

## Life in Nineteenth-Century Prisons as a Context for *Great Expectations*

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The entwining of the fates of Magwitch and Pip lies at the heart of *Great Expectations*, beginning when Pip meets the convict in the midst of his escape from a prison hulk (in Victorian England, hulks — ships that were no longer seaworthy — served as extra prisoner housing space due to prison overcrowding). While Magwitch does not go to great lengths to describe the harshness of prison life, we can get a sense of how insufferable it must have been by considering the desperation of his escape. When the sergeant and his company (along with Pip) discover Magwitch and the other convict in the marshes, a chaotic scene unfolds:

Water was splashing, and mud was flying, and oaths were being sworn, and blows were being struck, when some more men went down into the ditch to help the sergeant, and dragged out, separately, my convict and the other one. Both were bleeding and panting and execrating and struggling.

One can deduce the cruelty and inhumanity of the conditions Magwitch sought to escape (and Dickens sought to reform) by examining the state of the Victorian prison system and other attempted prison escapes. *Great Expectations*, serialized from December 1860 to August 1861, could surely have been on the minds of those who read about a prison revolt and attempted (unsuccessful) breakout on St. Mary's Island, Chatham in the March 9, 1861 edition of *The Illustrated London News*:

The ruffians began by hooting and yelling, at the same time throwing their caps into the air. At this moment the Civic Guard contrived to keep the ringleaders out on the parade, while the main body of convicts returned to the prison and destroyed everything within their reach. The clocks were smashed, the medicine-room and its stores demolished, and the warders' room entirely dismantled, while the stoves were upset, and the burning ashes strewn on the stone floors.

The *News* article provides other background information about the prison, including a brief statement on the employment of the convicts:

The labor consists of the construction of a river wall of solid masonry around the island, for the purpose of improving the navigation of the River Medway, while it is ultimately proposed to extend the dockyard by building some large basins in connection with it.

Although this description of prison labor does not sound especially noteworthy, it undoubtedly understates the condition of Victorian prisons; the account of a prisoner on St. Mary's Island asserts that “more human blood was spilt and more human lives lost through excessive labor than in any other prison in the country” [Priestly, 132].

Convicts in Victorian prisons faced various kinds of meticulous labor, including sewing, weaving, and picking oakum. Prisoners picked oakum (“old tarred ships' ropes from an inch upwards in thickness” [Priestly, 121]) apart into strands for the formation of new rope, a tedious process that left them covered in tar; prisoners could almost never pick the daily weight quotas assigned for oakum, and would thus try to weigh it down with water or small found items (nails, etc).

Convicts also endured hard labor such as operating a treadwheel, which would grind grain or pump water; depending on the particular treadwheel (for example, the wheel at Stafford), a prisoner could climb more than half the height of Everest (16,630 feet) in a single shift (6 — 10 hours). Other forms of hard labor include operating a crank (in the production of firewood), carrying shot, and breaking rocks for public construction projects.

Prisoners showed their resistances in various small ways such as working as slowly as possible, talking during their work, and stealing other prisoners' products and passing them as one's own; prisoners also threatened or bribed guards and other prison workers. Prisoners commonly lashed out by destroying their surroundings: “few days passed but some desperate wretch, maddened by silence and solitude, smashed up everything breakable in his cellÉ in a vain rebellion

against a System stronger and more merciless than death" [Priestly, 208]. They would be handcuffed or strait-jacketed for days (sometimes also soaked in water) as punishment, or beaten in the prison yard.

Prison guards and officials punished prisoners for the smallest infractions of prison rules, the silence rule arguably being one of the harshest. The silence rule prohibited not only speaking, but also gesturing or communicating in any other way; a simple, meaningless smile to a fellow inmate constituted grounds for punishment. An article from the *Illustrated London News* drew attention of this harsh treatment to the public:

"As the silent system is the main ingredient in the discipline of the NEW MODEL PRISON the humane public cannot do better than to discourage it in warm and fervent terms, and to seek to procure its explosion by every earnest and legitimate means. Remonstrate with the authorities, petition the legislature, appeal to the gentler and nobler sympathies of society, and do not leave unprobed for mercy and pity the generous bosom of the Queen. The press will aid the public in its truly Christian crusade against cruelty; and these new model experiments upon the endurance of nature will cease to degrade the sacred name of justice, to make the law monstrous, and its retribution a disgrace and sin."

Prisoners also had great difficulty in communicating with their friends and relatives outside prison, as prison workers screened outgoing letters and used scissors to cut out anything that cast prison life in a negative light. And the difficulty of obtaining permission to have a visitor was such that prisoners often gave up even trying.

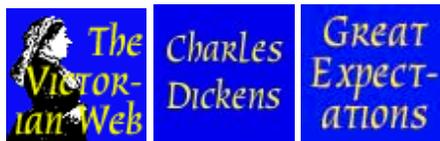
## Related Material

- Peter Miller Cunningham's *Two Years in New South Wales* (1827)
- *The Cornhill*, *Great Expectations*, and The Convict System in Nineteenth-Century England
- Dickens, *The Westminster Review*, and the Convict Question

## Works Cited

Priestly, Philip. *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography 1830-1914*. New York: Methuen, 1985.

"The Late Outbreak Among the Convicts at Chatham." *The Illustrated London News* (March 9 1861): 218-9.



Last modified 11 May 2009