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OPEN INSTITUTIONS

AN OPEN INSTITUTION IN VICTORIA (AUSTRALIA)

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Inspector-General of Penal Establishments  
of the State of Victoria, Melbourne



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In accordance with the tradition of past Congresses, it has been possible to secure the co-operation of certain national prison administrations for the printing of documentation for the First United Nations Congress on the prevention of crime and the treatment of offenders, which is from an historical point of view the Thirteenth International Penal and Penitentiary Congress. Thus the present report has been generously printed by the Federal Bureau of Prisons of the United States of America, in the prison printing plant at Leavenworth, Kansas.

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## AN OPEN INSTITUTION IN VICTORIA (AUSTRALIA)

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It is proposed to describe in this paper an experiment with an open prison in the State of Victoria, which, whilst conforming to the definition of an open prison as laid down by the International Penal and Penitentiary Congress at the Hague, differs somewhat from the usual type of open prison in that it has combined the primary aim of being an institution for the treatment of prisoners with the secondary aim of being a state developmental project.

The Coorimungle experiment is, therefore comparable to projects of earlier days where prisoners were used on roads and public works, but it should be emphasized at the outset that unlike many of these projects, this one has always stressed the primary aim of rehabilitation of prisoners and has always regarded the developmental aspect as purely secondary, and somewhat incidental. It will be seen that it is more appropriate to the less developed countries where settlement on Crown lands is still in progress.

### Nature and function of the institution

By European standards Australia is very much under-populated. Although the State of Victoria is smaller in area than most other Australian states, it is settled more closely, but it is, nonetheless, still undeveloped in certain areas. In area it is comparable to England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and it has a population of 2½ million of which 1½ million are in Melbourne. In the south-western part of the State large areas of heavily timbered Crown lands are quite undeveloped.

In 1939, sixteen thousand acres of these Crown lands were tentatively set aside for development by the Penal Depart-

ment and a very small party of officers and prisoners became the pioneers of the institution. The purpose of the experiment was not to establish and maintain a large scale farm, but to make the area suitable for the settlement of small landholders by using prison labour for the initial work.

The buildings were designed in the shape of a semi-circle. The staff quarters, all messing facilities and a store were built on the diameter, while thirty individual cubicles for prisoners were constructed on the perimeter. These were later expanded to forty cubicles, and this number has remained that of the maximum prisoner population. Each cubicle is 8 feet by 7 feet, separate and self contained. Walls and floors are wooden, windows are steel framed and light and ventilation are good. Furnishings are standard throughout but considerable latitude in decoration, etc., is allowed. Lawns and gardens with protective hedges have created a pleasant setting. Farm buildings such as the dairy, shearing shed, garages, machinery sheds, hay sheds and stores have been built in various parts of the home or central block of 140 acres. Coorimungle has telephone connexions and a daily mail service. It generates its own electricity. The live stock, which is used to consolidate the pastures and supply the needs of the institution, consists of 250 sheep, 30 heads of cattle and 6 horses.

At night the prisoners are locked into their individual cubicles from approximately 9 p.m. on and night sentries are not used. There is a considerable element of trust at all times as the only fences are normal farm fences.

An advisory council was set up under the chairmanship of the Inspector-General of Penal Establishments. The state Department of Lands and Survey and the state Department of Agriculture appointed representatives and two local landholders of standing also joined the council. Positions are honorary and much of the success of the scheme is attributable to the practical advice and planning of this council. The two local representatives have been very successful in establishing farms in the district. They show admirable civic spirit and their experience and reputation in the community is a valuable aid to the department in practical planning and in maintaining good public relations with the commun-

ity. Problems of community relations are in every way similar to problems encountered in other countries and care has been taken to foster the goodwill of the community.

Experience has shown that in the heavily timbered sections an area of approximately 180 acres could be regarded as suitable for a farm unit. About 200 to 220 acres are required in the grass tree or lighter areas. Surveyors from the Department of Lands and Survey have divided the area into blocks for development. Teams of prisoners are used to clear strips two chains<sup>1</sup> wide of all trees. At first only horse-drawn tree-pullers were available, but about a year ago, a very large caterpillar tractor was purchased to bulldoze the areas. The strips are then cultivated and sown as pastures, while posts cut from the timber on the site and wire netting manufactured in another prison are used to make substantial rabbit-proof boundary fences in the centre of these two chain strips. As a result, the boundaries are clearly defined and fencing is not affected by falling timber since trees are then at least at one chain's distance from the fences. At the completion of the boundary fences each block has a chain of sown pasture around its whole perimeter, and in addition about fifty to seventy acres are also grubbed, cleared, cultivated and sown as pastures.

To establish and consolidate the pastures, sheep and cattle are grazed on these areas by the Penal Department, and when the Advisory Council considers each block sufficiently developed, the block is made available to the Department of Lands for selection under the Land Settlement Act. This Act empowers the Lands Department to place settlers, selected by a Land Board, on these farms subject to favorable terms comprising a low deposit and long term repayments. The conditions of sale provide that the settler must establish his home, and complete certain improvements and that he may not alienate the land within six years of purchase. Each block when sold still requires considerable sub-divisional fencing, clearing and development, but sufficient work has been done to enable the purchaser to earn a living. The Penal Department does no further work once the farm is sold.

1) A chain—22 yards.

The institution lies approximately nine miles from an existing town, and in the general survey, provision has been made for a township area to be developed later. The intention is that the Penal Department will ultimately move further into the forest areas and vacate the block now used as a prison.

#### Work performed by the inmates

Prison labour and the development of the area are hampered by the excessive rainfall during the wet season and by bushfires during the dry, hot season. Mr. K. L. Chappel, Assistant Surveyor General of the State of Victoria has supplied the following up-to-date information.

Since the Cooriemungle Prison Camp was established the prison labour has been used to fence the boundaries and the subdivision of the original gaol reservation of 140 acres. The area has been cleared of timber and other vegetation with the exception of 10 acres and has been sown to pasture except where required for stock dams, prison buildings, vegetable garden, orchard or ornamental plantation. It has also dammed the adjacent Cooriemungle Creek to provide an adequate water supply for the prison throughout the year and has constructed a bridge over the creek to give access to a portion of the virgin land which has been set aside for penal department activity.

Other than the above the prison labour has fenced and partially cleared, ploughed and sown to pasture six farm blocks of from 137 to 210 acres which have since been granted to persons under selection purchase lease. Tracks have been cleared, grubbed and partly formed on government roads to provide summer vehicular access to those farms and four other blocks which are in course of preparation for allotting as farms. Fencing posts have been cut by prison labour from the trees on the land and that labour also operated a small sawmill to cut the better-quality timber for sheds, yards etc., for this and other gaols throughout the State. Small dams have also been excavated on some blocks.

Other than the gaol reserve area the amount of Crown land improvement effected by the prison labour may be summarized as follows:

Cleared, ploughed, harrowed and sown to pasture and maintained by stocking etc. until ready for allotment	550 acres
Cleared, ploughed and harrowed in preparation for seeding	170 acres
Cleared and rough ploughed	190 acres
Cleared of timber in preparation for ploughing	75 acres
Fencing—split posts 9 feet apart, wire netting and 3 wires	1,870 chains
Roadways cleared of timber and grubbed	280 chains
Roadways cleared, grubbed and formed, together with necessary culverts	130 chains
The timber mill established in recent years has milled over 100,000 super feet of useful timber for use in various penal institutions.	

#### Personnel

The staffing of this institution consists of the Officer-in-Charge, one senior officer and five officers. No families live at the institution. Officers live in comfortable barracks with single rooms and a staff mess with inmate cooks. Each officer remains on duty at the institution for twenty consecutive days and then has eight days' leave during which he returns to his home at the department's expense. Most of the officers' families live in Melbourne—180 miles away. One officer who has purchased a few acres in the district, lives there and is allowed to work a five day forty hour week.

Officers receive quarters and rations free and are paid special penalty rates for Saturdays, Sundays and Public Holidays. They receive normal annual leave as public servants. In addition, officers receive a standby allowance as they are available if required at any hour of the day or night. They observe approximately an eight hour day.

Officers work with and supervise the prisoners. They wear overalls at work, carry no arms whatever, and of course, are selected for this institution because of their experience in and knowledge of the rural industries and farm procedures.

One officer has been trained to supervise the educational

programme and leisure hour activities. He supervises correspondence courses, conducts evening lectures and discussion groups and arranges concert parties and weekend sporting fixtures including cricket and football. He submits monthly reports to the Education and Training Officer at the central administration.

All officers, especially the Officer-in-Charge, are expected to participate in the personal counselling of prisoners. A complete file showing the case history of each prisoner is sent to the institution with him.

Chaplains of various denominations and a medical officer visit Cooriemungle at regular intervals or as required in case of emergency.

#### **Selection of prisoners, length of commitment and regime**

In making its selection the Classification Committee at the main Classification Centre in Melbourne makes the custodial suitability of the prisoner a primary consideration. Prisoners regarded as not suitable for minimum security are not sent to Cooriemungle. Examination of the full case history or the whole tenor of his life is essential in assessing the prisoner and no limitation is placed on the Committee in its selection.

In addition, the physical capacity to undertake the work is essential, hence all must be physically fit and active. Prisoners who fulfil these two requirements must also be considered likely to benefit from the type of work being done there. If they require particular vocational training provided at training prisons they will not be sent to Cooriemungle. It is unusual to send a prisoner to Cooriemungle who has less than six months or more than eighteen months of his sentence to serve.

It is usual to have a prisoner who has already served a very long sentence sent to Cooriemungle for a conditioning period of six to twelve months prior to his anticipated release. This is particularly effective in the case of lifers when they are considered suitable for release by special authority of the Governor-in-Council. The transition from years of close custody in a walled prison to normal civilian life is more easily effected by a prisoner who experiences first the open conditions that prevail at Cooriemungle. Not one long

sentence prisoner transferred in this manner has returned to prison to date.

It should be noted that no Court has power to commit a prisoner to Cooriemungle. Authority of transfer is vested solely in the Inspector-General of Penal Establishments who, while retaining final the power to veto, delegates this to a Classification Committee consisting of the Deputy Inspector-General, the Education and Training Officer, the Supervisor of Industries, the Governor, Pentridge, and the Deputy Governor, Pentridge.

Each prisoner transferred to Cooriemungle signs a pledge or undertaking to abide by the rules of the camp. This may seem an unusual procedure but it has important psychological implications. Cooriemungle receives only trustworthy prisoners and it is important for them to realize at the outset that they must play a part in the institution; this pledge or undertaking is designed to stress the element of trust involved. In addition to normal good conduct remissions, prisoners may receive two additional days for each month served at the camp and three additional days per month after twelve months at the camp.

By 30 September 1954, 800 prisoners had been at the camp and a total of fifteen abscondings had occurred in the fifteen years of its existence. All escaped prisoners were quickly apprehended.

Not all prisoners sent to Cooriemungle follow rural pursuits on discharge, but some have acquired skill and do so. Others have benefited physically by the type of work undertaken and return to their former sedentary occupations.

The general atmosphere at this prison farm is as pleasant as possible within the limits of a prison. The close association with, and counselling by, the staff develop and reform the character. Very few prisoners who have passed through Cooriemungle have returned to prison, but it should not be forgotten that they belong to a selected group and that many would not have returned in any case.

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Victoria has other open prisons comparable to English Borstals, and other overseas open institutions but this account is limited to Cooriemungle because of its special nature.

This archiving project is a collaborative effort between United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and American Society of Criminology, Division of International Criminology. Any comments or questions should be directed to Cindy J. Smith at [CJSmithphd@comcast.net](mailto:CJSmithphd@comcast.net) or Emil Wandzilak at [emil.wandzilak@unodc.org](mailto:emil.wandzilak@unodc.org).