisoners would sing heartily left-wing songs such as 'The Red Flag'.[7] The demands being made by these prisoners were about having time to talk while in prison and to be allowed to write and receive letters.[8] In terms of both the actions of the protesting prisoners and their demands, it was a very intellectual, educated form of protest. Newspapers reported on the events at Wandsworth with interest, as well as with a degree of puzzlement and amusement.[9]

There was disagreement at the time about how many conscientious objectors at Wandsworth were involved in the disturbances and about how united they were about the tactics they planned to use. The government's official investigation into the Wandsworth disturbances suggested that just a small number of agitators were responsible. The report, written by MP Albion Richardson in April 1919, made a distinction between conscientious objectors 'actuated by sincere Christian principles' who refused to join the disturbances and 'anarchists' who instigated the disruption. 'There is a considerable number of conscientious objectors,' the report continued, 'who from the first refused to take part in the disturbance, and have used their utmost effort to prevent it.'[10] Home Secretary Edward Shortt supported this belief that there was division among the prisoners, telling a delegation asking for the release of conscientious objectors in February 1919 that he had received a letter from a conscientious objector in Wandsworth Prison complaining about the conduct of others who claimed to be men of conscience.[11]

It is tempting to dismiss this report as propaganda on behalf of the authorities. It would have served the government well to draw a distinction between genuine people of conscience and 'anarchists' who were intent on destroying all aspects of civilised society. The public would be likely to support tough actions against those causing prison disturbances if they thought that the protagonists were just a handful of trouble-causers whose actions were even opposed by many of the more moderate prisoners.

However, there is evidence apart from the parliamentary report that there were important divisions among the prisoners. This evidence shows that many conscientious objectors had mixed feelings about many of the tactics used by the prisoners at Wandsworth in the disturbance. When some prisoners resorted to damaging their prison cells by smashing glass spy-holes and destroying furniture, many conscientious objectors must have reflected on whether such vandalism was compatible with their usual ideas of non-violence.[12] An article in 'The Spur' in January 1919 revealed some clear tactical divisions among the Wandsworth rebels. 'The Spur' supported the actions of the Wandsworth prisoners and called for support from the wider labour movement, so the article's admission of differences of opinion among the prisoners is credible. Fourteen prisoners were named who had been on hunger-strike plus 'five other hunger-strikers who had not previously been work striking'. Also, eight prisoners were named as 'work and discipline strikers who will not hunger strike on principle'.[13] So there were at least three different groups here — those who would refuse to work but not refuse to eat, those who joined in the hunger-strike but not the work and discipline strike and those who were willing to take both forms of action. It was perhaps inevitable that people imprisoned for their strong principles should carry on upholding clear personal convictions while in prison, with the result that there would always be disagreement among such single-minded individuals.

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According to the biographer of Guy Aldred, one of the leaders of the Wandsworth revolt, 'only about a third of the C.O.s were in revolt' in late 1918.[14] Many of those not involved in the action actually complained to the governor that the protesting prisoners were making so much noise that they could not concentrate on

7. ibid p.169
8. Ibid p.165
9. *The Star* 17/1/1919
10. *Daily News* 10/4/1919
11. *Daily News* 20/2/1919
12. *The Spur* January 1919
13. ibid
14. Caldwell p.167

reading the books that they had now been allowed. One prisoner, Leonard J. Simms, complained about the 'Basement Oligarchy' who were stirring up trouble, distancing himself from their actions.[15] As this information comes from Aldred's biography, a source very sympathetic to the protesting prisoners, it is fair to say that there were genuine divisions among the imprisoned conscientious objectors and it would be wrong to dismiss such suggestions as mere governmental propaganda.

Causes of the Wandsworth Disturbance

Newspaper accounts of the disturbances at Wandsworth Prison date mainly from the early months of 1919. This may lead to the conclusion that the main cause was the demands by the prisoners that they should now be released, as World War One had come to an end with the Armistice on 11 November 1918.[16] There was indeed frustration during this post-war period that the conscientious objectors had not been released, expressed regularly in letters to newspapers and in journals such as the Labour Leader. In February 1919 a deputation from the Labour Party asked for the immediate release of 1,500 conscientious objectors.[17] The government's standard response was that the public would not tolerate the release of conscientious objectors while serving soldiers had not yet been released from their duties. Edward Shortt, the Home Secretary, said that 'there could be no doubt that if men who had fought in the war and were still retained in the Army knew that conscientious objectors were being released and discharged from the Army en bloc a very bitter feeling would be roused'.[18]

There was indeed frustration during this post-war period that the conscientious objectors had not been released, expressed regularly in letters to newspapers and in journals such as the Labour Leader.

However, frustration at not being released after the war could not have been the only reason for the disturbances at Wandsworth. Although the hunger strikes there only began on 1 January 1919, this was just a new tactic in an ongoing strategy of disruption that dated back to at least September 1918.[19] In this month many prisoners began a 'work and discipline' strike, several weeks before the Armistice. They refused to do the hard labour that was part of their sentence and as a result they were placed in solitary confinement, where the prisoners continued to cause as much disturbance as possible.[20] Indeed, as early as 1917, a medical officer at Wandsworth Prison had complained about the 'insolence' and lack of co-operation shown by nearly all the conscientious objectors imprisoned there.[21] So even when the war was still ongoing, the conscientious objectors had never accepted that their imprisonment was justified and they had shown open defiance of the authorities for several years. Other reasons, apart from the end of the war, need to be explored to explain these long-running disturbances.

Could it be that the conditions in Wandsworth Prison were worse than those elsewhere? At first glance it may seem that the conditions there were having an adverse effect on the physical health of the prisoners. The 'English Prisons Today' survey done shortly after World War One said that one in thirteen prisoners at Wandsworth had to receive hospital treatment in the early part of the 1910s.[22] This contrasts with a prison such as Northallerton where only one in 503 prisoners was admitted to hospital.[23] In the same period, there were only two medical officers for the 1,146 prisoners in Wandsworth.[24]

However, the figures at Wandsworth are actually quite typical of large prisons. Elsewhere in London at Wormwood Scrubs there were also just two medical officers for 1,365 prisoners, a worse ratio than Wandsworth.[25] At Birmingham it was a similar ratio,

15. Ibid p.169
16. Brown, A. (2003) *English Society and the Prison: Time, Culture and Politics in the Development of the Modem Prison,* 1850–1920, Rochester, p.161
17. Copy of petition in archives of Working Class Movement Library, Salford
18. *Daily News* 20/2/1919
19. *The Spur* January 1919
20. *The Star* 17/1/1919
21. *Wandsworth Prison Governors' Letter Books,* from the London Metropolitan Archives ACC/3444/AD/08/001
22. Hobhouse, S and Brockway, A.F. (1922) *English Prisons To-Day: Being the Report of the Prison System Enquiry Committee,* London, p.276
23. ibid
24. ibid p.261
25. ibid

with one medical officer for 499 prisoners.[26] Regarding the number of hospital referrals, a large number was not necessarily seen as a negative situation. The number of prisoners receiving hospital treatment at Wandsworth was actually regarded positively by the authors of the 'English Prisons Today' report, who were not typically making an effort to find good features of the prison system. They saw this as a sign of good medical care that provided prisoners with the treatment they needed, contrasting the high number of hospital admissions at Wandsworth with the much lower number at the smaller prisons, where, on average, just one prisoner in 271 was sent to hospital.[27] So it can be concluded that there was nothing particularly harsh about the conditions at Wandsworth in relation to medical care.

At the time, the attitude of the government towards conscientious objectors was seen as a significant reason for the Wandsworth disturbances. As with the Suffragettes earlier in the decade, the government responded to hunger strikes by using force-feeding. Another tactic repeated from the years of dealing with Suffragette prisoners was the use of the infamous 'Cat and Mouse Act', where prisoners were released from prison at a point where their hunger-striking was having very serious effects on their health, only to be re-arrested a few weeks later when their health improved. As with the Suffragettes, these tactics by the authorities resulted in some increased public sympathy for the conscientious objector prisoners. This kind of treatment also seems to have hardened the resolve of the conscientious objectors in prison and made them more inclined to take part in action against the prison authorities. In a discussion about the Wandsworth disturbance in Parliament on 12 March 1919, MP JH Thomas said, 'By the treatment meted out to them, the Government were turning many honest Christian men into rebels'.[28] So the government's policies towards the conscientious objectors in prison could have been a contributory factor in motivating prison disturbances.

However, the most important cause of the Wandsworth disturbances was probably the boost they gave to the morale of the participants. It is highly likely that many conscientious objectors at Wandsworth took part in the disturbances because of the positive effect it had on their mental wellbeing. Although they would not necessarily have expressed their actions in these terms, there is evidence that being part of communal agitation against the prison authorities created strong positive feelings. For those campaigning for the release and better treatment of conscientious objectors, concerns about mental wellbeing were a high priority. Most of these 'political' prisoners were accustomed to working lives and other activities where they would be involved in intellectually stimulating discussions, especially in the meetings related to political activism, as a member of the Independent Labour Party or the No Conscription Fellowship, for example. When they were placed in isolation in prison as a punishment for refusing to do hard labour, the absence of conversation and intellectual stimulus must have been very difficult to tolerate. An article in 1917 described 'the nerve-wrecking, soul-destroying torture' endured by the conscientious objectors in these circumstances.[29] A visit by a Quaker to a prison in the same year was designed to show the value of 'human fellowship to these lonely men'.[30]A chaplain called Maurice Whitlow was concerned that several conscientious objectors in isolation appeared to be 'nervous wreck[s]' and suffering from 'mental breakdown'.[31]

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Historian Victor Bailey has suggested that the requirement that punished prisoners should be silent was the most difficult condition for them to bear. 'If some conscientious objectors complained about the semi-starvation diet, some the intense cold, and some the monotony of sewing post office mailbags, all conscientious objectors bore witness to the silence rule as the most arduous of all prison regulations.'[32] The requirement that prisoners stayed silent for most of the day — or all the time if they were being punished for breaking prison rules — was very difficult for people who had been active in political and social activity before their imprisonment. Most of the conscientious objectors imprisoned in Wandsworth had been engaged in jobs and charitable work where intelligent conversation with other people would have been a

26. ibid
27. ibid p.276
28. *Daily News* 12/3/19
29. *Christian World* 31/5/1917
30. ibid
31. *Daily News* 30/1/1919
32. Bailey, V. (2019) *The Rise and Fall of the Rehabilitative Ideal, 1895-1970,* Abingdon, p. 25

continual feature of everyday life. Chaplain Maurice Whitlow noted that five of them had been 'well-known in religious, social and philanthropic work', four were school teachers, three were trade union leaders and three were artists, two of them having exhibited in London exhibitions.[33] For these people, the lack of social interaction and intellectual stimulus must have been particularly difficult.

Nor was there any outlet for intelligent and articulate discourse through letter writing. Prisoners were only allowed very limited written communication with the outside world in the early part of their sentence. The standard 'letter' read 'Dear _____ , I am now in this Prison, and am in _____ health. If I behave well, I shall be allowed to write another letter in about _____ and to receive a reply, but no reply is allowed to this.' A surviving filled-out version of this template, written by Thomas Ellison while in Wandsworth, says that his health was 'good' and that he would be permitted to write again two months later.[34] There must have been a substantial sense of frustration for educated prisoners with high levels of literacy that they were only able to write three or four words every two months. The combination of being silenced in terms of both pen and tongue was particularly hard to bear.

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In this context, the demands of the protesting prisoners at Wandsworth are very revealing about the motivation behind the disturbances. Most of the demands had a clear focus on improvements that would relieve the mental stress of the prisoners rather than their physical conditions. At some point in October or November 1918, the striking prisoners asked for the release of their leaders, who had been confined to their cells, the resumption of letters, visitors and books, plus the permission for prisoners to talk for one or two hours per day.[35] There were no demands here for better food, sleeping conditions or facilities within the cells, items that make their physical situation easier. Instead the prisoners were asking for social interaction and intellectual stimulus, things that would alleviate their mental and emotional wellbeing.

In these circumstances, the opportunity to mix socially with other prisoners in collaborative attempts to defy the authorities must have been very tempting. Even when in isolation, the prisoners seemed to enjoy devising ingenious attempts to be able to communicate with each other. In Wandsworth many prisoners in isolation broke the spy-glasses in the door of their cells, not as a mindless piece of vandalism but 'to push the cover round to see and to hear one another speak'.[36] This feeling of communal solidarity between the prisoners and the positive effects of it on their mental wellbeing was summed up by George Bayley, a prisoner writing in The Spur in January 1919. Talking about the spontaneous concerts and lectures with which the prisoners amused themselves he said, 'The feeling of comradeship which animates the work and discipline strikers is very real and deep'. He added that, wherever he would be sent for his next sentence, 'I will always remember my Wandsworth colleagues, and stand by them in the strike to the last ounce of fight that is in me.'[37] These powerful feelings of collaboration and mutual support, brought about by sharing in the disturbance, were a strong antidote to the policies of silence and isolation practised by the prison authorities. Even if the songs, lectures and other means of displaying disobedience achieved very little in the short-term, these collective acts of defiance served as an end in themselves, making the prisoners feel much stronger mentally just by taking part.

Consequences of the Wandsworth disturbance

The most immediate consequence of the Wandsworth disturbance was repression and a harsher tone from the government. At first the reaction of the authorities was to confront the conscientious objectors at Wandsworth aggressively. A new governor, Blake, was appointed in February 1919 and it soon became clear that his strategy was to aim to humiliate and provoke the conscientious objectors.[38] Even while he was being shown round Wandsworth Prison prior to taking up his duties Blake had launched a verbal attack on conscientious objector prisoners. A prisoner called Harris was 'shouted and raved at' by Blake, even though none of the prisoners knew at this point that he was the new governor. When Harris responded 'mildly' but perhaps sarcastically with 'Thank you, thank you, sir', this sent Blake into 'a mad frenzy', resulting in the

33. *Daily News* 30/1/1919
34. Original letter from archives of Working Class Movement Library
35. Caldwell p.165
36. Letter to *The Spur* by George Bayley, January 1919
37. ibid
38. Major Wallace Blake. (1926) *Quod,* London, p. 173
39. *Daily News* 10/3/1919

prisoner being taken to the punishment cells and put in handcuffs.[39] This was just the first of many instances of Blake insulting the conscientious objectors and making his contempt for them clear.[40] It was also reported that Blake had paraded 50 conscientious objectors around the prison, proclaiming 'I will not have these stinking C.O.s mixed up with respectable men.'[41] Even though Blake denied any mistreatment of the conscientious objector prisoners, he did admit that he had broken the prison rules by swearing at them.[42] So the immediate consequence of the Wandsworth disturbance was for the authorities to inflict further repression and humiliation on the imprisoned conscientious objectors there.

However, this tactic of confrontation did not last long and by April 1919 Governor Blake had gone, with a parliamentary investigation undertaken into his short but turbulent governorship. Although the Home Secretary refuted several allegations against Blake in Parliament and the prisoners were blamed for the escalation of tension while Blake was governor, the government did start to pursue a more conciliatory line with the imprisoned conscientious objectors from the spring of 1919[43]. In January 1919, Winston Churchill became Minister of War. He took a pragmatic view that the further detention of the conscientious objectors in prison would only exhaust and divert the resources of the authorities, so he started to argue in cabinet that they should be released. On 3 April 1919 government announced that all conscientious objectors who had served at least two years in prison should be released.[44] By August 1919, all conscientious objectors had been let out of prison.[45]

It could be argued that the Wandsworth disturbances had longer term consequences for the treatment of conscientious objectors. Twenty years later the Second World War broke out and Britain introduced conscription right from the start this time. Winston Churchill, the Minister of War who had overseen the latter part of the Wandsworth disturbances in 1919, became Prime Minister a few months into the second conflict. He was determined that conscientious objectors would be treated more humanely than they had been in World War One.[46] This determination was carried through by the authorities despite the fact that popular suspicion of conscientious objectors was often as strong in the 1940s as it had been in the 1910s.[47] A wider range of options was provided for the conscientious objector, enabling them to stay out of prison. Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister at the start of World War Two and a member of military tribunals in World War One, said that lessons had been learnt from the previous conflict, such as that 'it was an exasperating waste of time and effort to attempt to force such people to act in a manner that was contrary to their principles'.[48] The Wandsworth disturbances had been a prime example of the consequences of lots of vain effort by the authorities to enforce active universal conscription.

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Did the experiences of imprisoned conscientious objectors at Wandsworth and other prisons have any impact on prison reform in the years following World War One? As the first conscientious objectors were released in April 1919 there was an air of optimism that the case for reform would be argued potently by this very articulate and vocal group of former prisoners. This point was made by E. Hughes of Glamorgan in a letter to the Daily Herald on 15 April 1919. He had been in prison for three years. Hughes said that 'over 600 men with long practical experience of prison conditions are now at liberty to give abundant evidence....facts can be brought forward to show that a radical alteration is necessary in the entire system.'[49] Over the next three years Stephen Hobhouse and Fenner Brockway worked on compiling this 'abundant evidence' from their own

40. *Daily Herald* 8/5/1919
41. *Daily News* 7/3/1919
42. Major Wallace Blake. (1926) *Quod, London*, p. 176
43. *Daily News* 7/3/1919
44. *Daily News* 4/4/1919
45. Rae, *Conscience and Politics,* p.233
46. Rae, Conscience and Politics, p.240
47. Luckhurst, T, "The vapourings of empty young men": Legacies of their hostility between 1916 and 1918 in British newspaper treatment of conscientious objectors during the German blitzkrieg of 1940' *in Journalism Studies* Volume 17, 2016 - Issue 4
48. Ibid p.242
49. *Daily Herald* 15/4/1919

experiences of being imprisoned as conscientious objectors and from interviewing others who had seen prisons from the inside during the war. Hobhouse and Brockway published their detailed findings in 1922 in a weighty volume called 'English Prisons To-Day: Being the Report of the Prison System Enquiry Committee'.[50]

According to Victor Bailey, the 'radical alteration' to the prison system expected by E. Hughes of Glamorgan did not materialise. With reference to the decade or so following the Wandsworth disturbances, Bailey says that 'the pace of penal change remained decidedly halting'.[51] An example of this was that solitary confinement, perhaps the most hated aspect of prison life for the conscientious objectors, was only abolished completely in 1931.[52] However, there were several significant changes to the prison system in the 1920s. Solitary confinement was abolished in 1924 for all except prisoners sentenced to hard labour. The 1931 reform simply extended this provision to all prisoners. From 1922 prisoners were allowed to talk to each other and to the warders while working and the silence rule was abolished completely in 1926.[53] Books were allowed for prisoners and in some prisons there were regular lectures and concerts.[54] The annual reports of the Prison Commission in both 1924 and 1925 talked about restoring 'ordinary standards of citizenship' to prisoners.[55] In terms of both practical measures and the tone of its aims, the authorities were clearly addressing many of the aspects of prison life that the Wandsworth prisoners had hated so much. The fact that prison reform did make an impact in the 1920s can be seen by the resistance to these changes shown by former prison governor Lieutenant Colonel Rich in his 1932 autobiography. Rich, governor at Wandsworth in the 1920s, derided the 'impractical idealists' who had introduced 'classes, visitors, concerts, lectures and similar amenities' in the 1920s.[56] The Wandsworth prisoners from 1918-19 would have been pleased to see that the unofficial classes, concerts and lectures they had instigated as part of their protest had become an official part of mainstream prison life within the next ten years.

Conclusion

The strong-minded individualism of many of the imprisoned conscientious objectors and the internal divisions within this group mean that it is difficult to assign simple motives to those involved in the disturbances at Wandsworth in 1918 and 1919. However, the actions taken were largely consistent with the idea of defying the silence and solitude the prisoners were expected to endure. Those taking part in the disturbances did this partly as a protest against their detention and the conditions of their confinement but perhaps mainly because the alternative, of accepting the imposed lack of companionship, would have been too much for their minds and hearts to bear. The authorities' attempts to repress the Wandsworth disturbances failed and rebounded, so that in the end the only answer was to release the conscientious objectors from prison ahead of the original schedule. Within a decade or so, the mental and emotional punishments that the Wandsworth prisoners had challenged the most had been removed from the British prison system forever.

50. Hobhouse and Brockway, *English Prisons To-Day*.
51. Bailey, V, 'English Prisons, Penal Culture, and the Abatement of Imprisonment, 1895-1922' in *Journal of British Studies,* Vol. 36, No. 3 (Jul., 1997), p. 301
52. ibid
53. Ibid pp.300-301
54. Brown, A, 'Class, discipline and philosophy: Contested visions in the early twentieth century' in *Prison Service Journal,* March 2011, No. 194, pp.4-5
55. Bailey, 'English Prisons', p. 301
56. Rich, C.E.F. (1932) *Recollections of a Prison Governor,* Plymouth, p.253