

Jared Davidson

Blood and Dirt: Prison Labour and the Making of New Zealand
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Hard Labour, Prisoners, and the Building of New Zealand

JOHN PRATT

For most people, I think, the origins of New Zealand's colonisation are quite straightforward. That is, from the 1830s, and for the best part of a century thereafter, the country was built on the backs of 'honest artisans'. Initially, these people were carefully vetted by Edward Gibbon Wakefield's New Zealand Company, and thereafter by successive governmental administrators, before being allowed to set sail for the 'Britain of the South Pacific' that was the intended product of their labour. As Governor George Grey put the matter in the 1840s, for example, the ideal of the Canterbury Association was to reproduce 'an English county with the Cathedral city, its famous University, its Bishop, its endowed clergy, its ancient aristocracy and its yeoman farmers, its few necessary tradesmen, its sturdy and loyal labourers'.¹ As Grey infers, these artisans would also be serving the interests of the landed gentry, thereby haplessly reproducing their own subservience, rather than leaving it behind. Nonetheless, this imagery of a pristine Britain in the early stages of development informed early reports of the colony:

1 Henry Purchas, *Bishop Harper and the Canterbury Settlement* (Whitcombe and Tombs, 1903), 32.

New Zealand is an integral part of Great Britain. . . . An Englishman going thither goes among his countrymen, he has the same queen, the same laws and customs, the same language, the same social institutions and save that he is in a country where trees are evergreen, and where there is no winter, no opera, no aristocracy, no income tax, no paupers, no beggars, no cotton mills, he is, virtually, in a young England.²

And in such advertising, travelogues, and similar sources it became possible for the fledgling colony (and its citizens) to pruriently distinguish itself from its neighbour Australia, which, as a result of the British policy of transporting prisoners there, bore the taint of a very different ancestry: 'the convict stain'.

However, as Jared Davidson admirably shows in his book *Blood and Dirt*, such preconceptions are entirely wrong and unfounded. In this excellent and highly original work, supported with plentiful photographic evidence (some of which is unlikely to have seen the light of day before), he argues that the building of much of New Zealand – certainly a large part of its original infrastructure, including defence fortifications, prisons, government and other public buildings, and roads, as well as the planting of extensive new forests intended to replace those cut down in the initial phases of colonisation – were, in fact, the work of prisoners. This is something that, as far as I am aware, has been almost wholly neglected in all the major studies of New Zealand history. However, the evidence for Davidson's claim, he writes, has been 'hiding in plain sight' as 'the use of prison labour weaves its way through every major urban centre, across the pastoral grasslands of heartland New Zealand and into . . . the Pacific'. Thus, rather than being free from the convict stain, it was prison labour that played a large part in the building of this country, often providing major landmarks in its history. For example, in 1815, 'at Waitangi, the convicts dug a sawpit and began to build several houses, including their own

2 Charles Hursthouse, *New Zealand or Zealandia*, Vol. 2 (Edward Stafford, 1857), 637.

dwelling near the beach. These were the first European structures [there]'. structures [there]'.³

What sort of people were these prisoners who played such an important role in the building of New Zealand? Up to the 1930s, at least, they were to a large extent a motley band of dissolute sailors and soldiers, stowaways, itinerants, drunks, and sundry petty offenders (Māori, for the most part, did not feature to any significant extent in the prison population in this timeframe, except during times of armed conflict, the 1870s in particular). And much of their work was astonishingly arduous and hazardous, and they only rarely had adequate shelter, clothing, and food. Deaths and injuries were thus not uncommon. In 1891, for example, when prisoners were building part of what is now known as the Milford Track – a highlight of the modern tourist experience – the tools were minimal and of poor quality, clothing was threadbare, there was never enough food and much of it was rotten, with the prisoners reduced to begging for food from some of the early visitors to this sight.⁴

The use of prisoners to build the country, and in so doing help make colonisation possible, begins well before 1840. In 1814 a ship carrying the Rev. Samuel Marsden and would-be 'missionary settlers' arrived at Hoki with convict labourers from Sydney. Thereafter, for much of that century, 'the hard labour gang', watched over by armed guards, became 'an accepted part of the urban landscape'.⁵ In this respect, New Zealand took a very different course in its use of prison labour than was being pursued in many other Western countries. By the early 19th century the general trend was for law breakers to be removed from the streets and public view, often for years on end, in what was then the new sanction of imprisonment (as opposed to gaols, in use for centuries as holding places, mostly for those awaiting execution or transportation). Certainly, after formal colonisation of New Zealand in 1840, it was the intent of the colonial administrators

3 Jared Davidson, *Blood and Dirt: Prison Labour and the Making of New Zealand* (BWB, 2023), 13, 15, 25.

4 Davidson, *Blood and Dirt*, 61–62.

5 Davidson, *Blood and Dirt*, 15.

and the settlers to follow this course here and, in so doing, provide further proof of the colony's adherence and allegiance to all things British. To this end, it was intended that a replica of Pentonville Model Prison, opened in London in 1840, was to be built in Wellington – its first public building. Pentonville, with its ominous design giving a very clear message that this was a place best avoided, became a prototype for much of modern prison building. Once securely sequestered inside, its prisoners were kept under surveillance, separated from other inmates, taught religious tracts, and made to perform back-breaking toil on fiendish and unremittingly cruel treadwheels and cranks – at a time when the industrial revolution had given labour a new pecuniary value. Instead of being used productively, their labour was intended to produce nothing at all, which served as a constant reminder to them of how much their crimes had cost them.

Inevitably, though, the Wellington Pentonville – which was to replicate state-of-the-art structural design, including segregated chapel quarters and exercise yards, 18-inch-thick walls that diminished the transmission of sound, and 520 individual cells which contained the necessities of prison life, such as central heating and a flush toilet – never materialised: there were neither the resources for this, nor the need for such measures. Instead, the Wellington version of Pentonville, completed in 1844 when the local population was about 3,000, had just 16 cells. Furthermore, rather than producing nothing at all on the fiendish machinery of British prison administration, the inmates worked outside the prison – ‘the insatiable need for labour was the overriding imperative’.⁶ Hence major road building in Lyttelton, Railway Street in Auckland, and Bell Hill in Dunedin; Lambton Quay, the Terrace, Adelaide Road, and Hill Street alongside Parliament Grounds in Wellington, as well as ‘Tinakori Road, Willis Street, Taranaki Street Molesworth Street, Manners Street’ (and numerous others).⁷ Prisoners also built defence works at Devonport, Mount Eden Prison in Auckland, and the Esplanade in New Plymouth – just some of the many examples that show how urban life in this country was shaped by their labour. In

6 Davidson, *Blood and Dirt*, 44.

7 Davidson, *Blood and Dirt*, 49.

addition, prisoners were involved in connecting the early townships to one another by building roads: 'labouring through bitter winds and seas of alpine tussock, prisoners formed a 65-kilometre road from Waimariono that passed below Lake Rotoaira and continued to Tokaanu. Now State Highway 46 and most of State Highway 47, it became one of the arterial roads of the Dominion, thanks to the bridges prisoners built across snow-fed rivers'.⁸ 'Plain sight' indeed.

Davidson also points out that no training or trade qualifications were gained through this work. Opposition from free labour, as with some of Inspector-General Arthur Hume's initiatives in the 1890s, whereby he intended that prisoners would produce merchandise that would be sold commercially, scotched any such initiatives: there was widespread opposition from free labour to prison inmates gaining any advantages from their crimes, or being allowed to sell their products at prices that would undercut those of free labour. But as colonisation of New Zealand expanded and settlement grew across the country, other forms of prison labour began to transform rural New Zealand, coinciding with the colonial government absorbing more and more Māori land. As with many other of its social and economic policies, New Zealand scored a 'first' with its penal policy: prisoners worked on plantations and on farms, some of the products of which are still evident today: over 40 million trees were planted at various rural sites across the country between 1901 and 1910. Prisoners were also involved in forestry work in Rotorua. Davidson notes that

as forests gave way to prison farms and fertilisers . . . agricultural labour became the mainstay of New Zealand prisons during the twentieth century. By 1923, 70 per cent of the country's incarcerated workers were employed in farm work, including clearing and opening land for settlement. Instead of planting trees, prisoners helped to forge dairy farms.

The same principles guiding the use of prisoner labour were put into practice

8 Davidson, *Blood and Dirt*, 69.

as the New Zealand government established its mini-empire in the South Pacific: there were plantation works in Samoa and ‘prisoners in Apia put up fences, weeded and watered roads, built bridges and painted lighthouses’; in Nauru, prisoners worked as general labourers for nine hours per day. In Raratonga, prisoners were involved in tree planting, road making, and were also used as domestic servants.⁹

By bringing to light this history, Davidson makes an important contribution to New Zealand historiography. But he does more than this. The book also raises important sociological questions (although not addressed by the author himself) regarding prison development in this country, as well as the nature of New Zealand society itself. Essentially, Davidson’s thesis is that prisoners were employed on public works or associated labour tasks in urban New Zealand from the time that the first British settlers arrived to the end of the 19th century; thereafter, they were mostly employed in outlying rural areas. From the 1930s, however, the use of prisoner labour begins to dwindle, until this mode of work virtually disappears altogether: for the last 30 years or so, prisoners have been almost wholly confined to the prison itself, rather than being sent out to work beyond its walls. Davidson establishes this pattern of development as a matter of historical fact. But why did the hard labour gang come to an end in urban communities, and why did prisoners (and prisons, for that matter) steadily disappear from public view and scrutiny over the course of the 20th century?

At one level, the desperate need for labour in the early stages of New Zealand’s colonisation overrode people’s sensitivity to the sight of the hard labour gang at work; this contrasted with the increasing public aversion to them elsewhere, particularly in Britain.¹⁰ The wretchedness of the prisoners on public view was just one of a range of ‘disturbing events’ that disappeared from public view during the course of the 19th century, others included the slaughter of animals, performance of toilet habits, and, eventually, public executions. These sensibilities to the

9 Davidson, *Blood and Dirt*, 160, 184, 192, 176.

10 See John Pratt, *Punishment and Civilization* (Sage, 2002).

suffering of others were the product of long-developing social forces: the central state gradually assuming more authority and control over the lives of its citizens, to the point where it came to have a monopoly regarding the raising of taxes, the use of legitimate force, and the imposition of legal sanctions to address disputes; and the internalisation of restraints, controls, and inhibitions on their conduct by citizens in these societies, as their values and actions became framed around the privatisation of ‘disturbing events’ that would otherwise unsettle these social forces.¹¹ Such sensitivities were not altogether absent from early New Zealand. Edward Jerningham Wakefield thus complained about the upsetting sight of the hard labour gang in Wellington in the early years of colonisation:

I remember sharing with some of the simple labourers who looked on a feeling of indignation at the brutal way in which one of the policemen repelled a friend of the prisoners who offered him his assistance to walk. . . . An idea of the chain-gangs of New South Wales, guarded by the Military, was called up by the displaying and jingling of handcuffs, carbines, and sabres, which accompanied the whole proceeding.¹²

At that time, though, such sympathies were outweighed by the important function the gangs played: the frontier society that New Zealand then was had no time for heightened sensitivities raised by the plight of the prisoners.

But public sensibilities underwent significant change as New Zealand quickly developed as an entity and a viable central state. The public presence of the labour gangs began to be seen as offensive to public decorum and sensibilities. In 1863, the *Daily Southern Cross*, based in Wellington, observed that ‘when the convicts cannot rest for quarter of an hour upon the handles of their picks and spades to criticise the dresses of ladies who may chance to be passing, and cannot sleep as long as nature

11 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Basil Blackwell, 1939).

12 Edward J. Wakefield, *Adventure in New Zealand, from 1839 to 1844, vol. 1* (John Murray, 1845), 302.

indulged to the utmost may permit, then will our cases of lawlessness and stabbing begin to grow more rare'.¹³ The Royal Commission on Prisons complained, in 1868, that 'the habit of permitting prisoners to work in the streets of the towns . . . is admitted by almost all the witnesses . . . to be most objectionable, as regards both the prisoners and the public . . . great criminals by this practice become objects of curiosity and subjects of exhibition to the public'.¹⁴ And in 1883 it was claimed in parliament that 'it is most objectionable to have criminals under any circumstances in the midst of a numerous and crowded population, so as to be brought from time to time in the way of temptation and under the wandering gaze of children; and it so happens that the large schools of [Wellington] are situated in this neighbourhood'.¹⁵ Now, though, it was no longer the pitiable wearing of irons, the ill-fitting convict uniform, and so on that had disturbed Wakefield; rather, it was the very sight of a prisoner outside the gaol that was seen as shocking, offensive, and threatening.

Indeed, by the end of the 19th century, New Zealanders' distaste extended to the sight of prisons themselves, as with corresponding societies.¹⁶ Up to this juncture, prisons had been built unproblematically where populations were accumulating. In this respect, Davidson provides a photo of Lyttelton Gaol, circa 1900, built in the centre of the town with children playing outside it.¹⁷ This is a photograph that could not be taken today, because, by the end of the 19th century, the presence of the prison itself was becoming offensive. In Wellington, for example, an increasingly bourgeoisified population wanted everyday sights that had been acceptable in the early days of the colony to be suppressed and removed: the sights of prison itself had become another of these disturbing events that were best placed behind the screens of the modern social fabric. And thus, as regards

13 *Daily Southern Cross*, 2 December, 1863, 3.

14 Royal Commission on Prisons, *Reports of the Royal Commission on Prisons*, Wellington, 1868, 15.

15 W. Hutchison, 'Trades Taught in Gaols', *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 44, 1883, 205.

16 Pratt, *Punishment and Civilization*.

17 Davidson, *Blood and Dirt*, 54.

what had been intended, with much acclaim, as the replica of Pentonville, it was suggested in 1883 that

it is impossible to avoid pointing out the deplorable mistake made by the Government in setting down a convict establishment in the centre of [Wellington]. . . . It is objectionable from every point of view – objectionable as opposed to all good taste or propriety in placing a criminal lazaret-house on the finest site in the whole town, where a public building dedicated to some noble or benevolent purpose should stand as the cynosure to the public eye.¹⁸

Amidst regular complaints about the gaol thereafter, one letter to the *New Zealand Times* in 1897 stated it was

a disgrace that gaol should be placed in such a conspicuous position in the capital city . . . the gaol looms up against the skyline and naturally attracts the attention [of visitors]; and when informed what it is they exclaim: ‘What! That your gaol, perched on your highest hill and overlooking your whole city; the thing is monstrous!’ . . . in Australia, Wellington is known, even by people who have never seen it, as the city where their most conspicuous building is their gaol.¹⁹

Instead of providing settlers with reassurance about their national identity or security against any incipient Māori uprising, as it had previously done, it was as if the omnipresent sight of the gaol now reversed the respective

18 Hutchison, ‘Trades Taught in Gaols’ 205. See, also, Rebekah Bowling and John Pratt, ‘Punishment in an Early Colonial Society: The Inglorious History of Wellington Gaol, 1844–1931’, *International Journal for Crime and Social Democracy* 12, no. 1 (2024), 17–29.

19 S. Brown, ‘Mount Cook Gaol. Letter to the editor’, *New Zealand Times*, 19 October 1897, 3.

qualities of New Zealand and Australia: its presence tainted the purity of the former, rather than the latter.²⁰

As a consequence, most subsequent penal development in this country occurred at the far edges of towns and cities or in remote rural areas. In such locations, out of public view, prison labour could still be put to use beyond prison walls. But being out of sight, the prisoners, and the institutions in which they were housed, could largely be forgotten about until scandal or escape raised public attention and awareness – usually resulting in demands that they be removed still further from public view. In other words, this ‘disappearance’ of both prisons and prisoners from public view led to growing suspicion and intolerance of them – as if they should not be allowed to re-enter the public domain and disturb public consciousness again. It is thus possible to trace a line of development that leads from building conspicuous urban prisons to erecting them in out of the way locations – and, concomitantly, on the overwhelming emphasis on security in prison administration today – to make sure that those inside them cannot threaten the public with their very presence.

In other words, to understand the history of prison labour in this country, we must also examine what has led to its disappearance from public view. This, though, is not intended to be a criticism of what is an excellent book. Rather, it is to say that Davidson has not only uncovered a much neglected area of New Zealand’s past, but he has also stimulated new questions about its present.

20 John Pratt, *Punishment in a Perfect Society* (Victoria University Press, 1992).