

1881.

NEW ZEALAND.

REPORT OF INSPECTOR OF PRISONS.

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.

The INSPECTOR of PRISONS to the Hon. the MINISTER of JUSTICE.

SIR,—

Office of Inspector of Prisons, Wellington, 15th March, 1881.

Having completed my inspection of all the prisons in the colony, I have the honor to submit the following report for your consideration and information.

The chief evils that have come under my notice are, that the prisons, as they at present exist, are neither deterrent nor reformatory. I consider this is mainly due to the absence of any system of classification, owing to the very limited accommodation in most of the prisons; and I feel I cannot too urgently impress upon the Government the necessity of at once enlarging the chief gaols to admit of this classification. To effectually carry out this, there should be one large central prison, capable of accommodating 300 prisoners, to which all male offenders sentenced to penal servitude should on conviction be sent, and so kept entirely separate from hard-labour prisoners during the whole period of their servitude. The district prisons should be large enough to accommodate, each in a separate cell, all prisoners sentenced to hard labour, debtors, remands awaiting trial, and youths. These prisoners should have their meals in their cells, and be kept quite separate, except when on the works, at exercise, or at Divine service. The existing system of prisoners having their meals and spending their spare time in association is most detrimental to prison discipline.

The washing and bathing arrangements in most of the prisons require improving, and in some I found they had no means of weighing the prisoners. I need hardly point out that it is most necessary that every prisoner should be weighed on reception, and a record of his weight kept; and, further, that he should be periodically weighed in order to test whether he is losing or gaining flesh.

The foregoing remarks apply equally to female as well as male prisoners. All prisoners should be liable to undergo personal correction for prison offences, but as the law now stands corporal punishment can only be inflicted for repeated prison offences. A serious assault by a prisoner on an officer, for instance, is a case in which corporal punishment should invariably be resorted to (subject always, of course, to the medical officer's opinion as to the fitness of the offender to receive it); and if the law in this respect is not altered I fear serious results. I would also recommend that the birch rod be introduced in prisons, as it has been found in English prisons that birching, whilst being a safer punishment than flogging, at the same time, by placing the recipients on the footing of boys, has a humiliating affect, and therefore is deterrent, and a valuable addition to the cat as a means of punishment.

The system of endeavouring to educate prisoners is I believe a mistake, and I know that the assembling prisoners together for the purposes of school tends to great irregularity. I think it stands to reason that a man who has performed his day's allotted task of hard labour cannot possibly benefit by attending school in the evening, and I therefore beg to recommend that schooling in prisons be abolished; but the teaching prisoners trades is a subject that cannot have too much attention, and every prisoner who is not too old, and conducts himself well in prison, should have every facility afforded him to learn a trade during his term of imprisonment, whereby he ought to be enabled to earn an honest living on being discharged from prison.

All criminals should in prison be divided into classes, as follows: 1. Old and habitual criminals who have several previous convictions recorded against them. 2. Those against whom no former convictions are known. 3. Youths and boys sixteen years old and under. 4. Those under remand and awaiting trial. 5. Debtors, &c. Each of the above-mentioned classes being kept separate, both on the works, at exercise, and when in the prisons. To encourage good prison conduct I would beg to recommend that prisoners sentenced to hard labour or simple imprisonment be required to pass through the following classes: Probation, third, and second classes, after which they would be eligible for promotion to the first class, one-fourth of the whole sentence being passed in each of the three first-named classes; and the penal-servitude prisoners with long sentences should be required to pass through (a minimum period with good conduct and industry) one year in the probation, one in third, and one in second classes, after which they would be eligible for promotion to the first-class; and, as a still further incentive to good conduct and industry, they might for the last twelve months of their sentence be promoted to a special class. A scheme of classification based on the foregoing, which is the English system, is herewith enclosed for your information and approval, marked A and B.

In order that criminals on their discharge from prison should not be utterly destitute, I enclose