

**EXTRACTS FROM THE SECOND REPORT OF  
(WILLIAM CRAWFORD AND WHITWORTH  
RUSSELL, ESQS.,) THE INSPECTORS OF  
PRISONS FOR THE HOME DISTRICT; ADDRESSED  
TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE THE SECRETARY  
OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT**

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Extracts from the second report of (William Crawford and Whitworth Russell, esqs.) the inspectors of prisons for the home district; addressed to the Right Honourable the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Various

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# **VARIOUS**

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FROM THE  
SECOND REPORT

OF

[WILLIAM CRAWFORD AND WHITWORTH RUSSELL, ESQS.,]

THE

INSPECTORS OF PRISONS

FOR THE HOME DISTRICT;

ADDRESSED TO THE  
RIGHT HONOURABLE THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR  
THE HOME DEPARTMENT.

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BY AUTHORITY.

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TO THE RIGHT HON. THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE  
HOME DEPARTMENT.

*Raymond Buildings, April 7th, 1837.*

MY LORD,

In preparing our Second Annual Report, which we have now the honour of presenting to your Lordship, we have thought it our duty, before proceeding to report upon the prisons connected with our own District, to submit to your notice our observations upon those particular subjects to which your Lordship has been pleased to direct our special attention.

In pursuance of this arrangement, we beg leave, in the first place, to lay before your Lordship our observations upon that system of prison discipline which is denominated "*The Silent System.*" In the course of our inspections and inquiries, during the last year, we have had numerous opportunities of observing that System in operation under all the various circumstances which have the effect of obstructing or of facilitating its action, and which, therefore, have afforded us the means of making that full and complete investigation of the subject which your Lordship requires at our hands; and, as the advocates of this System maintain that it successfully disputes the claim to preference with "*The Separate System,*" we deem it our duty to submit to your Lordship such facts and inferences as have led us to an opposite opinion. We are prepared to show that the Silent System, originating in a

deep conviction of the great and manifold evils of gaol association, and designed to guard against those mischievous consequences which attach to it, is cumbrous and intricate in its construction, inadequate to the purposes which it contemplates, and dependent for its successful working upon circumstances which can neither be universally secured nor relied upon; that, besides its good qualities, it has others which are pernicious or useless; and that, while its excellencies are contingent and accidental, its defects are necessary and inherent.

In expressing ourselves thus strongly, we beg that we may not be understood as designing to impeach the motives of those who advocate this System. We believe that they are influenced by an anxious desire to save the Criminal from the alarming evils of gaol contamination; and that, in compassing this most desirable and necessary end, they have been led to the adoption of their plan by benevolent motives. Nevertheless, we feel satisfied that, even to them, we shall be able to impart that conviction of its unfitness, which attentive observation and reflection have produced in our own minds; and we moreover persuade ourselves that, upon a closer examination of the system, they will be led, by those motives of humanity which dictated its adoption, to repudiate it, as inflicting upon the prisoner much severe and needless punishment; namely, the interdiction of intercourse under circumstances which render the inhibition peculiarly oppressive, and which arm the temptations to violate it with more than usual force.

We believe that the strong expressions in which witnesses who have been examined by Parliamentary Committees have denounced or recorded their admiration of the merits of the Silent System are imputable to a view of the question which does not necessarily involve the pre-eminence of that System, or a solid conviction of its intrinsic excellence;—that view we conceive to resolve itself into a *comparison* of the Silent System with the present most mischievous plan of gaol association. No well-regulated mind, indeed, could contemplate the dreadful evils which attach to this last-mentioned plan, without feeling instinctively impelled to embrace any measure by which such evils might be avoided; and we are confident that it is owing to such a commendable feeling as this, that the advocates of the Silent System have permitted themselves to be hurried, with rather too great precipitation, into the adoption of a plan which, though upon a superficial view it may appear to possess many advantages, is pregnant with evils of which we are certain that its advocates are either unconscious, or of which they have not formed an adequate conception. Under these circumstances we have felt ourselves bound, no less by our



unfeigned respect for the motives of those who maintain the superiority of the Silent System than by our sense of the importance of the interests involved in the subject, to examine it carefully and impartially, in all its bearings, and in every point of view; to scrutinize minutely the whole of its complicated machinery; to witness its operation, and to register faithfully its effects. All this, my Lord, we have done heedfully and repeatedly, and under such circumstances as were calculated to afford us the clearest and most complete insight into the nature of the subject. We feel persuaded, therefore, that your Lordship will do us the justice to believe that we do not approach the discussion of this question without great and careful consideration; that we have impartially weighed its merits, as well as its defects; and that the conclusion at which we have arrived is based upon evidence at once extensive and incontrovertible.

We say, in the first place, then, that so far as the prevention of intercourse is concerned, the Silent System is not efficacious. If it be granted that communication may be carried on by *signs*, or in a subdued tone of voice, then it is in evidence that this System does not and cannot prevent such intercourse. The difficulty of enforcing the prohibition of intercommunication under this System is felt and acknowledged by some of its warmest advocates. The objection which this fact involves appears to us to be fatal to the whole measure; for let us consider for a moment the effect which this abortive attempt at securing a main object of the System must necessarily have both upon the prisoners and upon the numerous Monitors and Wardsmen employed to enforce it. Upon the former, the persuasion of the obvious fact, that communication cannot be prevented, will operate most prejudicially; it will act at once as a constant spur and a premium to their ingenuity, which will have abundant scope to exercise itself amidst the multiplied and perplexing engagements of the Monitors. We ought to bear in mind, likewise, the adroitness and tact which the human mind and frame gradually, but surely, acquire by practice, when the man is impelled by necessity or by strong inclination; both of which are known to enable the agent to accomplish purposes which, to himself as well as to others, had appeared to be utterly unattainable. The truth of this is demonstrated by the following among other remarkable facts, that in the prison of Coldbath Fields, in which the Silent System is believed to be brought to the greatest degree of perfection, under the management of a highly intelligent and able Governor, who has at his command every possible advantage for working the System, there were in the year 1836 no less than 5,138 punishments "for talking and swearing."

Now, my Lord, if, under circumstances so favourable to the Silent System,—in prisons upon which the public eye is more especially fixed, which are perpetually visited by a vigilant Committee of Justices, are under the care of excellent keepers, are superintended by active and trustworthy officers, assisted by monitors and wardsmen who are selected from the most active and intelligent class of prisoners in the whole kingdom,—we say, if, under such favourable circumstances as these, the Silent System fails to the extent indicated by the circumstances and by the number of punishments which we have stated, what must be the working of the plan in other prisons, where such advantages are not only not to be had in combination, but where, as will sometimes happen, not one single advantage of the kind can be calculated upon or secured?

It is impossible to convey to your Lordship an adequate idea of the successful dexterity in fraud and artifice in which this System has been the means of training the prisoners; and, if once it were to become fixed and general by authority, we do not hesitate to say that we defy the most vigilant and zealous superintendence to defeat the contrivances which the prisoners would employ to baffle it. Now, while the prisoner's mind is thus either occupied with attempts to elude the vigilance of his monitor (attempts which, from the very nature of the case, must often prove successful), or amused by watching and secretly applauding the attempts of others, can it be believed that, under such circumstances, his mind can receive any salutary impression of the penal nature of his condition, or have inclination or opportunity for self-examination or reflection?

But the necessary effect of this System upon the wardsmen and monitors is no less to be deprecated. From the foregoing observations, some notion may be formed of the incessant demand which the nature of his duties imposes upon the watchful vigilance of the monitor; that vigilance he knows is not always effectual; and he must be aware that, in spite of his utmost efforts, the prisoners will be able to elude it. Now is it unlikely that, seeing the impossibility, with all his exertions, of preventing communication, he should at times, from absolute weariness or despair, relax a watchfulness, the most painful stretch of which he sees to be unavailing? And yet it is upon the equable and uninterrupted maintenance of this vigilance, wound up to the highest degree of tension, that the advocates of this System rest their persuasion of its efficacy.

But let us suppose this difficulty on the part of the monitors surmounted, and that every violation of the rules enjoining silence is promptly followed by detection and punishment: it is obvious

that this must excite in the minds of the prisoners a feeling of irritation and resentment towards the monitor, which must add materially to the difficulties of his arduous duty. We have repeatedly found that, under this System, prisoners eagerly seek occasion to bring accusations against the monitors; and that the adjudication of these charges is productive of much trouble and consumption of time to the Governor, who, in the case of Coldbath Fields, has every morning, on an average, no less than 60 reports to inquire into and decide, upon extensive, perplexing, and questionable evidence.

But it will be said, perhaps, that an approximation to the maintenance of absolute silence is all that is designed or expected; and that this is a great improvement in prison discipline. We are ready to concede to the Silent System whatever praise its advocates claim for it as a successful mode of escaping some of the frightful evils of gaol association; but we must be permitted to examine the means which it professes to employ, before we can feel ourselves warranted in recommending it for general adoption; because, if these means be subject to grave and insurmountable objections, it then becomes a question whether we cannot discover some other mode of proceeding, by which equal or greater advantages may be secured, without incurring the evils which attach to the system in question.—The warmest advocates of the Silent System admit that they cannot carry it into operation without the constant employment of means which are obviously adverse to the spirit of the Constitution, and to the first principles of substantial justice. They confess that they must be permitted to inflict punishments for every detected violation of the rules. Now, of the average amount of such punishments your Lordship will be enabled to form a just estimate, from the statement which we have given respecting the House of Correction at Coldbath Fields; from which it appears that, in the year 1836, the punishments “for talking and swearing,” without reckoning those which have been inflicted for other prison offences, and which amounted to 6,794, averaged about 12 per diem. Nor is the nature of those punishments less objectionable than their frequency. They consist in reduction of food, or in confinement in dark and ill-ventilated cells; both of which have such a tendency to impair the prisoners’ health, that the Governor has thought it necessary to reduce the punishment to a degree that impairs its efficacy. Nevertheless, the prisoners persevere in counterfeiting ill health; and, for the purposes of carrying on the deception, they frequently resort to practices of an abominable and revolting nature. Here, then, my Lord, is one punishment, or, to speak more correctly, here are many punishments, superimposed upon that to which the