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CHRISTIANITY AMONGST CONVICTS.

DR. BROWNING'S LABOURS.

[Issued by the HOWARD ASSOCIATION, London.]

1872.

"We hear much of various systems of prison discipline, as the Separate, the Silent, and the Congregate systems, but unless the CHRISTIAN system be brought to bear, with Divine power, on the understanding and consciences of criminals, every other system, professedly contemplating their reformation, must prove an utter failure. We willingly concede to various modes of prison discipline their just measure of importance, but to expect that human machinery, however perfect, can take the place of GOD'S OWN PRESCRIBED METHOD of reformation, involves not only ignorant presumption, but practical infidelity."—Dr. BROWNING.

IN one of the official reports to the Directors of English Convict Prisons in 1871, the Chaplain at the Portsmouth establishment wrote: "I often feel that the simplest expressions of the actual truth of religious life in a convict prison may excite a smile even among Christians, but I must say this, that the men here are impressed with the solemnities of godliness." He might have added that the very mention of such officers as prison chaplains also often excites a smile. It is, however, an indication of scepticism as to Christianity itself, that its influence and its ministers should be thus quietly discredited by many otherwise intelligent persons. Doubtless there are to be found prison ministers who are frigid, careless, or crotchety; but on the other hand, there are many devoted and excellent Chaplains, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, (as also Governors and Warders) of prisons, who feel their responsibilities to God, and delight in showing their love to Christ by seeking to win to Him the souls for whom He has died, however sin-stained those souls may (perchance through pitiable disadvantages) have become.

It is an indisputable fact, that mere religious talk will not reform men. Preaching must be accompanied by fervent prayer and healthy practical discipline in every-day duties, decencies, and industries, or it will be fruitless; just as the best wheat sown on an undrained bog will only rot. A large reformatory was rendered an utter failure by a superintendent who deluged the youths with verbal theology, but neglected industrial and practical duties. His successor, a man of quiet but operative religion, has rendered the same institution an exemplary one. Nor will even wisely directed Christian effort effect its purposes other than very imperfectly, if obstructed by a neglect of certain requisite accompaniments. For example, several of the most devoted Chaplains in the English Convict Prisons assert that their earnest labours are largely nullified by the continuance of *gang labour*, a system long ago condemned by all experienced observers.

One of the most striking instances of the real power of Christianity, even over outcasts, is afforded by the successful labours of a Medical Officer of Convicts, DR. COLIN A. BROWNING, R.N., whose example is the more interesting inasmuch as he was a layman.*

Between the years 1831 and 1848, Dr. Browning was engaged as Surgeon-superintendent of Convict Ships, during the long voyages between England and Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania). Nine times he was entrusted with the direction of large parties of these wretched outcasts from their country. Many of them had previously been confined in the hulks, and the parties always included a large number of the most depraved and desperate characters. When these were congregated together, within a small space, on shipboard, for periods of four or five months, the difficulties of management were necessarily very great. Indeed the voyages of convicts presented in general such scenes of horrible corruption and riotous insubordination, that the transport vessels were commonly spoken of as "floating hells." But Dr. Browning's parties formed a most remarkable contrast to the general rule. Yet he was not furnished with the slightest outward advantage or facility beyond other surgeon-superintendents, and in every case he had to contend with the excessive moral obstacle of the close congregation of many of the vilest men with others. Whence then his exceptional success?

From his practical reliance upon, and application of, the power of the Gospel. From a daily and hourly maintenance of a combination of Scriptural exposition, fervent and intercessory prayer, plain secular instruction and lectures; thorough cleanliness and order, and the strictest, but kindly, discipline.

He records of one of his later voyages, "The last words uttered to me by the prison officers at Millbank, were designed to impress on my mind that the men destined for embarkation in the *Pestonjee Bomanjee* were a most depraved set, including some most desperate characters. A friend, moreover, advised me never to venture myself among them at night, or alone, or unarmed. Their character from England had reached Maria Island (Tasmania) before they did, and the gentlemen who came on board before debarkation told me that he understood that I had brought out the worst body of men that had ever been landed in the Colony."

The Doctor then says:—"But I can speak with confidence and gratitude of their behaviour while under my authority, instruction, and discipline. The united prayers of many of God's believing and wrestling people were heard and answered. Not a lash was inflicted, not an iron was seen on the prisoners' decks. The behaviour of my men after they had been a few weeks under Scriptural instruction, prayer, and discipline, exceeded, in correctness and superiority of character, that of any other body of men ever committed to my care. Their advancement in Christian knowledge was amazing, though their fearful and most appalling ignorance of the Bible and of Redemption when they came on board was truly astounding and heartrending. It is difficult to imagine in what part of the United Kingdom such frightful heathenism could have been fostered and reared, until it is recollected how fearful is the want of faithful preaching, ministerial visiting, and catechising, and domestic instruction and discipline; to which must be added, the weakness of faith in professing Christians, their deficiency in intercessory prayer, and the disregard of that Divine command, 'Let him that heareth say come.'"

* *Vide* Dr. Browning's work, "*The Convict Ship and England's Exiles.*" London: Hamilton, Adams & Co.

Many of these men wrote letters to Dr. Browning, telling him how astonished they were on first hearing of his plans, and how utterly incredulous they had been in regard to his expectations of securing their co-operation, and of governing them without corporal punishment. But in the end they acknowledged their grateful admiration of the success of his system.

When this party (of 200) left Woolwich, for Hobart Town, 135 could neither read nor write. On their landing in the Colony all could read. 76 had learnt to write, 39 had signed the "Total Abstinence," and 150 the "Temperance" pledge. All were supplied with a Bible or Testament. And the Doctor mentions, "Out of their few remaining shillings, the prisoners, without my knowledge, subscribed among themselves the sum of £7 8s. 10d., as an expression of their gratitude to the British and Foreign Bible Society. Had they possessed more money the sum would have been greater. *Many of them gave all they had left in my hands.*"

When in charge of another party of 220 convicts sent out from England in the *Theresa*, the Doctor established thirty-three schools in active operation on board, and again landed all the men able to read. Not a lash nor an iron was laid on any convict throughout the voyage. During another voyage in the ship *Margaret*, Dr. Browning proved that his decidedly religious, whilst practical and strict, mode of treatment was also successful in the management of female convicts, who are generally even more difficult to manage than the worst of men.

But one of his greatest triumphs was his voyage from Norfolk Island (of horrible history) to Tasmania, in charge of 346 "old hands." Before leaving the island he visited a little chapel which a detachment of soldiers (who had come out with him two years previously in the *Theresa*, and had then become religious men through his influence) had built in a valley. Of these also he reports, "The most pleasing improvement is manifest in their manners, speech, temper, and conduct."

A number of the 346 convicts, now removed by him from the island, had agreed to take a terrible revenge on some comrades who had previously been employed as constables over the others. But under the instruction and discipline of Dr. Browning this purpose was entirely abandoned. (Murder was a common crime among the Norfolk Island convicts at that period.) The Doctor landed his large party at their destination without having had a single punishment. He remarks: "The men were given to me in double irons; I debarked them without an iron clanking among them. I am told this is the first and only instance of convicts removed from Norfolk Island having had their irons struck off during the voyage, and being landed totally unfettered. They are almost uniformly double-cross-ironed, and often chained down to the deck, everybody afraid of them. I was among them at all hours, and the prison doors were never once shut during the day. To God be all the glory. The Gospel of his well-beloved Son, and gracious answers to believing prayer, have been the means. All is of Christ Jesus."

Three Governors of Tasmania—Sir John Franklin, Colonel George Arthur, and Sir William Denison (all thoroughly practical and shrewd men)—expressed their high opinion of Dr. Browning and his system. Colonel Arthur appointed a commission to enquire into the conduct of Dr. Browning's men after they had been in the Colony some time. In spite of the exceeding difficulty of maintaining their ground amid the ever-prevailing debasement of the convict settlements, these men were thus reported of: "We cannot avoid remarking upon the very judicious

impressions made upon the minds of these prisoners by the surgeon-superintendent; and that these have not been thrown away, is best shown by the exemplary conduct of the convicts since their arrival. The superintendent of the barracks reports that they have been invariably clean, sober, and regular, whilst at the same time none of them have yet been brought before magistrates for punishment, a fact which has never before occurred within the knowledge of the chief police magistrate or principal superintendent."

Colonel Arthur particularly approved Dr. Browning's mode of classifying his men, and of, as far as possible, developing their good qualities *by giving them some useful service to do*, and causing those prisoners who were, in however humble a degree, competent, to teach and help some of their comrades. His theology also was very practical. He taught that with God there is no arbitrary or *unconditional* forgiveness; that Christ saves by really *taking away* sin, and that heaven and hell are not merely localities, but mental and moral states, either of happy goodness or miserable ungodliness. He declared, "Pardon is indeed dispensed, but not at the expense either of law or justice." Hence he refused to remit merited punishments, on the ground that it would be unkind both to the offender and others to do so. In addressing the prisoners he said: "What did man's disobedience require ere he could be restored to purity and to bliss? Nothing less than the incarnation, sufferings, and *obedience*, even unto death, of the Son of God. Can any of you, then, think lightly of disobedience?" Like all good men, Dr. Browning had great faith in prayer, *public, private, and intercessory prayer*. He recommended and practised it constantly, and regarded it as the primary means of obtaining the indispensable aid of God's Holy Spirit to influence the objects of his exertions.

Whilst strict in repressing offences, he always recognised and fostered the good qualities remaining in convicts, some of whom he knew to be not greater sinners than many persons free and respected in the community. And he strongly disapproved of the too-prevalent scepticism as to the reformation of criminals, especially seeing that it is only by Divine *grace* that any person can become a true Christian. Why then should we dishonour God and limit the Holy One "by doubting the Divine power to convert, by His Spirit, a convict, through the knowledge of Jesus Christ His Son?"

[Copies of this paper have been posted to about one thousand chief officers of prisons in Great Britain and Ireland, in addition to a wide distribution amongst other persons at home and abroad.]

The HOWARD ASSOCIATION was instituted (under the patronage of the late LORD BROUGHAM) for the *promotion of the best methods of Penal Treatment and Crime Prevention*. Treasurer, R. N. FOWLER, Esq., M.P.; Secretary, WILLIAM TALLACK; Office, 5, Bishopsgate Street, Without, London, E.C. It labours to indoctrinate the public mind with the importance of a *reformatory* and radically *preventive* treatment.