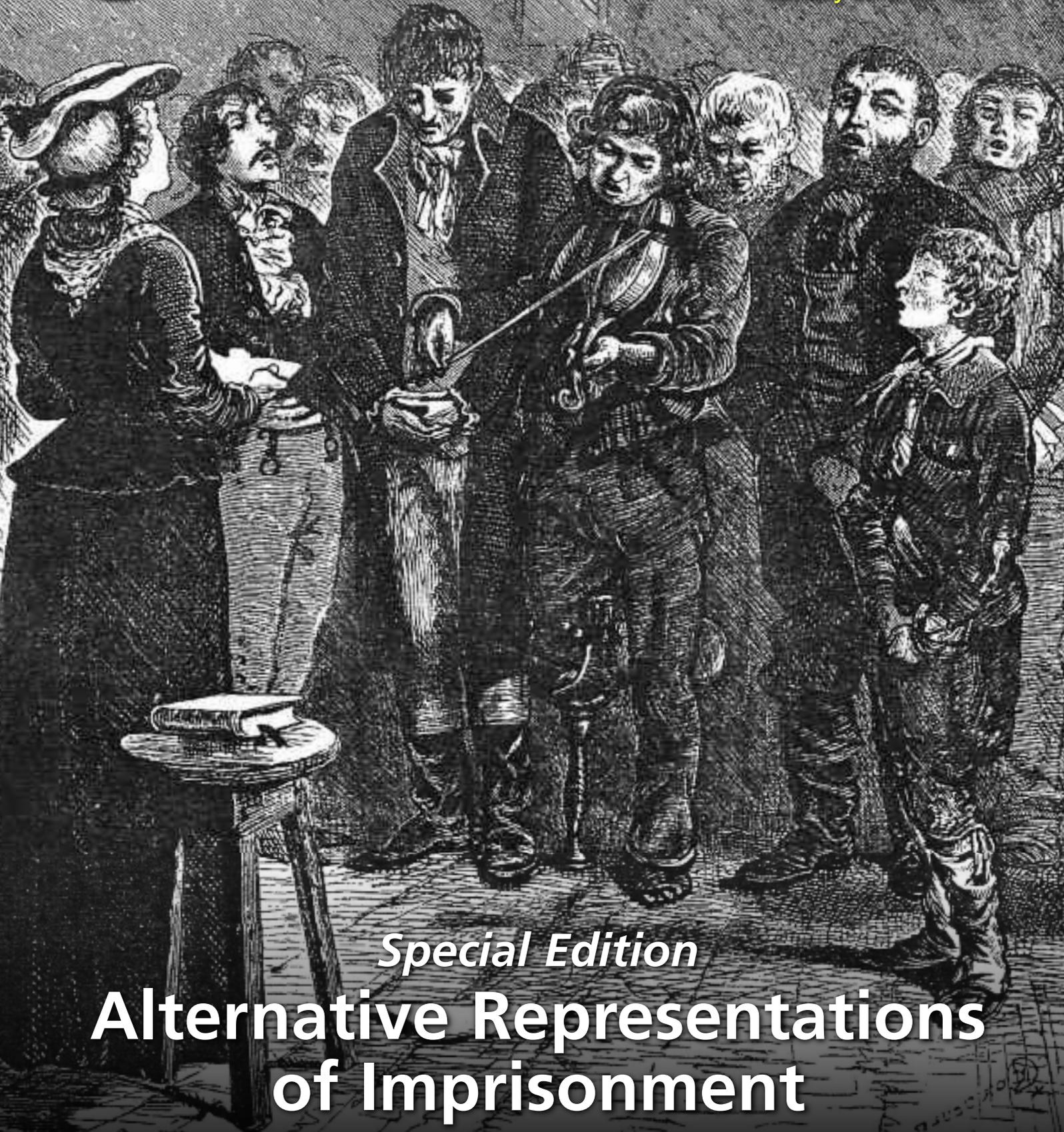


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**Alternative Representations
of Imprisonment**

Dark Tourism and the Modern Prison

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It has been suggested that ‘as long as people have been able to travel, they have been drawn...towards sites, attractions or events that are linked in one way or another with death, suffering, violence or disaster’.¹ This phenomenon has become known, both within academia and the media, as ‘dark tourism’.² According to Seaton³ ‘dark tourism’ is part of a broader ‘thanatopic’ tradition (ie. a meditation or reflection on the topic of death), hence the term is frequently used interchangeably with that of ‘thanatourism’. Thus, ‘dark’ tourism is travel that is driven by a demand for ‘actual or symbolic encounters with death’.⁴ In Stone’s⁵ typology, seven categories (or ‘shades’) of ‘dark’ tourist sites are presented. These categories range from those at the ‘lightest’ end of the spectrum, which are normally purpose built attractions, focused purely on entertainment (e.g. The London Dungeon or the Dracula Theme Park in Romania) to the ‘darkest’ sites, which are actual locations of genocide and massacre (e.g. Auschwitz-Birkenau or the ‘killing fields’ of Cambodia), the purpose of which is primarily education and remembrance. In the middle of this typology, and thus representing a combination of education and entertainment, are what Stone refers to as those sites that ‘present bygone penal and justice codes to the present day consumer’⁶, primarily former prisons. This paper will examine the prison as a site of ‘dark tourism’ and, using Stone’s definition, will analyse the ways in which, and the reasons why, former prisons have become popular tourist destinations. However, and further, we expand on Stone’s classification and, using Dartmoor prison as a case study, explore the operational prison as a (previously un-analysed) tourist site. The paper will examine how ‘prison

tourism’ can facilitate the construction of dominant narratives around the politics of punishment that leave little space for critical scrutiny or challenge.

From the 19th century, and the ‘birth’ of the modern prison, punishment began to shift from being a very public and visual spectacle to something altogether more private and restricted. However, this move to the imposition of punishment behind closed doors and high walls did not lead to a decrease in public curiosity about the ordeals of offenders and nor was this likely the intention. Indeed Gatrell⁷ has suggested that this shift was not about reducing the terrors of the scaffold but rather reigning in the disorders and disrespect of the gallows crowd. In private death became more sanitised and more dreadful in ‘chilly proceedings’ without crowd support. As with the scaffold the public are, and always have been, the intended audience to decipher the messages conveyed by the prison. Indeed, prisons of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were intentionally built to ‘shape public response through direct emotional communication’.⁸

The prison is, by definition, an arena that is founded on segregation and secrecy. It ‘...denotes layered meanings of concealment’.⁹ So, unlike public and exemplary punishments which aimed to deter deviant behaviour through visual display and public access, the prison performs this function through a combination of the visible signals emitted by its external structural and a concealment of its inner world. As Wright¹⁰ explains, ‘...the intimidation and deterrence factor of prison is served by keeping it distant, remote, and unknown, but at the same time, nearby, an immediate threat of imaginable evil’. Prisons are at once obvious and familiar yet at the same time they are ‘antipublic’¹¹ and unknown. This paradoxical symbolism means the reality of prison

1. Sharpley, R. and Stone, P. R. (2009) *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism*, Bristol: Channel View Publications p.4.
2. Foley, M. & Lennon, J. (1996) ‘JFK and Dark Tourism: Heart of Darkness’ in *Journal of International Heritage Studies* 2:4 p.198-211.
3. 1996, cited in Stone P (2006) ‘A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a Typology of Death and Macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions’ in *Tourism* 54:22 pp.145-160, p.149.
4. Stone (ibid) p.149.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid, p.154.
7. Gatrell, V.A.C. (1994) *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770 — 1868* Oxford: Oxford University Press p.590.
8. Bender, J. (1987) *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* Chicago: University of Chicago Press p.218.
9. Schrift, M. (2004) ‘The Angola Prison Rodeo: Inmate Cowboys and Institutional Tourism’ in *Ethnology*, 43 :4 p.331-44, p.331.
10. Wright, P. (2000) ‘The Cultural Commodification of Prisons’ in *Social Justice* 27:3 p.15-21, p16.
11. Schrift (2004) *ibid*, p.331.

life is 'constantly mystified and mythologized'¹² and thus, when one factors in the extensive (factual and fictional) depictions of prisons in the media, it is little wonder that there exists a public desire to infiltrate the 'backstage' areas of prison life.¹³ At the same time this paradox has lent an important flexibility to state discourses around the prison allowing its public façade to be manipulated to evidence and reflect contemporary penal philosophy whether in fact it does so or not.

As noted earlier, much of the literature on 'dark tourism' emphasises the phenomenon as being death-related. In terms of actual deaths, historically only a small proportion of offenders have died in prison. There are of course those who, after 1868 were executed within penal institutions, and some prison tourism focuses on such sites, but in terms of the general population, prison authorities have historically tended to operate early release systems in order to keep deaths in custody to a minimum. Thus 'dark tourism' to prison sites is perhaps *symbolically*, rather than *actually*, death related. Prisoner autobiographies have often evoked an image of prison life as being like 'a living death'¹⁴ or of those serving time as 'dead men'¹⁵ whilst other commentators have described prisons as 'electronic coffins'¹⁶. Such expressions evoke the timelessness and isolation of prison life and, moreover, imprisonment as a metaphor for the death of civil life, individual freedoms and identity. Prison tourism then may serve to heighten our sense of mortality but it also invokes a shared sense of morality imbued with feelings of relief at our own distance from such an experience. It provides a dramatic space whereby one group of people (the 'law-abiding audience' / 'us') can experience the world of the 'other' (the 'criminal actors' / 'them') whilst, at the same time, remaining untainted by the ignominy and denunciation that normally defines both the domain and its denizens.

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Strange and Kempa¹⁷ have noted that former sites of state-sanctioned incarceration are among the most popular of dark tourist locations and these have mushroomed with the decommissioning of many 19th and early 20th century prison buildings, for example Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, Alcatraz in California and Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin, although this is less evident in England where we have continued to make use of most of our large Victorian prisons. Such decommissioned penal institutions are immensely evocative, inducing myths of bygone eras of seemingly greater moral certitude, where punishment was severe and deterrent. They reflect the power to modify or reconstruct the individual through architecture and discipline. There is unmistakable and commanding religiosity about the prison internally and externally and the austerity of these institutions is clearly manifest in their architectural design. Direct contact with prison structures is powerful because they are silent but often imposing monolithic witnesses to history and, as Markus has pointed out, they are architectural structures with double meanings, 'making concrete both power and bonds'.¹⁸ In the case of the prison, architecture can embody the abstraction and isolation of the prisoner and construct, convey and reaffirm 'basic moral-political categories and distinctions'.¹⁹

Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia is arguably one of the most popular prison tourist sites. It began operating tours in 1994 although it had been attracting up to 10,000 visitors per year from the moment it opened in 1829.²⁰ As a structure it is undoubtedly impressive as the architect sought to embody the instructions of the Building Commissioners to 'convey to the mind a cheerless blank indicative of the misery which awaits the unhappy being who enters within its wall'.²¹ Left deliberately in a state of decay the viewer is guided through a 'haunting world of

12. Wright (2000) *ibid*, p.12.

13. Schrift (2004) *ibid*, p.333.

14. Balfour, J. S. (1907) *My Prison Life* London: Chapman and Hall p.110.

15. Macartney, W. (1936) *Walls have Mouths: A Record of Ten Years' Penal Servitude* London: Camelot Press p.205.

16. King, R. D. and Elliot, K. W. (1977) *Albany: Birth of a prison — end of an era* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul p.227.

17. Strange C & Kempa M (2003) 'Shades of Dark Tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island' in *Annals of Tourism Research* 30:2 p.386-405.

18. Markus, T.A. (1993) *Buildings and Power: Freedom and control on the origins of modern building types* London: Routledge p.25.

19. Garland, D. (1990) *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* Oxford: Clarendon Paperbacks p.252.

20. Wilson, J. (2008) *Prison: Cultural Memory and Dark Tourism* London: Peter Lang.

21. Johnston, N. (2000) *Eastern State Penitentiary: Crucible of Good Intentions* Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art for the Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site p.7.

crumbling cell blocks' in an experience that is 'eerily beautiful'.²² Tourist experiences here are very much aestheticised encounters with symbolic structures rather than authentic, and perhaps uncomfortable, confrontations with the realities of penal history. At Eastern State, like at the former convict settlement at Port Arthur, Tasmania, 'the horrors of the past...have been substantially effaced by the contemporary appearance of the ruins in a romantic landscape'.²³ As Dewar and Frederickson have observed, '[i]n a museum context this creates a visually impressive fabric that frequently overwhelms both interpretation of the nuances of prison life, and public dialogue about that life'.²⁴ Thus, whilst there may be attempts to develop prison-museums as 'thinking environments which engage with many types of exclusion from the community'²⁵, a focus on the fabric and structure of the prison may actually exacerbate, rather than diminish, the real and ideological distance between the prison and the public.

Wilson²⁶ argues that prison 'tourism' generally centres on prison buildings rather than their inhabitants but the former cannot be extricated from the latter or from ethical considerations in relation to the commodification and commercialisation of the suffering of individuals, whether in the recent or distant past. The prison as a tourist site is flexible and can be constantly reconstructed or distorted depending on the prison, visitor, penal and social context and, in the case of prison museums, the manner in which the site has been represented.²⁷ Or as Strange and Kempa have articulated, whilst state agencies and other stakeholders of 'dark' tourist sites predominantly manage their presentation and interpretation, 'unofficial storytellers and consumer expectations criss-cross the transmission

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and reception of site representations'.²⁸ A notable example of this is Alcatraz prison in California. Probably the most famous, and visited, decommissioned institution in existence it opened to the public in 1972 and attracts approximately 1.5 million visitors every year. Although for the last 20 years or so there have been strong attempts to market Alcatraz around the notion of 'freedom' rather than 'confinement' (with tour guides emphasising the island's important role as a nature reserve and as a Native American heritage site — being the birthplace of the Red Power movement), the tourist

interpretation of the prison is fundamentally influenced by media depictions and tourists overwhelmingly visit 'the rock' to envisage the lives of those notorious inmates made legendary via Hollywood movies.²⁹ The construction of the infamous or 'celebrity' prisoner is a significant aspect of prison tourism yet, like the focus on fabric and structure, frequently serves to simplify and romanticise the harsh and complex reality of prison life in a way that has been evident since at least the early 18th century with the public notoriety given to Jack Shepherd's repeated successful escapes from prison. The 'celebrity' or 'folk hero' prisoner (generally male and symbolising masculinity, daring, defiance and autonomy) stands in stark contrast to the mundane,

yet more accurate, image of the prisoner 'stripped of his freedom and individuality, and more often than not, a symbol of social filth'.³⁰

Not all prison-museums have succumbed to superficial depictions or public interpretations however. Robben Island in Cape Town for example, has become one of South Africa's most visited tourist destinations but its presentation and reception has been shaped by the country's political struggles rather than fantasy

22. Eastern State Penitentiary www.easternstate.org (date accessed: 1 July 2011).
 23. Garton-Smith, J. (2000) 'The Prison Wall: Interpretation Problems for Prison Museums' in *Open Museum Journal Vol 2* <http://hosting.collectionsaustralia.net/omj/vol2/pdfs/smith.pdf> (date accessed 30 June 2011).
 24. Dewar, M and Frederickson, C (2003) 'Prison heritage, public history and archaeology at Fannie Bay Gaol, Northern Territory' in *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 9:1 p.45-63, p.46.
 25. Garton-Smith (2000) *ibid.*
 26. Wilson (2008) *ibid.*
 27. Till cited in McDowell (2009) 'Negotiating places of pain in post-conflict Northern Ireland: Debating the future of the Maze prison/Long Kesh' in W.Logan and K.Reeves (eds) *Places of Pain and Shame* London: Routledge p.215.
 28. Strange and Kempa (2003) *ibid.*, p.391.
 29. Loo, T. and Strange, C. (2000) 'Rock Prison of Liberation: Alcatraz Island and the American Imagination' in *Radical History Review* 78 p.27-56.
 30. Schrift (*ibid.*), p.337. See also Duncan M. G. (1996) *Romantic Outlaws, Beloved Prisons: The Unconscious Meanings of Crime and Punishment* New York: New York University Press.

media constructions. Thus it symbolises 'victory over adversity' and has managed to resist 'the trivializing forces upon public consciousness'³¹ that characterise many other prison-museums.

Further, not all prison tourism occurs at decommissioned institutions. There are a number of penal institutions in Britain which have attracted public attention and witnessed high visitor numbers but among the most prominent of these would be Dartmoor Prison. Built at an elevation of 1400 feet above sea-level Dartmoor is the highest and wettest prison in the United Kingdom and also one of the oldest still in use. As Tunbridge and Ashworth have argued, "dark' places are especially marketable if they were notorious, if the perpetrators of death or pain were especially cruel, if the historic regime was manifestly unjust, or if those who suffered were famous or especially sympathetic victims'.³² Dartmoor prison has long possessed an inglorious reputation as Britain's most 'feared', 'hated' and 'notorious' prison.³³ It has been described as 'a place...the very name of which strikes terror into the most hardened criminal'³⁴ and, according to Prison Commissioner Methuen (1946), in the public consciousness it was considered 'only one degree better than being condemned to death'.³⁵ Part of the fascination of Dartmoor is that its structure, purpose and isolated location seem timeless or rather to be without the impetus of time. Indeed, it has been described as the 'prison that time forgot'.³⁶ Given its location and historical usage, perhaps more than any other prison, is

a prime example of what Edmund Burke described as the 'Sublime' — an aesthetic which combines qualities of Terror, Obscurity,

*Vastness, and Silence to produce a powerful effect of awe upon the beholder.*³⁷

Dartmoor has been attracting sightseers since the nineteenth century but it was during the inter-war period that visitor numbers appear to have increased significantly. This was in part linked to the expansion of motor car ownership and the increased accessibility of this remote prison. Clayton, a Prison Governor there, describes how, on occasions, roads would be blocked by the sheer number of tourists.

*In the summer charabanc after charabanc would arrive at Princetown about midday and their occupants, having picnicked, would make their way to the prison gate just in time to see the convicts marching out to afternoon labour.*³⁸

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Such attention was not welcomed and prisoners and officers alike objected 'to being turned into a peep-show for the mob'.³⁹ But more significantly tourists began to cause problems for security as 'morbid curiosity...drew crowds of sightseers to the entrance, and...impeded the guards'.⁴⁰ In the wake of the large scale riot which occurred at the prison in January 1932 people flocked to

see the 'great prison', including a small army of journalists and press photographers.⁴¹ The problem persisted in the post-war era when Prison Commissioner Duncan Fairn asserted that Dartmoor Prison was becoming a 'zoo' for the 'droves' of tourists coming by car and clambering up the walls. He commented particularly on the number of 'scantily clad young women... [who] hang around Dartmoor' in the summer.⁴² So obstructive did tourists become that various steps were taken to shield prisoners from the public gaze.

31. Strange and Kempa (2003) *ibid*, p.399.

32. Cited in Strange and Kempa (2003) *ibid.*, p.389.

33. Dendrickson, G & Thompson, F. (1954) *The Truth about Dartmoor*. London: Gollancz Ltd p.22. Also see, Rhodes, A.J. (1933) *Dartmoor Prison: A Record of 126 Years of Prisoner of War and Convict Life, 1806-1932*, London: John Lane The Bodley Head Limited p.ix.

34. *Times* 26 November 1945.

35. Cited in Simpson, A.W.B. (2005) 'Shooting Felons: Law, Practice, Official Culture and Perceptions of Morality' in *Journal of Law and Society* 32:2 p.241-66, p.244.

36. Anne Owers quoted in *Independent*, 1 February 2002

37. Garland (1990) *ibid*, p.259.

38. Clayton, G.F. (1958) *The Wall is Strong: The Life of a Prison Governor* London: John Long p.113.

39. *Prison Officers Magazine* (1932) XXI (5) p.136.

40. Rhodes (1933) *ibid*, p.4.

41. *Guardian*, 28 January 1932.

42. *Times* 14 March 1957.

During the 1930s Prison Commissioners banned sightseers from taking photographs of prisoners.⁴³ By the 1950s a large canvas screen was constructed between the prison and the quarry 'so that prisoners could go to and from their work unobserved'⁴⁴ and the 1959 White Paper *Penal Practice in a Changing Society* even recommended that bands of trees be planted around the prison in order to obscure the view of tourists.

The tourist interest in Dartmoor shows no signs of abating. In recent times the prison has been attracting up to 30,000 visitors each year, supplying a captivating and dramatic combination of '[b]ogs, fogs, dogs and tales of celebrity convicts'.⁴⁵ However, unlike earlier decades when prison authorities went to great lengths to keep sightseers away, more recently they have welcomed the tourist interest. Because Dartmoor is an operating prison it could be suggested there need be no consideration of the dissonance, the distortions that can be brought about by heritage reconstructions, except that Dartmoor Prison now has a dedicated museum which clearly embraces the prison's notoriety. 'Genuine cell doors' sell for £50 and visitors can purchase their own 'prison mug shots', using an identity board with the name 'Madman Lee' for the photos.⁴⁶ Although, the museum staff do preserve an archive and endeavour to aid researchers where possible, such elements of frivolity obscure the clear ethical issues that this form of prison tourism raises. Therefore, while the Prison's Governor states on the site that he hopes the museum will encourage people 'to think hard about the serious issues of crime, punishment and rehabilitation' opportunities have been lost to facilitate this. Primarily, like other forms of prison tourism concerned with profit, it does little to challenge popular ideologies and commonsense values around punishment and the prison.⁴⁷

Primarily, like other forms of prison tourism concerned with profit, it does little to challenge popular ideologies and commonsense values around punishment and the prison.

The emphasis on the 'celebrity' and 'notoriety' of prisoners serves to simplify the complex realities of the meaning and experience of incarceration. So, whilst on the one hand the prison is gratuitously presented as excessively brutal, on the other the representation is moderated and sanitised (for example stories/images of state sanctioned floggings would be perfectly acceptable but accounts of sexual violence in prison less so). Further, as with its US equivalents, the commodification of Dartmoor's ignominious history and its celebrity inmates arguably nurtures, in the viewer, a sense of nostalgia for a time when punishment seemed excessively severe and the 'criminal' an uncomplicated product of poverty and social inequalities. Whilst this may invoke feelings of sympathy for those incarcerated in years past, it essentially eclipses any space for critical dialogue or concern about contemporary penal practices. This is immensely problematic for a prison that remains operational. For whilst some of the prisoners who feature in Dartmoor's museum are interpreted as 'folk heroes', those who are incarcerated behind the walls remain 'othered'. As Garton-Smith puts it, prisoners in present eras '...are much closer to our contemporary fear and security needs that they

tend not to be regarded as sympathetically and indeed, often to be feared'.⁴⁸ Thus, unlike many other 'dark' tourist sites, contemporary prisons are 'possibly the only ones where the mainstream visitors' attitudes by and large endorse the suffering of the victims'.⁴⁹

To conclude, undoubtedly prison tourism may permit the public some insight into the injustices and/or progressive measures of the past and so, like many other 'dark' tourist sites prisons can encourage a sense of personal, if not collective, shame and regret amongst the viewing public. But it also, arguably, creates feelings of comfort and satisfaction that, by comparison to those misfortunate 'others', 'we are the lucky ones, the survivors, *the chosen*'.⁵⁰ It thus communicates an

43. Rhodes (1933) *ibid*.

44. Grew, B.D. (1958) *Prison Governor*, London: Herbert Jenkins p.72. See also Clayton (1958) *ibid*, p.113-4 and National Archives PCOM 9/2.

45. *Telegraph* 1 May 2009.

46. *Telegraph* (2009) *ibid*.

47. Wilson (1008) *ibid*.

48. Garton-Smith (2000) *ibid*.

49. Wilson (2008) *ibid*, p.45.

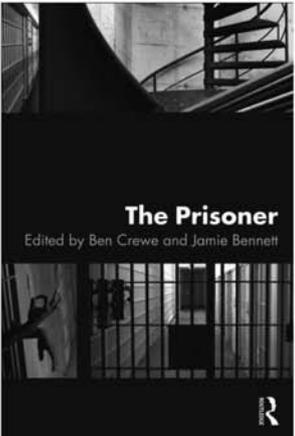
50. Logan, W and Reeves, K. (2009) (Eds) 'Introduction' in *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'* London: Routledge p.3-4 Emphasis added.

impression of inevitability about the prison and its inmates, inferring that 'prisons are there because they exist [and] [p]eople go to prison because that is where they have wound up'.⁵¹

Strange and Kempa have suggested that, despite the commodification and trivialisation of human suffering that is often the consequence of prison tourism, this should not necessarily 'preclude the presentation of counter-hegemonic stories or tales or injustice'⁵² as demonstrated by the penal site at

Robben Island. They go on to argue that to close off these sites to tourists would be a mistake as they can provide an arena on which to 'confront the ongoing challenge of interpreting incarceration, punishment and forced isolation'.⁵³ They may be right. But to do this successfully requires an 'inclusive integrity' on the part of state agencies, other stakeholders *and* the viewing public and a 'readiness to present and acknowledge the manifold strands of narrative from both sides of the Us-Other divide'.⁵⁴

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51. Wright (2000) *ibid*, p.20.

52. Strange and Kempa (2003) *ibid*, p.387.

53. *Ibid*, p.402.

54. Wilson (2008), *ibid*, p.58.