

1 Introduction

A British Expedition to the Brazilian Penal Colony of Fernando de Noronha in 1887

On 9 July 1887, the botanists and collectors Henry Ridley, T. S. Lea, and George A. Ramage left the English port of Southampton on an expedition to Brazil's island penal colony of Fernando de Noronha. They were on a mission to collect animal, mineral, and plant specimens for London's British Museum. The men travelled first to the city of Pernambuco (Recife), on Brazil's mainland, and from there to Villa los Remédios, the island's main settlement. On arrival, they went to see the governor, Captain Dom Joaquim Agripino Furtado de Mondouça, and he gave them rooms and allocated them two *sentenciados* (convicts) as assistants: Sylvano de Barro and Marçal de Corria. (Figures 1.1 and 1.2).¹ Five decades earlier, during his round-the-world voyage on *The Beagle*, Charles Darwin had spent a few hours on the island, and in 1871 the survey ship *HMS Bristol* had anchored there. American naturalist John

¹ RBG Archives HNR/5/4 Henry Ridley Book of Travels 1887–1912: Of the island of Fernando Noronha and the expedition thereto by T. S. Lea, George Ramage, and Henry N. Ridley to which is added an historical account of the island; Alexander Rattray, 'A Visit to Fernando Noronha', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 42 (1872), 431–8. See also Peter M. Beattie, *Punishment in Paradise: Race, slavery, human rights, and a nineteenth-century penal colony* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Peter M. Beattie, "'Born under the Cruel Rigor of Captivity, the Suppliant Left It Unexpectedly by Committing a Crime": Categorizing and Punishing Slave Convicts in Brazil, 1830–1897', *The Americas*, 66, 1 (2009), 11–55. On Fernando de Noronha in relation to other contemporary Latin American penal colonies, see Ryan C. Edwards, 'Post-Colonial Latin America, since 1800', in Clare Anderson, ed., *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 245–70; Ricardo D. Salvatore and Carlos Aguirre, 'Colonies of Settlement or Places of Banishment and Torment? Penal Colonies and Convict Labour in Latin America, c. 1800–1940', in Christian G. De Vito and Alex Lichtenstein, eds., *Global Convict Labour* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 291–6 (273–309). The Portuguese had colonized Fernando in 1741, to impede contraband trade. Following independence in 1822, Brazil claimed it.

2 Introduction



Figure 1.1 Marçal de Corria, by G. Ramage, 1887

Source: Archives of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew: HNR/5/4 Henry Ridley Book of Travels.

C. Branner had also visited in 1876.² Darwin had noted Fernando de Noronha's thick and dense forests, as had a Royal Naval ship that had touched the coast in 1884. However, excepting coconut groves, by 1887 there were few trees on the island, for they had been cut down to open land for cultivation and to prevent convicts from using the wood to make boats in which to escape (Figures 1.3 and 1.4).³

² John C. Branner, 'Notes on the Fauna of the Islands of Fernando de Noronha', *The American Naturalist*, 22, 262 (1888), 863–4 (861–71); John C. Branner 'The Convict-Island of Brazil – Fernando de Noronha', *The Popular Science Monthly*, 25 (1889), 35 (quote), 38–9 (33–40). Darwin was mainly concerned with the island's geology. See the diary entry dated 20 February 1832, at John van Wyhe, ed., *The Complete Works of Charles Darwin Online* <http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?viewtype=side&itemID=CUL-DAR32.39-40&pageseq=1> (accessed 4 October 2018).

³ Argentina's penal colony of Ushuaia (1902–47) was also deforested, as a photograph in the collections of the British-based Howard League for Penal Reform attests. See MRC MSS 16A/723/3: 'Ushuaia, Penal Colony of Argentina in Tierra del Fuego. Remains of forests cut down by convict labour, because they facilitated escapes. Photograph sent by Commander Keevil RN who visited it in 1933? 34?' Just five years after the 1887 visit,



Figure 1.2 Expedition [left to right] Mar[ç]al [de Corria], [George A.] Ramage, H.N. R[idley], T.[S.] Lea, Da Silva [Sylvano de Barro?]
 Source: Archives of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew: HNR/1/2/7
 Photographs of Fernando de Noronha, 1887.

Convict Marçal de Corria, who spoke English, acted as Ridley, Lea, and Ramage's guide. He told them that he had been transported to the island for murder and though he had once made his escape to the mainland, at the end of the previous year he had won a probationary ticket for helping the governor put down a military mutiny.⁴ With de Corria's help, the party collected dozens of specimens: rocks and minerals, plants, and animals, including earthworms, spiders, scorpions, cockroaches, earwigs,

contemporaries were connecting the island's barren appearance, and the near-total absence of woodland, to a sharp decrease in rainfall and a sharp increase in the risk of severe drought. See 'A Brazilian Convict Island', *Chambers Journal*, 25 Feb. 1893, 117 (116–19), and Beattie, *Punishment in Paradise*, 21. For an environmental history of Ushuaia, including the relationship between forestry and penology, see Ryan Edwards, 'From the Depths of Patagonia: The Ushuaia Penal Colony and the Nature of "The End of the World"', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 94, 2 (2014), 271–302; Ryan C. Edwards, 'Convicts and Conservation: Inmate labor, fires and forestry in southernmost Argentina', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 56, 2 (2017), 1–13.

⁴ This is certainly the enslaved man 'Marçal', who Beattie notes conspired to escape with five non-enslaved inmates. See Beattie, "Born Under the Cruel Rigor of Captivity", 28–9 (n. 38).

4 Introduction



Figure 1.3 Convict village

Source: Archives of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew: HNR/1/2/7
Photographs of Fernando de Noronha, 1887.

grasshoppers, locusts, crickets, dragonflies, fish, geckos and birds. The men spent their days in the field, and their evenings drying and pressing plants, skinning birds, labelling rocks, writing up notes, repairing equipment, and sketching. Convict de Corria took them everywhere. He showed them where best to collect, he carried their loads, and he told them the local names of the resources that they gathered. Ridley later wrote:

We all grew very fond of him, for, besides his extensive local knowledge, he was full of quaint fun. He seemed to know everyone on the island, and was expert in fishing, showing us how the small fry in the rock-pools of the shore might be poisoned with a species of vetch, a device which, though perhaps unsportsmanlike, filled up our collecting bottles with but little trouble. He was always ready to help us to carry home specimens, even of considerable weight, and the contents of his basket were always an important item when we overhauled the day's takings in the evening.

Before leaving Brazil, Ridley, Lea, and Ramage sent home a range of specimens, and de Corria promised that he would send on further samples. This he did, collecting Burra (weeping grass) seeds, and giving them



Figure 1.4 The square, Fernando [de] Noronha. My horse, Marçal, in background.

Source: Archives of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew: HNR/1/2/7 Photographs of Fernando de Noronha, 1887.

to the governor for shipment. Ultimately, the materials gathered by the botanists and collectors and their Brazilian convict assistant ended up in the natural history section of the British Museum.⁵

At the time of Ridley, Lea, and Ramage's visit in 1887, there were 1,400 convicts on Fernando de Noronha. Peter M. Beattie writes that the

⁵ RBG archives HNR/5/4: Of the island of Fernando Noronha; letter from Marçal de Corria to Henry Ridley, 26 December 1887; 'The Island of Fernando do Noronha in 1887' by Rev. T.S. Lea – read at the evening meeting of the Royal Geographical Society 23 April 1888 (printed in *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*, 10 [1888], 431 [424–34]). John Branner criticized T. S. Lea's article, for its view of the 'excellence' of the convict system. He stated that if Lea had been able to speak Portuguese, he would have got 'a clear insight' into the true nature of the penal colony, which included an illegal flogging of such violence that Branner himself had been unable to watch. Branner, 'The Convict-Island of Brazil', 36–7 (footnote). Of course, their difference in views might also be explained with respect to the introduction of the new 3-stage penal regime in 1879, and Fernando's transfer from the authority of the military to the judicial wing of government, in the years between Branner and Lea's visits in 1876 and 1887. See also Beattie, *Punishment in Paradise*, 83–4, 89, 116–7, 191–2.

6 Introduction

island was ‘a large, if exceptionally isolated, plantation where convicts provided most of the labour’.⁶ On average, around nine tenths of the convicts were men. Some were soldiers and slaves, and others were Indigenous or free.⁷ Whilst most were ordinary criminal offenders, government also used the island to confine a few political prisoners. During the first half of the nineteenth century, they included the leaders of the Cabanos Revolt (1832–5) and the Cabanagem and Praieira rebellions (1835–40, 1850).⁸ The convicts were organized into military-style sections or companies and moved through the stages of a three-class penal system. In 1885, the government had passed by-laws which directed that the penal colony would become part of a new graduated penal system in Brazil, based on the globally influential model developed by Sir Walter Crofton in Ireland. Under Crofton’s Irish system, prisoners served a relatively short period of initial solitary cellular imprisonment in Dublin, on basic rations. They were then sent to Spike Island, where they were separated at night and worked in association by day. Next, they were transferred to an ‘intermediate’ prison on probation, in Lusk, where they wore their own clothes and worked on farms. Depending on their conduct, prisoners could be remanded back to the previous stages, and have to work their way back up again. Finally, came conditional liberation. The Brazilian government decreed that Fernando would receive convicts during the ‘intermediate’ stage of their incarceration, under terms of probation. However, in the final instance it never actually implemented the by-laws, and Fernando’s convict system instead incorporated all three elements of the scale. The Justice Ministry had introduced this following an inspection by penal experts Conselheiro Fleury and Bandeira Filho in 1879. Prior to their visit to the island, both men had visited prisons in Europe.⁹

The convicts on the island worked hard, for labour was central to the regime. The first-class convicts made a living by making and selling shell

⁶ Beattie, *Punishment in Paradise*, 4.

⁷ RBG archives HNR/5/4: Life on the Islands, n.d. See also Beattie, *Punishment in Paradise*, 4–5; Salvatore and Aguirre, ‘Colonies of Settlement’, 291. For a roughly contemporary description of Fernando: E. C. Wines, *The State of Prisons and of Child-Saving Institutions in the Civilized World* (Cambridge, MA: University Press, John Wilson and Son, 1880), 553–6. Brazil abolished slavery in 1888.

⁸ Beattie, *Punishment in Paradise*, 90, 130–3.

⁹ Beattie, *Punishment in Paradise*, 50–9, 116–7, 191–2. On Crofton, see Lawrence Goldman, ‘Crofton, Sir Walter Frederick (1815–1897)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004); online edition, 23 September 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/65325> (accessed 7 May 2020). Following the US national prison congress in Cincinnati in 1870, American reformers sent Spanish translations of documents on the Crofton system to Latin American states. See Wines, *The State of Prisons and of Child-Saving Institutions*, 548.

boxes, hats, and boots, or preparing crabs and lobsters. Those in the second class worked as farmers, or in handicrafts, fishing, quarrying, or stonecutting. The island was self-sustaining in terms of maize production, and exported manioc, castor seeds, and cotton. Convicts received a share of profits. Third-class convicts repaired roads, walls, and paths. Those in the lower classes could move up a penal stage according to satisfactory work and conduct, but those who did not submit to the labour and penal regime were downgraded, flogged, fettered, and confined. The ultimate sanction was banishment to neighbouring Ilha Rata (Rat Island), where convicts had to sustain themselves through fishing and foraging. All the convicts had to go to evening mass, where a convict band played. As a reward for good behaviour, and in the belief that family units fostered social stability, government permitted convict men and women to marry. First-class convict men could call for their wives. Though born free, government compelled convicts' children to attend school until they turned 14, when the girls were sent to a mainland convent, and the boys made to enlist in the army. In these ways, as Beattie argues, Fernando de Noronha served multiple purposes: 'as a site for punishment, exile, rehabilitation, colonization and production'.¹⁰ The penal colony endured until the proclamation of the Brazilian republic in 1889. Public opinion then turned against the island, and the new government wound down and eventually abandoned it in 1897.¹¹

The shipment of convicts and political prisoners to Fernando de Noronha is part of the history of punishment and governance in Brazil. It is also part of a much larger national, regional, and global history of punitive mobility. The existence and operation of an island penal colony such as Fernando de Noronha into the late 1890s disrupts the dominant narrative of carceral history: that in the nineteenth century the closed walls of the cellular penitentiary largely replaced other modes of punishment or architectures of confinement. Rather, Fernando de Noronha was one among many carceral sites that reveal the persistence of alternative forms of punishment, for a much longer period of time than historians and penologists have previously assumed.¹² Convicts were sent long distances and offshore, to work on and in plantations, farms, households, quarries, mines, forests and jungles, to build penal infrastructure, and to labour on public works such as road, bridge, canal, and dockyard construction. The long life of such penal mobility, to islands and colonies as

¹⁰ Beattie, *Punishment in Paradise*, 7 (quote), 24, 28, 78, 108, 110–16, 118–21.

¹¹ Beattie, *Punishment in Paradise*, 86–90, 140–2; Salvatore and Aguirre, 'Colonies of Settlement', 292–3.

¹² For an expansive discussion of a large literature, see Mary Gibson, 'Global Perspectives on the Birth of the Prison', *American Historical Review*, 116, 4 (2011), 1040–63.

8 Introduction

also to remote inland or border regions, can be accounted for in the close and enduring connection between punishment and nation and empire building. States, imperial powers, and, sometimes, even trading companies used convicts to satisfy geopolitical and social ambitions. Convicts constituted a supply of unfree labour that could be used to occupy territories for economic and commercial reasons. In turn, those territories became places to which socially and politically ‘undesirable’ people could be removed. As is evident in the case of Fernando de Noronha, penal colonies were bound up with colonization, resource extraction, and productivity. The penological influences brought to bear on the island also show that the operation of places of punitive relocation, and the management of convicts and political prisoners, became intertwined with global circulations of ideologies of punishment and rehabilitation, including of enslaved, Indigenous, and military populations. Thus, punitive mobility is connected to the history of governance and repression, and to the creation of new modalities of work and organization including racialized labour regimes. It also produced new kinds of classifications and social structures in which governments encouraged and nurtured family formation as a route to both convict reform and permanent settlement.¹³

Marçal de Corria’s work with British botanists and collectors in 1887 also suggests that convict expertise made a vital contribution to the local practices and global circulations that together shaped contemporary knowledge production and straddled nations and empires. It is well established that science as a global practice emerged out of local encounters and exchanges, rather than centrifugal European transfers of knowledge, in which multiple global nodes were connected in chains of scientific production. Local mediators played a key role in these circuits, which were facilitated by new technologies of preservation and transportation.¹⁴ If the very existence of Fernando de Noronha disrupts accepted views on the history of punishment and provides a new lens through which to consider the coercive basis of nation-making and governance, the employment of a formerly enslaved convict in a European-led scientific expedition injects the social and geographical global margins

¹³ Clare Anderson, ‘Introduction’, in Anderson, ed., *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies*, 1–35. These themes are also discussed in regard to prison labour in De Vito and Lichtenstein, eds., *Global Convict Labour*.

¹⁴ Anne Coote, Alison Haynes, Jude Philp, and Simon Ville, ‘When Commerce, Science, and Leisure Collaborated: The Nineteenth-Century Global Trade Boom in Natural History Collections’, *Journal of Global History*, 12, 3 (2017), 319–39; Lissa Roberts, ‘Situating Science in Global History: Local Exchanges and Networks of Circulation’, *Itinerario*, 33, 1 (2009), 9–30; Sujit Sivasundaram, ‘Sciences and the Global: On Methods, Questions, and Theory’, *Isis*, 101, 1 (2010), 147–8 (146–58).

into intellectual histories of scientific mediation in an important new way.¹⁵ Convicts and penal colonies, it would seem, played a role in the making of the modern world, with respect not just to the history of punishment, but of governance, labour, nation and empire, and global knowledge exchange.

Convicts and Punitive Relocation: Definitions, Themes, and Concepts

This book uses Ridley, Lea, and Ramage's expedition to the penal colony of Fernando de Noronha in 1887 as the starting point for a global approach to the history of convicts since 1415. This represents the time when Portugal first used convicts (*degredados*) for imperial expansion in the North African *presidio* (fort) of Ceuta. After this date, the European empires, Russia, China, Japan, and numerous independent Latin American nations transported, banished, and deported men and women to *presidios*, penal colonies, and other punitive destinations all over the world. This practice endured into the 1970s in the case of Spain, and later still in parts of Latin America and Russia. Convicts, exiles, and deportees were rendered mobile through a variety of legal avenues, from judicial conviction and military court martial, to administrative removal and banishment. Though it does not perfectly capture such differences, the book uses the nomenclature 'convicts' to describe generally people subjected to various forms of punitive mobility. Where specific groups are the focus of discussion – including transportation convicts but also nationalist agitators who during the period since the nineteenth century were held in separate penal facilities without expectation of labour – they are referred to more precisely. Otherwise, the book terms the mobility of convicts, deportees, and exiles at large 'punitive mobility' or 'punitive relocation', and where appropriate uses more precise descriptors such as 'penal transportation', 'convict indenture', 'deportation', or 'penal

¹⁵ For the long eighteenth century, see Simon Schaffer, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj, and James Delbourgo, eds., *The Brokered World: Go-betweens and global intelligence, 1770–1820* (Sagamore Beach, MA: Watson Publishing International, 2009); David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, landscape, and science, 1800–1856* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Kapil Raj, *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the construction of knowledge in South Asia and Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006); James Delbourgo and Nicholas Dew, eds., *Science and Empire in the Atlantic World* (London: Routledge, 2008); Ricardo Roque and Kim A. Wagner, 'Introduction: Engaging Colonial Knowledge', in Ricardo Roque and Kim A. Wagner, eds., *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: Reading European archives in world history* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), 1–32.

10 Introduction

impressment'.¹⁶ *'Presidios'* describes the Iberian forts in which convicts were kept alongside soldiers, the enslaved, and other workers; and 'penal colonies' designates places in which systems made efforts to separate convicts from neighbouring populations, whether they were Indigenous, enslaved, free, or migrant. The book identifies other, mixed locations as 'penal settlements' or 'sites of punitive relocation'. All were distinct from prisons and penitentiaries, which incarcerated and immobilized inmates. As we will see, though sites of punitive relocation sometimes blended features of mobility and immobilization, it is important to appreciate different carceral forms in understanding continuities and shifts in the history of punishment, and the perhaps surprising endurance of punitive movement into the modern age.

Underpinning the argument is the contention that convicts were agents of occupation, colonization, and frontier expansion, and were labour pioneers. Convicts were highly mobile, moving geographically across, around and within nation states and land and sea-borne empires. The chapters that follow examine the multivalent relationships that existed between convicts and punitive relocation and governance, and nation building and imperial expansion. They explore histories of punishment and state repression, the occupation and settlement of borderlands and colonies, the forging of new global connections, the development of scientific and medical knowledge, and the spread of political or anti-colonial ideologies.¹⁷ In this regard, the book's objective is to write a new global history from below. In doing so, it focuses on the lives of convicts and pays attention to the ways in which they found agency in and resisted their punitive relocation. This included by mutiny and rebellion, sometimes with political intent, and through the establishment of economic, social, cultural, and intimate relationships, forged at least partly outside the purview or surveillance of states and empires. Escape is a key theme. The book also foregrounds the place of convicts and punitive mobility in the global circulation and exchange of knowledge, practices, and people, highlighting flows in penal thinking, systems of classification and connections, and relationships and encounters between convicts and Indigenous men and women, free settlers, and indentured and enslaved workers. Through this approach, the book draws out comparisons and distinctions between

¹⁶ Christian G. De Vito, Clare Anderson, and Ulbe Bosma, 'Penal Transportation, Deportation and Exile: Perspectives from the Colonies in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', *International Review of Social History*, 63, S26 (2018), 6 (1–24).

¹⁷ See also Uma Kothari, 'Contesting Colonial Rule: Politics of exile in the Indian Ocean', *Geoforum*, 43 (2012), 697–706.