

Pentonville Prison.

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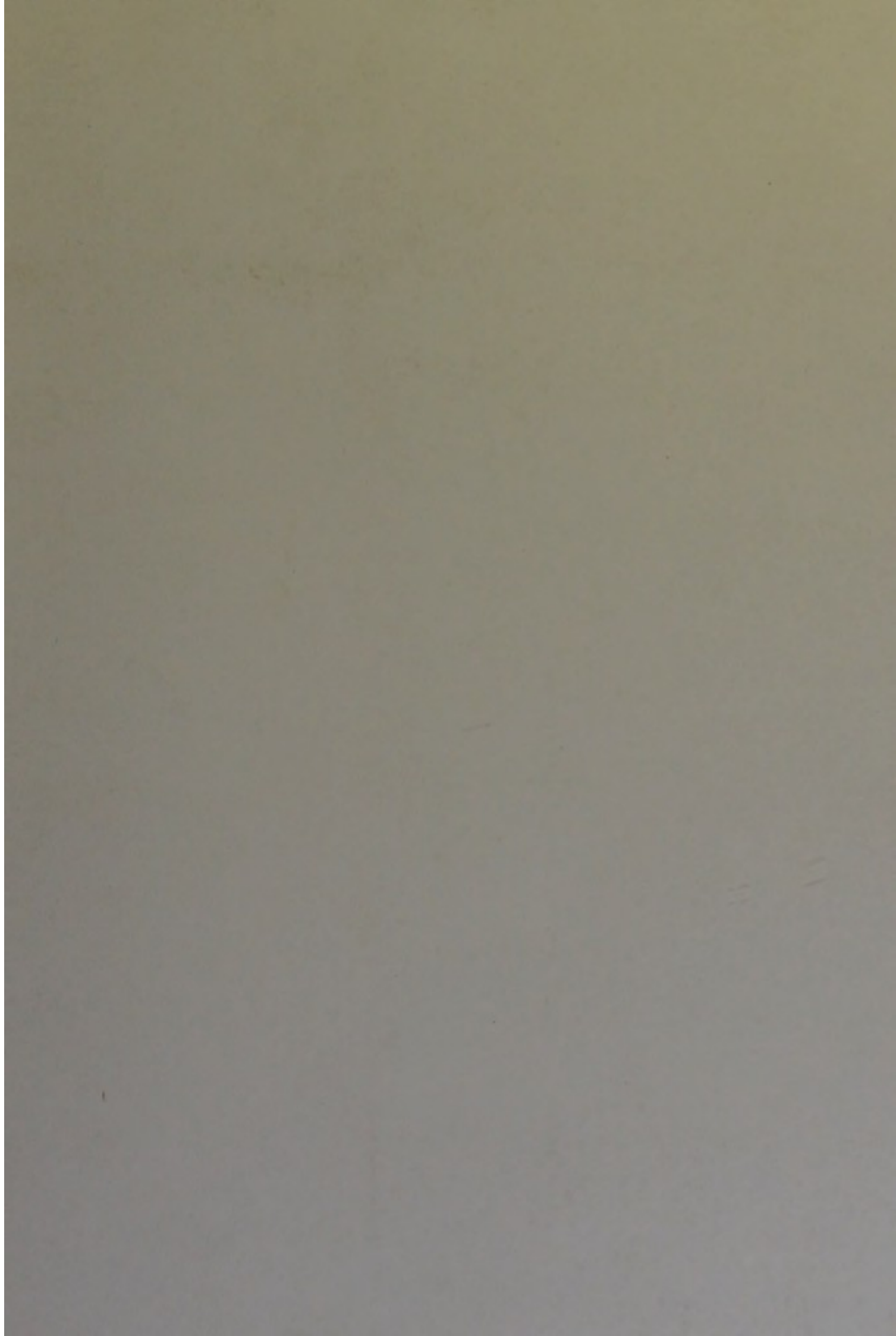
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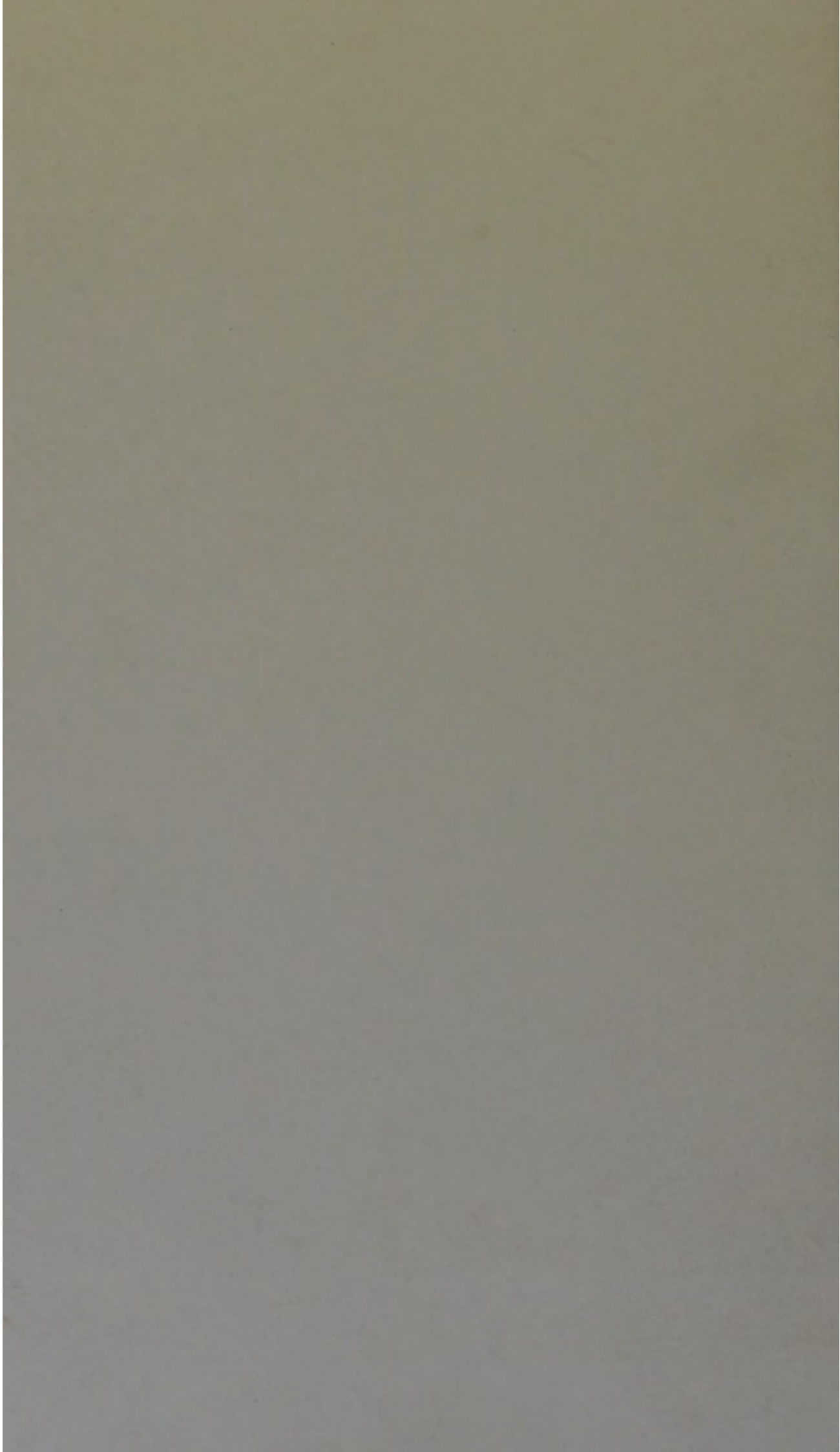
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PENTONVILLE PRISON.

(NOT PUBLISHED.)



THE TOWN OF TILTON

1891

PENTONVILLE PRISON.

LONDON, JANUARY, 1851.

IN the latter part of the year 1842, in compliance with the wishes of the Secretary of State, Sir James Graham, we became Members of the Commission for the Management of the Model Prison at Pentonville, which was then just opened for the reception of convicts, under what has been called the *separate system of imprisonment*; and we continued to act as Commissioners until we resigned the office in the spring of 1849. In the meanwhile, we were in the habit of frequently visiting the prison, seeing and conversing with the convicts, and endeavouring to satisfy ourselves as to the physical and moral effects which the peculiar discipline to which they were subjected produced upon them.

The principal results of our observations may be thus enumerated. The mortality among the prisoners varied very much from year to year. The deaths within the walls of the prison were very few, but if to these were added three-fifths of those who were pardoned on medical grounds, and probably died ultimately, the average mortality of the six years was in the proportion of about 12.77 per 1000 annually. Comparing this with the mortality which occurs under other circumstances, we find that it is somewhat higher than that of the general population in the metropolitan districts, where the deaths of males between the ages of twenty and forty, in several years of which we have an account, vary from 9.71 to 12.42 per 1000.* Of course, the comparison of the mortality among the Pentonville prisoners, with that of the general population, can afford only an approximation to the truth: as while on the one hand none are sent to the prison who are not supposed to be at the time in a healthy state, so on the other hand it cannot be doubted that the previous habits of many of the convicts had been such as to make them more prone to disease than those whose habits were more regular. On the whole, we are justified in the conclusion that

* In the Foot Guards the mortality is as much as 21.6 in 1000 annually. In the Household Cavalry it varies from 13. to 15.33 in 1000 annually.—*See Quarterly Review, for December 1847, p. 190.*

there was nothing in the system pursued at Pentonville, which materially tended to shorten the duration of life, and we have reason to believe that disease prevailed there to a less extent than in most other prisons.

There can be no doubt that separate confinement exercises a powerful influence over the minds and moral qualities of the convicts. We observed, in the first instance, that it was always painful and irksome, and that it was regarded as a much more severe punishment than imprisonment in association. By degrees the repugnance to it, which was felt at first, abated, and ultimately the great majority of the convicts declared that they preferred it to the system of association adopted in prisons in which they had been confined previously. Of Newgate, and some other prisons of the same kind, they generally spoke with horror, and many of them described very graphically the miseries to which they had been there subjected, expressing their opinion that no one could pass through such an ordeal without being contaminated, however little disposition he may have had to vice previously.

It is reasonable to suppose that many whose characters seemed to have been reformed while in prison have relapsed afterwards, and that some of the more cunning and accomplished culprits may have pretended to be reformed, though not in any degree reformed in reality. Still we are satisfied that in a great number of instances there was a real moral improvement, and

this opinion is confirmed by the reports relating to the convicts sent, with conditional pardons, as exiles to Port Philip, communicated by the superintendants of the convict-ships, as well as by those received from the colony afterwards. Whether the object of punishment should be simply to deter others from crime, or whether there should be combined with this another object, namely, that of reforming criminals, it was not in our department to consider, but we certainly believe that, in the case of those who have been committed for their first or second offence, the latter object may be, to a considerable extent, attained in a prison in which the separate system is properly conducted, while the effect of confinement in a prison on the principle of association can be no other than to make those who have been accidentally led to crime really vicious, and those who were previously vicious, more vicious still.

Sensible as we are of the wholesome influence which the separate system exercises on the mind of the convicts in many instances, still we cannot overlook the fact, that so powerful an instrument as this may, if not prudently applied, be productive of injurious as well as beneficial results. We observed in the convicts generally, when they had been for some time in the prison, a subdued tone of mind. On leaving the quiet and silence of the prison, and being embarked on board ship, they were painfully affected by the noise and bustle to which they were suddenly

transferred. Many of them, on that occasion, had fits which seemed to be of the character of hysteria, and which, although they occasioned some alarm when they first occurred, were followed by no ill consequence. Some of the convicts, while in the prison, had strange and unfounded fancies, such as that deleterious matters had been put into their food, or that they were pardoned, or about to be pardoned. These are what are described in the various reports under the name of delusions. Fifteen cases of this form of mental disease occurred in the first six years after the prison was opened.

In the first year after the prison was opened, when the average daily population did not exceed three hundred and thirty-two convicts, as many as three individuals were affected by mania; and in the sixth year* the same number of cases of mania occurred with an average population of five hundred. We need scarcely say that in each of these years the proportion of maniacal cases was very much beyond what exists in the general population.

* The cases of mania reported in the prison this year were in reality five; but in two of them the maniacal symptoms showed themselves so soon after the convicts entered the prison, that it cannot be supposed that the peculiar discipline of the prison was concerned in producing them; while the probability is, that the disease had begun in the Milbank Prison, where they had been confined previously.

But, on the other hand, in the whole of the four intervening years, there were only three cases of mania within the walls of the prison, while a fourth was said to have occurred in a convict immediately after he was removed to the hulks at Woolwich. Having carefully considered the subject, we have been led to believe that the large number of mental affections in the first year was, in fact, to be attributed partly to the circumstance of the system of instruction in trades and of labour not having been, in the first instance, completely organized, and the convicts having been left in consequence without sufficient occupation of mind ; and partly to the operation of other causes, which it is needless to discuss at present. However that may have been, some changes having been made in the management of the prison, these were immediately followed by such a diminution in the number of cases of mania, that in the next four years, the proportion of them was scarcely greater than we believe it to be in the general population.* But

* These four years, taken by themselves, give a proportion of cases of mania as 1.65 per 1000 annually. It appears from Mr. Thurnam's observations, that in the Society of Friends, the proportion of cases of mania of persons of the same age as those at Pentonville, is as 1.5 per 1000 annually. In some of our regiments abroad, the annual proportion of maniacal cases is more than 1.40 per 1000. *See a Table in the Quarterly Review, for December, 1847, p. 189.*

here the question arises, how is the increase of maniacal cases in the sixth year to be accounted for? To this we do not undertake to give any positive answer. We may, however, observe that in the spring and summer of the year 1847, the Commission was deprived of two of its most active and efficient members, by the death of Mr. Crawford, and Mr. Whitworth Russell. These gentlemen also held the office of Inspector of Prisons. They were very much interested in the success of the separate system, and themselves selected, with the greatest care, the convicts who were to be sent to Pentonville, rejecting those who did not seem to be, for any reason, fit subjects for the discipline. We have reason to believe that the same anxious attention was not paid to the selection of the convicts for Pentonville afterwards.* In one respect certainly, a very important change was made as to the principle of selection. It is plain that, for the purpose of reformatory discipline, convicts should be taken as much as possible from the class of those who have been committed for their first, or, at the most, for

* Mr. Crawford died in April, and Mr. Whitworth Russell died in August. But after Mr. Crawford's death, Mr. Russell seldom visited the prison, seeming to have lost very much of his interest in it; and it is very probable that he either left the selection of the convicts to others, or himself selected them less carefully than before.

their second offence, and of young men, in preference to that of old offenders. Such was the rule observed, with few exceptions, by Mr. Crawford and Mr. Russell; and this rule was, to a very great extent, neglected by those who made the selection afterwards.

We are unable to connect the occurrence of mania with a greater length of imprisonment. In many instances the disease showed itself in those who had been very recently admitted, and it has been very clearly shown by the Rev. Mr. Burt, in the evidence given by him before the Committee of the House of Commons, that in *the first nine months there is a greater liability to mania*, than in the whole term of imprisonment afterwards.*

It is difficult to compare the statistics of Pentonville Prison, as to the physical and moral condition of its inmates, with those of ordinary prisons in which there is a rapid succession of individuals condemned to short terms of imprisonment. As far as we could pretend to institute such a comparison, during the time in which we acted as Commissioners, it seemed to justify the belief that the separate system, if prudently and carefully conducted, is to say the least of it as little prejudicial, as it regards either body or mind, as other modes of imprisonment. We

* See some observations on this and other subjects, connected with the separate system, in the "Medical Gazette" for November 22, November 29, and December 6, 1850.

thus express ourselves, believing at the same time that, without due precautions being used, especially as to keeping the attention of the prisoners occupied by employment in various trades, by instruction in school, by affording them the opportunity of reading, and by moral and religious instruction judiciously administered, there are few minds which would not suffer from the monotony and ennui of this mode of existence, continued during even a shorter period than that of eighteen months; and it is conformable to all medical experience, that such moral depression must be a fruitful source of bodily disease. With due attention on the part of those to whose management it is confided, the separate system may be rendered both safe and useful, and without it the expectations of those who recommend it will terminate in disappointment. This is the opinion which we expressed on a former occasion, and we find no reason to alter it.

In December 1850, having taken much interest in the prison formerly, and having been informed that considerable changes had been made in the management of it since we ceased to act as Commissioners, we were anxious to know what these changes really were, and how far the new system was or was not

an improvement on the old one. Accordingly we applied to the Secretary of State for an order enabling us to visit the prison, which he kindly sent us, with permission to communicate with the prisoners in their cells. We have availed ourselves of the opportunity thus afforded : have conversed with many of the prisoners, generally without the presence of the Governor, or other officers, and have procured from the Governor, and principal medical officer, such general information as we could expect them to give us, considering that we were now merely visitors, and not as formerly officially connected with the prison.

In the course of our inquiries, we have ascertained that the time during which convicts are detained in the prison has been very much diminished. From some data furnished by the Report of the Commissioners for the year 1849, we learn that, during that year, the average period of imprisonment scarcely exceeded thirty-eight weeks. But this observation applies to the whole number of the convicts. If we make allowance for those who were sent away soon after their admission, on account of ill health, or for other reasons, still we may conclude that with the remainder the term of imprisonment did not amount to much more than forty weeks. We have reason to believe that the period has since then been further abridged, and that during the last year, the average has not exceeded thirty-two, or thirty-three weeks.

It appeared to us that some of the convicts whom we visited were much older than those who were admitted formerly under the direction of Sir James Graham, to the effect that they should be from eighteen to thirty-five years of age; and on referring to the report which has just been mentioned, we find that such is the case, several prisoners having been admitted in 1849, who were more than forty, some between fifty and sixty, and three who were actually more than sixty years of age. From the same document, we learn that another very important change has taken place. It was understood that the convicts sent to Pentonville should be selected, as far as it was possible, from those who had committed their first or second offence,* it being supposed that it was only among them that there was any reasonable chance of reformation; and we believe that our recollection serves us rightly when we say, that of those first confined in the prison, at least four-fifths had been convicted not more than once, and very few of the remainder more than twice. But we find, on referring to the printed Report, that in the year 1849 many of the prisoners of that year were old offenders, who had been convicted more than four times, one of them as many as

* Sir James Graham's directions were, that they should generally be those convicted of their first offence. See his *Letter, end of the Appendix to the Second Report of the Commissioners.*

twenty-seven times, and that there were even twenty-six who had returned from transportation ! Besides the abridgement of the term, during which the convicts were detained at Pentonville, another alteration has been made in the system pursued there ; many of them being placed in association during the day. They are, however, still confined to their separate cells during the night.

In the year 1849, of six hundred and sixty individuals removed from the prison, one hundred and seventy were sent with tickets of leave to the colonies, the remainder being sent either to the public works at Portland, or to the hulks, for the purpose of passing through what is called "the secondary stage of probationary discipline."* Since then, we understand that very few have been sent to the colonies, that the greater part have been removed to the hulks in England or Bermuda, some to the prison at Shorn-cliff, and the remainder to the public works. We cannot find that any rule is observed in selecting them for these several destinations, except that those who seem to be the most fitted for labour, and those who have the longest sentences, and therefore may be supposed to have been guilty of the worst offences, are sent to the public works, and the others to the hulks.

We have not sufficient data to enable us to form

* See Appendix to the Eighth Report, p. 10.

an opinion as to the health of the convicts under the new system of management, as compared with what it was under the old one. In the year 1849, it appears from the printed Report that the mortality was below the average ; but from what we have been able to learn, we are led to believe that in the year 1850 it has been above the average of former years. With respect to the prevalence of insanity, we have been enabled to obtain some more definite information. In the year 1849, according to the printed Report, there were four cases of insanity ; and we understand that in the year 1850, five cases of insanity were reported ; in addition to which, we saw two of the convicts, one of whom certainly was insane, while the other, as it was reported to us, had been, and still was, in a state of dangerous mental excitement. It would appear, therefore, that in the last two years, during which the term of imprisonment has been shortened, and a considerable number of convicts have been placed in association, the actual number of cases of insanity has been fully equal to that which occurred during the whole of the six preceding years before the system was altered. There has been a corresponding increase in the number of cases of these slighter forms of mental aberration, which are referred to in the Reports under the head of delusions. Of these, we understand, that as many as thirteen have been reported during the last two years, being only two

less than the whole number which occurred during the six years in which we acted as Commissioners. These facts are the more remarkable, as it was very much on the supposition that the tendency of the former system was to produce insanity that the changes above-mentioned were introduced.

On conversing with several of the convicts in their cells, it appeared to us that they were in a more passive state of mind than formerly. They all admitted that being at Pentonville was more calculated "*to do a man good*," than confinement in other prisons, and those who had been removed to Pentonville from the prison at Shorncliff or the hulks, spoke of those establishments (and especially that at Bermuda) with abhorrence. The principal change which we observed, was that formerly a large proportion of the prisoners, (the better class especially of them) looked forward to their being sent to the colonies with the hope that they might redeem their characters and begin life anew; whereas, at present there is no such prospect to support them. It does not appear to us that a notice which is placed in their cells affords them any real knowledge as to their destination after they leave the prison; and indeed, however well conducted they may be, it seems that there is a greater probability of their being sent to the hulks than anywhere else. It certainly is possible, that the increase of mental diseases during the last two years may have arisen from acci-

dental circumstances ; but we conceive that it is very much more probable that it has arisen partly from the circumstance which has been just mentioned, and partly from a less careful selection of prisoners. As connected with this part of the inquiry, it is worthy of notice, that in the course of the last two years, there have been two instances of suicide ; whereas, there had been only a single instance of it in the whole of the six preceding years.

The prison at Pentonville was instituted for the purpose of making an important experiment in prison discipline, namely, the combining the punishment of offenders with the attempt to reform them. Such is the object expressly stated in the Act of Parliament under which the prison was established ;* and such was the object kept in view during the whole of the period in which we acted as Commissioners. At the present time, although it may be ostensibly otherwise, this object is in reality almost wholly abandoned. We do not undertake to consider the question as to the expediency or in expediency of so important an alteration, but merely express our opinion as to the matter

* The words of the Act of Parliament are, "Whereas it will be of great public advantage that a new prison be provided in which criminal offenders may be imprisoned and corrected, and may receive such instruction, and may be subjected to such discipline as shall appear most conducive to their reformation and the repression of crime," &c.

of fact. Our reasons for holding that opinion may be briefly stated as follows :—

1. Sir James Graham in his letter addressed to the Commissioners, to which we have already referred, proposed, that the convicts sent to Pentonville should be selected, as far as that was possible, from those who were convicted of their first offence, and not more than thirty-five years of age ; and there can be no doubt that it is in this class of persons that there exists the greatest chance of reformation, while in that of regular and accomplished thieves, the chance is so small that it may be regarded as none at all. But, we have already stated, on the authority of the printed Report for the year 1849, that in that year, not quite one-third of the prisoners admitted belonged to the class thus specified, while a considerable portion of the remainder were old offenders, (one of them having been actually twenty-seven times in prison,) and *twenty-six were convicts who had returned from transportation, having been, as we conclude, exposed for some years to the abominations of Van Dieman's Land.*

2. Mr. Kingsmill, the Chaplain of Pentonville, in his evidence before the Committee of the House of Commons, has given it as his opinion, that eighteen months is too long a period for convicts to be confined under the system of separation ; but he does not advocate the reduction of the period to less than

twelve or fifteen months. Mr. Burt, the Assistant-Chaplain, is of opinion that even twelve months are not sufficient to produce any permanent reformation in the class of criminals sent to Pentonville, these having been all guilty of such grave offences as caused them to be sentenced to transportation; and that no evil arises from it being continued for a longer period. From such knowledge as we have been able to obtain on the subject, we are very much inclined to agree with Mr. Burt. But, in 1849, the average period was not more than forty weeks, and since then it has been even further reduced. It must be, at any rate, a matter of great doubt whether so short a period as this is in any case sufficient to do any good.

3. It is too much to expect that any reformation of convicts should be lasting, if they are afterwards placed in a situation in which, debarred from all other society, they are exposed to the contaminating influence of the guilty and the dissolute. But such we believe to be the lot of the majority of those who are removed from Pentonville, as they are sent not to the public works at Portland, but to the prison at Shorncliff, or to the hulks at Woolwich, Portsmouth, or Bermuda. We have conversed with several of the prisoners who are now at Pentonville, but who were in the hulks formerly, and the accounts which they have severally and separately given us have only

tended to confirm the rumours which had previously reached us as to the abominable conversations and practices which prevail in these establishments. We have no doubt that what one of these individuals said to us is literally true, "that a man cannot do well in the hulk if he would;" and that where the hulks are his ultimate destination, it is useless for a convict to be detained thirty or forty weeks at Pentonville.

B. C. BRODIE. R. FERGUSON.

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