
An Account of the Penitentiary, or State Prison, at Sing Sing, near New York, and of the discipline pursued towards the prisoners confined in it. By Captain BASIL HALL.*

On Wednesday the 30th May, we visited the Penitentiary, or State Prison, at a place called Sing Sing, on the left or east bank of the Hudson River, at the distance of thirty miles from New York.

I have yet seen nothing in any part of the world in the way of prisons, which appeared to be better managed than this establishment. It is no easy task to bring people who are well disposed under the influence of strict discipline; but when the parties to be wrought upon are wicked and turbulent by nature, and altogether unaccustomed to restraint, the difficulty is considerably augmented. This problem, however, has been, I think, pretty nearly solved in America.

I had been told, in a general way, that several hundred convicts were employed at this spot, in the construction of a prison in which they themselves were eventually to be confined; but I could scarcely credit the accounts which described the degree of order and subordination maintained amongst a set of the most hardened ruffians any where to be found. Accordingly, although prepared in some degree, my astonish-

* Travels in North America, vol. i. p. 51.

ment was great when I approached the spot, and saw only two sentinels pacing along the height, from whence I looked down upon two hundred convicts at work. Some of these were labouring in a large marble quarry, others in long wooden sheds surrounding the spot, and some were engaged at various parts of the new prison, an extensive stone building running parallel to the river, about one-third of which had been finished and made habitable.

Captain Lynds, the superintendent, for whom we had brought a letter, joined us on the edge of the cliff, and begged us to walk down, that we might see what was going on, and judge, by personal inspection, whether or not the accounts we had heard were exaggerated.

There was an air of confident authority about all the arrangements of this place, which gave us a feeling of perfect security, though we were walking about unarmed amongst cut-throats and villains of all sorts. There was something extremely imposing in the profound silence with which every part of the work of these people was performed. During several hours that we continued amongst them, we did not hear even a whisper, nor could we detect in a single instance an exchange of looks amongst the convicts, or what was still more curious, a sidelong glance at the strangers. Silence in fact is the essential, or I may call it the vital principle of this singular discipline. When to this are added unceasing labour during certain appointed hours, rigorous seclusion during the rest of the day, and absolute solitude all night, there appears to be formed one of the most efficacious combinations of moral machinery that has ever perhaps been seen in action.

The principles upon which this system of prison discipline rests are very simple, and may be easily explained; perhaps, however, the readiest method will be to run through the routine of one complete day's operations, by which all the principal parts will be seen, and their bearing on one another more readily understood.

The whole secret of the astonishing success of this plan, lies in preventing the prisoners from holding any kind of communication with each other, however slight or transient. As a matter of indispensable necessity towards the accomplishment of this object, it is obvious that the convicts must be kept separate at night. To effect this completely, without any great cost in the way of houseroom and of superintendence, is a difficulty which has been completely overcome in the state of New York. According to the system alluded to, each prisoner has a separate sleeping place, seven feet in length, seven high, and three and a half wide, built of solid blocks of stone, and secured by an iron door, the upper part

of which contains orifices smaller than a man's hand. Through this gate a sufficient supply of air is admitted, and as much light and heat as are necessary. The ventilation is made complete by a sort of chimney or air-pipe, three inches in diameter, which extends from the upper part of each of the apartments to the roof of the building. These cells, or sleeping births, are placed in rows of one hundred in each, one above another, and in appearance by no means unlike wine bins in a cellar, only deeper, wider, and twice as high. Each tier has in front of it a narrow gallery just wide enough for one man to pass, and connected at the ends with a staircase. The prison at Sing Sing when completed, which it probably is by this time (1829), will contain eight hundred cells, four hundred of which are on the side facing the river, and a like number on the side next the land. The block or mass of building, formed of these two sets of cells placed back to back, may be compared to a long, high, and straight wall twenty feet thick, perforated on both sides with four parallel and horizontal ranges of square holes. This again is encased on all sides by an external building, the walls of which are at ten feet distance from those of the inner work, or honeycomb of cells. These outer walls are pierced with rows of small windows, one being opposite to each door, and so adjusted as to afford abundant light and fresh air, but no means of seeing out. Stoves and lamps are placed along the area or open space between the external wall and the inner building, to afford heat in winter, and light to the galleries after sunset.

As soon as the prisoners are locked up for the night, each in his separate cell, a watchman takes his station on the ground floor abreast of the lower tier, or if he thinks fit he may walk along the galleries past the line of doors. His feet being shod with mocasins, his tread is not heard, while he himself can hear the faintest attempt at communication made by one prisoner to another; for the space in front of the cells seems to be a sort of whispering or sounding gallery, of which fact I satisfied myself by actual experiment, though I do not very well know the cause. In this way the convicts are compelled to pass the night in solitude and silence; and I do not remember in my life to have met before with any thing so peculiarly solemn as the death-like silence which reigned, even at noon-day, in one of these prisons, though I knew that many hundreds of people were close to me. At night the degree of silence was really oppressive; and like many other parts of this curious establishment must be witnessed in person to be duly understood.

The convicts are awakened at sunrise by a bell; but before they are let out, the clergyman of the establishment reads a prayer from a station so chosen, that without effort he can

readily make himself heard by all the prisoners on that side of the building, that is to say, by 400, or one half of the number confined. The turnkeys now open the doors, and a word of command being given, each of the prisoners steps out of his cell into the gallery. They are then formed into close line, and made to march with what is called the lock step, with their eyes turned towards their keeper, along the passages to the work-shops. On leaving the building, the different divisions or gangs under the several turnkeys, make a short halt in the outer-yard to wash their hands and faces, and also to deposit their tubs and water-cans, which are taken up by another set of prisoners, whose duty it is to attend to the cleansing department of the household. Another party of the prisoners attend to the cooking; another to washing clothes; in short, the whole work is done by the convicts. The main body of the prisoners are then marched to their fixed tasks; some to hew stones, or to saw marble, some to forge iron, some to weave cloth; while others are employed as taylors, shoemakers, coopers, and in various other trades. Each shop is under the charge of a turnkey, of course not a convict, but a man of character, and known to be trustworthy, who, besides other qualifications, is required to be master of the business there taught; for his duty is not only to enforce the closest attention to the rules of the prison, and in particular that of the most rigorous silence, but he has to instruct the men under his charge in some trade. The prisoners when in these work-shops, are placed in rows with their faces all turned in one direction, so that they cannot communicate by looks or signs. Each turnkey has not less than twenty, nor more than thirty men under his charge; and it is found that one man, stimulated by a good salary, or by other adequate motives to do his duty, and who is duly supported, can perfectly well enforce these regulations upon that number of persons.

The general superintendent of the prison has a most ingenious method of watching not only the prisoners, but also the turnkeys. A narrow dark passage runs along the back part of all the work-shops, from whence the convicts, sitting at their tasks, as well as their turnkeys, can be distinctly seen through narrow slits in the wall, half an inch wide, and covered with glass, while the superintendent himself can neither be seen nor heard by the prisoners, or by their keepers. The consciousness that a vigilent eye may at any given moment be fixed upon them, is described as being singularly efficacious in keeping the attention of all parties awake, to an extent which no visible and permanent scrutiny, I am told, has the power of commanding.

At a fixed hour, eight I believe, a bell is rung, upon which

all work is discontinued; the prisoners again form themselves into a close line under their turnkey, and when the order is given to march, they return back to their cells. Each one now stops before his door, with his hands by his side, motionless and silent like a statue, till directed by a signal to stoop down for his breakfast, which has been previously placed for him on the floor of the gallery. They next turn about, and march in, after which the iron doors of their cells are locked upon them, while they take their comfortless meal in solitude. At Auburn, where this system was first put in operation, it was the practice, at the time of my visit, to allow the prisoners to eat their meals in company. But experience having shown that even this degree of sociability, trifling as it was, did some harm, and that much good was gained by compelling them to mess alone, the plan above described has, I believe, been introduced in all the other similar establishments in America, of which I am glad to say there are now a great many.

After twenty minutes have elapsed, the prisoners are marched to their work; which goes on in the same uninterrupted style till noon, when they are paraded once more to their cells, where they take their lock-up, unsociable dinner, and then pace back again to their dull silent round of hard labour. On the approach of night, the prisoners are made to wash their hands and faces, as they did in the morning on leaving their cells, and then, as before, at the sound of the yard-bell, to form themselves into lines, each one standing in order according to the number of his night's quarters. As they pass through the yard they take up their cans and tubs, and proceed finally for this day to their cell doors, where their supper of mush and molasses, a preparation of Indian corn meal, awaits them as before. At a fixed hour they are directed by a bell to undress and go to bed; but just before this, and as nearly at sunset as may be, prayers are said by the resident clergyman. It is very important to know from the best qualified local authorities, that the efficacy of this practice, considered as a branch of the prison discipline, and independently of its other valuable consideration, has been found very great.

Captain Lynds, the superintendent at Sing Sing, and the gentleman who is, I believe, universally admitted to have the greatest share of the merit which belongs to the first practical application of this system, is decidedly of opinion that it is not and never can be complete, unless there be a clergyman permanently attached to the establishment, whose exclusive duty it shall be to attend to the prisoners. Indeed he told me himself, that he had originally taken the opposite line, from a belief that this division of authority with a spiritual

superintendent, if I may use such a term, would interfere with the ordinary discipline; but that he now considered this alliance of primary consequence. This question is one of great moment, and the name of Captain Lynds stands so deservedly high, that I cannot afford to relinquish the support which his authority lends to my own deliberate opinion upon this subject.

In April 1827, at the earnest recommendation of this gentleman, a chaplain was sent to Sing Sing. The person who was induced to assume the responsibilities of this station was Mr. Gerrish Barrett, and that he feels these obligations in the proper spirit, will I think be freely admitted by every one who reads the following extract from a letter written by him, which I have transcribed from page 109 of the Second Report of the Prison Discipline Society of Boston, an institution which has rendered eminent services to this cause in America.

"A little after seven o'clock every evening," says Mr. Barrett, "I commence reading the scriptures to the convicts, afterwards make some remarks, and then offer a prayer on each side of the prison. I have found by experience, that to stand as near the centre of the prison as possible, on the pavement below, is far better for the purpose of being easily heard, than to stand upon the gallery. I am persuaded, that of all the methods which have been used for fastening divine truth upon the minds of convicts, this daily reading of the scriptures and prayer is most likely to succeed. The truth strikes upon the ear, when the men are sobered by the labours of the day, when no mortal eye sees them, and when the twilight and the silence, and the loneliness combine in causing it to make a deep impression. They can then reflect on what they have heard till they fall asleep.

"After divine service on the Sabbath, a considerable portion of the time is spent in talking to the men in their cells. In this business I feel more and more interested. I have found no one yet, who showed any disrespect or unwillingness to hear what was said."

Sketch of a Classification of the European Rocks. By Henry T. De la Beche, Esq. F. R. S. &c.

[*Extracted from the* Philosophical Magazine, No. 36.]

To propose in the present state of geological science any classification of rocks which should pretend to more than temporary utility, would be to assume a more intimate acquaintance with the earth's crust than we possess. Our knowledge