

FIRST OFFENDERS' PROBATION ACT REPORT.

1. It is with great pleasure I am able to reiterate all that was said in the report of last year upon the satisfactory working of this Act; and it is a somewhat curious fact, as shown by Table L, that for the year ended 31st December last the total number of offenders treated under the Act was within one of the number so treated the year before—viz., 83 last year, as against 82 in 1888. Of these 83, 50 satisfactorily carried out the conditions of their licenses and were duly discharged, 2 were rearrested and imprisoned, 1 absconded, and 30 remain still working out the conditions of their obligations successfully.

2. The amount of costs, &c., ordered to be paid by the various Courts before which the 83 offenders were brought during the past year was £319 4s. 7d., of which sum £203 13s. 9d. has been already actually paid into the Probation Officers' hands, while the great portion of the balance is not yet due and is being paid by instalments, and as a rule the probationers carry out the conditions of their licenses with commendable punctuality. The system of leaving to Probation Officers discretion in exceptional cases to give additional time for these periodical payments in cases of persons with families to maintain, or when sickness or other unforeseen misfortune interferes with their chances of earning a living, or for other sufficient reasons, has been continued, has proved efficacious, and worked well.

3. The approximate cost of keeping these offenders in prison, had not the Probation Act been brought into force, would have been about £2,170. Therefore, if the sum actually paid into the Probation Officers' hands is taken into account, we have an actual saving for the year of £2,373 13s. 9d.; and, as the administration of the Act is carried out absolutely free of all cost to the Government, and has been so ever since its introduction, it will be admitted to be as much a success financially as it is reformatory.

4. Since the Act came into force, on the 1st October, 1886, 283 persons have been placed on probation. Of these, 222 have been discharged on satisfactorily completing the conditions of their licenses, 49 are still on probation, 10 have been rearrested and brought to justice, and 2 only have managed, by eluding the vigilance of the Probation Officers and police, to escape so far unpunished; but they are not supposed to have left the colony, and will probably yet be rearrested.

5. The Probation Officers continue to perform their duties with zeal, tact, and ability, and give satisfaction. It is surprising the amount of information about supposed offenders they are able to obtain in a very short space of time; and, now that they know that their reports are looked upon as confidential by the Court to which they are presented, they feel less fettered and more able to give a genuine and independent reliable report, which is almost invariably adopted. It has been found, too, that many Probation Officers frequently visit and advise their probationers, and in some instances have obtained good situations for them. Considering the arduous duties that Gaolers have to perform, I think the interest shown by them and the other Probation Officers in the Act ever since its introduction is praiseworthy and philanthropic, and has tended much to the successful working of this very useful measure.

6. When this Act was first passed it was thought by many that it was a dangerous piece of legislation, and probably would do more harm than good; but now that its utility has been so thoroughly established I am of opinion that its provisions might be extended with beneficial results to such cases as attempted suicide caused by excessive indulgence in strong drink, and that if the accused has the means he or she should be made to pay the whole costs of the trial. It may be argued that this would, in effect, be punishing a man for excessive drinking; but it seems to me that if a person will drink habitually to such excess as to lose all self-restraint, and in that state attempts to take his life, such person, and not the taxpayers, ought to bear the costs of the trial; and such an offender would certainly have no grounds for complaint if he were placed under some such wholesome restraints as those of the First Offenders' Probation Act. As the case now stands a person who attempts to commit suicide is usually committed for trial to the Supreme Court, has perhaps to be detained in prison for two months awaiting the sessions, and then is probably discharged upon recognisances to come up for judgment when called upon, the State having to bear the expense of keeping the prisoner in gaol for two months, in addition to the cost of the trial.

7. Again, the Act, I think, is somewhat defective in respect to the persons to whom it may be made applicable, one condition being that it can apply only to a person "against whom an indictment has not previously been laid or a warrant of arrest for an indictable offence issued;" so that, if a person has once been brought up on a warrant of arrest for an indictable offence, though he may be acquitted and leave the Court without the slightest stain on his character, that person can never afterwards be eligible to be placed on probation.

8. The Act might also be further extended to prisoners undergoing sentences in prison, who, from their exemplary conduct in gaol, and if their previous history warrants it, might, after serving portion of their sentence, be released on probation; in fact, I should like to see a system introduced by which long-sentenced prisoners, after they have served a portion of their sentences, could be drafted off to some work under the Public Works Act, and not located in a prison, but in huts under proper supervisors, and there made to work on roads, or some such labour, for an indefinite period, their discharge depending entirely on the results of their work and conduct. This might be arranged either under the Prisons or First Offenders' Probation Acts. A similar experiment has been tried in America with good results, and I have every reason to believe it would work well in this colony if tried in some isolated position such as the West Coast Sounds, where, if the prisoners attempted to escape, they would probably starve, and where they might be employed in such work as making a road from the coast to the Sutherland Falls. They would probably render a good account of themselves, and work as well as free men, in the hope that every time a mail or provisions arrived orders for the liberation of some would also be received, or they might be placed on piecework, and given a certain amount to do, and informed that if their conduct continued good they would receive their conditional discharge on the completion of the work allotted.

I have, &c.,

A. HUME, Inspector of Prisons.