

Historical Reflections on the Sesquicentennial of the Founding of the Boston Prison Discipline Society (1825-1854)*

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Serious interest in prison reform in America goes back to the eighteenth century. In the 1790s and early 1800s, the New York Quaker philanthropist, Thomas Eddy, stands out as one of our early prison reformers. Boston, however, was the site of the first American prison reform organization with a world-wide audience. The founder and moving force was the Reverend Louis Dwight.

Born in 1793, Dwight injured his lungs and his voice in a chemistry laboratory accident while a divinity student. He gave up the ministry and became the first general agent for the American Bible Society. In 1824, he traveled on horseback visiting jails through the northeast, distributing Bibles to the inmates. He was appalled by the conditions he found and was convinced that it was only public ignorance that permitted their existence.

In 1825 he founded the Boston Prison Discipline Society for the improvement of prisons and the rehabilitation of prisoners. Not the first such society, it soon, however, became the most active, most vocal, and most widely known of all American prison reform groups. Its annual reports were purchased by many state legislatures and read, as well, throughout Europe. Dwight, as the secretary and the only paid member of the Society, traveled extensively, visiting many prisons, interviewing wardens and keepers, and reporting his findings.

Dwight soon became a devotee of the Auburn, New York, or Congregate System, which called for prisoner isolation at night and congregate work during the day, with no verbal communication between prisoners. This last rule was enforced by military-like discipline and liberal use of the whip. He was dedicated with equal passion to the discrediting and annihilation of the Pennsylvania or Separate System—which called for strict isolation of prisoners from each other, less physical punishment, and frequent visits from chaplains and other morally uplifting visitors from the community. So strong was Dwight's antipathy that he distorted data about the Philadelphia penitentiary and withheld information indicating European preference for the Pennsylvania System. It is a historical curiosity that Dwight used the Wethersfield (Conn.) penitentiary as the exemplar of the Auburn System, perhaps because the Auburn Penitentiary administration was allegedly corrupt.

The Boston Society Reports played a major role in the overwhelming popularity and adoption of the Auburn System in America. In his first attack on the Pennsylvania System, Dwight pointed out that the estimated cost of the new penitentiary in Philadelphia, accommodating 250 prisoners, was \$500,000, or \$2,000/cell. The new Wethersfield prison, accommodating 136 prisoners, would cost \$30,000, or \$220/cell. In the new Philadelphia prison, the cells were to be 12 feet long and 8 feet wide, while the Wethersfield cells

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were to be 7 feet long and 42 inches wide. Another economy feature was that convicts in the Congregate System could serve as cheap, sub-contracted labor, earning money for the penitentiary, while the Pennsylvania System was restricted to the revenues from whatever craft or trade the individual prisoner could practice in his cell.

Some members of the Boston Society opposed Dwight's use of the annual reports in the service of his personal prejudices. This minority included Samuel Gridley Howe and Charles Sumner (later U.S. Senator). Howe was deeply disturbed to find that, after 15 years' activity of the Society, idiots and the insane were still being kept in Massachusetts jails. An attack on Dwight was launched at the 1845 meeting, and Sumner and Howe were appointed to a committee to investigate and report on the Pennsylvania System. The internal three-year battle that followed was so dramatic that as many as 2,000 persons per evening were reported to be attending the Society meetings to watch the antagonists attack and "bait each other like bulls and dogs." Finally, in 1848, the debate was tabled, and the Dwight forces pushed through a resolution discontinuing public meetings. Dwight suffered a "nervous breakdown" at this time but was kept on as secretary. When he died in 1854, the Boston Prison Discipline Society died with him.

During this period, America rejected the Pennsylvania System while the rest of the Western world adopted it: England in 1835; Belgium in 1838; Sweden 1840; Denmark 1846; and Norway and Holland in 1851. In 1853 a Peruvian investigatory commission praised the Philadelphia penitentiary as the epitome of an enlightened Christian approach to corrections. By this time, however, America's world leadership in penal reform had passed into history.

Whatever his failings were, Louis Dwight was one of the first to document the revolving-door treatment of alcoholics in prisons, to expose the indiscriminate mixing of first offenders and recidivists, to enumerate the insane in prisons, to call attention to the disproportionate number of black convicts in Massachusetts jails, and to call attention to the high rate of homosexuality in prisons. It wasn't until more than one hundred and twenty-five years later that we solved the first problem by the simple expedient of re-defining alcoholism as a non-criminal offense. The other problems appear to remain essentially unchanged. We might note further that the Society felt that the racial disproportion in the jails would be eliminated by improved education for blacks. The progress we have made in corrections and in social conditions associated with crime, in the more than 120 years since the demise of Louis Dwight and the Boston Prison Discipline Society, can hardly be called impressive.

In 1840, Alexander Maconochie introduced his Mark System in Norfolk Island, Australia. Prisoners could elect to earn time off their sentences by their own efforts at study, work, and citizenship. Maconochie characterized this as putting the key to the cell in the prisoner's hands. A direct outgrowth of this approach was the Irish System of Walter Crofton in 1853, which was introduced into America in 1877 with the Elmira Reformatory and its parole system, a variation and forerunner of the indeterminate sentence. The indeterminate sentence, introduced and universally hailed as a humane reform, is now under attack as a cruel and unusual punishment. One wonders if our culture's approach to the problem of crime inevitably must be, in effect, a zero-sum game.

Will we be able to learn from the past, or like our socially concerned forebears, will we, too, proudly and hopefully introduce humane reforms, only to see them later as barbaric?

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