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978-1-108-00492-3 - An Inquiry, Whether Crime and Misery are Produced or Prevented, by our Present System of Prison Discipline

Thomas Fowell Buxton

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### **An Inquiry, Whether Crime and Misery Are Produced or Prevented, by Our Present System of Prison Discipline**

Thomas Fowell Buxton, M.P. (1786–1845) was a philanthropist who had many connections with the Quaker movement through the family of his wife, who was the sister of Henry Gurney and Elizabeth Fry. He was a passionate opponent of slavery, and campaigned to end it at a time when most British people believed that enough had been done by the abolition of slave trading in 1807. His other great interest was the punishment of crime: he wanted the death sentence abolished, and his campaign succeeded in reducing the number of capital crimes from over two hundred to eight. This book is a plea for a complete change in the purpose and operation of prisons, and an argument (still valid today) that prisons actually encourage crime and produce recidivists rather than reformed characters. Buxton draws on own his experience as a visitor to produce a harrowing account of Victorian prison conditions.

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# An Inquiry, Whether Crime and Misery Are Produced or Prevented, by Our Present System of Prison Discipline

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AN INQUIRY,  
WHETHER  
CRIME AND MISERY  
ARE  
PRODUCED OR PREVENTED, BY OUR PRESENT SYSTEM  
OF  
**Prison Discipline.**  
ILLUSTRATED BY DESCRIPTIONS OF  
THE BOROUGH COMPTER.  
TOTHILL FIELDS.  
THE JAILS AT ST. ALBANS,  
AND AT GUILDFORD.  
THE JAIL AT BURY.  
THE MAISON DE FORCE AT GHEM.  
THE PHILADELPHIA PRISON.  
THE PENITENTIARY AT MILLBANK.  
AND THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
LADIES' COMMITTEE AT NEWGATE.

BY THOMAS FOWELL BUXTON.

"I make no scruple to affirm, that if it were the aim and wish of Magistrates to effect the destruction, present and future, of young delinquents, they could not desire a more effectual method than to confine them in our Prisons."—HOWARD.

"Whereas, if many offenders convicted of crimes, for which transportation has been usually inflicted, were ordered for solitary confinement, accompanied by well-regulated labour and religious instruction, it might be the means, under Providence, not only of deterring others from the commission of the like Crimes, but also of reforming the individuals, and inuring them to habits of Industry, &c."—19 GEORGE AND 14. S. 2.

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## P R E F A C E.



BEING at Ghent during the early part of this winter, I took some pains in examining the excellent prison of that city, known by the name of the *Maison de Force*. On my return to England, I communicated to the “Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline, and for the reformation of juvenile offenders,” the intelligence which was thus acquired. The members of that institution had accurately investigated the state of almost every jail in the metropolis and its vicinity. Their inquiries had led them to a decided and unanimous conviction, that the present alarming increase of crime arose more from the want of instruction, classification, regular employment, and inspection *in Jails*, than from any other cause, and that its prevention could only be accomplished, by an

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entire change in the system of prison discipline. These views were strongly confirmed by the practical illustration afforded by the Maison de Force, and this led to a request from the Committee, that the description of it might be published.

When I sat down to this task, the work insensibly grew upon my hands. It was necessary, to prove that evils and grievances did really exist in this country, and to bring home to these causes, the increase of corruption and depravity. For this purpose repeated visits to various prisons were requisite.

Again a detail of the regulations of the Maison de Force alone, did not seem to establish the point contended for, with sufficient certainty. An experiment might succeed abroad, which might fail at home. Local circumstances and the habits of the people, might have rendered a plan very judicious in the Netherlands, which was quite impracticable in England. It appeared therefore desirable, to shew, that whether the attempt be made on the Continent, in England, or in America, the same results are invariably displayed.

This occasioned a new series of inquiries,

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While I was occupied in procuring this intelligence, which was intended to be printed at a distant period, the unexpected appointment of a Parliamentary Committee to examine the jails of this city, and the discussions which took place in the Court of Common Council, attracted much attention to the point. It was probable that this session would not pass, without some legislative enactment upon the subject. If the intended communications were of any importance, the time seemed arrived for making them. The immediate publication of even crude and undigested materials was better calculated to do good to the cause, than a more finished and elaborate treatise, when general interest may have subsided.

The haste with which the parts of this Pamphlet were put together, in the last fortnight, and the consequent impossibility of any revision, must explain, if they do not excuse, many obvious errors in expression, and numerous inaccuracies in printing. For the truth of the facts, no indulgence is required. Every method has been used to discover their authenticity. Nothing is stated, (with the exception of the account of the Philadelphia Jail) which has not come within my own observation, and which has not been confirmed by the concur-

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rent testimony of the gentlemen, who have been my companions. The descriptions of the Borough Compter, Tothill Fields, the Penitentiary, the Jails at St. Albans, at Bury, and at Ghent, have been read to their respective jailers, and that of Guildford was handed to a magistrate of the County of Surrey, with a request that he would point out any mistakes.

I have generally mentioned the days on which I visited jails, the persons with whom I went, and, where I could do it with propriety, the names of any prisoners whose case attracted my particular attention. I have done this as inviting inquiry, as placing my statements in a more tangible shape, and as furnishing a facility for the detection of errors.

Feeling no uneasiness as to the accuracy of the facts related, I must confess I have felt some repugnance to the disclosure of scenes, which may be considered as reflecting discredit on those who ought to have prevented them; but against the pain which this pamphlet may give to the affluent and the powerful, must be weighed, the secret sufferings, the unknown grievances, the decay of health, and corruption of morals, which by its suppression, may be continued to the inmates of many dungeons in

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this country. I have great confidence in the power of public opinion, in preventing detected wrong; and if this confidence be not misplaced, all option upon my part ceases, the publication becomes a matter of imperative duty; to conceal would be to participate.

I will conclude this Preface by stating, that none of the grievances represented, are occasioned by the jailers; that class of men are often subjected to undistinguishing abuse, my experience would furnish me with very different language. Without any exception, I have had reason to approve, and sometimes to applaud their conduct; and I can truly say, that of all the persons, with whom I have conversed, they are the most sensible of the evils of our present system of prison discipline.