

OUR CRIMINAL TREATMENT AND PRISON PUNISHMENTS.

SELECTIONS.

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MENTS.*

A considerable amount of time was devoted at the International Prison Congress in London, last year, to the question of Isolation until the end of long sentences, as in Belgium—a matter of importance no doubt to the States which are now settling their principles of prison discipline. It is, however, almost needless for me to state that this question was disposed of in England upwards of twenty years since, after experiments carried out at Pentonville with a care and attention which could not be exceeded in any country. It will be noted that these experiments were not carried out by the prison officials only: they were conducted by experienced commissioners in conjunction with them; and I assert, without fear of contradiction, that the reports upon this subject were most exhaustive and most valuable. The result of these experiments led, as we all know, the Government to adopt the gradual modification of "Isolation" now carried out in the Public Works Prisons. The report of the Prison Discipline Committee, in 1850, based upon the most experienced evidence in the country, entirely supported the Government in this Act. There must be no mistake in our principles. We acknowledge the separate system to be the basis of all prison discipline, but in long sentences, such as those of penal servitude, it has been proved, both for the health of the criminal and for his proper training, that modifications are necessary as the sentence advances.

I submit that in the discussion at the Congress no arguments were adduced calculated to make us change our principles, and that Belgium was the only country having practical experience of "Isolation" for any very lengthened period of time, besides Philadelphia, was clearly shown. The feeling of the delegates themselves was evinced by the resolution recommending "Progressive Classification," which has been made a reality

with us; and by its adoption we have found that not only the criminal is better prepared for his release, but that the public are more disposed to give him employment.

In order to carry out a system of "Isolation" to the end with our penal servitude prisoners (which experience has taught us to reject), we shall have to expend half a million in prison buildings, and to sustain a very heavy annual loss in the value of "prisoners' labour." Independently of cost, I need scarcely add that we are not likely to reverse a policy, which, after many years' experience, has proved most eminently satisfactory, and has met with the support of the highest and most experienced authorities on the subject.

There was much discussion in the Congress with regard to "Corporal Punishment" and "Penal Labour," as carried out in this country. In both cases it was, I think, evident that there was some misapprehension of the subject on the part of the delegates who shared in it. It is, I submit, necessary that this matter should be fully explained on our part, for our assumed practice has since been made the subject of severe comment on the part of some of the delegates. It may be possibly considered that explanation is unnecessary: but I cannot agree in this opinion, because we must remember that they were eminent and earnest gentlemen, selected in different countries for their practical knowledge of prison discipline, and considerable weight will very probably attach to their statements.

With reference to "Corporal Punishment," the arguments for the abolition of the power to inflict it were evidently based upon the assumption that it could be indiscriminately exercised. The speakers did not appear to realize the safeguards against abuse which exist in this country, namely, that it cannot be inflicted without magisterial sentence, approved by medical authority: and that the case must be recorded for the information of the Government inspector, who has also access to every prisoner at his periodical visits. I am confirmed in this impression by the fact that Mons. D'Alinge, the official delegate from Saxony (a gentleman of great experience and ability), in his memorandum on the "Penal Confinements in Saxony," dated 1872, informs

* This was a paper read at the National Associations, for the promotion of Social Science, by the Right Hon. Sir Walter Crofton, C.B.