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Colonial Discipline: The Making of the Irish Convict System
(review)

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New Hibernia Review, Volume 5, Number 1, Earrach/Spring 2001, pp.
155-156 (Review)

Published by Center for Irish Studies at the University of St. Thomas

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2001.0002>

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Colonial Discipline: The Making of the Irish Convict System, by Patrick Carroll-Burke, pp. 256. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000. \$55 (cloth). Distributed by ISBS, Portland, OR.

Patrick Carroll-Burke has published a revised version of his master's thesis on the mid-Victorian Irish convict system. Based on his archival research, Carroll-Burke argues that the Irish system was, paradoxically, both harsher and more humane than the British system.

The body of the book traces the development in Ireland of the world's first national system of individualized incarceration. Spurred by the abolition of transportation, the Irish convict system was developed in the 1850s. Its experimental element was first demonstrated by the fact that administrative decisions rested with a central board—a sharp break with traditional localism. The system proposed three stages of incarceration. The first was penal, the second reformatory, and the final stage involved release on license. During the first stage prisoners were kept in solitary confinement under strict discipline. Irish prisoners at this stage were treated more harshly than their British counterparts, lending credence to defense attorneys who warned Irish juries that it was better to let a guilty man go free than banish him to the cruelties of the prison system. But, during the second stage, significant efforts were made to rehabilitate the prisoners using a hierarchical system of classification, a carefully constructed system of rewards and punishments, and constant surveillance by the chaplain and schoolmaster. The third stage was the intermediate prison where prisoners worked on public projects under minimal supervision. The goal was that convicts be both morally and practically prepared to reenter the community.

As a detailed account of the nineteenth-century Irish convict system this book provides valuable new information. However, as with many master's theses, this is a work without a strong central argument. Much of the background material from secondary sources is unnecessary for the specialist, yet this is not a book for the general reader. In the introduction and conclusion Carroll-Burke discusses how his findings differ from those of Foucault and his critic David Garland; however—as he admits in his preface—the body of the book has not been reworked to reflect the discussion in the introduction and conclusion. Though he provides a detailed account of the construction of the system and its operation, the material is presented haphazardly. Rather than attempt an evaluation of the impact of the system, Carroll-Burke spends a chapter illustrating the similarities of disciplinary practices being used in the convict prisons, Irish schools, and seminaries. While he successfully demonstrates the common emphasis on rigid morality and order in the institutions of Victorian Ireland, the finding is neither new nor surprising.

The material is fascinating, however, and demonstrates a progressive attitude on the part of authorities. Irish convicts heard lectures on industrial development, technology, economics, history, geography, astronomy, biology, and geology. Whether these lectures prepared them for successful lives on the outside is unclear—but this and other evidence in *Colonial Discipline* certainly provides a corrective to the assumption that Irish criminals were considered too savage to be salvageable.

☞ CAROLYN A. CONLEY