

No.171

Executive
Marmion 4 Oct

Van Diemen's Land Gov House
27 July 1850

My Lord

I have the honor to forward herewith the Report of the Comptroller General of Convicts for the half year ending 30 June 1850.

2. The very detailed manner in which the whole subject of Convict management has been discussed by me in various Despatches and the precise information which has been laid before Your Lordship in the half yearly Reports of the Comptroller General will render unnecessary on my part any lengthened comment upon the present Report, which indeed is as far as V. D. Land is concerned, nearly a recapitulation of the facts shown in detail in the Tabular statements which accompany it.

3. I shall limit my observations therefore to one or two points connected with the system of Convict management in force in this Colony, and its results to which I think it desirable that Your Lordship's attention should be specifically called.

4. In my Despatch No.39 dated 31 January last, I mentioned that the Station at Maria Island and Salt Water River would be reduced, the officers at these Stations have been diminished in number and I have no doubt but that I shall be able in a short time to reduce nearly the whole Establishment, retaining only so many persons at Maria Island as may be able to keep the buildings in a proper state, in case circumstances should occur to compel the Government to make use of this again as a Convict Station.

5. The delay in breaking up these Agricultural stations has been caused by the necessity of maintaining a certain number of men to thresh out the crop of last year, and to prepare the ground and lay it down in grass for the stock which

will still be retained for a time at Maria Island, and permanently at Salt Water River.

6. The stations which are still maintained will be required for some years to come as necessary portions of an effective system of convict discipline, but every effort will be made on my part to simplify the arrangements, and to reduce the expenses so far as is consistent with the maintenance of a proper system of discipline to which of course every arrangement must be considered subordinate.

7. At the Cascade Station in the Peninsula, a most efficient system of Task work is carried out and the results are very satisfactory. At present a certain number of men are employed there preparing 100 loads of sided Blue Gum Timber for the Admiralty. The result of this experiment on the part of the Lord Commissioners will I trust be a more extended demand in future years for a material of which we possess in unbounded quantity of a size and quality unequalled, I believe in any part of the world.

8. The strict system of discipline maintained at the different stations began to produce its natural effect in the diminution of crime during the course of last year, as evidenced by the Police Returns which accompanied the last Report of the Comptroller General, and many of the offences now brought under the notice of the Visiting Magistrates especially at the Road Stations are in some way or other connected with attempts on the part of the Convicts to escape from a system of discipline which, from the strict mode in which it is generally enforced has proved most effective. If it were possible to trace the causes which have led each of the tenants of a Convict Station to his position as a Prisoner of the Crown, it would be found that idleness, a deeply ingrained disinclination to any occupation requiring continuous and steady labour, either of body or mind has been the primary cause in nine cases out of ten.

9. The steady work exacted from the men at the station, and the monotony of the employment is most distasteful of course, and as opportunities are easily found of escaping from a Gang at work upon the Roads cases of absconding have been

numerous. I can, however, notwithstanding, corroborate the assertion of the Comptroller General as to the diminution of crime, the evidence of this, however, will be laid more fully before Your Lordship in the next half yearly Report, which will comprise among the documents which will accompany it the statistics of crime for the whole of the present year.

10. The arrangement alluded to by the Comptroller General in paragraph 15 of his Report were reported in my Despatch No.168, dated 25 July last,—their object is to hold out inducements to female Passholders to remaining the service in which they once engage, and they are the same in principle with those which were submitted by me to Your Lordship in my Despatch No.9 dated 8 January 1850.

11. While, however, I trust that some may be prevailed upon by the inducements this held out to them to discard those desultory and migratory habits which in point of fact have been one of the chief evils of the Passholder system as compared with that of Assignment, I cannot conceal from Your Lordship my opinion that the operation of the remedy will be but partial and inefficient, at all events as regards the male convicts.

12. In my Despatch No.195, dated 28 September 1848, I pressed upon Your Lordship most strongly the advisability of sending out the convicts to this Colony in the condition of Passholders and of enforcing a regulation that the hiring or engagement between the man and his master should be as extensive with the period during which the convict may according to the terms of his original sentence, expect to remain a passholder. I am bound to state to Your Lordship that a longer residence in the Colony and consequently more intimate acquaintance with the working of the different systems of Convict management has only served to strengthen my conviction that some modification of the present system analogous to that which I have mentioned above is essential.

13. The fact of the migratory habits of the Convicts was brought very prominently under my notice by a return furnished for a purpose altogether different of the number of men who had passed through the hands of two or three individuals, the number of those hired compared with those

retained was so enormous as to lead me to call for a special return, copy of which I forward herewith, and I submit it to Your Lordship as bearing strong evidence to the evil effects of the system, both upon the interests of the masters and the character of the servants.

14. In the same Despatch No.195, I allude to that part of the present scheme by which the men who arrive as Ticket of Leave holders are not to receive any further indulgence until they have repaid the cost of their passage to the Colony. I pointed out to Your Lordship the improbability that men would be found willing to contribute so large a proportion of their earnings for such a purpose, and that the practical effect of such a Regulation would be to retain in the Colony by far the greater number of the men thus transported, preventing them from seeking a better market for their labour in the other Colonies, and depressing unnaturally the market here.

15. I forward herewith a Return of the amount received from the Ticket of Leave holders thus sent to the Colony, from the 1st January 1849 a period of eighteen months, by which it appears that out of 966 men to whom this regulation applies, but one has thought it advisable to attempt to shorten the period of his punishment, the remainder, as I foresaw, being content to await the period when their sentences would naturally expire.

16. In my Despatch No.39, forwarding the Report of the Comptroller General for the last half of the year 1849 I mentioned that I hoped to be able to transmit to Your Lordship a detailed account of the state of the Establishment at Norfolk island, the result of the personal inspection of the Comptroller General. I am now enabled to do so.

17. Mr Hampton sailed from this place in March and remained upwards of a month on the Island, and the report which is herewith submitted contains the result of his observations during this visit of Inspection.

18. I am happy to be able to transmit so satisfactory a document, the evidence as to the efficacy of the strict and stern, but just system which has been introduced is most conclusive,

and I believe it to be carried out most judiciously by the present Commandant.

19. The working of the system is fairly shewn by the number and character of the punishments inflicted and to the diminution in their quantity and severity. Of this the Report of the Comptroller bears ample testimony, while at the same time the discipline and efficiency of the Station has been much improved.

20. The prospect afforded under the skilful management of Mr Price of a great increase in the Agricultural products of the Island are very satisfactory. I informed Your Lordship of my intention to attempt the introduction of a variety of tropical productions with the view of providing as many different descriptions of labour as possible, and also of making some money return to the Government. The main object will of course be to produce a sufficient supply of vegetable produce for the food of the population and to increase the quantity of live stock as much as possible. But after this all the spare labour should be devoted to such occupations as may be calculated to yield the largest money returns. I have no doubt that I shall be ably and efficiently assisted in this by the Commandant and that with an Establishment of 1000 men, a fair return may be made eventually for their labour covering a portion of the expense of superintendence.

21. The Comptroller General has alluded in his Report to certain remarks which were contained in a letter addressed to him by the Right Reverend Bishop Wilson after his visit to Norfolk Island, suggesting some alteration in the present system by which punishments inflicted upon men under sentence have a cumulative effect, as well as in the employment as Constables of men who had been convicts. The opinions of a really good and earnest man like Bishop Willson are entitled to every consideration, but I feel certain that any relaxation of the system by which punishment is made a certain consequence of every offence would in such a population as that of Norfolk island prove most injurious to discipline and indeed eventually to the habits of the convicts themselves.

22. *It is true that some instances occur in which a man may have his original sentence prolonged indefinitely by the punishments consequent upon irregular and insubordinate conduct, but on the other hand there is ample evidence to show that very many men can and do pass through the ordeal of their original sentence without incurring a single punishment of any importance. To allow the violent and insubordinate man to escape the consequences of his conduct would hold out but a very bad example to his fellows in Crime, and as the object of all punishment is example, I cannot recommend any alteration that would render that less striking and effective.*

23. *With regard to the question of Convict Constables, there can of course be no doubt that it would be better to employ free men, when such can be found properly qualified for the duty they have to perform and no opportunity is allowed to escape of securing the services of such men. I am bound, however, to say that the evils which originate in the employment of Convict Constables have some counterbalancing advantages, and are not of such a nature as to call peremptorily for a change.*

24. *The arrangements relative to the transfer of the females from the Anson and the alterations in the buildings and system of management are not yet sufficiently matured to admit of comment, but they will probably be detailed in the next half yearly Report.*

25. *All that is necessary for me to say at present is that I am fully satisfied with the mode in which the change has operated, and that I have every reason to think favorably of the manner in which the business of the Convict Department has been administered by the Comptroller General and his subordinate Officers.*

*I have &c
(signed) W. Denison*

*The Right Hon^{ble}
Earl Grey
&c &c &c*

replied to 29 January 1851

3 enclosures

- 1. Report of the Comptroller General with its several supporting documents.*
- 2. Return of passholders engaged in certain services in 1847, 8.1.1849.*
- 3. Return of monies received from Ticket-of-Leave holders towards their passage money.*